

ARAB WOMEN EMPLOYMENT IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES, MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This research paper identifies and explores the challenges and barriers that Arab women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) face in their careers. Primary data was collected via an interview process involving 12 Arab women who reside and work in senior decision making positions in the UAE. Taking into account an overview of the global and UAE-specific challenges faced by women in the workplace and considering the significant efforts of the UAE government to promote women in leadership, as reported in literature, the analysis revealed that women often navigated their career through a sub-text of deep rooted social and cultural values that manifested themselves as stereotypes both in and out of the workplace and that these stereotypes impacted their career trajectory. Main barriers highlighted include; unfavourable policies, work/family conflicts and lack of support and options for entrepreneurial activity. The recommendations at the end of the paper focus on the need for continued government and institutional support in an effort to break down and change societal perceptions of Arab women who want to pursue a career.

KEYWORDS

Women employment; Gender; Double burden; Glass-ceiling; Inequality

INTRODUCTION:

Throughout their careers women across the world experience challenges in the working environment and are often excluded from boardrooms, overlooked for promotions and are not financially rewarded on an equal basis as their male counterparts. Debate on this topic has been well documented by various international agencies including the United Nations (UN, 2010; 2014) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2004). The global situation is so acute that it has captured the attention of world leaders; 80 of which came together at the end of 2015 for a UN summit aimed at ending gender discrimination and inequality. The Heads of State directly addressed the most urgent barriers that women faced and this included the need for parity for women at all levels of decision-making as well as ending discriminatory legislation (UN Women, 2015).

The summit builds on the commitments made by many countries at the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 (UN, 2015) but gives them context within a new framework – Agenda 2030 and its sustainable development goals. This is a historic moment as no other single issue received the same level of political attention at the September summit. A distinguishing factor of Agenda 2030 (from previous goals and agendas) is that it references that there are serious challenges for women in middle-high income countries and that women need to be empowered in decision making roles. The Agenda and the discussions at the summit reflect current research in the UK where half of women report an unconscious bias as a barrier to progression in the workplace. In France, high profile politicians have recently reported and are fighting back at harassment in the work environment (BBC Europe, 2016) and this once again demonstrates the widespread nature of the problem. The ILO attributes many of these challenges that women face, down to pre-existing stereotypes of societies and individuals. This type of stereotyping is particularly prevalent in societies that have deep-set cultural and religious values and research into these societies can provide important information about how cultural values affect women's career paths (Gallant & Pounder, 2008).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a unique country in the Middle East where this cultural impact can be studied in the context of an emerging economy, operating on the basis of western modern principles. Growing at a spectacular pace, building outstanding infrastructure, developing social and economic institutions and achieving tremendous progress in the size and quality of healthcare and education services in both public and private sector, the UAE has been positioning itself as an economic, social and cultural leader across the GCC and the wider Middle Eastern region (WEF, 2015/16; UNDP, 2015).

The UAE has seen incredible economic growth since the country was founded. Despite being overly reliant on the oil sector in the early years, it has worked towards strategies to decrease its reliance on oil whilst simultaneously rebranding itself as a global hub for business (Hvidt, 2013). Evidence shows that the UAE has been relatively successful in this goal. At the most recent Middle East Economic Forum, the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2016) revealed that the UAE had reduced oil contributions to the economy from well over 70% in the 1970's to 30% in 2015 (Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry cited in Hyidt, 2013). This is a direct contribution from competitive international sectors such as tourism, financial services and aviation (Hyidt, 2013). Positive reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum (WEF) have helped to create confidence in the UAE as a market leader and in turn attracted many multilateral organisations who invest foreign capital alongside domestic activities. In addition, the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), an off shore zone with a separate common law jurisdiction, together with the Abu Dhabi Global Market have cemented the country as the financial hub for the wider region and the leading country for business in the GCC (World Bank, 2013; 2016; Vision 2021). Furthermore, the UAE has outperformed other countries in the region in the WEF's global competitive report. The WEF singled out the UAE's

economy as being “significantly more diversified” than other countries in the GCC (WEF, 2015/16). Interestingly, although the UAE was singled out in some areas, its overall position dropped from the previous years and this could be attributed to one of the measurement indicators in which the UAE achieved its worst scores – Women in business. The WEF noted that female labour participation was consistently below male participation and that most women were not returning to the labour market after maternity (WEF, 2015; IMF, 2015; The National, 2014).

Historically (pre 1990’s) women leadership in the region has not been particularly encouraged through specific action plans. However in recent years the UAE has recognised the potential of investing in women and that they could be important contributors to the long-term economic success of the country. As a result, the government, demonstrating its commitment to promoting women leadership in various fields, has taken significant steps to enhance the legal, institutional and policy framework aimed at empowering women. Most importantly, the UAE has signed and ratified the UN Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and has accepted to report to its monitoring body, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, therefore participating in a constructive dialogue with UN experts aiming at empowering women (International Federation for Human Rights, 2010). Furthermore, policies adopted in this framework include the launch of a national strategy for the empowerment and advancement of Emirati women (2015-2021) and the promotion of the participation of women in political representation and decision-making, as well as in the diplomatic sector (MOFA, 2016; CEDAW, 2015). In spite of these efforts, Arab women (in particular) continue to fall short in labour participation compared to their male counterparts (Madichie & Gallant, 2012).

