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**From the Selected Works of Susan R. Madsen**

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# The Experiences of Arab Women Leaders in Learning to Lead

Susan R. Madsen, *Utah Valley University*



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**SESSION PROPOSAL:  
INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE**

**WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP**

Session Presenters

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Susan R. Madsen is an associate professor of management and the assistant dean of faculty in the Woodbury School of Business at Utah Valley University. She recently published two scholarly books on the development of women leaders and has authored/co-authored nearly 50 peer-reviewed articles primarily in the areas of leadership, ethics, individual change, work-life issues, and strategic faculty development. Susan is currently continuing her research on the lifetime development of women leaders in the United Arab Emirates, China, and the U.S. She is also an independent leadership and change consultant.

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Stacie Furst, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Center for Organizational Leadership. Dr. Furst received her doctorate in Management from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2004 and has more than eight years of industry experience working in the areas of Human Resource Management and Organizational Development. Her research interests include virtual teams, gender and leadership issues, and the challenges of leading across cultures. Her research has appeared in the Journal of Applied Psychology, Leadership Quarterly, the Academy of Management Executive, and Human Resource Management. Stacie frequently works as a consultant with organizations in the areas of virtual teaming, compliance management, and retention. Her past and current clients include GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), Ernst and Young, and Virtual Global Technologies.

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Eric K. Kaufman is an assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Prior to joining the faculty at Virginia Tech, Eric was program coordinator for Florida's Wedgworth Leadership Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources. He has also been involved in developing leadership programming for adult and youth organizations. Eric's research interests include multiple aspects of leadership and leadership development, including agricultural, collegiate, grassroots, strengths-based, and volunteer leadership. He has presented at numerous research conferences and has authored several peer reviewed journal articles.

Pat E. Grace is a graduate research assistant in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Prior to pursuit of her doctoral degree at Virginia Tech, Ms. Grace worked for 17 years as an Extension Agent for the University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service. She also has experience as a Social and Rehabilitative Services Counselor. Her research interests include program development, behavior change, and Community Based Social Marketing.

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Katherine Tunheim is an assistant professor of management in the Economics and Management Department at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN. Prior to completing her Ph.D. last December, 2008, she worked in industry and business for 15 years as the Director of Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness at American Express, Northwest Airlines and Carlson Companies. For the past 10 years, she has served as president of Tunheim Leadership Group, a leadership and organization development firm, based in Minneapolis. Her research interests include women and leadership, work-life issues, and college presidents.

#### Session Short Description

The purpose of this session is present research findings from four recent qualitative studies focused on women and leadership. Papers include research on 1) career paradoxes, 2) leadership training program participants, 3) the lifetime experiences of Arab women in developing leadership, and 4) spouses of college presidents as leaders.

#### Session Abstract

Public, private, and social sector organizations in various settings are now acknowledging the importance of preparing both men and women for strong, competent leadership. In 1994, Harvard Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter stated that it had become essential for business success

to let “talent rise to the top regardless of where it is found and whether it is male or female” (p. 11). In the last few decades, women and leadership has emerged as an important focus of researchers and practitioners in many countries across the globe. Although many studies have been published on women and leadership, there is still much to be discovered and understood. The studies presented in this session will provide insights into unique populations and perspectives that will be helpful for educators, scholars, and practitioners who design leadership programs for women in educational and non-educational settings.

The purpose of this session is to present research findings from four recent qualitative research studies focused on women and leadership. First, Furst will propose that women encounter a number of paradoxes during their careers that can affect their ability to assume and prosper in leadership roles. Her presentation will summarize findings from an exploratory study of 30 women leaders designed to understand how women react to these paradoxes and the outcomes associated with their responses. Second, Kaufman and Grace will discuss their qualitative study results focused on the experiences of women who participated in a grassroots organization’s leadership training program. They argue that female members on traditionally male-dominated boards are becoming more common and will discuss the gender bias and other barriers that prevent women from feeling successful and ultimately being successful. Third, Madsen proposes that to consider designing and developing leadership programs for women in the United Arab Emirates, it is important to understand how current leaders have learned to lead throughout their lives. She will report data gathered from in-depth, qualitative interviews that were conducted with Arab women leaders (government and business) to investigate their lifetime experiences in developing leadership. Finally, Tunheim will discuss the female spouses of college presidents as leaders. She explains that boards have not typically paid these high-profile “volunteers” who serve as influential and informal leaders to the college. Her phenomenological study describes experiences of male former college presidents who report the criticality of their spouse’s leadership to their overall presidential effectiveness. The session will conclude with a few minutes for questions, answers, and discussion.

