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Women-focused Leadership Development in the Middle East: Generating Local Knowledge

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Generating Local Knowledge

By

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Women-Focused Leadership Development in the Middle East:

Generating Local Knowledge

Leadership development is high on the agenda of many executives around the world, particularly in fast-developing regions such as the Middle East. Although leadership development programs in these regions are often based on an export model, our effectiveness in preparing successful leaders largely depends on locally generated knowledge. Despite a surge in cross-cultural studies comparing management practices across different regions, research about and conducted in the Middle East remains extremely scarce. In particular, little research has been conducted with respect to women in the workplace. This paper outlines our research efforts in the Middle East related to the Women Leadership Initiative and presents preliminary findings from two studies. In the first study, gender stereotyping is examined using the Schein Descriptive Index, based on a Saudi student sample. The second study explores women’s career decisions in the UAE and identifies challenges and coping mechanisms. Implications for leadership development and future research are discussed.
**Introduction**

With female labour increasingly viewed as a significant factor in economic growth in the region (Metcalfe, 2006), Middle Eastern countries and particularly the more prosperous Gulf countries have placed a strong emphasis on the education of women and on building human capital. Indeed, the WEF Gender Gap report indicates that with respect to educational attainment, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries rank highly and even surpass countries such as the US and Switzerland (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2007). However, with respect to women’s economic participation and opportunity, Middle Eastern countries consistently lag behind. Their high educational achievements, it would seem, are not reflected in the work sphere. Indeed, many countries in the region still fall short in female capacity utilization (UNDP, 2003). Moreover, although female participation in the workforce has increased over recent years, it is unclear whether the actual role of women in business has evolved (World Bank, 2003) thus casting doubt on effective capacity usage and the development of leadership potential. Sex-role stereotyping has been identified as one of the most important barriers to women’s progress in the workplace (Fullagar, Sumer, Sverke, & Slick, 2003).

Given the abundance of cross-cultural comparisons in sex-role stereotyping and the dearth of information on the Middle East, placing the region on the map in this respect seemed particularly important. Concurrently, it was important to harvest a ‘thick’ description of women’s experiences with respect to their career aspirations and career progress. Therefore, two studies were undertaken to lay the foundation of our knowledge about women leaders in the Middle East. In the first study, gender stereotyping was examined using the Schein Descriptive Index, based on a Saudi student sample. The second study explored women’s career decisions in the UAE and identified challenges and coping mechanisms. Before presenting the two studies, we provide an overview of the Middle Eastern context in general, as well as the status of women in the region in particular.

**The Middle East as a Context**
Many different labels are used to refer to this region of the world: the Arab nations (the 22 member states of the Arab League), MENA (Middle East and North Africa), the Muslim world (which also includes Iran, Pakistan and other Muslim countries in Africa and Asia) and the Middle East (the geographical area ranging from Egypt to the Arabian Peninsula).\(^2\) Sub-regions are also used to distinguish culturally similar entities or economic trade zones, such as the GCC countries, the Levant, and the Maghreb. Rather than being a monolithic bloc, the Middle East can be seen as a cultural, economic, political and religious mosaic. Diverse historical backgrounds, successive foreign influences, and disparities in natural resources and demographics have created a set of widely differing societies and economies.

Nevertheless, two common denominators exert a strong influence on most of the countries within the region: the first in terms of language (Arabic), the second in terms of religion (Islam). However, it is important to note that even those commonly chosen characteristics to define the region are not uniformly present across the region to the same extent. Arabic is frequently complemented with the use of foreign languages (mostly English or French) in education or public administration. Moreover, whereas formal written Arabic is the same across the region, dialects vary substantially within the Middle East and are seen as a marker of identity, community and nationality (Holes, 1995; Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002).

While Islam is the official religion in most of the region’s countries, there is great religious diversity, from important minorities of other faiths to diverse interpretations of and factions within Islam. The divine Qur’an, which represents the verses transmitted by God to the Prophet, establishes basic standards for Muslim societies. The second pillar of Islam, the Sunna, covers the traditions and practices of Muhammed and represents ideal behavior to be modeled by followers. These are memorized and transmitted as Hadith. Whereas the holy book cannot be challenged, there is significant debate about the authenticity and accuracy of some of the Sunna transmitted through Hadith (Rehman, 2005). While the Qur’an and Hadith provide moral frameworks (Awde, 2005), the Sharia (Islamic law) provides the legal framework (Metcalfe, 2007). Sharia law is not limited to religious matters but

