

Full Length Research Paper

Women-only Leadership Positions in the Middle East: Exploring Cultural Attitudes towards Syrian Women for Sport Career Development

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Based on the gender ratios in the leadership positions of general sport organisation in Syria, this article aims to explore the reasons behind the low level of women in sport leadership positions. Leadership training used in the general sport organisation in Syria for high-skilled leaders serves to understand the how individual leaders develop in sport bodies, but it fails to explain the reasons for the low level of women in senior sport administrative positions. In this study, I attempt to analyze the cultural aspects to find out: the nature of challenges surrounding women's career development; and how Syrian women learn and develop within the institutional-cultural context of Syria. Data were collected by semi-structured interviews with ten Syrian women leaders: eight from sports governing bodies, one from the National Olympic Committee, and one from the high executive committee. Implications for addressing the challenges for the low level of women in top management in Syrian sport are outlined.

Keywords: national culture, leadership, development, Syrian women, and sport.

Introduction

The term 'dominance' is an important issue in social interactions (Gifford, 1991; Wiggins, 1979) and the emergence of dominance hierarchies in small groups is well documented (Bales, 1950; Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). Although some studies have mainly focused on how dominance hierarchies are formed (Mazur, 1985; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986), there is little research on the implications for Arabic culture on genders in order to address the reasons of the low level of women in senior sport administrative positions. The topic of gender in leadership is a renewed subject, at the very least, in the Arab world and in the Middle East region. This might be because gender is a sensitive issue in leadership and in these regions from different perspectives: religious, social, economic, and political views that constitute the motor nerve of daily life. Consequently, considering women in leadership and its development requires taking into account privacy in the local context in general and religious and strict societies in particular. However, it is argued that women's labour is considered as a significant factor in economic growth in these regions (World Bank, 2006) because the Arab world has witnessed a resurgence of Arab women's activism in

leadership in different fields (O'Connor, 2010). This has increased the need for women's career development, which has become a real priority for policy makers and firms in the Arab world. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2005), the Arab region witnessed a greater increase in the role of women in economic activities than other parts of world between 1990 and 2003. In Syria, as well as in other Arab countries, the increasing participation of women in the labour market and their career development has been fully attributed to politically led nationalisation strategies. However, it should be further noted that although modernisation has assisted changes and development in economic and social contexts across all Arab countries, the institutional-cultural context continues to be a great challenge for Arab women (Alajmi, 2001). For instance, Wilkinson (1996) found that Emirati, Omani, and Bahraini women in top leadership positions face discrimination at work, cultural barriers, and lack of trust in their leadership. Similarly, Al-Suwaihal (2010) found that Kuwaiti women leaders have reached various leadership positions, but cultural difficulties are still the main challenges in most leadership positions. This is because males still dominate most leadership

positions in all professions and have the ability to influence their surrounding social network more than women do. When discussing the level of women in leadership positions in international sport organisations, it is noted that sport leadership positions are still dominated by men and this seems to be a global phenomenon. According to the International Olympic Committee, the proportion of women in leadership positions was supposed to be 10 per cent, but this proportion was not achieved in practice because there were only eleven women among 126 members to represent their national countries on the International Olympic Committee. This weakness seems to be a global phenomenon in the sport discipline.

Context of the Study

It is noted that organisations, regardless of their type, state, or for-profit and non-profit sector, rapidly pay attention to human resource development including leadership by increasing the development budgets for training and development and for designing leadership development programmes in order to develop leaders, but these efforts are still not enough for applying effective and successful leadership development and the efforts placed for developing leaders across all leadership positions are seen as one of the most critical barriers in this regard (Madsen, 2008). Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin (2007) claim that because leadership development has implications for three interconnected categories of the field of human resource development – career development, training and development, and organisation development – the strong application of leadership development separates between organisations that take into account the challenges of their internal and external environments and other organisations that do not take such issues into consideration. In this vein, it is argued that to ensure the outcome required by leadership development, a successful, comprehensive and global approach to organisational leadership development intended to foster an understanding of the uniqueness of experience and environment, maintain a focus on cultural heritage and organizational future, and adapt the leadership model and approach is required (Weir, 2010). However, in some countries, such as an Arab context in general and Syria in particular, these efforts are only in their infancy.

Syria is one of the key countries in the world because of its historical legacy, religious legacy, geographical location, tourism features before the political and religious conflicts began in 2011. Although Syria has witnessed new changes in all aspects of life since the 2000s, scholarly research on Syria and its people is difficult to find. More specifically, research focused

on sport and leadership development and gender in that country seems to be almost non-existent, and there is no evidence of existing research on the development of women sport leaders. At the same time, a number of scholars have observed that there are few empirical studies that address the key themes and problems around women's leadership in developing countries, and the Middle East region in particular (Al-Lamky, 2007; Madsen, 2010; Omair, 2010; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010; Yaseen, 2010).

It is noted that perceptual changes in Syria toward women for many decades have served to help women to compete with men strongly in all aspects of life: education and employment, not only in state and non-profit organisations supported or managed by governments, but also in for-profit sector organisations that have surfaced from all directions which has increased the opportunities to design, adopt, and implement leadership development for Syrian women leaders. Without doubt an understanding of the context in any country might help to design leadership development programmes that deliver the desired outcome, but without research that explores the influence of national culture on these women in career development, the application of leadership development will be questionable because one of the main implications of leadership development in the field of human resource development is career development.

This study begins by shedding light on the challenges for women leaders in Syrian sports of how to learn, and develop in terms of on-job training and off-job training for career development. Hence, the primary research question for this study is: What are the challenges to leadership development of Syrian women that influence the issue of women's representation within the highest ranks of Syrian sports? To address this problem, I conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with Syrian leaders in Syrian sports bodies and the national Olympic committee to investigate the reasons behind the low level of women in senior administrative positions in sport. I also wanted to understand the influence of national culture on attending training and development sessions. Identifying the leadership's needs requires an understanding of the context. Because developing leadership occurs as a result of the internal and external challenges that reflect the organisation environment, Hofstede's theory has provided a valuable theoretical lens to guide this research.