Excluding women from career opportunities can have serious negative implications on a national and global level. Low female labour force participation can have negative consequences on macroeconomics, while promoting the participation of women in the labour market can be a powerful ‘engine’ for growth (ILO, 2015; Booz & Company, 2012). A study by the ILO stated that GDP capita losses in some regions could be attributed to gender gaps in the labour market and estimated that it could contribute to up to 27% loss in some countries (Woytek et al, IMF, 2012). In the case of the UAE, this figure was estimated to be 12% compared with 5% for the US. Based on this data, an overall figure of 865 million was estimated as the figure that women worldwide had the potential to contribute to national economies (Woytek et al, IMF, 2012). This is of most significance for emerging market countries (such as the UAE) and ageing economies (such as Japan) as women could boost the growth of the economy by mitigating the overall impact of the shrinking workforce.

In this context, the purpose of this paper is to explore the opportunities, challenges and barriers that exist for Arab women who are in senior-level, or decision-making positions of employment in the UAE and contribute to the existing literature on this topic. In particular, highlighting the UAE’s commitment

to empower women, the paper studies the nature of the global and regional factors which undermine the enhancement of women participation in leadership and examines UAE-specific challenges from different perspectives, including the legal and administrative framework, the institutional background, the HR policies and corporate governance rules, as well as the domestic and social sphere. Arab women have been chosen as the group to be studied due to commonly shared cultural features and traditions between their countries of origin, as well as and their shared language and geographical history. In addition, there is a strong presence of Arab women in the UAE and it is presumed that, despite their religious and cultural differences, they do share common values and cultural systems. As a result, the challenges they may face in their career and in the workplace bear similarities. The mix of non-Arab nationals and Arab Emirati women selected for this research is a deliberate proportional mix, reflecting the structure and national representation in the UAE population. Government statistics show that the UAE has one of the highest percentages for female participation in the labour market in the GCC countries – 46%; this figure includes women of all nationalities (DWE, 2010). However, when the demographics of the population are broken down, variances are revealed which show that Emirati women are hugely underrepresented and make up less than 20% of the labour market. This is low even when compared with other similar populations in the GCC (Woytek et al, IMF, 2012; The UAE National Bureau of Statistics, 2011)). Referring to table 1, two Emirati women participated in the research with a further 10 non Emirati Arab women. This gives an overall ratio of 16% representation – this is just above national representation. In 2015, the Emirati population in the United Arab Emirates was just over 11% (World Bank, 2015).

This paper aims to identify and explore the various factors that Arab women working in the UAE perceive to be barriers for career advancement and suggest strategies to address them from a legal, institutional, corporate, social and cultural perspective. Pursuing this aim, through a review of relevant literature and an analysis of Arab women's own experiences, in the context of the UAE's government commitment to promote women in leadership, particularly UAE National Women, the paper seeks to examine the global, as well as, UAE-specific challenges that undermine the participation of women in senior positions at the workplace.

Global challenges faced by women in the workplace

This section outlines the challenges that women globally face in respect to their employment and how this affects career motivations, choices and opportunities. The main analysis focuses on the concept of the 'glass ceiling' and outlines the contributing factors to this phenomenon. The glass ceiling can be described as an invisible but impenetrable barrier that restricts the vertical mobility of women in an organisation by preventing them from reaching senior positions (Chen et al, 2007). Several factors have been attributed to this phenomenon and they are

wide-ranging. Some of them are endogenous factors meaning that the company may have internal barriers but that these are in direct control of a particular company to change. Others are exogenous and refer to issues that fall outside of the control of companies, such as societal and structural barriers (European Monitoring Observatory, 2002). Two specific factors have been selected for discussion in order to succinctly illustrate some of the global challenges that women around the world may face. These are – family and work conflicts and the double burden. Family and work conflicts will focus on the pressures and decisions that women have to make (more so than men) about their careers and progression and how this impacts their personal life. The double burden will examine women’s working patterns and the unpaid roles they take on in the domestic sphere (Denham, 2014). A direct result of the ‘glass ceiling’ is the occurrence of a phenomenon identified as ‘leaking pipeline’, particularly prevalent in developed economies, whereby qualified women exit their organisation at high career levels at a much faster pace than men, leaving senior positions to be predominantly held by men (PWC, 2008; ILO, 2015).

Previous research has found that the lack of women in senior level positions can be attributed to a number of factors, ranging from socio-cultural barriers to economic disincentives (PWC, 2008). One such barrier is the conflict between family and career and that more often than not, women feel pressured to make a decision between the two (Hoobler et al, 2009). This conflict seeks to explain how some women experience barriers to career progression because of an imposed assumption that their domestic life will affect their performance at work (Hoobler et al, 2011). This happens regardless of whether a woman is married, has children or has previously shown dedication to her career. In Hoobler’s (2009) study on gender conflict and misunderstandings of work/life conflict, it is found that both female and male managers were equally guilty of assuming that women were less capable to manage work and a family and that this assumption permeated to appraisals and promotability ratings. This process is ultimately keeping women out of senior positions in many organisations and confirms the existence of a glass ceiling. The other side of this is that as a result, some women feel they are forced to choose between their family and their career because of the social pressures and lack of options in the working environment. In an American study by Pew research centre, 75% of women reported that they had evaded promotions because they felt the difficulties of balancing a career and a family (Pew, 2009). The same sample of women did not show a preference for being the main caregiver for the family but felt that part time work was not an option.

