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The First Steps toward Developing Leadership Programs for Women in the United Arab Emirates: A Survey Study Exploring the Transformation of Emirati College Students

Susan R. Madsen, *Utah Valley University*



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**DEVELOPING WOMEN LEADERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
GENERATING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE**

Proposal for a Presenter Symposium
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MED: International - Cultural or Educational Approach Differences, Leadership Skill Development, Management Education Strategies

GDO: Women in Management, Leadership, Comparative/Cross-cultural

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Symposium Chair

Dr. Stella M Nkomo

Bateman Distinguished Professor of Business Leadership

University of South Africa

P O Box 392, Pretoria 0003, South Africa

+ 27 11 652 0342

Nkomosm@unisa.ac.za

Symposium Presenters

Dr. Susan R. Madsen

Assistant Dean of Faculty

School of Business

Utah Valley University

800 West University Parkway - 119

Orem, Utah 84058-5999

801 863-6176

madsensu@uvu.edu

Dr. Lynda L. Moore

Simmons School of Management

300 The Fenway

Boston, Massachusetts

USA

617 521.2370

Lynda.Moore@simmons.edu

Mrs. Katty Marmenout (**Organizer**)

INSEAD

The Abu Dhabi Centre

P.O. Box 48049

United Arab Emirates

+971 2 446 0808

katty.marmenout@insead.edu

Mrs. Hayfaa Tlaiss

Manchester Business School

The University of Manchester

Doctoral Suite, Room 5.14

Manchester, M15 6PB

+44 7849826087

hayfaa.tlaiss@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Symposium Discussant

Dr. Beverly Dawn Metcalfe

Liverpool Hope University

Hope Park, L16 9JD

+ 44 151 291 3868

metcalfb@hope.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This presenter symposium brings together four studies on Women Leadership in the Middle East and highlights the importance of generating local knowledge to enhance our leadership development programs for women in the Middle East. The papers confront empirical work in the region with theories and concepts from our Western knowledge and focus on the similarities and differences between contexts and their implications for leadership development. Findings of the studies indicate the transformational role of higher education and shed light on how Middle Eastern women perceive leadership, what challenges they face and how they cope. Implications for leadership development are discussed.

OVERVIEW STATEMENT

Leadership development is high on the agenda of many executives around the world and particularly in fast-developing regions such as the Middle East. Whereas leadership development programs are often based on an export model, we believe, that especially with respect to women leadership development in the Middle East, our effectiveness in preparing successful leaders largely depends on locally generated knowledge. Therefore, we are proposing this symposium around the theme of “Developing Women Leaders in the Middle East – Generating local knowledge.”

Despite a surge in cross-cultural studies comparing management practices across different regions, research about and conducted in the Middle East remains extremely scarce (Metcalf, 2006). Particularly little research has been conducted with respect to women in the workplace.

Many countries in the Middle East still fall short in female capacity utilization (UNDP, 2003). With female labor increasingly considered as a significant factor in economic growth in the region (Metcalf, 2006), local policy makers are increasingly voicing the need for women to take up leadership roles in all areas of public life. Thus, women leadership development has become a priority for policy makers in the region.

The presenters in this symposium believe that it is time now to generate more local knowledge and discuss ways in which this knowledge can help us devising better leadership programmes for women in the Middle East. It is the purpose of the symposium to bring together recent empirical work in the region with existing theories and concepts from our western knowledge. This confrontation of theory with local data may help shed light on the similarities and differences between contexts and their implications for leadership development. Finally, we hope that the topic will generate discussion among members of the

audience about conducting research and generating local knowledge about the Middle East in general or women leadership in particular.

OUTLINE OF SYMPOSIUM

We have brought together presenters with diverse backgrounds but a common interest and passion for Women Leadership in the Middle East. The speakers and the discussant represent a group of both young researchers and senior professors well known for their work in the fields of leadership, diversity, and organizational development. The symposium brings together presenters from Europe and the United States who have all worked and/or lived in the Middle East.

In the first paper **Susan R. Madsen** will discuss how Emirati women are prepared for leadership. Susan's paper will highlight the transformational role of higher education. Susan is an associate professor of management and assistant dean of faculty in the Woodbury School of Business at Utah Valley University.