Hofstede (1980a) defined culture as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another' (p. 51).

Hofstede's framework, including data collected from forty countries, focuses on the range of norms, beliefs and value that together constitute a culture. He identified four dimensions: (a) power distance, (b) uncertainty avoidance, (c) individualism versus collectivism, and (d) masculinity versus femininity to which he subsequently added a fifth, (e) Confucian dynamism (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). The descriptions of these dimensions adopted by most scholars and researchers are as follows.

Table 1

Description of Findings Based on Hofstede's Dimensions

Dimension	Description and examples
Masculinity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family system determines the degree of parental support to their daughters. 2. Family system is influenced by geographical location of family home. 3. The location of the family home had implications for the equity between boys and girls. 4. The low level of women in academic field influenced their performance in teamwork.
Power Distance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Patriarchal system of family makes male the second leader in the family beyond paterfamilias. 2. Mother in a masculine job did not have influence at home. 3. Ignoring women opinions in most sport meetings even for issues related to women's sports. 4. Male leaders refused all forms of criticism by women. 5. Male leaders did not accept working under female leadership. 6. Ignoring the privacy of women. 7. Promoting the belief that women must do what they are asked to do.
Uncertainty Avoidance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of stability. 2. Political conflicts altered to religious conflicts had impact on women career development. 3. Merging between religious bigotry and jobs by men. 4. Keeping women from any leadership role due to security reasons. 5. Difficulties for women's daily attendance at work. 6. Difficulties of attending weekly and

monthly meetings across all Syrian cities.

7. The common tendency for most women was to overcome the crises, rather than the desire for career development.

Individualism-Collectivism

1. The lack of collective culture of learning from academic early stages.
2. The use of autocratic thinking rather than distributed leadership.
3. Demonstrating women as a passive element in collective meetings because of resisting culture of sharing ideas and opinions.
4. Self-development was as a result of the lack of collective culture for learning and completing the tasks required.
5. Self-learning is still seen as uncompleted efforts of women.

Power distance. This refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. In low power distance organisations, a flat organisational structure seems to be more common. Countries that value low power distance are Denmark and Austria. In high power distance, there is a clear line between leaders and followers because of the hierarchical structure adopted. Countries that value high power distance are Arab countries, Malaysia, and Panama (Hofstede, 1980b). It may be stated that discussing this dimension in developing countries, such as Arab world, suggests that power distance is related to the norms of acceptable work-related behaviours because the Arab world considers women as *less than* compared to their counterparts males. For example, Luthar & Luthar (2002) found that women in low managerial positions in high power culture are accustomed to their leaders' sexual behaviours; and they illustrated this behaviour, acting as a legitimate exercise of power by those leaders. In a similar vein, previous research examined how men's perceptions of power distance and levels of social dominance orientation interact to influence perceptions of women as managers in egalitarian and non-egalitarian countries. The findings revealed that high levels of social dominance orientation in college men was negatively related to a favourable attitude toward women as managers in the USA and Kuwait. It was also found that perceptions of power distance moderated the relationship between social dominance orientation and attitudes toward women as managers in Kuwait, but not in the USA (Aneika, Duffy, & Hamad, 2012). This may shed light on the nature of challenges that face women's career development.

Uncertainty avoidance. This deals with rule orientation, stress, and employment stability. In low uncertainty avoidance, there are few rules and high tolerance for deviant and innovative suggestions. Additionally, organisations tend to have a transformational leadership role. For instance, Singapore and Jamaica were examples of low uncertainty avoidance. High uncertainty avoidance refers to many rules, resistance to change and low tolerance for deviant suggestions to reduce uncertainty, lack of confidence and belief in members' leadership abilities, and rationality by using a vertical style of leadership. In this regard, Greece and Portugal were examples of high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980b).

Individualism-collectivism. This refers to the degree to which people characterise themselves and their group/organisation. In high individualism, a culture has ties between individuals that are loose because the individual tends to care about self-actualisation; in low individualism, a culture has individuals who are integrated into strong in-groups and extend their families, which continue protecting them in exchange for loyalty (Hofstede, 1980b). This may suggest that societies in which women's rights are neglected, and women seek for career development attempt to show individualised behaviours. This may be supported by previous research by Shafiro, Himelein, and Best, (2003). The findings of this research revealed that although correlations between individualism/collectivism and gender attitudes were not statistically significant, there was a tendency for individualism to be associated with liberal gender attitudes in the USA.

Masculinity. This is the extent to which the leading values in a society are distributed between masculine and feminine. In a high masculinity culture, few women can reach top management level; but in a low masculinity society, women have more opportunity, similar to men (Hofstede, 1980b). King (1995) argues that there is a relationship between leadership and masculinity. He suggested that women must prove their masculinity to be accepted as leaders, as Halberstam (1998) put it that 'female masculinity has been situated as the place where patriarchy goes to women on the female psyche and reproduces misogyny within femaleness'. However, although women managers were called the managers of the twenty-first century (Schwartz, 1992), it is noted that only 42 women have been presidents or even prime ministers and 50 per cent of those women came to office in the 1990s (Adler, 1999).