The globalised business environment has both contributed to some of these barriers as well as provided opportunities. For example, some barriers have been exacerbated as the structure of the working day in the western world can be seen as being incompatible to raise a family (McCarthy & Burn, 2013). Many major corporations often require flexibility from workers and their idea of the ideal worker is someone who can stay late, travel for business trips and give everything to the company (Schoen & Weinick, 1993, cited in PWC report). As women often assume the responsibility for a larger percentage of the parenting

duties, they are then perceived to be 'inflexible' and passed over for such opportunities and again. As a result, they are missing out on promotions and are struggling to access senior level management positions. However, on the other side of the coin, the globalised economies have also provided opportunities by breaking down physical and location barriers which has opened up employment opportunities for women to be able to work at home either within large corporations or building their own businesses (Denham, 2014). The UK, US and Europe are particularly advanced in this sphere and women are taking advantage of this at a growing rate.

Another contributing factor to the glass-ceiling concept for women is the double burden. This study of women's working patterns describes the workload of women who are in paid employment but also have responsibility for unpaid domestic duties and household labour (Denham, 2014). Women continue to bear responsibilities in the domestic sphere by being the main carer for children and undertaking household duties such as cleaning and preparing meals – the ILO estimates that women spend twice as much time than men on unpaid domestic work (ILO, 2004). If this figure is accounted for, then women's total work hours are in fact longer than men's on average in all regions around the world. It is clear to see from these statistics that the pressures of family life and the double burden is one of the most tangible barriers in terms of women being able to choose a career, stay there and progress.

Within the literature, there are critics of the glass-ceiling phenomenon and that not all academics subscribe to the idea that it exists (Lockwood, 2004). One argument against the glass ceiling is that much of the literature tends to focus on larger companies – multinational companies in the US and FTSE companies in the UK and Europe and it largely ignores small companies. Nancy Lockwood (2004) an HR professional who has studied this topic extensively states that in the US and the UK, women have been successful entrepreneurs and able to secure top positions in smaller companies. She also points out that there is less research on why women are not in these positions and that it could simply be a matter of personal choice with women wanting to stay at work and being happy to not pursue careers (Lockwood, 2004). More recent research by the London School of Economics (LSE, 2011 & 2013) adds value to this and researchers state that demands on further equality policies to encourage more women in to the boardroom are "out-dated" and based on "partial evidence" (Hakim, 2011). In her study, Hakim believes that it may be as simple as men and women having different career aspirations. Interestingly, a research study investigating gender disparities in the workplace, revealed a gap between women and men in career ambition and confidence, both at the recruitment stage and in the course of promotions. This lack of confidence and ambition experienced by women may partly explain why they are underrepresented in senior management positions (Institute of Leadership and Management, 2011).

Irrespective of family status and commitment, evidence shows that female professionals today are still underrepresented in the top positions, and self

reporting indicates that they find it increasingly difficult to maintain a career and that the glass ceiling is ever-present (McCarthy & Burn, 2013; ILO, 2012). Statistics from the OECD (2012) show that disparities in the labour participation between men and women increase with seniority of a position and that for every 100 men executive-level positions in multi national companies, there are only 10 women in the equivalent role. Similar data are provided in the ILO Company Survey Report (2014/15), which revealed that 34% of the companies participating in the survey had no women at the top executive level and 21% of the companies had 10% or less women.

Some countries have adopted a quota system as a way to decrease this gap and evidence from European countries reveal that this can be effective (Chen, 2010). Norway for example has been successful in implementing quotas for women representation at board level and the gap between men and women at this level has decreased steadily (Hoobler et al, 2009; ILO, 2012). But critics of this model would say that economic consequences of quotas have not yet been fully realised. In addition to this, the EU (among other organisations) has highlighted the fact that gender quotas could actually be perceived as being a form of positive discrimination and therefore detrimental to the overall health of an organisation and economy (European Observatory for Working Life, 2002). Brigitte Dahl, ex Speaker of the Swedish parliament commented that although Sweden did adopt a quota system they first laid the ground work for women to be introduced into higher positions in politics; ultimately you need to prepare the system rather than rely on quota systems alone (Chen, 2010).

Additional UAE-specific challenges in the framework of the UAE's commitment to empowering women

Through the UAE Government's commitment and political will about promoting women's rights, women's rights overall have significantly improved (OHCHR, 2006). However, changes implemented have only resulted in a small increase in Arab women taking up senior positions in public and private companies (ILO, 2004; 2013). Low participation of women in the workforce is a widespread phenomenon in the MENA region, with recent reports rating it at 27% versus men at 77% (ILO, 2016). Furthermore, most working women in the region are employed in the public sector, their percentage for the UAE being estimated at 62%. This is largely due to cultural and working-environment factors (Hvidt, 2013). Working in the UAE public sector is largely preferred among Emirati women, as it is likely to offer more flexible maternity arrangements, shorter working hours and higher salaries (CIPD, 2015).