In the second paper, **Lynda Moore** will discuss her Fulbright research, which is an exploratory investigation of Emirati women business leaders. She will discuss how Emirati women view leadership and implications for understanding their leadership styles. She will also discuss the impact and importance of a cultural and gendered lens while conducting research on women business leaders cross culturally. Professor Moore has taught courses at undergraduate, graduate, and executive levels and conducted research on women's leadership and diversity for over thirty years.

The third paper will be presented by **Hayfaa Tlaiss** who will draw a social comparison between women managers in different parts of the Middle East. Hayfaa is an advanced doctoral student at Manchester University and is currently focusing on diversity in management in the Middle East.

In the fourth paper **Katty Marmenout** will present challenges for Middle Eastern women and their coping strategies. Katty is a Research Fellow at INSEAD Abu Dhabi, working on the Women Leadership initiative. She is also an advanced doctoral candidate at McGill University.

The session will be chaired by **Stella Nkomo**, Bateman Distinguished Professor of Business Leadership at the University of South Africa's Graduate School of Business Leadership. She is recognised for her work on race and gender in organisations and is co-author the critically acclaimed Harvard Business School Press book, *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*.

Beverly Metcalfe, Professor of International Management and Development at Liverpool Hope University, will be the discussant of this symposium. Professor Metcalfe has undertaken consultancy and advisory roles on women's development and empowerment, and HR issues in the Middle East for the Bahrain and Islamic Republic of Iran's education ministries. She is also preparing a book on Leadership Development in the Middle East.

PROPOSED DIVISIONS

We submit this proposal for consideration by the following divisions:

GDO - Gender and Diversity in Organizations: Women Leadership Development in the Middle East will discuss issues at the core of the interest of the GDO division. How women leaders are prepared to become leaders and how they experience the challenges present in their environment in the particular cultural context of the Middle East should be of interest to scholars interested in both gender and diversity. This symposium will also discuss the particular case of the United Arab Emirates, where diversity in organizations takes on a whole new dimension with only 17% of nationals and expatriates from 200 countries.

IM – International Management: This symposium focuses on a geographical region, the Middle East, about which limited knowledge is available. The present symposium should be of interest to the IM division as it will present local knowledge from the Middle East, which can provide the base for better understanding of cross-cultural differences in operations among different regions. The symposium also includes a within region comparative study between Lebanese and Emirati women leaders, as well as a study with a diverse sample of working women in the UAE. Both of these contributions highlight that even within one region, cross-cultural differences may be important.

MED – Management Education: Whereas leadership development programs are often based on an export model, we argue that our effectiveness in preparing successful leaders largely depends on locally generated knowledge. This symposium addresses a gap in our body of knowledge about management education in a fast-growing region. As Western educational institutions are increasingly entering this market, offering Management Education in this region, the present session should also interest faculty who wish to learn more about management education in the Middle East, particularly about the inclusion of women, which has become a strategic priority at a policy level.

SYNOPSIS OF EACH PRESENTATION

Presentation #1

The First Steps toward Developing Leadership Programs for Women in the United Arab Emirates: A Survey Study Exploring the Transformation of Emirati College Students

Susan R. Madsen, Utah Valley University

Developing effective leaders has become one of the most critical challenges for many organizations today, as strong, competent leadership often separates high-performing, successful organizations from less effective ones. In many countries research is being conducted to assist practitioners in designing successful leadership development programs for both men and women. However, in some countries, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), these efforts are only in their infancy, and leadership development for women is a new concept. Needless to say, there is no evidence of existing research on the development of women leaders in that country, and only a few indications that the development of leadership for women has even been addressed in past years. However, it seems that things may be changing (Al Qasimi, 2007; Khaleej Times, 2007), and with these emerging perceptual changes it is expected that there will be future opportunities for management practitioners to design and implement leadership development initiatives for Emirati women.