Confucian dynamism. This refers to long-term versus short-term orientation. Short-term orientation

refers to past and present-oriented values such as respect for tradition and habits, personal steadiness and stability; and long-term orientation refers to future-oriented value such as perseverance, thrift, and ordering relationships by status (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Hofstede (2001) suggests that individuals in long-term orientation emphasize the development of social relationships, draw a high level of satisfaction from daily human relations, and link between family and business issues; while individuals with short-term orientation often emphasise the short-term results, draw less satisfaction from daily human relations, and separate between family and business issues. This dimension was illustrated through studying gender differences in the long-term and short-term goals and life plan that might be influenced by national culture characteristics. For example, evidence from a variety of research suggests that women pursue a diversity of goals compared to men. This result may reflect the nature of changes in women's role in Western culture. However, this tends to be questionable in societies which lack any form of changes in action regarding women's role. This is not because women fail to pursue a greater diversity of goals compared to men, but such factors as security, religious bigotry, and family system may be the reason of the lack of women career development

Sivakumar and Nakata, (2001) have criticized Hofstede's (1980a) work because of a set of weaknesses summarised as follows: it reduces culture to an overly simplistic four- or five-dimension conceptualization; it limits the sample to a single multinational corporation; it fails to capture the malleability of culture over time; and it ignores within-country cultural heterogeneity. Although researchers have criticized Hofstede, they still favour this five-dimension framework because of its clarity and resonance with managers. Accordingly, there is a practical need in the literature at this time for a comprehensive discussion of ways to improve the use of Hofstede's framework.

Hofstede's Culture Theory has been used in a multitude of studies with different types of participant. Kirkman, Lowe, and Gibson (2006) reviewed 180 studies published in 40 business and psychology journals and two international annual volumes between 1980 and 2002 in order to consolidate what is empirically verifiable about Hofstede's cultural values framework. A variety of samples were utilized and classified by three levels of analysis, whether individual, group/organisational, or country, some of which included: change management (Eby, Adams, Russell, & Gaby, 2000); conflict management (Oetzzel, 1998; Smith, Dugan,

Peterson, & Leung, 1998); decision-making (Steensma, Marino, & Weaver, 2000); human resource management HRM (Earley, Gibson, & Chen, 1999; Ryan, McFarland, Baron, & Page, 1999); leadership (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Pillai & Meindl, 1998; House et al., 1999); work-related attitudes (Thomas & Au, 2002; Spector et al., 2002); entrepreneurship (Morris, Davis, & Allen, 1994; Thomas & Mueller, 2000); and social networks (Manev & Stevenson, 2001). Although Hofstede's culture theory has been used as a theoretical framework for a variety of studies in a multitude of countries, to date no research has been published on Hofstede's culture theory being utilized as a basis for research in sport leadership development within the Middle East. In these countries, there is a need for understanding national culture for explaining the challenge toward women in their opportunity structures with sport organisations.

However, although general sport organisation in Syria supports women leaders, anecdotal evidence has suggested that national culture threatens many women's career development in leadership in Syrian sport. It is worth mentioning that previous sport management literature has discussed women's career development, growth, and their opportunity structures with sport organisations. For example, researchers such Knoppers (1992), Burton, Barr, Fink and Bruening (2009), Deal and Stevenson (1998), Inglis, Danylchuk, and Pastore (2000), Cunningham, Doherty, and Gregg (2007), Pastore, Inglis, and Danylchuk (1996), Sagas and Ashley (2001), Sagas and Cunningham (2004), Sartore and Cunningham (2007), Schein (2001; 2007), August and Quintero (2001), and Yiamouyiannis and Osborne (2012) have all examined the experiences of women in leadership positions, but none of them has mentioned women's career development and their opportunity structures within sport organisations in unstable environments. Consequently, to date no research has been published on Hofstede's culture theory in order to explore opportunity structures of women with sport organisations in unstable environments.

Many studies in the literature do propose that there is a dynamic interaction between culture and leadership development in the country of this study. For instance, Weir (2010, p. 220) argues that before putting energy into seeking the answer of how to develop leaders, successful leadership development needs to identify the cultural nuances that exist in the Middle East; and to understand the leadership needs in the context of factors that contribute to shaping Arab organisations into what it is today (Weir, 2010). Mabey and Finch-Lee (2007) stated that a culturalist perspective, best associated with the work of

Hofstede (1980), is a promising source of explaining leadership development. Although the main purpose of this study was to use Hofstede's culture theory in order to explore the challenges to women's career development, and to understand how Syrian women learn and develop with the institutional-cultural context of Syria, it is worth mentioning that there is relationship between understanding leadership needs and national culture for designing or implementing effective leadership development, which is one of the main issues required for career development.

Research Methods and Design

The notion of gender and leadership has attracted attention in most academic disciplines including sport, but this attention is still lacking in some countries and clusters because of institutional-cultural contexts. In this regard, qualitative research was adopted for this study to explore in-depth the nature of this problem in a particular country. The purpose of this research has required understanding participants' views regarding the challenges facing their career development. In this vein, Klenke (2008) states 'qualitative methods produce a wealth of detailed data about a small number of people and cases; they provide depth and detail through direct quotation and careful description of situations, events, interactions, and observed behaviours. Consequently, qualitative analysis involves the non-numerical organisation of data in order to discover patterns, themes, forms...' (p. 33). As the goal of this qualitative research design was to gather descriptive data, which reflect the experiences of women leaders in Syrian sport, a phenomenological approach, in particular, guides the design of this study (Wolcott, 2009), because qualitative research can capture cultural values in interviews using qualitative content analysis to characterize culture at the individual or group/organisational level. Sample size in a phenomenological study may vary from 2 to 25 (Klenke, 2008), so the sample of 10 participants is accepted in this study. Phenomenology attempts to understand the world from the point of view of the women leaders in Syrian sport directly involved in the social process, which leads to a 'deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences' (Van Manen, 2001, p. 9). It is worth mentioning that as phenomenology is essentially the study of lived experience, it refers to the world as lived by an individual, not the world or a reality as something separate from the individual (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989).