Women in the UAE face similar challenges to the ones faced by women globally. In addition, there are barriers to the participation of women in the workplace specific to the wider MENA and GCC region and the UAE in particular. These will be explored in this section, against the backdrop of the UAE's achievements in promoting women in leadership.

In the UAE there has been an advancement of women rights, and in particular for Arab women leadership in recent years (DWE, 2012). Firstly, setting the framework, it should be noted that the UAE is a State-Party to five core international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which was ratified in 2004. By becoming a Party, the UAE undertakes to take legislative and administrative measures to protect women's human rights, to combat all forms of discriminatory practices against women, to fight gender stereotypes that undermine women's effective participation in social, economic and cultural life and to develop strategies to empower women in all these areas, including the employment sector. In its efforts to fulfil its responsibilities under the Convention, the UAE is assisted by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which monitors States-Parties' compliance with the Convention. Through this process the UAE has been engaging in a constructive dialogue with UN experts, assisting the government to fulfil its agenda on empowering women in the workplace.

The commitment of promoting Arab women has been demonstrated in various ways; through open forums, through policy debates and also through the establishment of advocacy groups. One such group is the General Women's Unions (GWU), which has become a key player in creating a supportive environment for women and has brought all the various societies working for women's rights under one umbrella (GWU, 2015). Among its many duties and responsibilities, the GWU suggests amendments to laws and policies to benefit women and was integral to the 2011 laws extending the maternity leave (Federal Labour Law, 2011). The GWU works closely with the Arab's Women's Federation to promote leadership and develop careers among young women. In 2004, the UAE became a State-Party to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). As such, it is subject to the monitoring evaluation of its treaty body, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Through its participation in this constructive dialogue, the UAE has a valuable opportunity to improve its policies, laws and practices with the aim of enhancing women empowerment.

Another progressive step was the opening of a regional office for UN women in Abu Dhabi in 2014 (UN UAE, 2014; DWE, 2014), demonstrating the dedication of the UAE in advancing women. This coincided with a strategy for the Empowerment of Emirati women 2015 - 2021 vision. This strategy aims to provide a new framework for government organizations to develop empowerment programs in all areas of sustainable development. One of the 8 tenets of this framework specifically focuses on the social domain and decision-making. Although this specific initiative is only of relevance to local Emiratis, it could have a wider benefit of exposing and educating others about the contributions women generally could make in the work place. It could serve as an introduction to breaking down barriers and existing stereotypes for all Arab women.

It is also worth noting that the UAE has made exceptional progress in education and has some impressive statistics relating to higher education and female participation (Insight Report, WEF, 2013). The UAE has achieved gender equal access to education and is the highest ranking Arab country for gender equality in education (WEF, 2014). Quite recently, compulsory education has been extended to 18 years of age. In addition, 95% of female high school graduates go on to tertiary education. Despite these success stories and initiatives, statistics and anecdotal evidence still suggests that Arab women have not progressed in their careers at the same pace of their educational achievements (Kausar & Tlaiss, 2011).

Evidently, the UAE has demonstrated its commitment in empowering women, through its efforts to promote women participation in political representation and decision-making, as well as in the diplomatic service. For instance, currently, 30% of the leadership positions in Government are held by women, among 29 ministers in the UAE Federal Government Cabinet, eight (8) are women, 217 women serve in the diplomatic and consular corps at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in missions abroad, many of them in ultra-senior posts, and, a woman, Her Excellency Dr Amal Al Qubaisi, was elected as a chair of the Federal National Council (MOFA, 2015/16).

Despite the consistent efforts of the Government to empower women and promote their participation in leadership, regional challenges still persist that create additional barriers for women's entry into the job market and in the work place. For example, as study in Saudi Arabia found that while the integration of woman into the workplace was of a key priority for many companies and part of official discourse, more conservative societal norms became 'blocking mechanisms' (Emtairah, Al-Ashaikh, Al-Badr, 2009). Similarly, the historically patriarchal structure of society in the UAE, and other countries in the region, are still an obstacle for many woman. The responsibilities of Arab women have (historically) been bound by domestic boundaries that define them as mothers, wives and caregivers, while men have been traditionally recognised as the sole-providers for a family (CEDAW, 2015; Tlaiss, 2013). Motherhood and family commitment are very important to Arab culture and evidence from the literature seems to point towards Arab women feeling an undue amount of guilt for pursuing careers that may conflict with their home life (Omair, 2011, in Tlaiss).

The cultural norms prevalent in the UAE, as in most Arab States in the region, are also influenced by the teachings of Islam, which is the country's official religion and has a special place in its legal system, as many areas of law are governed by Islamic Law (Sharia), (Gallant & Pounder, 2008). From scholarly analyses of Islam, based on English translations, it is believed that Islam supports the idea of women working and having their own businesses, provided that it doesn't interfere with their domestic duties (Gallant and Pounder, 2008; Tlaiss, 2013). However, traditional teachings have been interpreted as promoting the role of women as mothers and wives and prioritising household duties (Gallant and Pounder, 2008). The patriarchal structure is dominant among the Arab population in the UAE and is sometimes evident in the way in which specific

gender roles are widely recognised. For instance, women focus primarily on their roles as mothers and wives and their subordination to their husbands is reflected in some areas of family law, such as in respect to personal status, inheritance, divorce, etc. (CEDAW, 2015). In the framework of this subordination, it is possible that women may be expected to seek permission from their husbands or fathers to take up employment. (UAE Federal Law 28 on Personal Status, 2005). Research from Tlaiss and Klauser (2011) has found that patriarchal attitudes impact gender role attitudes and this may spill over into the work place. These traditional perceptions and cultural values have affected the employment framework in the UAE resulting in Arab women having different experiences and facing different challenges in their careers than women in other parts of the world.

