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Women in Business Leadership: A Comparative Study of Countries in the Gulf Arab States

Susan R. Madsen, *Utah Valley University*

Linzi Kemp, *American University of Sharjah*

James Davis, *Utah State University*



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Susan R. Madsen

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Global leaders now acknowledge the importance of developing both men and women for leadership positions in the public and private business sectors. In addition, scholars from various disciplines have been conducting studies over the past century to better understand leadership and how to develop it in individuals and organizations (Jogulu & Wood, 2006). Although leadership studies with a focus on women did not emerge until the 1970s (Jogulu & Wood, 2006), steady progress has been made on understanding this complex phenomenon as it relates to gender. Yet, studies about developing women leaders in many countries around the globe are only just beginning to emerge. Within the human resource development (HRD) field, Kowske and Anthony (2007), Ardichvili and Manderscheid (2008), and Madsen (2012a, 2012b) have specifically highlighted the importance of studying leadership development globally. Few studies of women in leadership are currently found in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region, and so a number of researchers (e.g., Kemp, 2006; Madsen, 2010a, 2010b) have begun to qualitatively explore the lifetime development, perspectives, and experiences of women leaders in business in the region. But the numbers and percentages of female managers and leaders in GCC countries are rare, and detailed position-specific data are essentially nonexistent. It is critical to identify the presence (or absence) of women managers and leaders within countries and companies, to motivate change towards gender equality within organizations. Hence, we have designed a study to fill this gap—to provide a foundation for tracking the progress of women in leadership in the Gulf Arab states.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the status of women in leadership positions (senior executive and management roles) in private companies within the countries of the Gulf

Cooperation Council (i.e., Kingdom of Bahrain, State of Kuwait, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman, State of Qatar, and United Arab Emirates). Henceforth in this article we refer to the countries collectively as either the Gulf Arab states or the GCC countries, and the countries by their common or shortened names (e.g., Bahrain, UAE). The study explores where women are located within the organizations (e.g., as board members, chief officers, vice presidents, top management, division or unit heads) and analyzes and compares them by country, business classification, company size, and ownership. Although we recognize that not all women in the workforce in these countries are Arab or Muslim, we concentrate our review on the GCC culture and context because of its impact on gender equality in the business world.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

To understand the multifaceted dynamics within GCC countries that impact the participation and progress of women in the labor force, a number of *external factors* must be highlighted. There is no question that economic, legal, political, and social factors bring complexity to the role of women in the region. Although progress has, and is being made, one report stated, “Arab women on the whole are still less economically and politically empowered than women in other parts of the world” (Dubai Women Establishment, 2011, p. 15). In addition, understanding choices at the individual level can also be particularly challenging because of the numerous complexities inherent in exploring women’s backgrounds and leadership journeys—*internal factors*—(e.g., culture, traditions, religion, values, backgrounds, education, work-family issues, self-concept, gender barriers, expectations, previous opportunities, perceived future opportunities) (Kemp, Madsen, & El-Saidi, 2013). Clearly these internal and external factors overlap; for example, culture influences women at the individual level and policies and business practice at the organizational or country level as well. A variety of frameworks (e.g., Hofstede,

Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Metcalfe & Mutlaq, 2011) exist that may help us understand some of the variables behind understanding women and leadership in the region, and these two are presented in the full length paper.

We have reviewed the literature that relates to the employment and leadership status of women within the private and public sectors, and we have discovered there is most definitely a paucity of literature about women employed in the private sector in the MENA region. Although limited, there is literature that does report general statistics on women in the workplace within the Gulf Arab states. The detailed paper will highlight published findings on the overall gender gap, GCC labor force participation rates, women's employment status in the private sectors, and acceptance of female labor within various business classifications. Based on the full literature review (beyond the scope of this abstract), we propose the following four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: There will be a significant difference in the percentage of women in (a) senior leadership and (b) departmental leadership positions in the Gulf Arab states.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a significant difference in the percentage of women in (a) senior leadership and (b) departmental leadership positions by business classification in the Gulf Arab states.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a significant positive relationship between the size of the organization and the percentage of women in (a) senior leadership and (b) departmental leadership positions within companies in the Gulf Arab states.

Hypothesis 4: There will be a significantly higher percentage of women in (a) senior leadership and (b) departmental leadership positions in privately owned than publicly-listed companies in the Gulf Arab states.

Research Methods

This study is based upon data available from *Zawya*, which contains various components, including live news, industry and asset class research, online networking, and detailed profiles on companies and projects (Zawya, 2013). The total population categorized as GCC privately-owned companies in the Zawya database was 13,927 companies. The category is classified into publicly-listed (5%) and private (95%). Just under a quarter of these companies (24%) employed at least 300 employees (10% publicly-listed; 90% private), which was the criteria for our study. We included both categories of companies (i.e., ownership) as a variable in our study. We analyzed 2805 companies, which were 80% of all companies employing 300 or more employees; 20% were not included because basic data on these companies were not available. In all, the final sample included 315 publicly-listed (11% of sample) and 2486 private companies (89% of sample), with four companies missing.