Using culture as a source for explaining the challenge of career development suggests that a phenomenological approach serves to provide deeper understanding of the challenge of women in their

career development. Indeed, a descriptive phenomenological approach is used in this study because little is known about an issue, and the aim of the study is to make clear and understand the most essential meaning of a phenomenon of interest from the perspective of those directly involved in it (Giorgi, 1997).

Selection Criteria for Participants

Selecting appropriate individuals to this study has been based on specific criteria. I visited general sport organisation while I was collecting my doctoral data in Syria. This helped me to get access to further leaders by using my relationships. In this regard, my visiting general sport organisation purposed interviewing all women who had managerial roles. As a result, only ten women leaders were identified for my research because they were the only women who had managerial roles in Syrian sports organisations. Although the final result from phenomenological approach research is characterised by the limited number of interviewees, it is characterised by its exploratory nature and the new knowledge that surfaces.

Research Interview Protocol

Data collection was conducted between 26 July and 24 December 2012 by in-depth one-hour interviews with women leaders in Syrian sports on general sport organisation in Syria. The interview guide helped to organise the interviews through dividing each interviews into two parts. The first part included introductory questions to reinforce the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Musselwhite, Cuff, McGregor, & King, 2006). The second part included the key research questions that were designed based on culture theory. The first interview was utilised as a pilot test to ensure that the questions required would be the same; there was no modification (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, & Sparkes, 2001). All interviews were audio-taped for later transcription. All women leaders in Syrian sport had similar leadership roles and responsibilities.

Data Analysis. The transcribed raw data has been read many times in order to ensure full understanding of the nature of the collected data. More specifically, the nature of challenges accompanying women in sport career development and leadership in particular in the Middle East context is scarce. This required utilising a thematic interpretational content analysis for this study because this approach is appropriate to understand the nature of the challenges surrounding women to reach top management levels in sport (Gibbs, 2010). This was followed by data analysis

steps summarised by Gratton and Jones (2010). The first step was data reduction that included extracting raw data themes relating to sport career development and the influence of national culture surrounding women in general sport organisation from each interview. After that, I identified quotes that belong to the common themes and categories, which were classified as low-order themes. Then all low-order themes were combined and compared to identify high-order themes. This was followed by also comparing all high-order themes to identify general dimensions (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Jackson & Baker, 2001). As a result, this served to build a collective picture from the experience of each woman leader about the topic. At the same time, the leadership and culture literature has clearly dominated the data analysis, and this was evident when the naming of the low-order themes, high-order themes and general dimensions was correlated with perceptions from national culture literature to serve sport literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Young & Atkinson, 2012).

Trustworthiness and Validity

In relation to credibility, first, this study utilised data about the same topic through recording the interviews, and using interview forms with written details about each question. Second, the researcher consulted with colleagues about some legal and ethical matters, especially as data was collected in a culture sensitive to women's issues; third, I asked some academic staff to check the information collected and the conclusions drawn because this allowed the researcher to analyse their comments and suggestions to build stronger conclusion based on many views of different academic staff on the same data. This would help to provide strong conclusions and suggestions about the topic. However, it should be further noted that because the author came from the same country and is aware of the local culture of the country chosen for this study. The analysis results were sent to one of the participants who had a long history in leadership positions, and also two academic staff in the UK. This study achieved dependability as all interviews were conducted in the same setting by using the same research questions with all participants; the same rules and steps concerning categories and coding were consistently applied; asking one woman leader who was selected for her feedback because of her long experience in Syrian sport. This study achieved confirmability through interview notes with all participants and transcriptions of all interviews that would allow other investigators to pursue the chain of evidence. In relation to transferability, although the purpose of this study is not to generalise the findings,

transferability is possible because this study contributes to existing theory on the phenomenon of women in sport leadership positions via the description of this research process, especially when readers determine whether the findings of my study could be applied to different settings.

Findings

The inductive approach of the study helped to understand the nature of career development taking place in general sport organisation in order to explore the challenges for opportunity structures of women with sport organisations, and how they learn and develop in unstable environments because of culture sensitivity. Especially, this approach was based on the conceptual framework and the research questions of this study.

What are the challenges surrounding women's career development?

Education

The low number of women in the academic environment. Given that the number of universities operating in both state and private sectors is rapidly increasing across all Syrian cities, the number of students is still increasing, but the number of female students is still low and varies between schools and between universities. This was reflected in the capability of female students to learn in an environment characterised by its masculinity; or at least the leading character of the schools or collective projects in universities is masculinity. In this regard, all participants, except three, agreed that the academic environment at undergraduate level was not seen as a stimulating learning environment. One participant indicated:

when I was an undergraduate, we used to do projects in teamwork or groups, but the problem, for me like any other woman, was that each team contains at least five males with only one female. In fact, I was uncomfortable. Indeed, the education system did not support us as women to learn effectively and comfortably (M1).

One participant shared this story:

I failed once submitting a collective assignment with other three students in my team because I could not communicate with them at any time and my family did not allow me to go out anytime I wanted.... Although I submitted my own assignment, it was rejected because of being a collective task. Indeed, the tutor did not understand that I cannot meet with my colleagues based on their time

because of being a woman, so he supported my three colleagues' attitude, and then I was the loser (M9).

It is found that leadership training and development is still a new trend in Syria in general, so theoretical background regarding the concept of leadership development in the academic study was the essence of career development. In this regard, it should be noted most women who seek career development based on their theoretical background in leadership are much better than their male counterparts, but the problem is that not all women are able to cover all their roles in any managerial positions because of their commitments to either family or husband. One participant stated:

I have a masters degree in sport management that supports my opportunity for managerial positions. But I cannot commit for a long time, such as attending regular meetings in the 14 Syrian cities. So men tend to have more managerial positions than we have (M2).