On the other hand, some employment law rules may undermine women participation in the workplace. For instance, the current Federal law in respect to maternity leave policy may create hurdles for women in employment. Federal labour law Article 30 allows female employees a 45 calendar day paid maternity leave, upon completion of one year service with the same employer (Federal Labour Law, 2001). According to Mercer's 2014 Worldwide Benefits and Employment Guidelines, this ranks the UAE among the poorest performers in respect to provision of maternity leave. (ILO, 2014). Maternity policies around the world vary greatly, reflecting different socio-political systems and ideologies with Northern European Countries offering the longest maternity leave periods. Sweden and Norway provide women with 56 and 49 paid weeks from employment. On the other hand, the United States does not provide any statutory obligation for maternity leave, instead placing maternity leave at the entire discretion of the employer (ILO, 2014). It should be noted however that within the DIFC common law jurisdiction, maternity leave extends to a minimum period of three months (Article 35, DIFC Law 4, 2005). Larger private companies in some of the other free zones are also starting to come to 'private' arrangements with their staff on the matter of maternity leave offering up to 6 months leave in some cases with a further opportunity to extend on an unpaid scheme (CIPD & Ministry of Human Resource and Emiratisation, 2016; ILO, 2014). Furthermore, employment law does not contain clear provisions on part-time and other flexible types of employment, nor does it establish responsibilities for employers to provide benefits to working mothers, such as day-care assistance, etc. Such provisions would encourage women participation in the private sector.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to examine the experiences of Arab women in navigating their careers in the UAE. Twelve participants in total were interviewed for this research. The aim was to understand experiences of Arab women working in the UAE and it was deemed that it was more beneficial to do in depth interviews with a small number to achieve a deeper level of understanding. The participants were fairly

homogenous in the sense that they were all highly educated Arab women who held decision-making positions at some point in their career. Again, this demographic was deliberately targeted as a review of the literature had revealed that there is a gap in knowledge for this section of society. It should be noted that the paper focuses on Arab women in general, taking into account their commonly shared values, traditions and social norms. In that context, it does not consider in depth the underlying disparities between Arab women of different nationalities, predominantly between UAE-nationals and Arab expatriates. Also, all participants are located in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, emirates with the higher population concentration (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

A non-probability snowball sampling method was employed whereby initial contact was made with two women who were deemed to be relevant to the research (Bryman, 2012). The two women were used (with permission) to establish contact and make introductions to a further eleven participants. However, one of these participants subsequently withdrew from the process. Table 1 presents the profile of the twelve participants in this study.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants.

#	Nationality	Age range	Marital status	Highest education	Management Level
1	Lebanese	50 – 60	Divorced	MBA	Senior Executive
2	Lebanese	30 – 40	Married	Bachelor	Entry
3	Lebanese	40 – 50	Married	Masters	Mid level
4	Bahrain	20 – 30	Single	Masters	Mid level
5	Egypt	20 – 30	Single	Bachelor	Entry
6	Lebanese	30 – 40	Married	Masters	Mid level
7	Jordan	30 – 40	Married	Masters	Mid-level
8	Emirati	20 – 30	Single	Masters	Mid - level
9	Emirati	30 – 40	Married	Bachelor	Entry
10	Egypt	30 – 40	Married	MBA	Senior Executive
11	Jordan	30 – 40	Married	Masters	Mid-level
12	Lebanese	40 - 50	Married	MBA	Senior Level

For this study, primary research was conducted in March 2015, and this took the form of semi-structured interviews. A critical review of literature was carried out which aided in the development of the questions for the interview guide (Lewis-Beck et al, 2004). Each interview lasted for an average of 45 minutes and used typical qualitative characteristics of flexibility, exploratory and open-ended questions (Henn et al, 2006). Permission to audio-record the interviews was asked for all 12 participants; however, three interviews could not be recorded. One participant was interviewed over the phone due to logistical arrangements of meeting up. A further two participants did not consent to an audio recording but were happy for in depth notes to be taken. To ensure that information was accurately captured, the interviewer noted changes in pitch and tone when

answering questions as well as pauses and the general mood and reactions to particular questions. In addition, the interviewer asked the participants to review the notes to ensure that they felt that they adequately reflected their feelings. This ensures both validity and reliability of the data captured and assures that the researchers own perception of the topic has not negatively affected the data (Creswell & Millar, 2000; Creswell, 2010)

Upon completion of the interviews, all of the audio data was transcribed. The first step of the analysis process was to read this data several times and become familiar with it before starting the task of fundamentally reducing the amount of data to a more manageable state (Bryman, 2012). This was achieved by a coding process and thematic analysis that included five main steps: 1. Familiarisation with data - (Read through several times), 2. Development of initial categories, 3. Refinement and grouping together of categories, 4. Constant comparison of data and categories, and 5. Make meaning of the data through final A-priori and emergent themes. The process was adapted from Bryman (2012) and Creswell (2000; 2010).

