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The Golden Cage: Western Women in the Compound in a Muslim Country

By Roni Berger¹

Abstract

This article presents the results of a qualitative study, in which postings in virtual communities were content analyzed to capture the lived experience of western women residing in compounds in the Arab world. In spite of their growing number and unique characteristics, the life and struggles of these women has not been studied. Four major themes emerged: challenges, perceived benefits, available support systems and coping strategies. These themes are discussed and illustrated.

Keywords: Qualitative content analysis, women in Arab culture, virtual community, Western women, Saudi Arabia, Muslim world

It was a hot and humid afternoon in Borneo. The visitors who came to observe wildlife in a lodge in the heart of the rain forest were confined in the dining area. A conversation with a woman who was there with her husband and two preadolescent children revealed that her husband served as a helicopter pilot for an oil company in Saudi-Arabia. Her story sounded intriguing and I was drawn to hear more. She sounded excited about being interviewed and recruiting additional women; however, several emails when both of us returned home remained futile. This further triggered my interest. Did she have a change in mind? Did she never intend to participate and expressed agreement to dismiss me? Were her or my emails intercepted? Thus I tried an alternative recruitment strategy by posting on relevant web boards an open invitation to western women who lived in compounds in Muslim countries to participate. This too failed to produce potential participants and I felt that I hit a dead end in seeking a venue for internet-based interviewees with a relevant sample. This challenge in access further intensified my interest. In the absence of responses and eager to learn about the experience of western women's who live in Muslim countries, I opted to find an alternative approach for researching the question. Document analysis, which is a qualitative research method, recommended when documents exist that are relevant to the research question and observation or interviewing are not feasible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), and appeared to offer a viable alternative strategy for collecting the necessary data.

Background

No public record could be located about the number of western families who live in Arab countries such as Kuwait, Bahrain and especially Saudi Arabia, where about a third of the 25 million residents are foreign workers from all over the globe and of all educational and professional backgrounds (Glaze, 2006). Typically, western men are employed for lucrative tax free salaries in the oil industry, defense, healthcare, IT, banking and telecommunications and the families come along. They tend to live in gated and guarded western compounds, which are autonomous cultural enclaves like "a country

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within a country”, based on the idea of a spatial seclusion of social groups with different “cultural” backgrounds (Glaze, 2006). Compounds first opened in the 1970’s to provide protection and an escape from life under rigorous Muslim rules. They are described in unofficial sources (e.g. <http://www.expatarrivals.com/saudi-arabia/accommodation-in-saudi-arabia>) as well as commercial advertisements as varying in size (between 10 to 300 residential units), security measures, level of amenities and population composition (a few of them have a mix of Arab and non Saudi residents while most do not allow Saudis and some do allow Saudi guests requiring men to dress in western suits and women to not cover their face). However, Westerners, who typically earn higher salary because they are employed in more professional positions than other non-residents (e.g. Indian/Pakistanis), tend to live in the more lucrative compounds, which are often surrounded by barbed fences and barricades with concrete fortifications against car suicide bombers, surveillance cameras, and patrolled by armed security guards.

The rules of the external environment are strict and informed by the Sharia, i.e. the conservative Muslim law, and no other religion is allowed. The religious police strictly enforce public observance of Islam-appropriate behavior including the exhibition of crucifixes, crosses and other religious symbols and celebration of no non-Muslim holidays. All commercial enterprises such as stores and restaurants and even some on-line newspapers close five times a day, during the Muslim prayers as well as during the daylight hours in the month of Ramadan (the holy month during which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk). Cultural opportunities are very limited because no public theater, movie houses and clubs are allowed and no cable T.V. is available, although satellite T.V. is. Because of the *khulwa* (separation) prohibition, gender segregation as well as women’s seclusion at home also apply (Coleman, 2010). For example, recently a group of adults were arrested and convicted to prison and lashing punishment for social mingling, which compromises the gender segregation rules (Al-Shiri, 2010)

