

## **Perspectives of Emirati Married Women in Higher Education**

### **Contact information for each author:**

Sumaya Saqr, M.Ed  
Emirates College for Advanced Education  
P.O. Box 126662  
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates  
**email address:** ssaqr@ecae.ac.ae - Corresponding Author  
Telephone: +971505628363

Lilly Tennant, Ph.D.  
Emirates College for Advanced Education  
P.O. Box 126662  
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates  
Email address: ltennant@ecae.ac.ae  
Telephone: +971508173572

Patricia Stringer, Ed.D.  
Emirates College for Advanced Education  
P.O. Box 126662  
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates  
Email address: gpstring@ihug.co.nz  
Telephone: +97125099999

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## Perspectives of Emirati Married Women in Higher Education

### Abstract

United Arab Emirates (UAE) women have enthusiastically taken advantage of the educational opportunities available for all after the discovery of oil. Their access to higher education has expanded considerably, opening new opportunities to them for participation and career development. This exploratory study has attempted to gain an insight into the challenges married female Emirati students undergo during their learning journey to pursue the Bachelor of Education teaching degree. The study also examines motivating factors and strategies, albeit individual and/or institutional serving as support factors. The research has been positioned within a socio-cultural framework of the UAE context. This article delineates the complexities of balancing married life juxtaposed with the demands of being a student teacher within a 21<sup>st</sup> century tomorrow's multicultural perspective school framework. The need for tertiary level supportive services empowering and inspiring these students is also discussed within the daily life family reality, community and society at large.

**Keywords:** *Higher Education, Women, Married, United Arab Emirates, Empowerment*

### 1. Introduction

The UAE, as an oil-rich country, has been greatly impacted by documented monumental changes. Oil and natural gas revenues have insured the creation of an extensive social welfare structure for the nation with a small population and enormous hydrocarbon reservoirs (Al Abed et al. 2007; & The World Bank, 2012). The UAE citizens are entitled to a wide range of adequate government benefits which provide equal opportunities and support for all at key stages of personal, educational, and professional life (Shihab, 1996). This is complemented by a spectacular environment with an endless growth agenda. In describing the scale of growth and the way people refer to the UAE, Bristol-Rhys (2007) explains, "It is almost impossible to avoid superlatives when writing about the changes that have occurred in this small country. Rapid, breathtaking, amazing, mindboggling, stunning and unbelievable have all been used to describe... the development that built the UAE so quickly" (p. 5). This reality has triggered the country to invest in education. Higher education in the UAE is geared to diversify the economy and reduce dependency on oil and gas. In 2010, the UAE appropriated 22.5 percent of its budget to education whereas the United States allocated 13 percent. The total number of higher education institutions in the UAE in 2010 has reached 95, of which three are federal and 92 are private institutions. Federal institutions serve about 36,700 students (40 percent) mainly Emiratis, while private institutions serve 54,500 students (60 percent) of both Emirati and expatriate students. From the 91,200 students enrolled in UAE higher education institutions, Emiratis make up about 11 percent (Ibrahim, 2011).

The major impetus behind this research study is to explore perceptions of motivating factors, challenges, and support strategies associated with married female Emirati students' progress while undertaking the B.Ed. teaching degree at a teachers college from the perspectives of the students themselves, their spouses, and the college student services staff. Challenges and support strategies are discussed in relation to the cultural context of the UAE society in addition to how these have been influenced by external determinants of educational and social changes. The results will not only attempt to contribute to the body of research in this area through a greater awareness of the contexts in which Emirati women find themselves, but will attempt to identify areas where further research and program development is needed to effectively meet their lifelong developmental needs.