Each transcript and set of notes underwent four rounds of coding whereby descriptive labels and memos were applied to key. The first round of coding went through the data line-by-line and generated several different codes. The next two rounds of coding were about grouping the codes together and reducing the number of themes, which were expressed in the interviews. The final coding round separated the themes into two category groups – one related to the pre-set themes (a-priori assumptions) that were determined from the literature review and the second category was emerging themes which represented new information which was valuable to answering the overall research question. A coding sheet was developed to reflect the frequency (i.e. recurring codes) of key themes that would be discussed in the results section. Overall, five themes will be discussed in the results section.

The a-priori themes were taken from existing literature on global challenges that women face in the workplace and during their careers. The reason behind this was to explore these same ideas and see if they exist in the unique sociocultural context of the UAE. Two emergent themes also developed during the analysis.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This section provides an analysis of the data from the interviews. As outlined in the methodology section, thematic analysis has been applied to the data set and two a-priori themes have already been identified as topics for discussion. These themes were a result of issues that were highlighted in the literature review and the purpose of analysing them is to see if challenges that have been identified in other parts of the world exist for Arab women in the UAE and how these issues manifest themselves in a different sociocultural context. These two themes are; 'family/work conflict' and 'policies'. The two emergent themes identified in the

analysis are 'improving women's access to entrepreneurship' and 'education and diversity of men in the workplace'.

Family work conflict

In order to explore the cultural sensitivities that may contribute to the family/work conflict in the region, respondents were asked about their family life and the level of support they had from them for pursuing a career. In addition, they were asked about family duties and the perceptions that they thought others had of them as Arab women. The responses showed that there were varying levels of 'tradition' and 'conservatism' among the participants but it was still clear that social roles were deeply entrenched for Arab women this permeated to other social areas outside of the private sphere (such as the workplace). The burden of upholding conventional sociocultural roles and navigating prejudice was identified as one of the greatest obstacles for Arab women to navigate.

"I think Arab men are becoming more involved in family life, but for my parents generation, this was not the case. My mother-in-law and my father-in-law both expect me to be a 'good wife' to my husband and find it hard to understand that I can contribute to my family as well".

"Everything changed for me when I went back to work after my baby. I returned to the same job and the same company but I felt invisible. I used to travel a lot and when I went back, no one asked me to travel and no one asked me to meetings. They made the decisions for me that I wasn't focused or that I couldn't do the same job just because I have children.... I had this experience from both Arab men and women"

This idea of institutionalised family arrangement is supported by literature, which shows that globally, women are more affected by work/ family conflict as they generally occupy the roles of caregiver in the family structure. In many countries, this family structure is becoming more fluid, but results from the interview as well as other literature show that this is not the case for many Arab women and their families and that any type of work that interferes with roles at home can be viewed as unacceptable (Krouse & Afifi, 2007).

It is worth noting that two of the participants had very different experiences and commented that they had not experienced challenges based on whether or not they are a wife or a mother. In one case, a participant was breaking with tradition and was the sole earner for her family. She reported that she had to make sacrifices in her career that she felt men did not have to, but that this was a global problem. She also felt that women in this generation were capable of creating their own change and challenging social expectations.

“Lets be clear. Yes, there are social expectations that some Arab women have to overcome, but they are also capable to pioneering change. There are cultural norms, but someone has to be willing to break the mould ... I have never faced negative consequences by not conforming and I am now treated as an equal in my company as I have more than proved myself”

Policies

The literature review had already identified HR policies as a theme to further explore and all participants were asked about this and if HR policies satisfied their needs or if they could think of anything to improve. Every single participant mentioned maternity policies and most agreed that there was a need for them to be readdressed and brought into line with other parts of the world. Many of the participants felt incredibly strongly about this issue and had either had a negative experience themselves or seen it negatively impact a colleague. The women reported that being Arab, they felt additional social pressures to stay at home. This corroborates with some of the existing literature (Tlaiss, 2014) and also supports the notion that social perceptions are often slower to change than policies that allow and empower women in their careers. Some of the women identified with being “more conservative” and they commented that they felt there was no other option for them than to put family and children first when they came to a certain age, and certainly when children were involved.

“Being from a conservative family, my destiny was already paved for me. As an Emirati woman, my duty is for my family and this had to come first. Returning to work was not possible for a lot of reasons. In my job, I had to work full time or not at all and so even if I had support and I wanted to return, I don’t know how it is possible so soon after my child is born. Like my friends, the option was not to work”

“It breaks my heart to see a women come back to work so soon after. I have seen the guilt they experience and had them in my office breaking down”

“I find it ironic that the country is so culturally focussed on ‘family first’ but the maternity leave is hardly even enough time for a new mum to recover”

Three of the participants also raised the issue of support (or lack therefore) once they returned to work after the 45-day maternity period and cited the breast-feeding law as one example. By law, new mothers returning to work in the UAE are allowed an additional one hour break to breastfeed (if there is a nursery on site) (Article 33, UAE Federal Law). The three participants all reported that they

had to demand this from their managers and that male managers in particular were unsympathetic of this right.