The restrictive nature of the social environment particularly affects women especially in Saudi Arabia. “Saudi women enjoy fewer legal rights than women in any other country in the world today...The Saudi state treats women as legal minors their whole lives, requiring father’s, then a husband’s permission for many basic activities” (Coleman, 2010, 205). In spite of limited gradual changes, extreme religiously based conservative rules relative to women dominate women’s role in politics, economy and social life. Women cannot vote, run for office or be elected; they are not permitted to drive or ride bicycle, use public transportation or dine in a restaurant unaccompanied by a male close relative guardian (*a mahrm*), which for western women who do not have the extended family around, means her husband. Women are expected to avoid eye contact with males, are not allowed to travel with their own passport and many aspects of their behavior are controlled by permission from the significant men in their life such as father, brothers and husband (Ahmed, 2008; Almunajjed, 1997; Bronson, 2006; May, 2010; Sasson, 2004) While not officially bared, women are discouraged from working out of their home and are forbidden from working in a mixed-gender environment. Some opportunities for working in a segregated work environment such as separate offices or from home do exist; however, women comprise only five percent of the Saudi workforce because of tradition, regulation and discrimination (Coleman, 2010). If a woman goes shopping alone, she risks harassment. Schools, stores and restaurants are segregated and include sections for men only and for families.

Strict dress codes also apply. When in public, although temperatures can easily reach the 90° or a 100 degrees, women are expected to be covered by a black *abaya*, a floor length long sleeve dress, not expose any skin from the neck to the wrist and to the ankle and the cloths are expected to be loose and not show the shape of the body. Failure to follow these restrictions is severely punished. For example, according to a popular blog translation of an article in the Saudi press (most such information is not available in official resources), in September 2009, over 800 young people were arrested for wearing low-slung jeans and sporting Afros (Serai, 2009)

While the requirement for a head cover (hijab) is mostly for local women, westerners may face a similar demand in certain circumstances such as the month of Ramadan when all women are expected to cover their head to demonstrate respect. There are no theaters, bars, pubs or nightlife, travel is restricted, the practice of religions other than Islam as well as consumption of alcohol and pork are forbidden. Because when the call for the mandatory five times a day prayer resonances, life come to a complete halt until the end of the prayer, daily activities are scheduled around prayer times. Involvement in drugs or pornography is a serious offense punishable by death (Ahmed, 2008; Almunajjed, 1997; Altorki, 1986; Sasson, 2004).

The dress and behavior norms are enforced by the *mutaween* (the Islamic religious police” whose task is to secure following the rules of the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and prevention of Vice, Coleman, 2010) who patrol public places and reprimand and threaten women that fail to meet the aforementioned modesty criteria. Any diversion is severely punished including beating and jailing (Coleman, 2010). For example, in February 2008, a woman working for an education software company was arrested, interrogated, strip-searched, forced to sign and fingerprint confessions of guilt and was told by a judge that she sinned and will go to hell because she set with a male business partner in the family section of a café (the only area where women and men can sit together) when the power in their company office failed (Vema, 2008). On another occasion, fifteen girls were killed when the *mutawa* stopped men who rushed to help the girls caught in a fire that broke in their school because the girls failed to cover themselves properly as they rushed to escape (Dickey & Nordland, 2002),

However, within the compounds liberal dress code rules of behavior are accepted and western services such as supermarket, co-ed gyms and pools, tennis and gulf courts, internal cable TV systems, which broadcast movies in English, French or German as well as libraries, beauty saloons are available. Accommodations are often modern and luxurious with high level maintenance (Glaze, 2006). While there have been some recent efforts to challenge these general restrictions, e.g. a women’s group collected 30,000 signatures to advocate the lifting on the ban of women to drive (Ambah, 2009) the experience appears to be quite homogenous and monolithic.

Knowledge about life within the western enclaves is limited. One exception is Glaze’s (2006) study, which documented the development of and using interviews with six German and Lebanese former expatriates, provided insights into their daily life as well as their social relations within the compound and with the Saudi Arabia behind the gates. The current study was conducted during 2008 -2009 and focused on the effort to understand the women’s perspective about the challenges that the women who live in the compounds encounter, their sources of support and strategies for coping as well as the social, emotional and psychological effects that they experience. Ironically, the goal of

this study was to give voice to women who moved from the open world in which they grew up to live in the context of culture where the voice of women is strictly silenced.

Method

This study used feminist content analysis to examine personal narratives posted on public electronic space such as Weblogs ("blogs") and bulletin boards to identify topics relevant to understanding the experience of western women living in compounds in Muslim countries. The analysis of written and visual material representing people's perceived reality as a way to gain understanding of human experience has been used in qualitative research when interviewing or observation are not feasible (Hodder, 2003; Prior, 2003). A feminist analysis framework focuses a contextual understanding of women life and the biases, prejudices and values pertaining to their experiences (Leavy, 2000).