In the sections that follow, we provide a literature review, describe the methodology and data analysis, present a discussion of our findings and offer suggestions for both program development and future research in the field.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Emirati women in focus**

Women in this part of the world have made rapid advancements in education. According to the UAE Cabinet (2012), the adult literacy rate among women (in the 15 plus age group) stands at 91%. This is comparable to most of the BRIC countries and is better than that of India and Brazil. The BRIC countries comprising Brazil, Russia, India and China have women literacy rates of 90%, 99%, 51% and 91%, respectively. Emirati females represent a better educated talent pool than the overall population at large. In the field of higher education, 77% of Emirati women go onto universities (Madsen, 2010) and form over two thirds of the UAE government university graduates (Abdulla & Ridge, 2011; Aswad, Vidican & Samulewicz 2011; UNESCO, 2009).

Crabtree (2007) notes, "academic studies do not appear to be taken for the love of learning solely, but rather that families view an education at this level as providing the final polish to a young girl's life, that marks her out as being successfully poised on the brink of adult life, commensurate with Islamic and cultural expectations of womanhood" (p. 577). She also states that although tertiary education for young Emirati females is flourishing and despite the rhetoric that encourages women to take their education to the workplace, it is evident that only a minority intend to use their acquired knowledge to pursue an active career upon graduation.

### **2.2 Social change, cultural demands, and the position of Emirati women**

The position of Emirati women has been traditionally dictated by religious, social and cultural norms. Girls, due to these traditions and customs, were brought up to be mothers and wives, instead of being encouraged to continue their education and to develop careers. As this has no longer been the case and women are now urged to get a higher education degree before marriage, there are still issues limiting women's career choices, such as limit on women's geographic mobility restricts the options open to them, concerning access to education and acceptable employment (Baud & Mahgoub, 2001). Additionally, Emirati women, just like their counterparts in different parts of the world, are confined in their employment options (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2004). Furthermore, there are specific professions, outside the familiar gender biases, regarded as unsuitable for Emiratis (e.g. personal service professions as those in hotel industry) and, in some situations, more so for females. Many Emirati women refuse to work in a mixed-gender environment, and prefer alternatively to work in female-dominated sectors, such as teaching, or opt to remain unemployed.

On the other hand, Abdelkarim (2001) denies the "common belief that National (Emirati) households are generally against their daughters' employment. Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam (2004) mentioned that the demands of marriage and child-bearing in the Emirati culture limit women's choices for higher education. They also note that "women in the region tend to give birth" (p. 5) within two years of marriage. Bearing children within the first few years of marriage is also a significant cause for women's decision to work or not, although Baud & Mahgoub (2001) state that the availability of domestic helpers facilitates women's access to higher education and labor force participation. Moreover, the culture of close family ties existing in the UAE means that the extended family plays a role in supporting student and working mothers (Ibid).

### **2.3 Emirati family**

Traditionally the UAE society, as part of the wider Arab Muslim world, has been characterized by close interpersonal relationships. The individual has a network of close ties including the nuclear family, relatives and close neighbors. The traditional socialization process emphasizes obedience, closeness and loyalty to parents rather than independence and self-reliance (Crabtree, 2007).

Despite the similarities across societies in family form, there are also considerable worldwide variations. The UAE society, like much of the world, tends to have an extended family, which consists of parents and children as well as uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews, cousins and grandparents. However, the nuclear family that is made up of the married parents and their biological children has recently become more common. As the number of nuclear families increases in the UAE, extended families are becoming less common. By helping out with household tasks and child

rearing, extended families make it easier for parents to study and work outside the home (Shallal, 2011). The Islamic law dictates that the husband is required to undertake the responsibility of fulfilling the financial needs of his family, including his wife. Most young women succumb to the cultural and social expectations of their families and their communities (Martin, 2003).

Within Islam, men and women are understood to be equal, but not the same. Moreover, they are seen as complementary with important roles defined to each based on their perceived strengths and weaknesses (Hashim, 1999). Economic prosperity together with an unbiased view on the part of decision-makers has provided women with the opportunity to devote their energies to education without having to think about the challenging demands of daily life. Moreover, the opportunities available to them in the field of employment have given women opportunities to reach excellence in different fields (Al-Awad & Elhilaika, 2002 pp. 38-39; & Al Orami, 2011).