## **Paper 1: Exploring the Paradoxes of Women and Leadership**

Stacie Furst  
Center for Organizational Leadership  
University of Cincinnati

### Short Description

Women encounter a number of paradoxes during their careers that can affect their ability to assume and prosper in leadership roles. This presentation summarizes findings from an exploratory study of 30 women leaders designed to understand how women react to these paradoxes and the outcomes associated with their responses.

### Abstract

Research regarding gender and leadership reveals that women encounter a number of paradoxes or “double binds” during their careers that can affect their ability to assume and prosper in leadership positions. For instance, in a recent study of more than 1,200 senior managers and

leaders from both the US and Europe, researchers at Catalyst (2007) found that women often fail to be promoted to top levels of their organizations because they presumably lead differently than men. Whereas women are perceived to “take care,” men are perceived to “take charge.” However, when women act against stereotype and adopt a traditionally masculine leadership style, they are viewed negatively by their followers and by their superiors charged with evaluating their performance. As another example, both men and women balancing careers and family are often encouraged to take advantage of work-family benefits (e.g., leaves, on-site day care) to minimize stress and improve quality of life. Because women continue to carry the bulk of household responsibilities, they are more likely than men to take advantage of those policies. However, when they do, these women are then perceived as less committed to their work and ultimately seen as less promotable into leadership positions.

In these and other instances, women may be forced to rethink the decisions they make regarding their work-related roles and behaviors. Female participants in the Catalyst study, for instance, reported that they adopt a gender neutral style of leadership to avoid the scrutiny of either being too masculine or too feminine. With respect to work-family balance issues, some women may forego work-family benefits to signal their commitment to the job and their readiness to assume leadership positions. The net effect of these decisions is that women must downplay gender and/or eschew traditional gender roles in order to obtain and sustain leadership positions. While these challenges are not new, we are only just beginning to understand the personal and organizational outcomes associated with these “gender neutralizing” behaviors.

The purpose of this presentation is to summarize findings from an exploratory study of more than 30 women leaders designed to understand the paradoxes associated with women and leadership. Interview and survey data was collected from women representing a variety of occupations and industries to increase the generalizability of results. After a series of general questions regarding their career experiences, women were asked whether (and to what extent) they faced various paradoxes or “double binds” often associated with women in the workplace. Women described these experiences and how they chose to respond. They were then asked to discuss the short- and long-term effects of those responses for their own careers and for their organizations. Participants were then invited to share their thoughts regarding the advantages and disadvantages of a gender-neutral workplace vis-à-vis a workplace that encourages full self expression.

The hope is that results from this study might provoke further dialogue and research aimed at understanding the unique challenges women face as they rise to leadership positions. A secondary aim is to explore our assumptions regarding the merits of a gendered versus non-gendered workplace.

## **Paper 2: Female Leaders’ Experience: Barriers and Biases**

Eric K. Kaufman  
Pat. E. Grace  
Virginia Tech

### Short Description

Female members on traditionally male-dominated boards are becoming more common. However, these women may face gender bias and other barriers which prevent them from feeling successful and ultimately being successful. This qualitative study focused on the experiences of women who participated in a grassroots organization's leadership training program.

### Abstract

The trend in historically male-dominated organizations is toward increased female leadership and participation (Carter & Rudd, 2005; Pini, 2005). This seemingly positive occurrence is not without problems. Pioneering women in diverse male-dominated organizations can, and frequently do, face numerous gender related expectations and barriers (Cassell & Walsh, 1997; Lester, 2008; Seevers & Foster, 2002). It is critically important to consider such gender-related issues in both research and practice with these organizations.