With the development of technology, the intersection of qualitative research and the digital age has opened new possibilities for access to previously hard to reach and "capsulated" populations (Palys & Atchison, 2009). Analysis of on-line activity has been used to study diverse topics such as Chinese digital political activities (Wu, 2008), spirituality issues of cancer patients and their families (Nolan et al., 2006), issues of identity in pro-Anorexia support groups (Gavin, Rodham & Poyer, 2008), and young siblings of children with chronic health needs (Tichon & Shapiro, 2003). Specifically, analysis of unsolicited first-person narratives, i.e. content posted by people independently to share their experiences and thoughts, have been used to understand the experience of care givers (e.g. Robinson, 2001) and coming out of gay athletes (Gough, 2007), presentation of self identity (Hevem, 2004), a community developed from an internet website devoted to a television serial (Gaston & Zweerink, 2004).

In spite of the censorship on internet and some web sites in Saudi Arabia (Black, 2009), this strategy offered access to virtual communities of western expatriates in Muslim countries and an opportunity to learn about their experiences.

Participants. The characteristics of the participants are largely unknown because of the nature of the research. However, from the self description of those whose posting have been analyzed, it is clear that they are women who self identified as living or having lived in compounds in the Muslim world. Their ages were often stated in the posting and ranged from late twenties to mid-fifties. Typically they self identified as American, British, Australian and Germans. Mostly they reported being married and having children, although a few posting were by single women. They came to live in compounds in Arabic countries, especially Saudi Arabia because their husbands received two to five years contracts with oil and gas companies, health services and high technology.

Data collection and analysis

Online interactions during six months within half a dozen virtual environments that have been identified by the use of relevant concepts such as "western women in compounds", "compounds in Arabic countries" and "expatriate in the Arab world". The forums are not identified to protect the anonymity of participants.

Inclusion criteria were an open forum, i.e. public discussion groups that do not require subscription, a user name or a pass word and do not self identify as sites designed to provide mutual support. Such bulletin boards and virtual discussion groups were

visited weekly and all posting by authors who self identified as western women living in compounds (i.e. a gated, fenced village-like community with independent services such as sports facilities, supermarket, restaurants, beauty parlor, social clubs, school and additional services) in Saudi Arabia were included. Material posted by internet communities on publicly accessible chat rooms and discussion boards on websites have been recognized as sources for rich data about the experience of people (Eysenbach & Till, 2001).

One hundred thirty eight web-based postings by western women who live or have lived in compounds in Saudi Arabia were content analyzed using the constant comparison method (Sandelowski, 2000). Postings varied in length from a few paragraphs to a few pages and some of them generated a long string of responses. Individual postings were first reviewed in their entirety and then segmented into sections, which were analyzed sentence by sentence to identify codes, which are often very descriptive and “close” to the text. These codes were then clustered into categories and eventually common themes across categories as well as the relationships among them.

Ethics. Using web accessible communication raises ethical issues, specifically privacy of participants and informed consent as well as the exclusion of individuals with no access to technology. While questions have been raised by some regarding this strategy (e.g. Flicker, Haans, & Skinner, 2004), this unobtrusive, passive collection data retrospectively has been recognized as contributing to the understanding of psycho-social issues and potentially enhancing the development of effective interventions (Laksmana, 2002). Therefore, it has been supported in previous similar studies (Gavin, Rodham & Poyer, 2008) provided that the privacy of those who post is protected. Enyon, Fry and Schroeder (2008) posit that “Virtual spaces in which people interact online as avatars can be treated as social worlds” and can be viewed as “third places”, i.e. between private and public (p. 30).

In the debate of such issues in internet research, several criteria have been used to define an internet community as a public sphere, which eliminates the requirement for informed consent. They include the absence of gate keeping mechanism in the form of a requirement to subscribe as well as no explicitly or implicitly articulated expectation for privacy in the definition of the goals, norms and target audience of the individual group, unlimited size of the community, non vulnerable nature of the group (e.g. no minors, severely sick individuals and people in acute crisis), degree of intrusiveness (i.e. whether the researcher conducts a “passive analysis” of published data or interacts with participants) and, the absence of more than a very limited potential risk for group members or the community as a whole (Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Robinson, 2001). The current study met all these criteria and quotations of potentially identifiable sources by surfing the internet were avoided. On the basis of these considerations, it was granted an exemption from review by the Institutional Review Board.

