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Developing Leadership throughout Life: The Experiences of Emirati Women Leaders in the
United Arab Emirates

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Leadership development for women has recently emerged as an important focus of researchers and practitioners in many countries across the globe. Public, private, and social sector organizations in various settings are now acknowledging the importance of preparing both men and women for strong, competent leadership (Madsen, 2008). During the past decade this topic has also become an important area of research and practice within human resource development (HRD) arena in the U.S. and beyond (Ardichvili & Manderscheid, 2008). However in some countries, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), research on and programs for developing women leaders are only in their infancy. Of course there are many challenges in moving these efforts forward, one being the lack of current Emirati women in management and leadership roles within the country and another being the oppressed role women have had in the Arab world for centuries. Fortunately, there are some fairly recent efforts in the UAE government persuading women to become more educated and employed, and this has expanded to encourage women to become more influential within these various settings (Al Qasimi, 2007).

Although there are currently few women Emirati leaders in the UAE, understanding the developmental experiences of those who have succeeded is critical to discover how to help other women nationals develop leadership. To do this I used the phenomenological research methodology to conduct in-depth interviews with six women business and government leaders in

the UAE. I studied their “lived experiences” (Van Manen, 2001) of developing the knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies required for successful leadership within their businesses or industries. This methodology was important to use so that “voices” could be heard and unique insights examined. Hence, the research question for this study was as follows: What are the lived experiences of women Emirati leaders in developing leadership throughout their lives? This study reports the influences that the interviewees felt were most important in assisting them in preparing for their current leadership roles and responsibilities within this Arab culture. This included their experiences during the different phases of their lives (i.e., childhood, youth, young adulthood, and adulthood) and with a wide variety of possible influences (e.g., family, siblings, influential individuals, schooling experiences, activities, transformational moments, employment, career paths, and struggles/difficulties). Questions created and used by Madsen (2008) in two previous studies on women leaders were used to guide the interviews, and each interview was audio taped, transcribed, and analyzed based on generally accepted data collection procedures for this type of methodology (Van Manen, 2001).

In sum, this referred presentation will provide information regarding the results of this study and implications to HRD related to leadership development research and practice in the UAE and possibly other Middle Eastern countries. It will also provide some lessons learned regarding collecting qualitative data in the Arab world. Importantly, by understanding these influences, practitioners can design more effective personal developmental interventions for Emirati women.

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