### **3. Methodology**

A mixed method approach was the design adopted for this exploratory study on the basis that this would allow for triangulation, add to the robustness of the study and provide a more holistic picture of motivational forces, challenges, and support strategies from the perspectives of married female Emirati students, their spouses, and student services support staff.

#### **3.1 Context**

The setting for this research is a specialist teacher college in the UAE. It offers a four-year B. Ed. teaching degree in English as the medium of instruction. Emirati students are prepared to teach cycle 1 students (grades 1 to 5) a range of subjects including English and Math and Science in English.

The college Student Services policy applies to all students– married and unmarried alike (College Student Handbook, 2013-2014). It includes personal counseling, student orientation and student representation. In relation to issues of maternity care, married students are required to provide the college with early notification of their pregnancy and must return to classes no later than 2 weeks (10 working days) after their child's birth. The Student Services Department provides assistance with health queries relating to pregnancy and breastfeeding during college hours. At this college, childcare services are unavailable. Suspension of studies is permitted for all students commencing at the start of the first/Fall semester and concluding at the end of the academic year (i.e., the second/Spring semester). Under current arrangements, students can be granted suspension from their academic program for health or personal reasons.

#### **3.2 Participants**

##### **3.2.1. Married female Emirati students:**

They were initially identified through the college data base. Participating students were from all four year groupings. The total number of students enrolled in the college at the time of the study was 400 and of these, 122 were married. From a combined pool of 122 married students, 100 agreed to participate and complete the questionnaire. From this, a cross section of 30 participants from year levels 1-4 participated in the individual interviews. Over 50% were from Year 4, 10% were from Year 3 and 20% were from Years 1 and 2. Age ranges of participants are as follows: 20-24yrs – 60%, 25-30 yrs – 28%, above 30 yrs – 12%. Numbers of years married is as follows: 36% married between 0-2 years, 34% between 3-5 years, 10% between 6-8 years and 20% married more than 8 years. Choosing to interview students from different backgrounds was a strategy employed to capture the varied experiences of married students.

##### **3.2.2 Spouses:**

Demographic information about the spouses obtained from the questionnaire revealed that about 16% were between the ages of 21-24 years, over 54% were in the age range of 25-30 years, 30% were 30 years and above. In terms of employment, 83% were working in the public sector, 9% in the private sector, 5% self-employed and 3% were unemployed. With regards to the educational qualifications, 33% had a Bachelor's degree, 23% had a diploma, 34% had a high school certificate and 10% had not finished their high school. Individual Interviews were conducted with 30 spouses of the married students who participated in the study.

### **3.2.3. Student services staff:**

Three student support services staff members that participated in the focus group consisted of one nurse and one student counselor, and one student coordinator. All three had been employed at the college for over 6 years and were familiar with the college set up and the academic programs. Also, they were all Arab expatriates who have lived in the country for over 20 years. In addition, the student service head who is a westerner was also interviewed using the semi-structured interview format.

## **4. Data Collection Tools**

Data collection was undertaken in three main phases. First, completion of an online survey by 100 students was undertaken. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 married students and their corresponding spouses. Third, a focus group was conducted with 3 student services staff. The Head of Student Services was interviewed separately using the similar semi-structured interview format.

### **4.1 Phase 1: Questionnaire**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) informed the construction of the questionnaire. Bronfenbrenner highlights five socially organized subsystems that support and guide human development: microsystem; mesosystem; exosystem; macrosystem; and chronosystem. In keeping with this, the questionnaire sought to examine motivational sources, challenges, support strategies and future support possibilities at the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem levels.