Findings

Four major themes relative to women’s experience in the compound emerged from the posting: Challenges women faced, benefits they saw in their life, sources of support that were available to them and strategies they employed to cope with the challenges.

Challenges

Women's posting focused on what they were missing from the life that they were used to and the negative effects that they experienced consequently. Some general aspects were cited such as "It's kind of hard especially when you are used to things to be organized. Getting along with school system, colleges and people itself gets on my nerves. They have no manners, "Honestly, I would not ever recommend for a non-Muslim to live here. I know most come for the money but it is not worth the misery" and "I didn't get out of bed this morning until 11:30 because I realized I was depressed that there was no place to go, nothing to see, nothing to experience that didn't require an absurd amount of inconvenience (paying for a taxi EVERY time I need tampons?!).

Main challenges identified in the postings included the loss of independence, the "split" between the outside and inside environment, lack of privacy, distance from extended family and friends, bureaucratic difficulties and physical conditions.

The aspect that emerged as most typically and painfully absent from women's life was freedom because Islam dictates all aspects of the pace of life., i.e. women felt that they were robbed of the freedom to dress as they wish, go where they want, dine where they feel like, buy products they prefer (e.g. one woman mentioned that vanilla extract used for baking is not available because it contains alcohol, which is banned), eat what they desire and in general be independent. Women reported that with the restrictions on entertainment, driving and clothes, they experienced being stripped of basic rights such as freedom of movement and felt that they lost the liberty to make decisions for themselves and their children.

Some women were specifically unhappy with losing the higher degree of gender equality that they experienced in the western world compared to what they viewed as severe deprivation of women's rights and their treatment as second rate citizens in the host country. They viewed two-tier gender-related standards as pervasive in financial, educational and social aspects of life of the Muslim women around them. While in the privacy of their family and community the western women were able to maintain the same independence and equality that they had in their western societies, several individuals expressed anger at what they perceived as anti-women discriminatory environment in their country of residence.

Less frequently were mentioned mostly futile struggled to find jobs, which were rare and hard to come by and when available in teaching or medical service were low paid, censorship on internet and missing family. While several women were satisfied by having to quit working and becoming a "stay home mom", others were frustrated with finding themselves involuntary following the command of the Sharia that a woman's best place is at home caring for her husband and raising her children.

Typical examples are: "I miss home [South Africa]; especially the freedom. Here there are no movie houses, bars or pubs", "Wearing abaya is probably one of the most annoying things for most western women, you gotta wear it and the polyester [of which most abayas are made] will make you a cooked vegetable in no time in the +50 [Celsius; approximately 122 Fahrenheit] heat", "not being able to drive is very frustrating", ".you cannot walk down the street and have coffee at the corner cafe. Even if restaurants do have outside seating, women aren't allowed to sit there", "yes, that's interesting, but you're not allowed to see or do it".and, "[rather than] the religious aspect of life here that boggles my mind, it's the traditional suppression of women, and women's cheerful

acceptance of it because ‘that’s how it’s always been’. One woman summarized the experience in the following words: “I feel and am controlled, restricted and oppressed. I don’t feel or believe that as a woman I’m being protected here or respected by the traditional place for women here. I have less options, less control over my own life, and less rights”. Almost unanimously they expressed the feeling that they are scarifying their welfare, careers and wishes for a stronger financial status of their families. Some women with previous experiences in compounds in other Muslim countries such as Dubai stated that the latter offered a more relaxed atmosphere and broader possibilities for entertainment.

A second major issue reflected in the postings was being caught between a rock and a hard place. One woman described the situation as “Two lives - those outside the compound and those inside”. These lives are very different. Outside the compound women are exposed to numerous restrictive norms whereas within the compound they can enjoy the liberal ways of life but are confined to a very small place, with intrusive interpersonal relationships. Out of the compound women had to live by Muslim rules. A constant source for frustration appeared to be the need to strategically and carefully plan their daily activities such as grocery shopping and running errands according to prayer times. Several women described situations when they were standing with a supermarket cart packed with frozen food, when the lights go off and cash registers close for the duration of the prayer.

To maintain the way of life that they are used to, women must remain within the gates, which some of them described as “a bit like living on Alcatraz”, “living in an army barracks” and “a suffocating environment”, causing many women to experience the environment as “claustrophobic” and causing “cabin fever”. Thus, they can choose between two types of restrictive environments leading them to feel that they are doomed [to very restrictive environment] if they opt to go out and doomed [to stay between the walls] if they decide to refrain from going out of the gates.