The companies analyzed represented 20% of all companies in the GCC countries. The final sample included nearly all the publicly-listed companies employing more than 300 employees (96%) and more than three quarters of the private companies employing more than 300 companies (78%). The number of companies analyzed from each country varied widely relative to country size: Bahrain (n=121); KSA (n=1125); Kuwait (n=295); Oman (n=122); Qatar (n=185); UAE (n=957). The number of companies analyzed by number of company employees is as follows: 300-499 (n=787); 500-999 (n=667); 1000-2499 (n=658); 2500-4999 (n=297); 5000+ (n=305); missing (n=91). Finally, company numbers separated by business classification is as follows: Industry (n=1287); Sales (n=359); Services (n=184); Finance (n=170); Hospitality (n=365); Technology (n=183), Transport (n=251); and missing (n=5).

Preparing the data for analysis was completed manually. Variable categories were created for analysis and raw numbers were coded appropriately. The database included names of senior

personnel divided into board members, top managers, key officers, and heads and managers. The name data also included role designation (i.e., departmental responsibility). Research assistants were able to determine whether individuals were male and female as many were designated by “Mr.,” “Ms.,” or “Mrs.” Other titles, used in this region, that indicate gender include Sheikh (male) or Sheikha (female). Some individuals were designated by “Dr.” and in some cases there was no title given or the individual was designated by their royal status common to both genders e.g. H.H (His or Her Highness) or H.E. (Her/His Excellency). For the data on individuals where gender was not obvious, research assistants from the region checked company websites, consulted a professional network (LinkedIn), and assigned gender based on their knowledge of regional names.

We tested hypotheses 1 and 3 using ANOVA and Scheffe follow-up tests; hypothesis 2 compares private and public companies, using an independent t- test; and hypothesis 4 was tested using Pearson, one-tail correlation. The dependent variable for hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 is the proportion of female employees to overall number of employees in the firm. Hypothesis 4 assesses the proportion of female employees to the total number of employees in companies of various populations.

Findings

Data emerged that revealed where the female leaders are located within organizations by position (e.g., board members, chief officers, vice presidents, top management, division or unit heads). We then compared the results with pertinent demographics: business classification, number of employees, and ownership. The descriptive results are shown in tables that are included in the full length paper, according to position, business classification, number of

company employees, and ownership, along with text that outlines each related hypothesis and its associated findings.

Not surprisingly, the data show that there are fewer women than men employed in management positions in companies within the GGC and that women are substantially underrepresented in senior roles. This study finds that females hold 5.2% of the top department leadership positions within the 2805 GCC companies we analyzed, while a lower percentage (3.1%) of female representation appears in the ranks of senior company leaders; there is a combined total of 3.7% female leaders in companies in our sample. When GCC countries are considered individually, overall percentages (2.5% to 4.9%) still range substantially below the percentages of women leaders in other developed world regions.

In terms of comparisons between GCC countries, the results confirm that there are significant differences between at least some of the countries in terms of overall percentages of women in senior and departmental positions, with KSA having the lowest percentage of the six countries. Although our study is the first to highlight the presence of women in the majority of leadership positions, the Dubai Women Establishment (2011) *Outlook* document reports there were between .01 and 2.7% females on corporate boards in the six Gulf Arab states in 2007. Our study actually found higher percentages, which range from 1.9% (KSA) to 4.4% (Bahrain). However, caution should be used in such comparisons because the study populations and samples are substantially different. More detailed results will be included in the full paper.

Overall, there are substantially fewer women in management and leadership roles than men, whether data are analyzed by business classification, company ownership, positions, or company size. Our data provide increased understanding of the current state of affairs within the private sector, both publicly-traded and privately owned, which is a starting point for future

benchmarking and research. In addition, our findings add to the knowledge about the leadership of women in the private sector and are also a catalyst for further investigation on that sector.

Limitations and Implications

The study had two primary limitations. First, the majority of companies did not submit complete profiles, so we were unable to run statistics on some variables (e.g. market capital, and total revenue) that would have provide more insight into the phenomenon being studied. Second, because of this, much of the statistical analysis provided was descriptive in nature; fortunately, ANOVAs and t-tests did provide some comparison analysis. Even with its limitations, the Zawya database continues to be the best quantitative data in the region to study the presence of female leaders within GCC companies.

Women in the Gulf Arab states are becoming more educated and are joining the workforce in greater numbers, but the presence of women in leadership roles is small. Hence, research on women and leadership in the region is of great import. This is the first known scholarly study comparing women in business leadership in the GCC countries, particularly in terms of the presence of female leaders in various positions through companies by business classification, company size, and ownership. This study provides helpful insights and important implications for the government leaders in GCC countries, as well as for educators, scholars, and practitioners who work to help prepare and advance women to leadership within this important region. HRD scholars and practitioners clearly fall into these categories as they participate in related society- and organizational-level organization development, training and development, and career development work that can propel this work forward.

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