To ensure validity and reliability, the questionnaire was piloted with 38 married female B.Ed. students from three different higher educational institutions in Abu Dhabi. Stringent ethical protocols were followed in the administration of the pilot questionnaire. Participant's data from the pilot survey were entered into an electronic file for analysis of reliability and trustworthiness of items in terms of internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of reliability for the question items in the survey was 0.814 indicating a high level of internal consistency.

The final survey questionnaire consisted of forty five items. It was divided into five sections: demographic information; motivational factors; challenges; supports strategies utilized; and future possibilities of support. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic and the final version was available in both English and Arabic.

### **4.2 Phase 2: Semi Structured Interviews**

One of the best ways to acquire information about an individual's thoughts, beliefs, reasoning, motivations and feelings is through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Such interviews allow the researcher to enter the inner world of another person to gain understanding from their perspective (Patton, 1987). In this study, in-depth interviews elicited depth of data (Denzin & Lincoln 2003; Hussey & Hussey 1997; Patton, 1990) as participants were encouraged to reflect, discuss and share their assumptions, beliefs, feelings and experiences motivational factors, challenges and support strategies. Thirty married female students followed by thirty male spouses were interviewed. An interview guide was used to steer the conversation. All interviews were conducted in Arabic and transcribed and translated into English.

### **4.3 Phase 3: Focus Group Discussion**

A focus group discussion was conducted in English with student services staff: the college nurse, one student counselor and one student coordinator. The semi-structured interview guidelines were used to facilitate the discussion. Participants got to hear each other's responses and made additional comments in connection to what someone else had said. This dialogue produced high quality data with respect to motivational factors, challenges, and support strategies. Additional information on how the college met the needs of married students was also gained.

The focus group discussion had several advantages. It triggered interaction and dialogue among participants (Morgan, 1997) with information on each topic overlapping rather than appearing discrete and compartmentalized. As a tool it provided a form of quality control as participants tended "to provide checks and balances on each other" (Patton 1990 p. 336). The focus group permitted participants a considerable amount of latitude to interpret issues according to their perspectives as student support services staff. This allowed similarities and differences in terms of opinions and experiences to surface which gave the data its richness and multidimensional quality. As topics of interest important to

the participants surfaced, it was fairly easy to assess consistency in terms of shared views expressed. For example, all participants expressed similar messages of how the college could actively support married students by initiating policy and structural changes. Advantages of the focus group far outweighed any disadvantages associated with time constraints, note taking difficulties, and conflicting points of view (Patton, 1990). The discussion was audio taped and transcribed by the researchers.

### **5. Data Analysis**

The survey data was entered into the eSurveysPro online software and responses tabulated electronically. Using descriptive statistics such as means and percentages, quantitative data was analyzed. Statistics were calculated for all questionnaire sections and subsections. The qualitative data was classified into themes according to the various sections. Interview data was coded and grouped into tentative categories and subcategories using the following process. For example, the first interview was read to establish data chunks related to reasons for pursuing the B. Ed. teaching degree, challenges encountered and support strategies utilized. This process was applied to other interview transcripts with the idea of determining similarities and differences related to challenges and support strategies. Once all the interview data was coded, a secondary analysis was conducted to confirm the categories and sub-categories that were established and determine which required moving and reconstructing as new perceptions and insights emerged. Inter-coder reliability was achieved by all three researchers working simultaneously with the data at all times.

Focus group data was analyzed in much the same way as that of individual interviews. Emerging themes were analyzed, removed, added or strengthened as the data analysis process proceeded. During this process of closely analyzing the data, sub-codes emerged which either substantiated the emergent themes, presented relationships or contradictory evidence (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

### **6. Findings**

This section presents and discusses the research findings from survey questionnaire, interviews and focus group discussion. The findings presented point to motivations to become teachers, challenges faced, support strategies utilized to deal with and respond to the multiple roles they experienced so as to get the degree, and the future possibilities.