One woman summarized the situation as following: “It’s just like another world inside the compound. The moment you enter the compound and set your foot inside is just like leaving your Saudi lifestyle in the guardhouse and just be amazed how much *normal* [emphasis in original] it is by just being inside the compound. Simply a normal world within a place that seems to be really unimaginably backward and illogical”.

Difficulties related to relocation caused by immigration or by global assignments of one or both spouses who work for multinational companies and specifically the challenges posed by such life change of reinventing oneself, learning to live in the context of unfamiliar physical environment, language and cultural norms as well as develop a new social network have been extensively documented (Berger, 2004; Caligiuri, Hyland & Joshi, 1998; Fukuda & Chu, 1994). However, women in the compounds face a unique situation because of their position in the intersection of challenges related to relocating combined with those related to living in an extremely conservative restrictive environment. One entry read “Outside the compound is the place where you have to realize that you are where you feel that the rules and laws are seems to be the ones who will harm you rather than protect you. Outside the compounds is just like a feeling you have to obey first before you complain”. Staying within the compound, while providing a sense of protection from the restrictive Muslim atmosphere and allowing an opportunity for living in a familiar type of environment, presented the issue

of lack of privacy. Diverse versions of the statement that “everybody in the compound lives in everybody’s backyard and minds everybody else’s business” were abundant. In addition, life in the compound was often described as boring, “Existence could not get much emptier than this”.

Challenges that women faced also included missing people left behind such as extended family, friends and sometimes pets in addition to the culture shock created by moving from a western culture to an extreme Muslim culture. Women expressed being frustrated by their families’ inability to celebrate Christmas with relatives and friends back home because their husbands could only get vacation according to the timing of Ramadan and hajj (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca).

In addition to the “normal” restrictive environment imposed on them by their life circumstances, several women reported on mounting fear, exacerbated by attacks on foreigners in the last decade. One of the deadliest attacks was often mentioned. On this occasion, on May 29, 2004, extremist who oppose the western life style and blame foreigners of abusing the local resources, attacked the Oasis compound in the Gulf city of Khobar, took more than 50 foreigners working for two Saudi oil companies hostages (Muslims who were captured were let go) (half of whom were killed and the others were injured). . On the same day, a British man was killed in another compound - the Apicorp. Such attacks led women to feel that the high and thick the brick, mortar walls and the barbed wire surrounding the compound may not protect them and their families as well as they previously believed and they expressed doubts whether gaining considerable income while living a comfortable life is worth the risk to their personal and their families safety. In some of the posting, women shared that they became so fearful that they preferred to not leave the compound except for necessary visits to the supermarket escorted by their husbands. A number of women reported having stopped to use the buses offered by some of the big compounds to specific shopping destinations. Although they were described as crowded, uncomfortable, infrequent and offering limited service, these buses provided a way for women to cope with the forbiddance prohibition on driving or traveling unescorted. However, the growing anti-western sentiments in the Muslim world following the terrorist attacks such as 9/11 in New York and 2004 in Spain as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan led some women to view these buses as unsafe because they are as potential easy targets. Postings reflected the feeling of insecurity stating that “Saudi Arabia is not as safe as some believe”, “I often feel concerned regarding my own safety and that of my children” and “Women in the UAE are CONSTANTLY stopped, harassed, unwanted signs, comments, whistles, propositions and requests in public, in the streets, in the middle of the day. Don’t even ask how unsafe it is for them at night”.

The challenges cited by women started even before they arrived and involved extensive and long bureaucratic procedures, separation from the husband who in many cases was required to relocate first and then apply for bringing his family. Gaining a resident visa that permits the wife and children to reside in the Arabic country is challenging, requires complicated paperwork and eligibility depends on the husband’s formal employment status, the formal definition of which is sometimes incompatible with the reality. For example, one woman whose husband was employed in a managerial position entitling her to residence had to compromise for a series of the more easily secured visitor visa, because the firm employing her husband preferred to identify him as a technician, a status that does carry eligibility for spouse’s residence. Similar stories

echoed in other women's experiences. Many women reported numerous mistakes and a frustrating process as described by one blogger, though with a blink "the visa- mess-up is just another kind of terrorism". A few women expressed being exhausted by the struggle and settling for applying for a series of visiting visas, which led to going through a revolving door in and out of the country, interrupting children's schooling and family life.