Patriarchal System

The structure of family for preparing women.

Although Syrian family, school, and society tend to look at both genders in the same way, the traditional rules, which relate to habits, traditions, and social norms, make male members the second leader in the family after the paterfamilias. In this regard, strict rules are applied with regard to sisters' behaviours. In other words, a brother can practise his leadership more than his sisters. One participant stated

I have no right to argue with my dad or brother regarding going out and spending my whole day outside the home; however, I registered on different management courses, but I failed to attend because most of these courses took place at night and my brother and dad do not allow me to go out after 7 pm (M9).

One participant observed:

My family is big because it includes 9 members as well as my dad and mom, so equity among all brothers and sisters is difficult because the priority is for brothers. What I want to say, my salary from my own career is not enough to cover my personal needs, ... and my family cannot help me support my leadership training (M9).

In a similar vein, one participant stated:

...my mother's job requires a strong personality because she is an officer in the military, but when she comes back home, she

turns to her traditional role as mother because my father is the lord of this home and he makes the final decision-making. Indeed, this is the same when I come back home because I had other responsibilities towards my husband. So I make a balanced relationship between job and home because I want to avoid all forms of argument with my husband regarding my home responsibilities (M4).

Another participant stated:

I left my job once because I had a serious argument with the head of our governing body. The reason is that he designs and identifies the training needs of our female team without taking into account that our female team has its own requirements that must be understood and discussed seriously with women, at least to run correctly (M6).

Refusing Criticism

Monopoly on managing internal and external affairs. The ten participants demonstrated a kind of disappointment because of the low level of women in leadership positions despite their high qualifications and performance compared to their male counterparts. Women were ignored and avoided for most managerial roles. Indeed, their disappointment manifested clearly in the examples presented by the participants. One participant said,

It is not fair that men are our guidance regarding developing our development strategies and legislating the laws and the rules...etc. Let me explain it to you. The federation of women's gymnastics is controlled by a male leader, and our participants in all championships are controlled by a male leader. There is not even any opportunity for negotiation (M7).

Another participant told this story:

Once one of our female champions was invited to participate in the World Rhythmic Gymnastics championship, but this player had a personal problem, which makes it difficult for her to participate. The head of our governing body attempted to find out all the details and the reason behind her apologies for participation, but it was embarrassing to this player. In this regard, we lack a female leader in the gymnastics governing body for females who understands such situations. But this leadership level has been controlled by men for the last 30 years

and we must accept all that we are asked to do in this federation (M8).

One woman had a sad story:

I worked in Olympic cities for 10 years, so I was selected to manage the Olympic cities across our country, but this raised a serious concern for different male managers of sport facilities in most of our Olympic cities because they do not accept working under female leadership and claimed that women do not have leadership capability; yes, I lost this leadership level, and when they selected a man for this position, all who opposed my leadership for this position acted to demonstrate their commitment to the new manager; even, the new male manager refused my criticism for any reason during our meetings because he had gained the others' trust and this is enough for him (M10).

Political and Religious Conflicts

Lack of stability and career development. The Syrian crisis altered from political to religious conflicts, which was reflected in all life aspects in Syrian society. These conflicts moved inside general sport organisation because these organisations contain people from all components of Syrian society. In this regard, leadership training workshops running in general sport organisation seemed to be useless. One participant said,

The political and religious conflicts affected the outcome of our training because of the merging of training inside the organisation with religious conflicts, which led to conflicts among participants, especially women because these conflicts had a religious character, which minimizes the effectiveness of leadership training and makes learning in an unstable environment more difficult (M1).

One participant stated

a leadership role at general sport organisation requires attending most of the events that occur here at any time. Well, however, this is not possible for me as a woman because I am living in one of the hot areas that witnesses the fight between the Syrian Arab Army and terrorist groups, so for security reasons I cannot come to the federation on time or even attend daily, so I do not feel I can be effective in this task if it has been elected me... for security reasons (M2).

Another participant noted

some of our managerial meetings take place across all Syrian cities, even within the Syrian crisis. This requires travelling weekly to different cities, but moving from one city to another is not safe because of terrorist groups, so you might think that we would delay these meetings. Indeed, general sport organisation relies on regulation, rules and law to ensure its effectiveness. Otherwise the leaders will lose their positions with defaults on attendance. For me, as a woman, I cannot travel to different cities now because of the lack of security, so I avoid putting myself in this situation and do not want any leadership role in this federation because of the instability (M8).

One participant stated

In fact, I do not have the desire to seek a leadership role in this federation because we are struggling to survive and because of the violence and fighting among all components of Syrian society. All that we want now is to overcome this crisis in Syria and protect our families (M7).

Weak Outcome of Teamwork

Lack of collective learning culture. Although religious rules, family structure, and the nature of social relationships are all based on strong relationships among people, there is still controversy about this issue and an exceptional situation that affects leadership development and career development, as this quote illustrates:

when I was in the university, I did not like teamwork. Even sometimes we were asked to complete either practical or theoretical assignments, but I did not like it because in teamwork, I saw competition among students, the sensitivity to other behaviours and acts, feeling jealous and other issues among the team members, which did not support us to work or learn in teamwork (M1).

Another participant highlighted the relationship between team members in the meetings determining the annual plans discussing the annual budget. She stated

Yes, we meet in general sport organisation because we are members in the high executive committee to discuss our sport requirements as teamwork with regard to participating in internal and external championships, funding, training and development, managerial programmes, and many other relevant issues. What I want to say is although we meet to

discuss the above issues, we do not have the right to make decisions or to be active, especially, and the main active members are men and they think that the degree of mistakes for women must be zero, otherwise, we will lose our role (M5).