To effectively design future leadership development programs to meet the developmental needs of Emirati women, research that explores the backgrounds and experiences of these women in learning environments can be helpful. In fact, the first step toward developing leadership programs for Emirati women is to understand the type of learning that transforms them. Learning that *transforms* individuals is learning that *changes* individuals. Since developing leadership is a transforming process, Mezirow's (1991) transformational learning theory provided a valuable theoretical lens to guide this research. As Merriam and Caffarella (1995) noted, "transformational learning theory is about change—

dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (p. 318). They explained that this kind of learning is more than merely adding to what we already know. Clark (1993) stated that “Transformational learning shapes people; they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize” (p. 47).

To begin understanding the learning and development of Emirati women, an online survey instrument was developed to explore perceptions of transformational learning at Abu Dhabi Women’s College (ADWC) and to determine the influences that may affect these perceptions. The study explored three potential influences (influential individuals, learning assignments and activities, and outside college-related influences) on the transformation of students during college through the three core components of the transformational learning lens (mental construction of experience, critical reflection, and development and action) (Merriam & Caffarella, 1995). Two research questions guided this study: 1) To which extent do individuals, learning assignments and activities, and specific outside opportunities or activities influence the transformational learning perceptions and experiences of female college students in Abu Dhabi?; and 2) Can demographics predict transformational learning ?

The survey instrument was created after a thorough review of the literature focused on transformational learning, transformative learning, and transformative education. Although there were many studies on transformational learning, only one researcher (King, 1998) used a quantitative instrument to collect data. I used her survey as the foundation for this survey, but substantial revisions and additions were made. The first section of the survey (18-items; 5-point scale, “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) focused on student perceptions of transformational learning through exploring the three change categories: 1) perceptions of change in self and others, 2) thoughts and actions in considering and making changes, and 3) awareness of the benefits of change and predictions of their own future behaviors. The second and third sections of the instrument focused on reflection and learning influences,

which served as independent variables for this study. The final section included seven intervening demographic variables: marital status, college major, prior education, years at the college, age, living location, and significant changes that have occurred during the past year (marriage, birth of children, move, divorce/separation, death of loved one, change jobs, loss of job, and new job). It is also important to note that the full survey was available for students in both English and Arabic.

Of the approximately 750 ADWC students invited to participate in this online survey via face-to-face or email invitation, 294 responded and took the survey. Overall, students in this study perceived themselves as having gone through a transformational learning experience at ADWC during their years attending. Students appear to have significantly changed their opinions, expectations, and views because of their college experience. Their educational experiences have often caused them to reflect on their previous decisions or past behaviors and on how their studies impact them personally. Student participants also believe that influential individuals, learning assignments and activities, and outside influences have influenced the transformation they have made throughout their college career thus far. Although it was clear that each of the three components of transformational learning influenced each other, the regression analysis showed that none predicted perceptions of change or considering and making changes. Reflection was a predictor of two of the three transformation learning components. Interesting, learning assignments and activities is the only potential influence that predicted awareness and prediction of future behaviors. The independent variables explained close to 50% of the variance for two of the three transformational learning variables: 1) thoughts and actions in considering and making changes and 2) awareness of the benefits of change and predictions of their own future behaviors.

Many findings provide insights helpful in offering numerous implications for designing leadership development programs for women UAE nationals. For example, these findings provide support that the inclusion of well designed reflective assignments and experiences can assist women in 1) understanding themselves and others, 2) thinking and acting differently, and 3) seeing how they can contribute to society, make a future impact or difference, and reach a new level of potential they now see in themselves. Although there are a number of limitations for this study, it provides a starting point to the exploration of how educators, scholars, and practitioners might assist in helping Emirati women develop leadership at least in college/university settings and possibly beyond.

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Presentation #2

A Preliminary Investigation of Emirati Women Business Leaders

Lynda L. Moore, Simmons School of Management

Introduction and background. Women's employment varies significantly across the Arab world, and within the GCC. Research from GCC countries shows that although women are exceeding men in university enrollment and 65% of graduates in the region are women, their participation in the labor force still lags behind the world average of 40-50%. Within the UAE the nearly 40% enrollment growth of female students in higher education has not been mirrored in women's economic participation where growth has been 7% since 1985. However, according to government sources, women constitute 20% of the public sector and only 4% of the private sector. Government support has been very strong - and crucial, along with cultural change and perceptions about women in employment. Given the growing need for women in leadership yet the pronounced lag between education and work force entrance, there is clearly a compelling need for research.