While most women who posted in the blogs and bulleting boards were married and moved to the Arabic country because of their husbands' employment, there have been references to the additional challenges and higher risk for personal security and safety of single women. They are reported to experience greater scrutiny of their activities as well as with whom they socialize to the degree that a few of them complained that they experienced having no privacy. One married woman posited "Personally, I wouldn't feel safe in [country] on any level, being a single women". Some single women who reported that they were recruited as nurses, physicians and teachers, were required to live in single sex compound, where their interactions with men ranged between limited to non-existent. However, others stated that while they indeed "lived on hospital accommodation with other females, there were many social opportunities available to mingle with both male and female expatriates on coed compounds".

In addition to the socio-cultural challenges that dominated the entries, some women mentioned physical challenges, especially those related to the desert climate; for example "I miss the green trees", "It's hot, very hot, so there's not much to do in high summer due to the severe heat. You just can't stand to be out in 120F heat for long".

Benefits

While the discussion of challenges considerably outweighed that of benefits of living in the compound, the latter were recognized in most entries although so did the warning "Don't come with the intent on having fun". Three major clusters of benefits seemed to emerge – material advantages, social opportunities and the easiness of child rearing.

The main benefit cited by women was financial. A typical statement was "Living here gives me lots of money to spend, or save". Making money for specific goals such as paying a mortgage back home as well as saving for life after the contract is over and they return to their country of origin were clearly the dominant benefit cited in almost all entries. In addition to the generous salary and benefits while prices are modest, and lots of opportunities for shopping of extremely affordable cloths, electronics and house items, women cited the comfortable living conditions in spacious, well furnished and air-conditioned villas, which one woman described as a "luxuriously landscaped oasis", availability of western type food and sport facilities. They described the life of "ladies of leisure" with local cheap labor tending to chores in the house and garden and the children are watched in the local nursery while they play tennis, take quilting, dance or foreign language classes or laze in the pool. Typical descriptions included "It is like being on holydays everyday", "it's living in a safe haven" and "I have such an easy life, much more than I ever dreamed of in the States, no pressure to work, maid, driver. I have more time to spend with family and friends than ever before". Another aspect of the comfortable life is that all aspects of maintenance are provided at all times including minute services like changing light bulbs to more serious issues such as fixing a non

working freezer. However, other women, while admitting the comfort provided by life in the compound also imply a more somber undertone alluding to what is not. For example, one woman states “Life in the compound can offer women some semblance of a ‘normal’ life... they look like neighborhoods in the U.S., actually have street signs, the houses are numbered, and people actually obey the rules of traffic”.

Another often mentioned benefit was learning about different cultures and making friends with people from all over the world. “We developed camaraderie with people whom we would have no opportunity to meet have we not been here” and “You make great friends with people from all over the world, who live in your compound.” Most entries recommend willingness to develop social relationships with different people. The social relationships involved spending “fun time” such as shared meals, especially weekend BBQ “I love walking around and smelling that charcoal lighting up on all corners of the compound”. Many mentioned excursions to the desert or to private beaches, often in a group of compound mates, partying as well as trips abroad, which are made possible by the low cost of flights.

Finally, a family friendly environment, good education for the children and the easiness of raising children were evident in many, but not all, entries. Some women described how children can run around in a mall with no scolding looks or comments. Others commented on the “Peace and quiet. Good education for the children. The compounds are really safe and the children love it”. One woman commented that once she had a blond toddler at her heel all she met were positive and friendly reactions. “Mothers are queens and children are princes”. On the other hand, one woman stated emphatically “This is a good place to make money that’s all but to live in for good that’s a big fat NO and if you have kids then please, please don’t come down here. It’s hell, school systems are hell; basically you will pay a lot of money for your child to go a day care where he won’t be taught anything”.

Similar disagreement were reflected regarding the over all atmosphere. Some entries mentioned a calm atmosphere and a low crime rate; however, others reported a different experience such as “The crime rate is high, and there are many who take offense to Westerners, even though we provide much needed services”.

One woman summarized many benefits that were reflected in other women’s comments “Immersion in another language, immersion in another culture (and by this I mean art, architecture, literature, historical sites, and food), easier proximity to all the ‘overseas’ places I’ve wanted to visit, and a job that is light years beyond my professional options in the states in my specific field, the opportunity to write my book without the constant stress of running my own business, and hopefully the side benefit of losing weight because of the loss of those stresses”.