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\(^2\) I will here retain the “Middle East” as the preferred term as it is considered the least restrictive and refers to geographical rather than political, ethnic or religious background.
includes a number of secular areas such as commercial law, constitutional and administrative law, humanitarian and human rights law (Rehman, 2005). In Saudi Arabia, Sharia law is strictly applied. However, in most other countries Sharia law is applied only in civil law cases, as commercial and penal codes have been established via colonial influences. Nevertheless, in most countries it is forbidden to enact legislation that is antithetical to Islam (Vries, 2009). Sharia law is also the basis for Islamic banking and finance, growing at an estimated 15 percent annually (Vries, 2009). Islamic finance modifies modern business practices to conform to the rules of Sharia. Under Islamic law the charging or payment of interest, *riba*, is prohibited. Sharia-compliant services include modified standard financial products like credit cards, savings accounts, mortgages and loans in which interest is replaced by profit sharing. Sharia-compliant investments avoid financing sinful things (*haraam*) such as weapons or alcohol.

Culture being defined as the common pattern of beliefs, norms, values and practices of a group of individuals (Aycan & Rabindra Kanungo, 2000), both language and religion are closely related to culture. They embody artefacts and expressions of values and provide the essence of a community’s basic assumptions. The Qur’an establishes rights and obligations for Muslims and their communities as well as advanced values such as compassion, good faith, justice and religious ethics (Rehman, 2005). Others highlight that Islam is a practical ideology focusing on equality among people and hard work, and emphasizing qualities such as honesty, trust, solidarity and loyalty (Ali, 1995). In addition to looking at the values salient in Arab societies, it may be useful to compare the Middle East to other regions on certain cultural dimensions. Findings based on Hofstede’s four dimensions indicate high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, low individualism, and high masculinity (Robertson, Al-Khatib, & Al-Habib, 2002). Moreover, the GLOBE Arabic cluster has been found to be characterized by in-group orientation, masculinity, tolerance of ambiguity, but a limited emphasis on planning, with “stronger rule orientation, planning, hierarchy of relationships, institutional collectivism, masculinity and low value on assertiveness”, (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002).
Middle Eastern society and business practices are affected by social networks in the form of *wasta*. The term *wasta* refers to both the act and the person who intervenes or secures a benefit on behalf of another person (Whiteoak, Crawford, & Mapstone, 2006). However, some ambivalence surrounds *wasta* as it may at times be considered justified and moral to help others, while at other times it can be seen as illegal or questionable (Metcalfe, 2007; Whiteoak et al., 2006).

Finally, at the socio-economic level it has been argued that many Arab societies have moved to the post-industrial stage without establishing the institutions required to deal with modern business practices (Ali, 1995). This lack of institutions creates a vacuum in society which may be filled by an authoritarian (*caliphal*) leadership model or a visionary (prophetic) leadership model (Ali, 1995). Although weak regulatory environments, high unemployment rates and limited political freedoms constitute important challenges (Hanouz, Diwany, & Yousef, 2007), these economical, legal and political differences create distinct business climates across the region.

**The Abu Dhabi Context**

Abu Dhabi is the capital of the United Arab Emirates, a small country in the Arabian Gulf which has seen spectacular economic development since its inception in 1971 thanks to the discovery of oil. It has witnessed a transition from a rural, tribal society to an urban and industrialized one in one generation. Solid legal frameworks and sound regulatory systems are lacking in the UAE (Hanouz et al., 2007). While many MNCs have entered this flourishing market, the number of expatriate workers (both skilled and unskilled) has increased dramatically, creating a truly multicultural society with around 200 nationalities represented. The drawback of this fast development is the marginalization of the local Emiratis who currently represent only 17% of the total population. Although the UAE economy has developed fast into service and knowledge-based industries, the labor market is still largely governed by a low-cost paradigm. The supply of cheap labor (both skilled and unskilled) from the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia, and expert labor from the West, combined with the recent programs of “Emiratization” aiming to transfer skills and knowledge
from the expatriate to the national workforce, has created a complex business context (Abouzeid, 2008). In addition, autocratic leadership has contributed to the creation of a fast-paced, but also uncertain, legal environment (Giuffrida, 2008).

A particular difficulty related to conducting research in or interpreting research about the UAE is to establish whether the frame of reference is the local Emirati population or the market, country or society as a whole. With limited data available from national statistical reporting and confusion about the population segments it covers, secondary data need to be evaluated with care. Any research study needs to identify the appropriate context and population to sample from.

Less than 2 percent of Emirati nationals (both male and female) are employed in the private sector (Abdulla, 2006). The banking industry is a notable exception as banks are held to a quota system based on an increasing percentage of Emiratis each year (currently 38%). Other private sector organizations need to employ 2% of local nationals in their workforce. However, despite fees and visa restrictions on expatriate employees many MNCs do not employ any Emiratis (Abouzeid, 2008).