#### **6.1 Motivations to become teachers**

The majority of the survey respondents (89%) strongly agreed that being an educated parent is the highest motivating factor encouraging them to pursue their teaching degree. Next, 84% strongly agreed that their motivation stemmed from a desire to extend their knowledge and experience capabilities. Over 82% strongly agreed that being a teacher meant they could contribute to society and honor their country. Over 75% of the married students mentioned that enrolment in this degree program had increased their self confidence, while 46% strongly agreed that teaching is a desirable occupation for women in their culture. Financial reasons were indicated by 45% as reasons for pursuing this degree. Peer encouragement accounted for 45% strongly agreeing that this was another motivating factor to pursue the degree.

The results of the in-depth interviews with selected students revealed that the majority of participants referred motivation to become a teacher to valuing education, wanting to be an educated woman, expressing a love of learning and teaching, and eventually wanting to be a successful teacher. Another motivating factor expressed by the majority of participants was the fact that the teaching profession is for women and is culturally accepted by their family. They claimed their spouse and parents preferred them to work in gender segregated environments. The majority mentioned that they would be able to teach their own children and their siblings as well as the future generations.

Spouses who were interviewed mentioned that they were aware of the importance of women's education. They believe this is true not only due to the fact that education is an entry point to other opportunities, but also because woman's educational achievements can have ripple effects within the family and across generations. They mentioned that education is essential for further successful living. They believe knowledge is power and the more one knows the easier getting the desired job is and consequently leads to a secure life. Several spouses stated that they inspired and motivated their wives to pursue higher education.

They also believe that an educated mother is better able to achieve her maximum human potential and raise her children to contribute to the overall development of their country. Becoming a teacher was also preferred by the majority as it is culturally acceptable and provides their wives the opportunity to work in gender segregated environments.

*I prefer a teaching job because I believe that she will teach generations, this is one point. The other point is the work atmosphere is suitable for her than other jobs and because of our culture, she would feel relaxed to work with females than males. This job will give her the chance to develop the children of this country and from the personal angle the school atmosphere is perfect for her, and in my opinion it is one of the best jobs.*

The results of the focus group discussion with student services staff also revealed similar motivating factors of valuing self-education and making contributions to family and society at large. One of the extrinsic motivating factors described by the student service staff was the freedom of having a job and the financial independence.

## **6.2 Challenges**

Participants clearly mentioned family and college responsibilities being major difficulties hindering their academic standing. Multiple non-college commitments and responsibilities interfered with their college work. Due to these responsibilities, the students expressed time constraints influencing their student academic status, perceptions, and ability to persist. They felt limited acceptability and support for their 'student' role status both on and off campus. Challenges presented relate to lack of support from spouse and extended family members, role conflict, and lack of college support.

### *6.2.1. Lack of Support from Spouse and Extended Family*

Survey results showed overall percentages representing the strongly agreed category as related to family aspects as challenges included the following: 53% commented that spending less quality time with their children was challenging; 52% claimed that spending less quality time with relatives and missing out on shared social life was a challenge; 50% responded that being a student meant having less quality time with their spouse; 39% found it hard to juggle family and study commitments. They said they were not fulfilling their role as wife, mother and daughter/daughter-in-law; 17% claimed that their extended family members did not offer support and this posed a challenge in terms of child care.

Data obtained from students' interviews revealed that they expected a great amount of consistent social support from their spouse and extended family members, however, many reported an absence and consequently the effects of stress of fulfilling college requirements were not buffered. There were students who confirmed modest amounts of social support from spouses. However, this vacillated or diminished as their 'student' role continued over time. One student mentioned: *My husband and my husband's family were not so encouraging to me. They do not understand my educational commitments.*

Student services support staff also mentioned that the students have issues with their spouses related to lack of mutual understanding and support during their course of study.