Support

Women identified compound-mates, on-line groups, spouses and children as sources of support. In the absence of extended family close by, women cited a strong sense of community (which was defined by one woman as “a sense of community through shared hardship”) with intense relationships as their main source of support and as a means to combat the feeling of isolation. A message that echoed in many posting was variations of “If there were any problems, there were many other women with whom I could consult” and “Socialize as much as you can to retain your sanity while you are

here". Description often resembled that of a kibbutz, an extended family or a tribe with mutual help and intensive close relationships with other women in the compound. For example "We all know each other in the neighborhood and keep an eye on each others kids". One woman described how during the month of Ramadan, when some families go abroad to avoid the inconvenience in daily life imposed by the nature of the religious rituals (i.e. no shopping eating or entertainment in public places from dawn to sunset), the compound feels deserted and those who remain are sitting around wondering when everyone is coming back".

Another source of support was the sharing of the experience on the bulletin boards and virtual as well as real life expatriate clubs, women's groups, which offer trips, monthly meetings with guest speakers and cultural events.

Some women mentioned relying heavily on their husbands whereas others mentioned that the latter was too busy with work to count on. Some expressed frustration with the limited availability of their husbands because of the severe restrictions and the need to be accompanied by a male accompanist for shopping, dining and traveling out of the compound.

Several women mentioned that mothering responsibilities and the ability to dedicate a lot of time to being with their children without the pressures that working mothers experience in western cultures because of conflicting demands of job and family provided a significant source of satisfaction. Common were comment like "I have my children to keep me very busy". Hobbies such as quilting, drawing, sport and book clubs were also mentioned as helping in the struggle with the aforementioned challenges.

Coping strategies

Women cited and demonstrated a wide array of strategies for addressing the challenges that they described. Consistent with the literature that supports the role of humor and laughter as a form of emotion focused coping strategy for restructuring stressful situations, distancing oneself from a threat and thus moderating stress and alleviating anxiety and tension (e.g. Abel, 2002; Overholser, 1991), women often described challenges in a humorous way. They specifically used humor to portray the demands put on them as absurd. Typical were variations of the comment that the full body cover (which one woman defined as "the black garbage bag") is useful to conceal a "bad hair day", gaining weight or a pregnancy and that "black is very sliming".

Often emphasized coping strategies referred to working to develop own helpful attitude and perspective, such as keeping an open mind, cultivating a sense of adventure and working to develop tolerance to a very different social environment and diverse people as one entry stated "Try to put any negative thoughts aside and open your eyes to this different culture because if you don't life here will be a horror" and "It might be a harsh environment and many things irritate us from time to time..But what can we do? Other than getting frustrated and anxious, try to look at it in a positive way and make your life a bit easier. I say, make the best of it! Don't spend your time complaining and moaning. It will only make you feel worse". Additional recommendations included looking at it as a short term experience "something to look back upon", and, taking "refreshing escapes" to places such as Dubai or Bahrain "to cool off when it gets too much"..

Although not directly reported, it appears that women use alcohol and excessive shopping as means for coping with their stress. Typical postings read variations of

“... Lots and lots of shopping to be done, in fact, and electronics are especially inexpensive” and numerous women mentioned shopping as a characteristic way of spending time. That alcohol is used for emotional coping with socially stressful situations and that women consume alcohol as a means to cope with negative affect and psychological distress has been documented (e.g. Cooper, Frone, Russell & Mudar, 1995; McCreary & Sadava, 1998; Roche & Deehan, 2002; Thomas, Randall & Carrigan, 2003). The numerous posting that emphasized the access to homemade alcohol and the abundance of affordable shopping in this study raises the possibility that drinking as well as disproportionate shopping are employed for ameliorating the boredom and feeling of confinement felt by many women. Such behaviors have been described as addictive and used for self soothing in stressful situations, especially by women (Haylett, Stephenson & Lefever, , 2004).

A couple of women also mentioned affairs within the compound. For example, one woman stated that “because of the limitations of relationships out of the compound, people tend to develop intimate and intense relationships within the ‘bubble’ of the compound and these sometimes slide to intimated relationships among men and women such as when their spouses go to their homeland for a vacation”. Another posting stated “living in such a pressure cooker, we sometimes loose awareness of boundaries and of what is acceptable in inter-gender relationships and do things that we would not do in our US neighborhood”.