In the UAE, therefore, business practices are influenced not only by the local culture but also to a large extent by the cultures of the expatriates each organization employs. The Emirati work context takes into account religious practices, such as availability of prayer rooms and opportunities to take breaks at prayer times. Business hours may also be shortened for religious observance during Ramadan. Traditions and the Muslim faith may also influence cross-gender interaction between men and women at work. Although gender segregation is not practiced at work, men and women who adhere to strict religious principles may prefer to limit interactions with the other gender or interact only in formal ways.

Overall, the rapidly developing Emirati society is greatly affected by foreign cultural influences. Recent findings indicate that certain values and attitudes may be changing (such as individualism) but others remain deeply held, such as the Islamic work ethic (Whiteoak et al., 2006).
Women in the Middle East

It has been argued that the major fault line in the divergence of views between the Middle East and the West is based on the status of women (Metcalf, 2007). In Western debates, Middle Eastern women are often regarded as oppressed and victimized, but also as more admirable and hard-working than their male counterparts (Essers & Benschop, 2009).

We start by highlighting the following facts related to legal status and economic participation. As mentioned earlier, the WEF Gender Gap report indicates that high educational achievements are not reflected in the work sphere (Hausmann et al., 2007). However, female participation in the workforce varies greatly within the region, and may be particularly driven by economic constraints. Although 75% of all UAE local university students are women, only 14.7 percent of Emirati women were in full-time employment in 2003 (Abdulla, 2006). In Egypt, official female employment rates are 22% (Service), whereas in Lebanon rates are closer to 30%, with female employees making up 90% of the workforce in the banking sector (Dima Jamali, 2005).

Although the constitutions of most Arab nations acknowledge equality between men and women (UNDP, 2005), personal status laws are largely inspired by Islamic law. “Arab personal status laws remain conservative and resistant to change because a number of Arab States are reluctant to develop a national personal status code. Instead, they leave matters entirely to the judiciary, which is heavily influenced by the conservative nature of classical Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh).” (UNDP, 2005, p.19) Moreover, nationality can only be transmitted through paternal descent, although recent movements across the region are trying to bring about change in this respect (Ma’ayeh, 2009). Equality of inheritance remains rare: daughters inherit only half the share of their brothers. While the origin of this practice is still debated (UNDP, 2005), it perpetuates unequal treatment between men and women, and diverges from the Qur’an’s provision for equality between human beings.

Next, we venture to make some observations related to customs and perceptions of women in Middle Eastern societies. As in the case of language and culture, women’s dress codes and traditions differ greatly within the region. Whereas
some Middle Eastern women may argue in line with feminist movements that covering ones hair (wearing *hijab*) is oppressive, many women consider this way of dressing to be part of their tradition and their faith (Metcalf, 2006). Indeed, wearing the *hijab* can be a reflection of one’s commitment to faith and modesty, or an essential part of one’s identity (Essers & Benschop, 2009). In the UAE, for example, Emirati women wear their traditional Abaya with pride and decorate it with fashionable beads and glitter, whereas in Saudi Arabia, where Islamic dress is required by law, it is widely perceived oppressive. Thus they prefer to remove their Abaya whenever possible, that is, when in a female-only environment. Still, with full face covering being the extreme, family pressure may exist regarding the extent of modesty considered to be acceptable. Social and family pressure is particularly strong in countries such as Egypt, where headscarves were rare 30 years ago but are now omnipresent.

While gender segregation in the workplace is strictly observed only in Saudi Arabia, certain professions may be dominated by either males or females in line with perceived appropriateness to for their gender (Metcalf, 2006). Although the late UAE ruler Sheikh Zayed was lauded for his support for women’s advancement, he also encouraged women to take up roles “suitable to their nature” (Gallant, 2006). A woman’s primary role is still mostly in the family realm or in traditional roles, with rigid religious interpretations regarding any change from that situation as a deviation from God’s will (Abdalla, 1996; Al-Lamky, 2007). The confinement of women to traditional roles may also be attributed to the fact that it is often considered *haraam* (a sin) for women to interact with men other than their close relatives (Metcalf, 2006). Therefore, settings that require frequent contact with men, such as hospitals or hotels, are often considered unacceptable workplaces for women by traditional fathers or husbands. Finding a “respectable” career is therefore important for women in the Middle East (Gallant, 2006).