### *6.2.2. Role Conflict*

Although these married students were achievement oriented and motivated to succeed, they often had other roles and responsibilities competing for their time and attention. Students, spouses, and support staff reported that in addition to their role as 'student', they typically have roles that included wife, parent and family member. Most of the students reported their primary role was that of wife and parent and the role of student necessarily occupied secondary status. They believed that family, especially children, needed to come first, and their student obligations were met only after all other responsibilities were completed. As full-time students, they expressed vulnerability to the strain and conflicts resulting from multiple role obligations encountered. Perceptions of student demands followed by family obligations were the best predictors of role conflict and role burden:

*As a mother I am trying my best. As a wife I feel guilty because I had to ignore my husband most of the time, but I believe if the husband is supporting and understanding there will be no problems. I also feel guilty for my son who is in KG and needs my support.*

Many students reported they felt as if the work they are expected to do never ends and being frequently preoccupied with one role while performing another was stressful. In other words, if they were taking care of children and home

responsibilities, college demands were always present in their minds; conversely, while doing college work, they felt guilty about neglecting their children and household tasks. Some students reported that, at times, they felt that they did not perform any role adequately. Others reported that because their student role had a lower priority than family responsibilities, they often did not complete college assignments until their children and home responsibilities were met and this had ramifications: *Because of the pressure, I became careless as a mother and wife. I feel depressed because my son's achievement in Math differed negatively from when I used to teach him.*

### 6.2.3 Lack of Support from College

Over 70% of the surveyed students strongly agreed that the number of courses, limited flexibility to choose pathways based on need, and too many assignments per semester were challenging. Over 65% strongly agreed and 19% agreed that the college lacked facilities which limited its potential to service students' needs. In this regard they mentioned the need for a nursery. Over 59% strongly agreed that college policies related to maternity leave presented challenges. Over 45% strongly agreed they needed qualified counselors to assist them solve issues of a personal nature. In the college, delivery of the curriculum occurs in the medium of English and in this regard, 44% strongly agreed that learning in the English language was a challenge for all students whose first language is Arabic. In relation to college staff not understanding the home circumstances and family obligations of the married student, 31% strongly agreed that this was a challenge.

Students commented that they realized they differed from other unmarried college students and this led to remarks that they needed external and internal faculty and systemic support to successfully participate in and complete college requirements. The majority of students reported that a definitive communication gap between the college and the students proved to be a stress contributor. The absence of student counseling services contributed to the communication gap. Inflexibility in course scheduling was viewed by participants; students and student services staff, as another aspect making the college less attractive to the married students. The absence of course delivery options such as online courses, weekend/evening course attendance options and compressed courses were considered disadvantageous to the married students in giving them the freedom to schedule their time so as to accommodate family and college responsibilities.

Although the spouses acknowledged the supports provided by the college, the findings from their interviews revealed that the college should have better facilities particularly a childcare/nursery and have flexible options for the course delivery including timing. Also, special privileges to the married students with regards to attendance policy, maternity and submission deadlines for projects. One student quoted: *I suggest that the college recognizes and understands students' circumstances (i.e., married, mother or has a special needs child, etc.) and deal with them accordingly*

## 7. Support Networks for Emirati Women

Quantitative and qualitative data related to support networks indicated that support strategies were provided from their spouses, family members, and the college.

### 7.1. Spouse and Family

Students were asked to complete the demographic section in the questionnaire detailing types of family support available to them during their course of study. An analysis of the data indicates four main categories of support: financial; child care; home management; and emotional. In terms of financial support, participants said they received 40% assistance from their spouse; 16% from their fathers; 11% from their mothers; 10% from their brothers and the rest from extended family members. In terms of child care, 26% mentioned that their mothers assisted with child care duties. Mothers also provided emotional and moral support. Mothers-in-law and husbands contributed 18% each as far as child care was concerned and assistance from sisters worked out to 11%. Other members of the family provided minimal assistance.

Despite some evidence indicating that limited and/or sporadic support given by the spouse formed part of the challenges, a high response rate attested to spousal support to continue with their studies. All students participated in the



study claimed they had support from people employed by them or their extended families to take care of household duties.