Discussion

The findings of this study opened a window to the understanding of a population group that, with one exception, has not been researched previously. Thus, it joins a legacy of research that examined the experiences of specific and often insular groups of women such as victims of domestic violence (Hague, & Mullender, 2006) and Ultra orthodox Jewish women (Rier, Schwartzbaum & Heller, 2008). Until the 1980’s studies of issues specific to women and especially the voices of the women themselves relative to their lived experience tended to be muted (Randall, 2009). It was not until the flourishing of feminist inquiries as a result of the feminist search for equality that the importance of the apprehension of women's social realities as they experience, perceive and interpret them has been recognized. This recognition begot distinctive principles of research focused on the commitment to understand the sources of the social position of women, especially the unheard segment of society, and its effects on their life.

Admittedly, women in this study are often financially comfortable, educated, typically belong to the middle class and do not meet classical criteria for being oppressed whereas traditional feminist research focused on women in marginalized and discriminated situations. However, better financial and social conditions do not secure personal and emotional welfare. Consistent with the goal of feminist research to render the everyday experiences of women visible and focus on their lived experiences by taking their standpoint as the guiding perspective, the current study expands the feminist perspective beyond the disenfranchised and oppressed. A similar approach has been adopted in previous studies of the experience of survivors of cancer, chronic fatigue syndrome and other medical conditions, immigrants, those struggling with intimate

partner violence, and other groups of women irrespective their class, economic status, educational level and personal background (e.g. Berger, 2004; Hart & Grace, 2000; McNamara, 2008; Nurius & Macy, 2008).

One major strategy for capturing women's voices has been the analysis of their narratives (e.g. Kirmani, 2009; Rubinstein, 2009). While traditionally feminist research has been done in face-to-face interviews, technological development allow researchers to reach out to hard to access groups of women and learn about their life. Thus, the current study joins the relatively few but multiplying research projects that take advantage of the opportunities provided by technology to study those previously "hidden" population groups.

Because, this is one of the first studies to examine the lived experience of western women in the context of compounds in conservative Arabic countries, it offers insights into this unique experience as well as directions for future research. Recent years have witnessed growing interest in the Arab world and its interaction with and effects on the rest of the world. While literature is available about the experiences of Arabs in the Western world (e.g. Aswad & Gray, 1996; Bagby, Perl & Froehle, 2001; Cristello & Minnite, 2002) and some reports specifically about the experience of Arabic women in the west are also available (e.g. El Guindi, 1999; Hattar-Pollara & Meleis, 1995; Rothenberg, 2000), not much has been published regarding the experience of westerners in the Arab world. This study highlights the experience of non-Arabs, specifically women, living in an Arabic context. The findings suggest that this is a complicated and often challenging experience, though it also offers benefits and opportunities.

Interestingly, while in discussing the effects of living in a compound, entries presented a mixed picture relative to difficulties and rewards for themselves, only benefits and no challenges were reported regarding children and mentioning of husbands was evident only in very few entries. At least two plausible explanations may help make meaning of this. First, women may try to avoid admitting the price their children pay for the decision to live in a closed community because of the potential guilt and regret this can ignite and further augment the conflict, which is evident in their entries relative to their own experience "is it worth it?" Ignoring possible negative effects on their children can help mitigate feelings of compromising children's welfare. Alternatively, women may be so intensely absorbed in their own struggle to cope with living in an unfamiliar and restrictive world that they become oblivious to potential effects of the experience on their children.

While women appeared to have a mixed experience, many of them were able to develop sources of support and strategies of coping with its challenging aspects. The availability of such resources can be further augmented by the inclusion of support and respite services in the form of visits to home country and/or permission for visits of extended family members.

However, this study only started to "scratch" the surface. Further research is needed to gain a comprehensive picture and full understanding of these women's experiences. For example, some issues have been alluded to but not fully revealed, such as the possible strategy of drinking as a way for self comforting and coping. Because they have been documented as effective in theoretically sound and effective in connecting with difficult-to-access and disparately spread populations without compromising quality requirements (Adler & Zarchin, 2002; Turney & Pocknee, 2005), virtual focus groups

help to further deepen the understanding of the themes that emerged in the interviews. Creative approaches to the development of such focus group may be called for as the next step in researching the experiences of western women who live in compounds in Arabic countries. Furthermore, it can be expanded to also capture the experiences of women in other insular and hard-to access- situations.

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