Whereas there is some evidence that women are increasingly making their mark in atypical professions (Nammour, Gokulan, Agarib, & Zain, 2008) and role models are starting to emerge (FT, 2008), still, only 14.7 percent of Emirati women were in full-time employment in 2003, with the majority of women employed in the public sector as teachers or clerical workers (Abdulla, 2006).
**Study 1**

**Saudi Managers: Male…but also Female**

**Introduction**

Sex-role stereotyping has been identified as one of the most important barriers to women’s progress in the workplace (Fullagar et al., 2003). The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between gender role stereotypes and requisite management characteristics in the Middle East. Since the early 1970s, Virginia Schein and her colleagues have conducted a considerable number of studies investigating managerial sex-role stereotyping using the Schein Descriptive Index (Schein, 1994; Schein, 1973; Schein, 1975; Schein, 2001; Schein & Mueller, 1992). A currently-in-progress meta-analysis by Eagly and Koenig identified more than 35 studies adopting this paradigm. Thus this instrument appears to be well suited to the objective of cross-cultural comparison, both with other countries around the globe and within the region.

**Methods**

**Sample.** The Saudi sample consisted of 247 students at Prince Sultan University, a private university in Riyadh. 145 female (58.7%) and 92 male (37.2%) undergraduate students completed the survey instrument. Ten cases (4%) were dropped because they did not indicate their gender, resulting in a sample size of 237.

**Instrument.** The Schein Descriptive Index was used (Schein, 1973) to evaluate the characteristics of successful managers. Three versions of the instrument were used, requesting the respondents to “use this list to tell us what you think a successful middle manager/ a women in general/ a man in general is like.” Respondents evaluated 92 attributes (such as ‘curious’, ‘consistent’, ‘high need for power’, ‘sympathetic’, ‘fearful’, ‘adventurous’), by placing a score from 1 (not characteristic) to 5 (characteristic). Surveys were administered and collected by
instructors in class. As English was the language of instruction, the original English instrument was used.

**Analysis.** In order to evaluate the resemblance between the descriptions of men, women and managers, intra-class correlation coefficients were computed according to the procedure used by Schein (1973).

**Findings**

Table 1 provides an overview and positions the Saudi (KSA) sample next to other relevant samples. Findings for the Saudi sample indicate that a bias is present among male respondents, with a large and significant coefficient for the ratings of men and managers and a zero, non-significant relationship between the ratings of females and managers. Female respondents also see males as possessing more requisite managerial characteristics, but there is also a significant relationship between the ratings of women and managers for female respondents.
Table 1 – Overview of selected country results

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<th>China</th>
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<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
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<td>Manager - Men</td>
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<td>Manager - Woman</td>
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<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
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<td>Manager - Men</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager - Woman</td>
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<td>.22</td>
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A comparison of the items reveals that males and females have quite different views of the required managerial characteristics. Indeed, male and female students’ rankings differ substantially. Of the top 15 attributes, 40% are different. Notable is that for women, being creative is seen as one of the important characteristics. Also particularly interesting is the finding that women see “separating feelings from ideas” whereas men see “aware of feelings of others” as important.

**Discussion**

Based on the current sample we find that male stereotyping is very similar to that observed in other nations previously studied. Thus this study appears to disconfirm the Western stereotype that regards Arab males as being strongly prejudiced against women. It appears that the Saudi male students are no more biased than their Western counterparts.
Also we find that women themselves do not have a more stereotyped view of requisite management characteristics than their Western counterparts, and score notably higher than Japanese and German women. A low resemblance between the women and manager ratings by females may explain why women are reluctant to pursue leadership responsibilities and why they are not well represented in higher ranks. However, the results from this Saudi sample indicate that female readiness is adequate and similar to that of Western countries. Indeed, the fact that Saudi women see their characteristics as important leadership qualities may provide an impetus for more gender-balanced leadership at the national level.

Although comparable studies have used similar student samples, it is important to be aware of potential biases which may be associated with this sample. First, the sample may not be representative of the mainstream Saudi mindset. Although Riyadh is known to be more conservative than the other main economic centre, Jeddah, as Prince Sultan University is a private institution catering mainly to upper-middle-class students, the views held by these students may be more liberal than those held in more rural areas or public universities. Also, with English being the vehicle of learning, Anglo-Saxon cultural elements may have significantly influenced students’ thinking. Nevertheless, as these upper-middle-class students are likely to hold influential positions upon graduation, they may also be best placed to effect change in their environment. As such, knowing that this elite is not extremely gender-biased and that the females among them see themselves as having a significant degree of resemblance with the managerial profile is encouraging. In further research it would be important to assess whether other subsets of the Saudi student population have similar views.