One participant stated

We achieve the results required through teamwork, but the reality is that we lack distributed leadership when working in teams because autocratic thinking is more common in our teams by certain men. Also, unwritten rules can be seen here. For instance, I should listen and accept other men's ideas, but I should not insist on my suggestions and ideas (M7).

Unequal Stimulation

Although General Sport Organisation of Syria is a non-profit organisation, its members are mostly volunteers because they are elected to their managerial positions in order to serve Sport as volunteers. In this regard, it is found that most external sport missions are supervised by a few men in each governing body and the national Olympic committee, which makes the desire for career development of women rare because of lack of stimulation. One participant stated

Most of our male colleagues in managerial positions select the individuals who will represent our sports missions. You know this organisation is a non-profit organisation, and thus there are no salaries for us, so we rely on the external missions of our national teams because it would provide us somehow some financial stimulus. But even this, it is controlled by men, which makes working for this organisation useless to me as a woman (M1).

One participant stated

...for me this is the last year in this federation because the result required of my voluntary period is finished, but I was met with nothing for this contribution regarding my future opportunity structures with sport organisations. Indeed, I am thinking to leave and continue my masters and PhD degree in the sport world. Then I will show my qualifications to all colleagues, particularly men (M3).

One participant indicated

Although we are all working in a non-profit organisation, there are differences between individuals regarding the stimulations and rewards, especially between men and women because the best external missions go to men and missions that lack financial benefits, such as local or regional missions, often go to us (M4).

How do Syrian women learn and develop within the institutional-cultural context of Syria?

Parental Support

Role of women within family frame. Although the family system mainly follows the social system used in Syria that follows habits, norms, rules, religion, and other sensitive issues that restrict behaviours, each family adopts its own system that differs from other families' system. In this regard, all participants confirmed that the family structure and the system used to guide the family is directly connected with the educational level of family members, the nature of their career, the geographical location of the family home, the number of family members, and the level of the cost of living. One participant stated

For me, my mom was the head of a primary school and my dad was academic staff in the university, so I learnt from their experience and try to compare this with my task in this organisation (M3).

Another participant noted

we used to live in different locations, some of them in poor areas, while others were in rich areas. Actually, this had positive and negative impacts on our family because living within rich areas that contain educated people, rich, friendly, easy going, and displaying good breeding of their children, influenced our family; yes, we cannot ignore their behaviours or rules because it is difficult to be a neutral element in this community; even if my dad was unsatisfied because of the exaggerated openness (M7).

Self-Development

Challenges for on-job training. Given that the general sport organisation is a large organisation of 26 governing bodies, the national Olympic committee, and the local executive committee in 14 cities, it fails to cover all individual requirements. In this regard, it should be indicated that the application of the questionnaire serves to highlight the weaknesses in the entire organisation because it is

found that it does not cover all internal stakeholders. This is likely to be because preparing and supporting women for managerial positions tend to be ignored. One participant stated

I found that the federation is implementing training sessions for specific subjects required for some individuals, especially men. This is the truth, because we do not hear how and why they adopt such training sessions. Yes, their questionnaire covers only some persons. I think some colleagues refuse giving managerial positions to women in this federation (M8).

Moreover, most women attempt to learn and acquire their knowledge to ensure they can take opportunities successfully. This manifested clearly through their efforts to develop their leadership capabilities by off-job training that enable them to learn and develop according to their own requirements; but self-development still requires further support to ensure its effectiveness. An example of this influential issue is

if we want to show that we are interested in managerial positions through off-job training, they will announce war on our attitude because women in managerial positions are simply not desired. But self-learning is not enough; we need additional support (M5).

This was supported by another participant who stated

...it is ridiculous to be like a thief, when I tell my husband about such a thing, because I feel that I stole something from others. However, all what I've been doing is just self-learning and development to have a high level of leadership someday. If I have the same support as my male colleague, I will be the best (M6).

Long-Term Purposes

Building experience for future opportunities. Given that women lack career development in the short term, it was found that women in general sport organisation seek to seize the opportunities when participating in external missions and conferences. One woman stated

...going abroad to participate in international conferences and giving sport presentations encourages me to nominate myself in future for membership of international sport organisation because there is no opportunity for career development and growth within general sport organisation in Syria. So I realized that going to international conferences

is not as easy as you think because they are mostly controlled by men in this organisation for social and power considerations. Thus, I do my best to exploit opportunities for the future (M2).

Another participant told an interesting story:

I participated in a conference on the Asian level four years ago and it was my first participation, after confusion about the person who would represent our sport federation. According to the conference agenda, I was given 20 minutes for my presentation. What I did was I merged between my presentation and discussing other issues and providing suggestions, acting as a golden opportunity in this conference, but it will not be repeated (M10).

Similarly, another participant noted

Because the only way to present myself to most heads of sport missions from all sport organisations around the world is to participate in international sport conferences, yes, this way helps me to be well-known; today, I have friendship with heads of many sport missions in Asia and other countries who support my membership of the Asian Olympic committee. Who holds Syria's seat in this committee: a man, despite the wishes this seat is held by a Syrian woman. As you can see, my opportunity tends to be in the long-term (M7).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover and understand the reason behind the low level of female participation in top management in general sport organisation by analysing the cultural aspects to explore the following objectives: the nature of challenges surrounding women's learning and development; and finding out how Syrian women learn and develop within the institutional-cultural context of Syria. The findings of this study suggest some initial evidence that national cultural aspects have affected women's presence in the top management in general sport organisation in Syria despite the fact that women have made a large effort to build their experience and knowledge in leadership for career development, and any other managerial positions in international sport organisations.