In 2006, a traditionally male-dominated grassroots organization conducted leadership training for local board members (both male and female). Six months after the program, participants were surveyed to assess program benefit. Researchers were surprised to find a statistically significant difference between males and females in self-reported performance. In fact, females who participated in the program were rating their performance even lower than females who did not participate in the program. Of course, this finding raises important concerns about the program, since the program planners intended for the program to increase the success and effectiveness of program participants.

The purpose of this study was to determine why female leaders in a grassroots organization were not reporting success with leadership practices, even after participating in a leadership development program targeted toward implementation of those practices. The population for the study included the 16 females who participated in an organization's leadership program event and subsequently participated in a follow-up survey six months after the event. Those who agreed to participate were interviewed by telephone. Twelve individuals completed all portions of the study, for a response rate of 75% ( $n=12$ ,  $N=16$ ).

Many of the women described experiences which they perceived as barriers to their effective performance as members of their local Farm Bureau. Analysis of the interview data revealed several consistent themes: (1) persisting stereotypes & bias, (2) separation & isolation, (3) desire for change, and (4) potential for added value.

More than half of those surveyed reported they had experienced gender bias and stereotypes. One woman commented: *"Frankly, some people still have the idea that women should be in the home and that's it. So we are still fighting this prejudice."*

A significant number of the women made statements which suggested they felt alone and separate from male board members. This was indicated by such statements as: *"When I first got on the board I think I was the token female."* And: *"I was the only female member on the state board, cause they, you see they have a woman's program, and so they sort of kept the women separate from the state board activities."*

A number of participants expressed frustration over the seemingly static nature of the board on which they served. For example, one said: *"Since we re-elected the same person [president], I became a little bit more disappointed in the fact that nothing was going to really change... I'm looking for other organizations that will help meet the needs of the things I really want to do."*

A number of those surveyed felt they had been and could continue to be great assets to the organization's board. One hopeful participant said: *"...women have taken the forefront and I think they're developing many other programs that previously were not thought of. I think slowly we have changed a lot of people's ideas about women..."*

Several other women, although confident they could positively contribute, expressed frustration and doubt at their chances of being able to do so. For example, one woman said: *"I think the counties where the women aren't involved is because the men don't realize how important and how much help they could be if they would share their board with the women."*

Although numerous researchers have reported gender biases and prejudices in organizational leadership, the practical recommendations for fixing these problems are few. Path-goal leadership theory may offer helpful guidance to practitioners. Following the theory, professional development programs must go beyond the steps of identifying goals and clarifying the path. These programs must remove obstacles and provide support. The task of removing obstacles may involve structural and policy changes, changes that ensure women appropriate representation and access. One effective approach to providing support may be to facilitate more interaction within the organization in an effort to combat the separation and isolation that women might experience. For some organizations, this may take the form of a formal mentoring programs; for other organizations the best approach may be more organization-wide events.

### **Paper 3: The Experiences of Arab Women Leaders in Learning to Lead**

Susan R. Madsen  
Utah Valley University

#### Short Description

To consider designing and developing leadership programs for women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it is important to understand how current leaders have learned to lead throughout their lives. In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with Arab women leaders (government and business) to investigate their lifetime experiences in developing leadership.

#### Abstract

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. However in some countries, such as the UAE, research on and programs for developing women leaders are only in their infancy. Of course the most serious obstacle has been the oppressed role that women have had in the Arab world for centuries. Although this continues to present obstacles for assisting current women in developing

leadership, Mostafa (2004) said that misconceptions now thwart progress more than actual practices. He explained that misconceptions about the role of Emirati women have led people to believe that they are not supposed to “publicly participate in the political and administrative processes” (p. 532). This perception is one of numerous barriers that have led to the continued underutilization of Emirati women in management positions within most industries in the UAE.