Second, when we evaluate the results of the present study, we need to take into account the particular work context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Many Saudi organizations still operate in a totally segregated manner, with men and women occupying segregated workspaces and interacting only at the highest levels, and only when needed. Thus men and women may only think of their own gender while ranking the manager. This could have particularly inflated our results for the female students. Indeed, when rating managers, women may have thought of female managers only, resulting in a greater resemblance between the woman and manager
rankings. Thus female readiness could be adequate when it comes to taking up leadership positions in segregated environments but not in mixed environments. Unfortunately it was not possible to verify this possibility. Nonetheless, the high resemblance of man-manager rankings of females suggests that this was not necessarily the case. Also, given their exposure to Western educational materials and to western work contexts through media and entertainment, we have reason to believe that women also think of men when thinking about managers. Nevertheless, future research should take into account the possible effect of segregation on women’s leadership development.

Study 2

Challenges Going Forward: How Middle Eastern Women Cope

Throughout their careers, women experience the tension between work and family related responsibilities (Greenblatt, 2002; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Collins, 2001), which may affect the role they can or are willing to play in the workplace. Work-family trade-offs are particularly salient at the outset of a career because a young woman’s graduation from college typically coincides with important transitions in a woman’s life, such as starting a family of her own (Baber & Monaghan, 1988). It has been argued that the way work is organized and experienced is defined by race, class and gender (Watts, 2007). Workplace settings and policies are in effect artefacts of underlying values and basic assumptions (Schein, 1984) and are therefore considered an integral part of a culture. Research about and conducted in Middle Eastern cultures remains extremely scarce, particularly with respect to women in the workplace (Metcalf, 2006). With the ultimate objective of contributing to the advancement of women leadership in the Middle East, this study aims to establish a base for subsequent research. Specifically, the proposed study asks: How do Middle Eastern women cope with challenges related to the management of their careers? Hence the purpose of this exploratory study is twofold: first identifying key challenges, second identifying patterns of responses to those challenges.
Background

A recent review of the literature on women in management in the Arab world identified just 20 relevant studies (Omair, 2008). While research examining working women in the Middle East remains scarce, a number of interesting contributions have been made in recent years. Exploring cultural dimensions of management and gender, Metcalfe (2006, 2007) found that women have made progress into managerial positions across the region but that they face career and development constraints due to the strong gender roles present in their local cultures. Childcare responsibilities, the lack of role models, limited organizational support and training possibilities, and the general business culture were reported as barriers to the advancement of female managers (Metcalfe, 2006). Particularly in the UAE, cultural factors seem to be responsible for inhibiting the level of employment of Emirati females (Gallant & Pounder, 2008). However, while the patriarchal culture and the traditional culture were seen as limiting career advancement, Emirati women appeared less likely (compared with Lebanese women) to describe religion as hindering their careers (Tlaiss, 2009). Moreover, accounts from female Emiratis indicated how important it was to convince the family to allow them to pursue their ambitions (Gallant, 2006). Although role models in business remain limited, role models such as college teachers can provide alternatives and are crucial to young women’s development (Madsen, 2009), increasing their assertiveness and enabling them to explore new roles.

An Omani study focusing on factors facilitating women’s access to leadership positions attributed a great deal of importance to early socialization in general, and particularly to the role of the father in facilitating independence, self-confidence and assertiveness (Al-Lamky, 2007). As well as a focus on education, an egalitarian home environment where equal treatment with male siblings prevailed were deemed crucial (Al-Lamky, 2007). Women were found to look for fulfilment in their work and were satisfied in their jobs (Robertson et al., 2002), which could be attributed to financial independence or the prestige associated with the positions they occupied. Finally, not unlike in other parts of the world (Lirio et al., 2007), attempts to combine work and family often gave rise to feelings of guilt. Moreover, the need to have a supportive husband was emphasized (Al-Lamky, 2007).
Methods

With the aim of giving something back to study participants volunteering to share their experiences with the researcher, the data collection took place as part of a one-day work-life balance workshop offered to Middle Eastern Women working in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. A total of 29 women (18 Emiratis, 5 Egyptians, 2 Jordanians, 2 Indians, 1 Pakistani and 1 Filipino) participated in the study conducted over 7 sessions. All participants were informed at the time of enrolment that the workshop was part of a research initiative. Participants were welcomed by the researcher and permission to audiotape was requested. The researcher explained that the day would start as a discussion with other participants about their work and family lives. Each participant was requested to introduce herself, following the elements on the worksheet (geographical background, nationality, family background, father’s occupation, mother, siblings, education, work, current family situation, husband’s background, children, whether or not living with parents). These introductions set the stage for further discussion and questions guided by the researcher around the themes of education, work, family and future, which lasted for around two hours.

