Women and Leadership in Bahrain

Susan R. Madsen, Utah Valley University
Linzi Kemp, Utah Valley University

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Susan R. Madsen, Utah Valley University
Linzi J. Kemp, American University of Sharjah

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Most leaders in public, private, and social sectors across the globe now acknowledge the importance of developing both men and women for formal leadership positions, and scholars (e.g., Bass, 1990; Bennis, 1989) have conducted leadership studies for decades in various disciplines (e.g., education, management, psychology) to better understand how to effectively do this. Within the human resource development (HRD) field, Kowske and Anthony (2007), Ardichvili and Manderscheid (2008), and Madsen (2009, 2012a, 2012b) have specifically highlighted the importance of studying leadership development within the United States of America and beyond. Yet, studies coming from any discipline about developing women leaders in countries around the globe are just now starting to emerge. Few studies of women in leadership are found currently in countries within the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. Interesting though, and emphasized by the paucity of study, Zahra (2011) has suggested that the Middle East is actually “fertile ground” (p. 18) for scholarship. Scholarship, particularly in relation to the gap between the number of highly qualified women available and the actual incidence of females in leadership positions within these countries.

The different political, social, and economic climates within the MENA countries bring additional complexity to the role of women in the region. According to the Arab Women Leadership Outlook (Dubai Women Establishment, 2011),

Over 51% of the female population in Kuwait is now economically active, compared to

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just over 18% in Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, over the last few years, a new generation of political leaders has promoted women in leadership positions across sectors. Likewise in Bahrain, the UAE, Jordan, Oman and Qatar, among other countries, political leaders have recently shown strong commitment to women’s rights and empowerment. While countries like Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt made advances for women decades ago and had significant progress, younger countries, such as the UAE has made many achievements for women in only one generation. But even taking these strides into account, Arab women on the whole are still less economically and politically empowered than women in other parts of the world. (p. 15)

The Global Gender Gap Report of 2011 reported that the countries of the MENA region occupied the last place in the rankings, ‘having closed a little over 58% of its gender gap’ (WEF, 2012, p. 17). Reviewing the countries mentioned in the study by Dubai Women Establishment (2011), we find that Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have deteriorated in gender gap ranking over a five year period.

According to the Dubai Women Establishment (2011) study participants, the “top three positive enablers for women striving to reach leadership positions in the Arab world” are 1) the economic environment (69%), 2) the perception of women leaders (59%), and 3) education (59%) (pp. 31-32). In addition, this study found that the top three challenging environments included 1) religious (44%), 2) legal (42%), and 3) cultural (41%). Yet, although the religious environment was noted as the most unfavorable enabler, “the highest percentage of Arab women leaders ranked it as having ‘no effect’ on access to leadership positions by Arab women (29%)” (p. 32). According to the Dubai Women Establishment (2011):
This point, perhaps more than any other, explains the contradictions faced by Arab women: Islam is very much in favour of women, but the inaccurate interpretation of the religion can do much to hold back their advancement. In the same vein, although the perception of Arab women leaders was ranked as one of the top three favourable enablers, it received one of the highest percentages as having ‘no effect’ (21%) on access to leadership positions by Arab women. (p. 32)

It is clear that not only understanding the environments within MENA countries is complex, but also understanding how to develop women within various regions and countries is multifaceted. Leadership development can be particularly challenging because of the numerous complexities inherent in understanding women’s developmental backgrounds and journeys (e.g., culture, traditions, religion, values, backgrounds, education, work-family issues, self-concept, gender barriers, expectations, previous opportunities, perceived future opportunities) (Karam, Ikhlas, & Kemp et al., 2012). However, as leaders, scholars, and practitioners start considering how to develop women leaders within these countries, it can be helpful to first understand the current country’s state of affairs within each sector. Currently, no literature provides a detailed look at specific data from organizations that provide a more in-depth descriptive look at this phenomenon in Bahrain. Yet, these types of initial studies can be important in setting the stage for future in-depth work that can then explore the developmental experiences of those who have succeeded within a culture. Because of this, initial descriptive studies are important for the field of HRD.

The purpose of this study was to research the state of affairs in Bahrain in terms of the presence (or absence) of women in senior business leadership positions generally and also where they are located within organizations (e.g., board members, chief officers, vice presidents, top
management, division or unit heads). This study is descriptive in nature and focused on a search for new and valuable information that can help scholars, educators, practitioners, and Bahrain leaders gain insight into this phenomenon. This study is part of a larger research project that is investigating the presence of women in six Gulf countries. A comparative study is planned once all of the data are prepared. This research is based on data available from the Zawya database that tracks information about public and private companies (Kemp, 2012). Zawya is a major online business intelligence platform that focuses on the MENA region and includes detailed profiles on the top companies, as well as comprehensive industry and asset class research.

The original list of possible data categories found in Zawya includes the following: 1) country (Levant, North Africa, Overseas, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, UAE, Yeman); 2) location of investments; 3) sector/industry; ownership type; company size (no of employees, market capital (USD million), total revenue (USD million), Total revenue growth (%), Total Assets (USD million), Total assets growth (%), Net profit (USD million), net profit growth (%); and 6) profile, officers, and news. Researchers decided not to use the variables that did not have thorough data for the majority of companies. For example, less than 10 percent of the companies analyzed had information on market capital, total revenue, total revenue growth, total assets, total asset growth, net profit, and net profit growth. Hence, these variables were dropped from this study due to lack of data. In addition, this study focuses solely on data analyzed from the 500 largest Bahrain companies found in Zawya.

Preparing the data for analysis was done manually. Variable categories were created for analysis and raw numbers were coded appropriately. The most challenging was the number of managers and leaders in the variety of categories. 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 assigned gender based on their knowledge of regional names.

All data were given numeric values for descriptive statistical analysis. Again, this was a descriptive study that investigated the presence of women in senior leadership positions in public and private businesses within the UAE. This includes analysis of where the female top leaders are located within organizations (e.g., board members, chief officers, vice presidents, top management, division or unit heads) and then compares those results with pertinent demographics (e.g., sector, ownership; number of employees).

The full length paper and conference presentation will present the detailed statistical findings of this study as it is beyond the scope of a single abstract to do so here. However, there are some important contributions of this study. First, understanding the presence and development of female business leaders increases value in the human resource pool and extends thoughtful choice on promotion and empowerment. Understanding the current state of affairs is foundational to track movement toward a more equitable workforce environment as well. Second, this is one of the first known scholarly studies conducted on the presence of women leaders in Bahrain. This study can provide useful insights for government leaders, educators,
scholars, practitioners, and others who work to help prepare women for leadership in the MENA region. The presence of women in leadership positions in all sectors in this region is growing, and attention is needed in terms of academic research and publication. The authors hope that this paper will assist in motivating other scholars to begin more in-depth studies in Bahrain and other Gulf countries. It is important that Bahraini women take up roles in both the public and private sector so they can become more effective role models to the rising generation of young women.
References