“I checked my contract and I was entitled have one hour for breastfeeding, but I had to demand it. And this is not easy in my company that was male dominated and I was made to feel I was slacking off or taking it easy. And also, it’s not easy to talk about this with male managers, and for some women they couldn’t. Really, I had such a hard time with this.”

Another example of lack of support that was identified by two participants was the lack of day-care options. Both women had worked abroad in large companies who offered on-site day care but have found from their experience that the UAE is less open to this idea. The advantages of onsite day care facilities has been researched and documented by various organisations and academics including the UN and the International Labour Organisation. The advantages for businesses include increased productivity from the women and statistics also show that retention is increased which ultimately is cost-effective for the company (Hein & Cassirer, 2010). Interestingly, it appears that the participants’ sentiment is also shared with the wider population of the UAE and in the last 6-12 months, as a response to demand, leaders of the UAE have come out in support of the idea of day-care facilities in large offices. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai announced in 2014 that Government institutions with 50 or more employees should set up a crèche or a nursery at their headquarters for all employee’s children (The National, 2014). The hope is that this will also permeate to private companies and that adequate and accessible childcare will become the norm in the UAE.

“My company was HUGE and actually there were a lot of other females and working mothers. We asked our company for a nursery or to consider something similar and it was totally rejected. Not even a discussion”

Others expressed that they felt pressure to return to work because under federal law, there was nothing protecting their right to return or their role (DWE, 2014). For all women who have had to make the decision, they felt they were in a losing position and something had to be sacrificed.

“Under law, I had no automatic right to return to work. My employer said he would keep my job available for 45 days only and I had to trust that. After 45 days, I felt I had to go back to work or lose my option to stay in the company that I had worked so hard in for 5 years.”

Although all the women expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of time allocated for maternity leave, two respondents who both worked in HR said that they can understand why it is this way in the UAE and that perhaps other options should

be explored as a solution as well. These solutions could include non-financial implications for the company such as job sharing or flexi-hours. It must be noted that all salaries in the UAE are tax free, and so in the case of maternity leave, it is the company that bears the financial responsibility of paid leave (Hein & Cassirer, 2010), whereas in other countries, it is usually divided between state and employer. One participant noted:

"I don't think companies can be held responsible for the private decisions that women make, but I do think that they could offer some flexibility and sympathy. Mothers can be good workers too, and in my case, I was more motivated than ever after having so much time out of employment to raise a family. There are a lot of women like me and this talent should be grabbed".

Entrepreneurial Desire

Several participants raised the topic of entrepreneurship and indicated a desire for running their own small business in the UAE as a way to combat inflexible working hours. However, the same participants went on to say that they did not think it was a realistic option for them mainly due to the difficulty in obtaining a license as a women and accessing capital. Unfortunately, despite entrepreneurship gaining momentum as an alternative path to economic empowerment of women, recent studies confirm that the rate of entrepreneurship in the MENA region is lower to other similar regions and lags behind men's (ILO, 2016). It should be noted however that the UAE is not only a leader in the region in providing a strong regulatory and normative foundation for entrepreneurship (Farid, ElSayed-Elkhouly, and Barnes, 2011), but is also leader in the support and number of women entrepreneurs in the region (ILO, 2016). Although the participants agreed that there are several cases and role models of Arab Women starting their own businesses in the UAE, it was believed that this was sometimes done under the umbrella and assistance of a husband or male relative and therefore did not truly reflect the real opportunities available to all Arab women. A study of Arab women's entrepreneurial activity by Erogul & McCrohan (2008) further confirmed this (and the participants own view), and showed that more than 75% of financial support for Arab women start-ups came from husbands and family.

"I know a few women who say they have their own businesses... but they don't! (laughs). It is all in their husband's name but they are the face of the business. I don't know why, but I feel this makes it harder for the rest of us."

"I have heard of conferences promoting Arab women leadership and I read so many articles about it too. But it seems that they are all concerned with people who are already at the top or who want to be. I don't think I will make the Forbes 100 list for Arab women"

and I don't want to. I just want the option to freelance or to have my own small-medium business and work hard".

Participants commented that they felt it was difficult to access banks for loans or apply for business licenses and those who had looked into it said they were required to apply with their husbands. Madichie and Gallant (2012) and Hattab (2011) have found evidence that loans to women in the Arab world are often offered with higher rates and shorter terms. Although women are free to enter into a business of their choice, it is evident that there are barriers which prevent them from doing so. In addition to finance issues, there are also issues around individual municipality rules which might mean that a business can only operate in one Emirate; Arab women living in Abu Dhabi then face social challenges (as well as financial) if they are to set up a business in Dubai for example (Madichie & Gallant, 2012)

On the other side of the argument, one participant felt that this was not solely a problem for Arab women and that expatriates, non-Arab women and also men faced challenges with business licensing and free-lance working in Dubai.

"Why should it be easier for Arab women? No, no, I don't believe it should be. It is an equal opportunity option for everyone and I don't believe in special incentives. I worked hard for what I have and so can others".

However, evidence has clearly shown that barriers to non-Arab women are often easier to overcome due to less social constraints and the fact that many expatriates have finance options in their home countries that they can access. Therefore, they are not solely reliant on the framework in the UAE as both locals and neighbouring Arab citizens are.