Findings

A number of themes emerged as challenges faced by the women part of this study. The data analysis also revealed a number of interesting coping mechanisms. Challenges are conceptualized as problems emerging while pursuing one’s goal, and coping mechanisms as solutions to deal with the problem experienced.

Challenges

3 In order to get a better understanding of the gender dynamics discussed it was found useful to listen to “the other side of the story”. Therefore, one last workshop was conducted with 7 men (5 Emiratis, 1 Egyptian and 1 Lebanese). This data set was not merged with the women’s data but was used for the purpose of triangulation and illustration.
1. The need to work

When the question “to work or not to work?” was raised, none of these working women indicated they even reflected upon this question. Answers were either “natural”, “of course” or “always wanted”. Work reflects the means to self-realization and financial independence and as such was a desirable goal for all the working women involved.

- “I always knew I would be an engineer - I am a nerd.”
- “The part of being independent is worth a lot. I would kill myself rather than having to ask my husband for money to go and do my shopping. From the day I started working, I have never taken a penny from my father or my husband or anyone!”
- “Work is necessary to keep yourself busy, because else you don’t feel productive.”

The need to work is not a challenge as such, but it becomes a challenge in the light of constraints experienced. Although it has been said that young women need a lot of strength to influence their family to allow them to work (Gallant, 2006), and the low percentage (14%) of working Emirati women (Abdulla, 2006) would seem to confirm this, the present findings indicate that it is possible to work but that society is still ambivalent about the condition of working women. With recent changes to the educational system, young female Emirati students are obliged get do an internship before graduation. These policies offer ideal stepping-stones and force the hand on conservative families to allow girls to go out in the workplace. Once the ‘experiment’ completed and with offers from employers it is often hard for fathers or husbands to reverse the situation in practice, although they may not entirely be ready to accept it.

- “My father thinks [my work] is only temporary and that I will stop working when I get married – they don’t take it serious.”
- “You married me like this!”
- “My husband accepted to marry me as a working women, but now he is telling his friends ‘Do not marry a working woman...You’ll be in trouble!’”
• “I want my sons to be settled in a good career, and have their own families…but I would prefer their wives not to work.” I used to leave work at 2.30pm but with the pressure of today it is very difficult to raise a healthy family.”

Constraints were perceptions of what is a suitable job, financial obligations, childcare and family obligations. Several participants indicated that “at the beginning” they started out wanting to work but, over time, with increasing financial and family obligations, they now felt compelled to work. They would sometimes prefer to work less, but not “not work”.

• “If I would quit my work, I would still do something, like volunteering.”
• “When I complain to my husband, he says ‘Then stay at home’, but I say ‘Never’...”

The need to work appears to become more of a challenge when care for children or a family member is of prime importance (when children are little, when exams come up or broader educational challenges are faced).

• “After my dad passed away, I felt guilty about always having worked so late.”
• “My mother travelled a lot when I was small - I do not want to do the same. Because I work, time becomes so precious, so I try to make all the time with my daughter quality time.”

2. Children

Having children could be seen as a desire or a pressure, but was considered a challenge either way. In collectivistic cultures extended families and children are traditionally highly valued. Emirati women face two kinds of pressures, one cultural, the other demographical. First, personal experience (they themselves have been raised with a large number of siblings, up to 12 children, possibly from different mothers) and tradition both generate high expectations in terms of numbers of children. Second, having over the past decades become a minority (less than 20%) in their own land, a

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4 It must be noted that this comment, by the most senior woman in the group, was received with great discontent from the others, upon which she continued to explain how times have changed.
high birth-rate is encouraged by the government. Large families being thus doubly well regarded, Emirati women face additional pressures with respect to childbearing. Discussions between spouses about having an additional (third or fourth) child appear to be common. Financial constraints may be one - but not the sole - cause of reluctance, as women recognize it will mean less time for others, themselves and their work.

- “I am no longer a master of my time and I feel guilty when I go out.”
- “If I have more children I will have to stop working. In the old days there was the support of the community – now we need to worry more.”
- “I fear that having a baby will be an obstacle to my career. Either my work or the baby will be affected. We always postpone having children, another 2 years, another 2 years.”
- “My husband wants more kids, but I say NO!” [...but then all laughed, saying she would have another one for sure.]

3. Family First

Other themes were recurrent in the discussions, such as the “family first” idea. Despite the need to work (both for self-realization or financially) it was clear that children’s welfare was considered to come first in all cases. It was often mentioned that if at any time career interfered with the well being of the children, the woman would prefer to put her career on hold. Fortunately, many indicated it had not happened but feared it might at some point if when they were to lose a valuable domestic helper or when children reached puberty or had trouble in school. Stories were often interspersed with “At the moment it is fine”, “Right now everything is going well”, while indicating “You never know”.