Two additional issues that relate to challenges in researching and developing leadership programs for Emirati women include the lack of current UAE women leaders and the lack of leadership preparation that young women receive early in life. First, currently there are few Emirati women in management and leadership roles within the country. Fortunately, there are some fairly recent (two or three decades) 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). Yet, although female employment in the Arab work is increasing, it still remains the lowest in the world despite the relatively young age of the female population and their educational level (Mostafa, 2004; Scott, 2004). In recent years the number of working women has increased, although most run their own businesses with few employees (which is real progress for many) or work at the lowest levels of the organizations (with a supervisory role as the top positions many can obtain). Hence, Emirati women are typically not found at the upper management and leadership levels of organizations within the UAE. Second, research has discovered that most young Emirati women are typically not exposed to opportunities and experiences early in life that would help them develop the foundational leadership skills more women in Western countries seem to develop (Madsen, 2009).

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. 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? 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). The exploratory nature of this research is a limitation for this study. The small sample of women participants the generalizability of this study. This study does, however, provide some clear themes that can serve as the basis for continued research in the area of women and leadership in the UAE.

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). This presentation will present themes



related to a portion of the findings (young adulthood/adulthood) and will focus specifically on difficulties and struggles, decisions to work, personalities, motherhood, motivations to lead, leadership style and philosophy, influential people in adulthood, helpful training and development, feedback and reflection, work-life issues, career paths, and advice to young Emirati women.

This is the first known scholarly study conducted on the lifetime development of women UAE leaders. This study provides helpful insights for educators, scholars, and practitioners to help them more effectively design successful leadership programs for Arab women in educational and non-educational settings. 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.

#### **Paper 4: Women and Leadership: Exploring the Role of the College Presidential Spouse**

Katherine A. Tunheim  
Gustavus Adolphus College

##### Short Description

The spouses of college presidents are predominantly female. Boards have not typically paid these high-profile “volunteers” who serve as influential and informal leaders to the college. This phenomenological study describes experiences of male former college presidents who report the criticality of their spouse’s leadership to their overall presidential effectiveness.

##### Abstract

The American Council on Education published its first study on demographics of college presidents in 1986 and reported that 91 percent of them were male. Twenty years later, they reported that 77 percent of all college presidents were male. The number of female presidents has more than doubled in the last 20 years, primarily at two-year institutions (June, 2007). The number of female chief executive officers in higher education has risen dramatically in recent decades (Brown, 2005). With this increasing number of women in presidential positions, more attention is now being paid to the spouses of these college presidents.

Not much has been written about college presidential spouses. This is a curious fact in light of the extremely important role that she or he plays on every college or university campus in America (Cotton, 2003). “Being a college president’s spouse means you are a part of the leadership team – maybe not formally, but certainly, informally,” (Wallin-Anderson, 2005 as cited in Tunheim, 2008). Almost universally, the president’s spouse is expected to fulfill institutional responsibilities such as raising money, managing the president’s home and staff, and representing the university at functions the president cannot attend. And for the women in particular, the college seems to expect enormous sacrifices – without pay (Cotton, 2003). It has generally been assumed that the institution gets “two for the price of one” (Basinger, 2000).

The purpose of this presentation is to summarize findings from a phenomenological study of 10 male former college presidents designed to understand the experience of leaving a college

presidency. One of the themes that emerged is the importance of the presidential spouse as a leader to the educational institution. Nine of the 10 male college presidents reported that they could not have been successful without the team leadership or partnership their female spouse provided.

An analysis of the interview data revealed: 1) Boards of Trustees need to have explicit expectations for the spouse in the role; 2) Appropriate compensation or rewards need to be considered for these predominantly female spouses; 3) Spouses need to claim their own sense of identity in the role; 4) Spouses can either positively or negatively influence the success of their presidential partner as an unofficial but extremely important member of the leadership team.

The hope that results from this study may increase future dialogue and research aimed at understanding the unique challenges female and male presidential spouses face as they play these important leadership roles in colleges across the country. Another hope is to explore how to appropriately compensate and reward these spouses for their work on behalf of the college.