All the spouses described themselves as 'supportive and empathizing' which have as many interpretations as 'commitment' or 'love'. Emotional support (listening and empathizing), esteem support (providing encouragement, expressing confidence), informational support (giving advice, gathering information), and tangible support (taking on responsibilities) were the kinds of support the spouses cited. Other mentioned gestures of support were help with the children, help with creating study spaces in the home, and help with studies.

Support from family members came from those in the home and also outside the home. Family members provided support voluntarily or the students asked for it. The spouses reported that their wives receive verbal support, financial support, and child care support from their family members. Family members understand the wives' time constraints. They prepared meals and assisted with whatever possible. Most spouses found their family members to be very supportive of their wives during their college studies.

*Actually we live with my family, so my parents and brothers and sisters help and support us so my wife could have enough time to study, also my daughter goes to KG in the morning, so we do not have any problem.*

The student services staff confirmed that the married students are well supported at home by their spouses and their husband's immediate and extended families.

### 7.2 College Support

Married students mentioned that some of the faculty members understood their family situation. They acknowledged that the student services staff was supportive of them when they had college or family related issues. All students at the college received a monthly stipend which extended throughout their academic years of study. However, only 27% strongly agreed that they benefitted from this amount of government financial support.

The majority of the spouses expressed appreciation for the kinds of support from the college. They were also impressed with what college offers their wives. Many spouses described their wives' college teachers and supervisors to be supportive of them during their years of study to get the degree. Gestures of support included verbal encouragement, nurturing and guiding.

The focus group discussion findings from the student services staff indicated that they provided support to students in matters related to academic and personal issues. They listen to their concerns, needs, requests, and try to meet their needs. The student services personnel identified themselves as advisors and counselors to the college students.

### 7.3 Future Support Possibilities

Employment as teachers in public schools was raised by students in terms of future possibilities. Over 43% strongly agreed that opportunities would be made available for them to be future teachers in the public schools. Over 48% strongly agreed that obtaining a teacher education degree would offer them better opportunities for career advancement. In terms of future support, changes to college policies were noted as important. For example, over 67% wanted policies to take into consideration the needs of married students. Possibilities for future support also included the need to provide alternative pathways for course delivery. For example, 50% expressed the need for distance education and a blend of online and face to face mode of curriculum delivery. Students' comments were positive in terms of undertaking their B. Ed teaching degree.

While these findings cannot be generalized, the study lays the groundwork upon which future research studies can be implemented, to look into and expand upon the important findings in this study. These findings on married students' experiences during their college learning journey will contribute to the existing research on resiliency and Emirati women in higher education.

## 8. Discussion and Implications

The young women in this study were achievement oriented and motivated to succeed. However, several common factors, in most role conflicts, occurring during their learning journey to pursue the B. Ed. teaching degree were cited. Strategies focusing on time management (prioritize, delegate, compartmentalize) were used to deal with their multiple roles. Feelings of guilt, stress, and exhaustion were common. The women depended on positive and affective support systems that included spouse, immediate and extended family, friends, domestic workers, and cohort members to deal with responsibilities of home and study. A strong sense of commitment, determination, enthusiasm, and spiritual faith was credited most often as the one thing that kept these women going as they responded to the problems, issues, concerns, and challenges of performing multiple roles in life and study.

This study sheds light on the motivations, in addition to challenges and supports, of Emirati women in pursuing higher education and found that higher education has become a social and familial trend as it was clearly expressed by many participants that parents expect their daughters to pursue higher education not only due to its accessibility but also its empowering young women to achieve greater social and economic progress. Mothers in particular advocate for their daughters to pursue higher education as a future insurance policy for education makes women less dependent on their spouses for financial support. Moreover, education enables women to seek employment to support themselves and their families in case of divorce or abandonment.