- “When I leave my kids at home, I always ask myself: Is it worth it?”
- “I think my mission is important. When I come home I have to help my children with their studies, I cannot rest, I have to make sure that they are well prepared because life is getting more and more difficult.”
Whereas discussions around family being the priority became quite serious and somewhat depressing, someone also noted the sky is the limit:

- “I have a friend who has 10 kids and her own business!”

Creating and maintaining a well-functioning support system was critical to all, although expatriates and locals differed on the options and specific challenges in doing so. A discussion about the do’s and don’ts regarding nannies and housekeepers, getting into details of references and cameras, made it clear that getting it all organized and bearing the final responsibility was a heavy burden.

- “One day I arrived at school to drop of my daughter and the place was empty... The guard told me: Today is off, Madam!”

Another concurred attempting to relieve her guilt:

- “When you have 5 children in different schools it is very hard to keep up with the notices!”

4. Maintaining Modesty

The Emirati women voiced a particular concern that one needed to be careful not to overstep one’s husband in earnings or promotions. This concern was also apparent in educational achievement: young women with a Masters degree find it more difficult to get married as men may not wish to marry women with higher qualifications than themselves. With women outnumbering men in higher education this challenge is expected to increase. The delicate balance between self-realization, career advancement and preserving equilibrium at home appears to be particularly challenging for women working in the private sector when their husbands have civil service jobs requiring considerably fewer hours on the job. Working longer hours than the husband seemed to create major frictions. Women are largely expected to be there
for their husbands and the family when the head of the family comes home. Thus they may have to sacrifice career opportunities for the sake of preserving that balance.

- “It is a problem; he is just relaxing and waiting for me.”
- “There was a case of a woman - she and her husband were both working in the bank and she got a promotion and she actually refused it…I had to talk to her and she said ‘If I take it, it is going to create issues with my husband at home…’ This was really shocking for me.”

But it was also noted that:

- “Now the mentality is that whoever stays at home will depend on you 100%. So the men think that if she works she will relieve them from their responsibility.”

However, it could depend on individual differences of the women involved. This divorced and re-married Emirati affirmed about her retired army officer husband:

- “If he wants to sit at home the whole day, doing nothing with his life, that’s fine, but I won’t.”

Other stories indicated a number of common challenges heard of but “not my case”. These are important to look at as they may hint at elements that were not disclosed as personal experience or that could indicate a bias in the sample of working women participating in the study. The “not my case” stories mostly revolved around women quitting a job because their husband requested it, or not being allowed to drive. It should be noted, however, that most of the participants had sisters who did

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5 The men in the study did not confirm this, which is not surprising as it is not socially desirable and would demonstrate their weakness. Of the male participants, one Emirati banker was married to a female bank branch manager and said that: “As long as she can manage with the children it is fine with me.” On the other side of the spectrum a colleague said “I am married with two wives, I have two children with one and the other one is pregnant now [Probed with the question whether his wives worked, he proceeded]…They do not work…I actually prefer that they do not work.” The three single Emirati men who were asked whether they would prefer their wives to work or stay at home, agreed that it would be up to them, it would be their choice.
not work, either because they were not interested or their husband would not let them. They also shared empowering stories such as the following, which I heard on several occasions from employees of a global bank.

- “This girl came into our boss’s office and she said she would have to resign because her fiancé would not let continue to work. The boss, [a senior Emirati lady] told her, ‘Well if he does not want you to work today, tomorrow he will not like it that you go out with your friends. So what will you do? Will you stop seeing your friends also? You should drop this guy and keep your job. He is not the guy for you,” she told the girl. However, the girl left her job with the bank and so it was. Six months later, however, she came back and asked the boss if she could have her job back because she realized that she did not want to marry this man…”

Coping Mechanisms

With respect to coping with these challenges, the discussions revealed a number of patterns, which included: studying to fill the gap of childbearing years, use of extended family and domestic help, preferring to work in the public sector, considering setting up one’s own entrepreneurial activity, and adopting a “shadow leadership” style.

1. Further Education

While being highly qualified may limit a young woman’s wedding options, once married, pursuing one’s education becomes a welcome possibility. With domestic help and extended families available, and higher education sponsored by the government, many Emirati women decide to continue their education while caring for their newborns. Husbands appear to be supportive of this strategy. In this way the
woman is not considered a working woman, which could be negatively regarded, but still has an activity to keep her busy.