According to Collinson and Hearn (1994), the reason for differences between men and women is their diversity in relation to age, class, religion, ethnicity, bodily facility, sexuality, world view, region, nationality, appearance, paternal/maternal kinship status, leisure, occupation and career, size, and

propensity to violence. In this regard, the findings of this study support what Hargreaves (2003) noted in that the patriarchal style of family and society has helped men to dominate women socially, legally, and politically because this was reflected in the way in which women grow, learn, and acquire their personality. In addition, the norms, rules, and habits have encouraged men to control and restrict women. This is manifested clearly by the highly hierarchal management structure and network structure that determined the nature of relationships and the style of communication between women and men within the frame of the Syrian family, Syrian society, or in general sport organisation. This is similar, to a degree, to Harry (1995), Knoppers Bedker-Meyer, Ewing, and Forrest (1990), and Whisenant, Pedersen, and Obenour's (2002) findings that shed light on historical precedent in the context of sport and sport organisations which identify a masculine domain rich in traditions of power, monopoly, and aggressiveness. Similarly, it is found that although the government has made large efforts to reduce the gap between the sexes in its schools and universities. Demographic characteristics of both sexes are influenced by the education system that restricts female behaviour and act against teamwork due to the low number of women.

Moreover, it should be noted that the findings of this study suggest that a masculine domain, characterised by its autocratic behaviour, was the reason beyond the monopoly of decision-making by men, as well as refusing any form of criticism by women because women's leadership in general sport organisation is still perceived as a shame on men in the Syrian context. It is found that women in Syrian society are still restricted through the social construction that affects the nature of family policy, which was characterised by its patriarchal system of power, and this patriarchal system was seen as the key determinant of women's talent towards leadership. This was supported by the two opposite results with regard to the implication for patriarchal system of power on women by Bierema (2005), and Cooke (2009).

It is also found that uncertainty in the Syrian context, especially since the start of the political and religious conflicts, have acted to make the opportunity for women's career development in sport in general and in general sport organisation more difficult and rare. Furthermore, it is found that although Syrian society is characterised by collectivism, the desire to work, learn, and lead individually is still the common tendency of Syrians. In this vein, it is noted that women do not feel comfortable to learn in a frame featuring high masculinity, which demonstrates

women as a passive element despite their talent. Given that the lack of women's opportunities to learn and advance in general sport organisation through on-job training because of the dominance of men, women rely on self-development as a means to build their experience via off-job training. This manifested clearly in the strong efforts of women to build their experience for future opportunities in membership not only of local sport organisations, but regional, continental and international organisations. Additionally, it is found this was as a reaction to unequal stimulation between men and women at general sport organisation with regard to rewards, travel in sport missions, external conferences, and training courses.

Thus, research on Hofstede's cultural theory on Syrian women in workplace settings is suggested to extend this line of inquiry in other settings. As is noted, there is a relationship between national cultural dimensions and leadership development (Mabey & Finch-Lee, 2007; Gooderham & Nordhaug, 2002), and career development (Sparrow, 1996; Beauregard, 2007; Thanacoody, Bartram, Barker, & Jacobs, 2006); and thus the findings from this study support this statement.

Implications and Conclusion

Despite the fact that the findings of this study cannot be generalised across all women in sport organisations in Syria or any other organisations, it can be stated that the findings can provide some insight into Hofstede's cultural theory and the preferences of Syrian women. There is also an opportunity for future research to follow the findings in order to address other challenges facing young women who are looking for sport leadership positions in general sport organisation. Furthermore, the findings of this study serve to guide instructors and designers of leadership development programmes for women and men in general and in sport in particular to take into account the privacy rules of national culture for equal opportunity of men and women in leadership training and development in order to achieve the final objective and in turn career development.

The findings of this study have theoretical and practical implications. For instance, these findings add new insights into how women learn and develop for leadership positions, an area where there is a lack of research (e.g., self-development and role of family support).

In addition, this study contributes to the literature in the area of national cultural characteristics. In this regard, this study also contributes to the theories of convergence and divergence (Geppert, et al., 2002).

This study contributes to our understanding of the nature of institutional-cultural challenges surrounding women's career development in general and sport in particular in Syria, as well as the other countries in the Middle East. The findings of this study supported what has been termed as crossvergence (Ralston, 2008) because of the similarities between Syria and the other countries in the Middle East along with: a) the masculinity of Arab societies that forbid 'weak' women to find their opportunity in sport leadership; b) despite the fact that the Arab world is characterised by the desire to live in groups, selfishness tends to be a common characteristics in jobs, learning, and development; and c) lack of stability has negative implications for sport career development of women, whether young or those who have middle management positions.

In addition to the above, this study also makes a significant contribution to practice by uncovering that although women take part in leadership meetings, and training and development activities, their equal opportunities with their male counterparts are still questionable. It appears that when women in general sport organisation take any opportunity to participate in external activities, they try to find their own identity and build their leadership knowledge as a means for building their good reputation in a masculine world. Also, the findings revealed that young girls who struggling for sport leadership positions have few opportunities to develop leadership skills during their career in general sport organisation.

This study had an additional contribution through exploring that men mostly dominate women in most sectors and in general sport organisation specifically, in terms of decision-making and the lack of acknowledgement of criticism made by women. Also, the family system and policy are affected by the family size, home location, and educational level of the parents. This, in turn, had negative impact on the women's learning, thought, and growth.

This study makes an additional contribution to practice by shedding light on the ways utilised for learning and development by women in general sport organisation. The findings revealed that even self-learning tends to be influenced by men. This was evidenced when women are prohibited from developing their leadership skills, and exceeding the boundaries made them feel shame and confusion.