In recent years the status and participation of women in Middle Eastern society (especially in the UAE) has improved greatly. This is due in large part to the full support of the late Sheikh Zayed and the UAE government, best illustrated by the UAE constitution, which guarantees the principles of social justice for all. Under the Constitution, women have the same legal status, claim to titles, access to education, and the same right to practice professions as men. Constitutional guarantees have been implemented through legislation. For example, under the terms of the Labor Law, there is no discrimination between men and women in terms of equal pay for equal work.(UAE Yearbook 2008) The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2007) depicts the Middle East and North Africa region as the worst performing in terms of gender inequality. However, the report also recognizes

the UAE for significant improvement in ratios of women's economic participation, wage equality and a decrease in the estimated income gap between women and men.

As of 2003, women constitute 66% of the workforce in the government sector, 40% in education, 35% in healthcare and 20% in social affairs. In 2004, female participation in the private sector was 18% and a significant 37.5% in financial services. While government sources claim that women occupy 30% of decision-making positions in all sectors, there is a lack of data on the number of women in decision-making or managerial positions in the corporate sector (UAE Yearbook, 2008).

Although the economic participation rate of female nationals has increased, their share of the total labor force is less than 27 %. This underscores the importance of current efforts to target women for jobs. Currently, the unemployment rate for women is at a high: 19.7%, compared to 8.2% for men. The reasons for this disparity include: more expatriate and non-citizen men are used in the labor force, some companies restrict the numbers of females employed, and the changing of traditional views concerning a woman's place in the family is a slow process. As the government forges ahead with its policy of emiratization, increasing the number of nationals in the workforce, women are being seen as being more and more crucial to its success (UAE Yearbook, 2006, 2008). Although four UAE women were listed in Forbes Arabia's recent list of the ten most powerful Arab businesswomen (2008), gender inequality remains an issue requiring renewed focus to ensure that individual success stories are no longer exceptional. Despite women's rise in status in the workplace and recent calls for increased access and advancement of women to leadership roles, little research has been done to date on female leaders in the UAE, and even less on female leaders in the corporate sector.

There are limited studies on leadership in the region, and very little work exists which examines the attributes and characteristics of leadership with a gendered and culturally

appropriate lens. This study, funded by a Fulbright fellowship, examines women's definitions of leadership, their leadership traits and experiences, motivations and perceived individual and organizational challenges. The presentation will report preliminary results based on research in progress. The purpose of this research is to identify the opportunities and challenges faced by corporate women business leaders and explore their unique leadership voice and characteristics within their Emirati cultural heritage. This study aims to understand who corporate women leaders in the UAE are, their background, education, career experiences and path, and their perceptions of individual and organizational challenges and solutions. Success factors identified in previous research on women managers in other cultures are used, and unique cultural attributes of Emirati women and their impact on leadership potential and success highlighted. A brief and preliminary review of the literature provides context and need for this research.

Preliminary literature review. A preliminary review of the literature reveals limited empirical research on women leaders in the UAE. One article examined students' attitudes towards female managers in the UAE (Mostafa, 2005) and another described a program to help Arab women gain access to senior positions ("Paving the way for Arab women managers", 2006). Recent popular articles provide biographical information on high profile Emirati women such as Sheikha Fatima, the "First Lady" of the UAE, Sheikha Lubna, and Raja al Gurg (AME Info, 2005; government.ae, 2006).

The "Middle East" and the "Gulf Cooperative Council" (GCC) Countries include the UAE and a number of other countries and/or territories. There continues to be a relative paucity of published empirical research on female corporate leaders in the region. Some research highlights both factors that limit women's participation in the workplace, specifically management (Ali, 2005; Metcalfe, 2007) in addition to the challenges of being a female manager. Empirical qualitative studies show overall challenges include the patriarchal

societal attitude and gender discrimination (Sakalli-Ugurlu & Beydogan, 2002; Zgheib, 2006), which created an unsupportive organizational environment (Jamali, et al, 2006). This research contributes to the literature as an initial investigation of the experiences of Emirati female business leaders, a previously ignored topic.