Education and diversity of men in the company

An interesting point that was put forward by one of the participants, related to the educational background of men and their exposure to working environments with a high density of women. From her own experiences, she believed that there was a clear trend between Arab men who had been partly educated in America or Europe and exposed to western and matured economies and their view of women working. In particular, she did not feel stereotyped or discriminated against and felt that diversity was encouraged.

"I was recruited for my skills and so I have never felt that I am anything but equal in my current role. I feel worthy, respected and my CEO will defend me if needed. He is typically Arab to outsiders, but his American education and experience means that he thinks differently... In all of my years of experience, I have found this to be the same. The higher educated a man, the more support I feel from

him towards all of his staff. Particularly American education – he was at Harvard and my other colleague was at Yale.”

Although there does not appear to be any clear research on this from the UAE, it is interesting to note from the primary research that international education and exposure to mature economies and businesses can have a lasting positive impact on men who then return to work in the UAE; compared to their peers who have not had the same experiences. Although clearly more research needs to be done, it could be suggested that lessons are being learnt from more matured (older) economies and that this could suggest that changes will take place in the UAE with time. The OECD (2013) publishes a yearly report on gender equality in the workplace and countries such as the UK, New Zealand and Norway are consistently achieving milestones and it could be concluded that this is a result of decades worth of work and strategies. For example, the UK has the highest ever level of female employment and a zero% pay gap for many occupations for women under 40 years of age (Women’s Business Council UK, 2014), but it has not always been the case. This shows that there is scope for positive development in the UAE, especially for those who most marginalised and discriminated against. The participant also believed that positive changes will come from increased interactions between countries and markets.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this research paper was to identify and explore the career challenges faced by Arab women in the UAE and to understand these in the context of the cultural setting of the UAE. The findings from the primary data highlight some of challenges facing Arab women are also emblematic of what women around the globe experience. However, Arab women are facing additional barriers due to conventional sociocultural roles and persistent attitudes towards their capabilities outside of the home.

Some of the factors that have a negative impact on women’s participation in the workplace are associated with deeply rooted social and cultural values and traditions which reflect gendered sociocultural roles that are hard to eradicate.

On the other hand, other challenges can be effectively dealt with by adopting legislative, institutional and policy reforms. For instance, current employment policies in respect to maternity call for reforms, as they are inadequate and in great contrast to the emphasis that the UAE places on promoting family values. Similarly, the introduction of flexible working options could help women balance career and family. Furthermore, more emphasis should be given on setting up affordable child care facilities within or in close vicinity to the workplace. Finally, it would be highly beneficial to adopt legislative reforms to facilitate women entrepreneurship. For instance, women in the UAE should be able to proactively pursue new start-ups and businesses without the consent of a male guardian.

It is worth noting however that these reforms do not necessarily require state legislative or administrative intervention. Most relevant laws are stipulated in a flexible manner, allowing for initiatives to be undertaken from private sector employers. For instance, the Federal Labour Law setting a minimum maternity leave period does not exclude the possibility of the employer to agree on the provision of a longer maternity period, in the framework of a corporate strategy to promote women participation in the workforce. Similarly, flexible working arrangements can also be agreed by the two parties and be provided for in labour contracts. As long as women labour participation is perceived as an 'engine' for growth, employers are not restricted from adopting reforms to promote it, within the current UAE legislative and administrative framework. Furthermore, the private sector can be instrumental in the growth of the women entrepreneurship sector by developing, encouraging and supporting initiatives that could provide a meaningful alternative path to economic empowerment of women.

One area which will be slower to change, is setting up strategies to cope with and modify deep rooted cultured stereotypes. This was identified as a major barrier by most of the women in the research. The UAE has already taken some steps to tackle this; for example, by promoting women's leadership and participation in the labour market through Government supported institutions (CEDAW & DWE, 2014). However, other strategies could be employed to supplement existing efforts and ensure change for the next generation. The introduction of positive language and tackling gender stereotypes could be introduced in the school curriculum as a means of normalising attitudes. Additionally, on a national level, promotion and even laws encouraging property rights and access to financial assets could be enacted. UN women provides additional examples and success stories which could serve as a future path.

Table 2: Summary of proposed recommendations

LEGISLATIVE	INSTITUTIONAL	SOCIETAL	PRIVATE SECTOR (EMPLOYERS)
1. Increase maternity leave for all sectors	1. Introduction of more childcare facilities to promote affordable and easy access to childcare	1. Normalising gender diversity – school curriculums	1. Introduce flexible HR policies aligned with strategies aiming at enhancing women participation.
2. Reforms to facilitate women entrepreneurship		2. Continued research of other markets	2. Develop / encourage entrepreneurship initiatives

Taking into account the above, it is crucial to note that, although this report has focused on the barriers and challenges, the UAE has made significant achievements in the area of promoting the empowerment of women, such as the establishment of groups and fora that undertake raising awareness and advocacy and suggest policy reforms. To further the country's own objectives, the UAE needs to continue to look at what other successful markets and economies are doing and could learn lessons of successful models. At the same time, it should continue to undertake the constructive dialogue with UN bodies, such as the CEDAW and UNICEF, in order to improve its legislative and policy frameworks with the aim to enhance the participation of women in the workplace.

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