Future Research

The findings of this study suggested that addressing the low level of Syrian women in the top management in general sport organisation can generally begin only if women are given the same

opportunities given to their male counterparts. Also, if Syrians avoid combining the socio-cultural aspects and their jobs in most filed aspect in general and general sport organisation in particular, this may be the first step in the right direction to address the problem of the low level of Syrian women for sport leadership positions. This appears to be the key challenge to Syrian women both young women who are struggling for leadership positions in sports and those who have a specific managerial role for their career development in the top leadership position at national and international levels. The next step will be guiding academic research to investigate the problems of and solutions for women leadership needs in sports and shedding light on the future trends for women sport leaders in the Middle East. Furthermore, there is an essential need for activating hosting international sport events because this would help women to communicate, learn, and build their experience regarding international relationships. This might have positive implications for their performance locally. In addition, articles written about the experiences of women in leadership and managerial positions in the Syrian context in the Middle East that represent a combination of all directions, such as moderate secularism and religious societies, can be very useful for future efforts on various topics. The data of this study was conducted within the Syrian crisis; future research is recommended to collect data in a stable environment to compare the results with the findings of this study to investigate the differences.

Conclusion

As a result of all the above, the key cultural challenges of women for sport leadership positions were present when Syria was perceived as a stable country before its current political and religious conflicts. These cultural challenges were also seen as written and unwritten rules such issues as habits, traditions, norms, values, religious rules, and the family system. However, after the Syrian crisis started in 2011, the application of cultural unwritten rules was found to be evident after the political conflicts altered to religious conflicts, which gave all aspects of life a religious feature. In this regard, the cultural barriers for women in sport leadership positions were not born of the moment. It may be stated that the instability in the Syrian environment due to geopolitical changes were not seen as the reason for the low level of women in sport leadership positions; rather cultural issues related to Syrian society were seen as the key reason for the low number of women in the top management. The lack of opportunities of most women in sport led to the lack of sport career development; but this is not the

only reason because even self-development was seen as a prohibited right. Therefore, women, who had the opportunity to be in leadership positions in general sport organisation, have been improving their skills and qualifications by off-job training depending on their own efforts.

It can be stated that women in Syria, like any other country in the Middle East, have many challenges to reach the top leadership positions in sport due to national culture barriers that may be seen as an iceberg, especially for those who may not have a full understanding of this part of the world.

Limitations

It is worth mentioning that one of the main limitations of this qualitative research is that it did not adopt a quantitative design. The reason is simply because of the low number of women in general sport organisation. In this regard, the small sample size of this study limits the generalizability of the results to all of Syria, let alone other Arab cultures. Hofstede's research targeted a large number of countries among different clusters, but few Arab countries were involved in Hofstede's research in general, and no research was made into Syrian culture in particular. In turn, there is a need for further research in Syria, as well as research on Arab culture, that aims at identifying similarities and differences between women for leadership positions and their challenges and opportunities in the context of Hofstede's cultural dimensions within and between Arab countries. Future research into all aspects of leadership and culture in the Syrian context is recommended and needed—both quantitative and qualitative.

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Appendix A

Research questions

Interview Number: Date: Time:
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1. Organisational Profile:
 - 1.1. Name of the federation:
 - 1.2. Number of staff
2. Interviewee Profile:
 - 2.1. Name:
 - 2.2. Position and Responsibilities:
 - 2.3. Educational Level (which country):

BSc	BA	MSc	MBA	PhD
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Masculinity
 - 3.1. How do you describe the relationship between brothers and sisters in your family?
 - 3.2. How do you describe the relationship between your development and your family attitude? Why?
 - 3.3. From you experience, could you describe the extent to which the society in which you lived influence family behaviours? Could you give an example?
 - 3.4. How do you evaluate the differences between sport male leader and their counterparts' females? Why?
 - 3.5. Do you think that the inequity between male and female in education has implication on their talents? Could you give me details?
4. Power Distance
 - 4.1. How do you describe the influence of male leaders on your early career up to know? Could you give details please?
 - 4.2. What kind of influence do your family adapt to deal with your family members? And why?

- 4.3. How do you describe the relationship between male leaders and you in the affairs of your sport? Could you give me examples and details please?
- 4.4. From your daily experience, have you ever had different opinions, feedback, comments to your leaders? If yes, what happened? If No, Why did not?
5. Uncertainty avoidance
 - 5.1. Because of Syria crisis since 2011, how did this crisis affect you in your sport career?
 - 5.2. How did Syrian political crisis affect your participant in national and international events? Could you give me examples?
 - 5.3. What is the relationship between political and religion conflicts in Syria and internal relationship in your sport federation?
 - 5.4. Personally, have the internal and external challenges affected your future inspiration in Sport leadership role? If yes why? If no why?
6. Individualism-collectivism
 - 6.1. Do you prefer to work individually or collectively on any sport case, champions, decisions etc? Why? Can you provide more details?
 - 6.2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of learning and training individually and collectively? And which one helped to improve your leadership skills?
 - 6.3. How do you learn and develop for your sport career development?*

*This question was related to the individual or collectivism cultures that they prefer each participant.**
7. Confucian dynamism
 - 7.1. How do build your strategy for sport career development? Why
 - 7.2. How do you promote your talents to others?
 - 7.3. How do you convenience others by your sport leadership?

Appendix B

Table 2
Research Participants
General Sport Organisation

Division	Participants	Codes
National Olympic Committee	1. Assistant Manager of National Olympic Committee	M9
Badminton Federation	1. Manager of badminton federation	M2
Gymnastics Federation	1. Gymnastics assistant manager 2. Aerobics manager 3. Rhythm and dance manager	M7 M6 M8
Executive Office	1. International relations manager	M3

Basketball Federation	1. Secretary of basketball federation manager	M2
Olympic Cities	1. Executive manager of Dams Olympic city	M10
Sport for all Federation	1. Secretary of Sport for All federation manager	M1
Swimming Federation	1. Secretary of swimming federation manager	M5