• “I love to be busy. I will always continue my studies.”
• “I cannot be full time at work, but I can study at home.”

2. Extended family and domestic help

Although the availability of extended family is often lauded, stories of too much interference were also frequent. Support from extended family comes at a price, and instrumental support may be overshadowed by its emotional toll. Domestic help, while readily available, raises many concerns in terms of quality of care, trust and cultural influence. Therefore, as with extended family, ambivalence dominated the discussions when it came to housekeepers and nannies.

• “I leave the baby with my mother, but she keeps calling me at work to complain that he is crying and not feeding well. It makes me feel guilty, but I cannot stay at home, I have to work.”
• “My family often tells me, ‘Why do you do this to yourself? You do not enjoy your life. You never have time to stay with us.’”
• “We need the support from the government like day-care initiatives, because leaving the kids with the maid is a problem.”

3. Public Sector Employment

Many sought financial security and stability in their jobs but felt that in the long run they were losing their passion and motivation. Although many considered public employment to be less interesting, Emirati women clearly agreed that public sector employment was preferable, as benefits were substantially higher and working hours considerably lower, typically ending the day at 2pm.
“In the private sector you have to work more and you are paid less. You also have less benefits and holidays.”
“In the private sector there is more competition. Government is more secure because a private company can fail, plus you get more benefits.”
“If I could, I would change to the government even for a lower salary.”

This coping mechanism could be seen as similar to Western women considering part-time employment, foregoing better career options on the full-time track. However, financially they would not have to make any sacrifice, which suggests a flaw in public policy as there is indeed no incentive for Emirati women to work in the private sector.

4. Entrepreneurship

Public sector employment regulations allow mothers to retire after 15 years of service with a generous retirement package. These funds could then be used to start up one’s own entrepreneurial activity, a dream several of the Emirati study participants appeared to share.

“I love interior design, but now in my government job I miss the creativity, so I try to do small projects for myself.”
“After 10 years of service I will resign and open my own business.”
“After a couple of years I may want to take the backseat. I think I have reached a high enough position. The higher you get in the hierarchy the crazier it becomes… my kids never see me… so either I will go for something less or…I will do something on the side.”
“I still want to have my own business, because it is easier, you are flexible and you can work from home.”

Entrepreneurship is not only well regarded by women but also by men. It appears that in entrepreneurship women need to be less careful about the ‘modesty’ issue: starting
one’s business tends to be seen as an activity to keep the woman busy and is not necessarily equated with an official position or a stable revenue generator, which is traditionally a male role.

- “My sister-in-law is always complaining that her husband will not allow her to work. She has her own business of Abaya’s but she would prefer to work in a bank like me. But I say: ‘You don’t know how lucky you are. You do not have a boss, you do not have to wake up early.’”

5. Shadow Leadership

Finally, the women participating in this study seemed to be skilled in influencing and navigating in their predominantly male environments, a style which could be qualified as “shadow leadership”. As none of these women had working mothers, role models were rare both in the family sphere and inside their organizations. As marriages are still often organized between families, choosing the right husband is often not an option, but many of these women were able to influence their husbands to accept their desire to work. Many affirmed that it depended on the women herself:

- “I am actually very strong in character, and he is very understanding - my husband is my best friend. He asked if I wanted to stay home and I said no. It was never an option for me to stay home. I worked until the day I delivered. I never stayed home.”
- “It all depends on the woman’s personality. When I first met my husband, he did not know I was working, that I am a manager and that I drive. He was shocked. You know in his village, most women are not allowed to drive. My mother was the first to drive. When I said I would not stop working, he thought about it and then he said: ‘Fine, no problem.’”
- “We have a saying that goes: It depends on what you make your husband used to! I totally believe in that.”
- “You have to learn how to bend with the wind.”
Conclusion

Our findings indicate that Middle Eastern women working in the UAE have challenges that are largely similar to their counterparts elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, they also seem to face challenges that are particular to the region, such as the pressure to raise a large family, and the need to contribute financially to the household while not overshadowing the husband’s contribution. The data collected also showed some interesting patterns of coping mechanisms, such as further education, public sector employment and contemplating the option of self-employment. It is particularly clear that women are strongly committed to their careers and personal development, but even more so to their families. The study also reveals that the challenges faced by expatriate women may be different from those of the Emirati nationals. Leadership development programmes for women in the region could benefit from taking note of these different challenges and learn from the ways women are currently coping with them. Leadership development should especially focus on influencing and coaching skills. Indeed, women leaders could exert a great deal of influence by developing others according to their vision, with the use of subtle influencing tactics and adopting a “shadow leadership” style which may be more appropriate and effective in a Middle Eastern context.

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