The qualitative analysis repeatedly pointed to the fact that, while students' personal interest in the field of study is of great importance in higher education choice, the power of the larger community, and also the family's approval, remain essential influences on all major decisions that women make. On the contrary, and based on the current findings, higher education institutions in the UAE do not generally involve families in their students' education process. This potentially exacerbates guardians' limitation in guiding their daughter's/wife's academic and career paths. It is also significant to note that, as a result of educational institutions not involving guardians in their daughter's/wife's education, female students were oftentimes prevented from engaging in extracurricular activities that may have enhanced their education, such as volunteering after hours, trips to conferences, networking events and clubs involvement. Parental/spousal involvement may impact Emirati female students enabling them to be actively involved in networking and educational events outside of school, particularly when families are openly invited to attend events with the students and persuasively informed of the importance of these events. Guardians are usually concerned that the activity provides 'a proper setting for their daughter/wife'. Hence, when guardians granted 'guardian permission', female students had a greater chance of participating in such activities and making educational choices closer to their interests.

The students in this study reported a moderate level of stress and a fairly high degree of resilience. They demonstrated that resilience was not only a powerful instrument to face adversity, but also their special way of living the learning experience. Resilience did not eliminate their risks and challenges, but it empowered them deal with them more effectively. It was about confronting risks and challenges in a new way, regulating stress and adversity and focusing on what they could gain from it rather than the opposite. Being resilient required them a conscious effort to go beyond previously defined limits within themselves, to consider their learning journey a tremendous opportunity for personal development.

Dealing with the multiple roles that married Emirati women experience in life and study and the effects of the problems, issues, concerns, and challenges resulting from role conflicts should not be a road traveled alone. To support women who pursue higher education, some kind of assistance would be helpful:

The following implications are based on the findings and conclusions of the study:

- Empowering married Emirati women by continuing to develop inclusive policies and procedures that are contextually and culturally relevant.
- Tertiary level institutions that enroll married female students need to conduct research from an ecological perspective to fully understand their role obligations in multiple contexts. Utilizing the data obtained, they need to make systemic decisions on what will empower these students to attain their degrees. A 'one size fits all' mentality will not suffice.
- Educating couples of effective coping strategies and various kinds of spousal support in addition to training of communication skills in couples to reduce stress.

- Providing facilities such as educational programs to empower couples (e.g., family education and stress management), increase students' self-satisfaction, and reduce life stress (e.g., flexible course schedules, course delivery mode, system (college) support, and child care facilities).
- Providing psychological and family consulting services at the educational institutions for the married students. Marriage counselors can also play an effective role in encouraging communication and support between these couples.

The results of the present study can be applied not only to improve the students' academic standing and increase their success opportunities, but also to improve their social health and family relationships (e.g., marital and parenting quality), and functioning in daily life.

### 9. Further Research and Concluding Thoughts

Due to the fact that so little qualitative research focusing on the education of Arab women has been conducted, nearly every area of research is encouraged, especially that the UAE holds a powerful position within the Gulf region and Middle East, for being economically strong and driving much of the growth and development in the region reflected in its educational systems. A research area worthy of investigation is the policies and practice in higher education systems, to determine features of success and/or failure, and to document and report the planned and the unplanned outcomes. It is important to think about the current teacher education programs in terms of successfully preparing the new generation of Emirati teachers to meet the needs of their changing society and of the schools and students they will serve. Curriculum models that might respond more meaningfully to changing social obligations and economic realities should also be researched. It is also recommended that this study is replicated in other colleges or universities so that generalizability can be expanded. Future research in the learning and development of Middle East women is important to various fields and disciplines (e.g. education, management, psychology, sociology, and human resource development). Conducting research on these and other related phenomena may provide ideas for specific educational policies, strategies, initiatives, curricula, and programs which can assist in the future development of Emirati women in a variety of settings (e.g. schools, colleges, workplaces, and government).

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