Research methodology and results. An exploratory qualitative research design using semi structured interview questions was used to contribute to grounded research and theory development (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Senior women business leaders were identified through the major existing business women's councils in the UAE and referrals from leading businesswomen. This snowballing technique produced eight in depth interviews to date. Narrative and more ethnographic approaches have been documented as important for capturing cultural nuances (Cox, 2004, Hjorth and Staeyaert, 2005).

In depth interviews of senior female business leaders revealed that stereotypical notions of ascribed and patriarchal leadership common to the region were not accurate. Strong family support and sense of faith heavily influenced self confidence and identity with religion was never perceived as a barrier. Their definitions of success included having a balance with one's family.

These women leaders were motivated to gain new experiences, challenges and opportunities, but also to give back to their country, and to change the image of Arab women. Their definitions of leadership included being democratic, sharing ideas, being passionate about work, and having a vision against three factors: sense of role and responsibility in family and business, having a sense of faith, and the ability to give back. Many of them acknowledged the importance and difficulty of the leadership role that women must play at home with their families. Many of them also acknowledge the traditional strengths and virtues of their mothers and grandmothers: resilience, a strong work ethic, excellent negotiation skills, ability to juggle work and family. This legacy of leadership provides an

important context for Emirati women. As leaders, they recognized the importance of being participative yet decisive, delegating work and empowering employees to make decisions, and treating employees like family. Many of these practices are touted as critical skills necessary for effective management in today's organizations. Barriers included stereotyping, and work/family conflict.

Many of these findings mirror similar issues facing women leaders around the globe. However, it is important to note that the context for understanding the definitions of leadership and leadership success are embedded in their roles as Muslim women. Although many of these attributes may be considered traditionally feminine, many traits and characteristics also reflect cultural and religious values and contribute to the leadership qualities and success of Emirati women business leaders. The presentation will focus on understanding research results in the context of indigenous and gendered perspectives on leadership. Discussion will focus on how it contributes to the literature on women leaders globally, and creates new knowledge about Arab women leaders in general and Emirati women business leaders more specifically.

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Presentation #3

The Social Dimension Of Management And Gender In The Middle East:

A Comparative Study

Hayfaa Tlaiss

The strong presence of women in the labour force has grown in importance as organizations cannot afford to exclude a growing realm of talent because of gender (Adler and Izraeli, 1994). Despite that, women continue to be the target of discrimination as their presence within the managerial hierarchy is not proportional to that of men in the workforce (Yukongdi, 2006; Adler, 1994) as management continues to be perceived as a privilege worthy only of men (àBenson & Yukongdi, 2006).

Research problem. Nowadays, the Arab world is an area of strategic importance given its economic prosperity and its significant impact on world trade and economic stability (Sidani and Gardner 2000). However, while there is a growing volume of literature on the status of women in management in Europe, the USA and the UK, there is a lack of theoretical and empirical research conducted in the Middle East Arab world. Moreover, much of the research on women's progress in the area of business and management is dominated by research executed in North American and Western European contexts, with relatively limited understanding of the status of women in management in the Arab world. Although some studies have attempted to inspect the status of women in management in a number of countries including Egypt (Kattara, 2005), UAE and the Gulf (Metcalf, 2006; Salloum, 2003; Abdallah, 1996), these studies lack the ample understanding of the status of women managers in those contexts as well as the broader picture on women in management in the Arab Middle East.

In general, the Arab societies share certain common values and have inner similarities and commonalities. Despite the different political regimes and economic situations, citizens

of the Arab nations share the same language, religion, and history (Muna, 1980). This however does not imply that the status of women in management or the attitude of the Arabs to women is the same across the Arab region. Sidani and Gardner (2000) questioned the validity of generalizing the findings of one Arab country to the Arab Middle Eastern region since the findings of their study regarding the attitude of people toward the work of women could not be transferred or applied to the rest of the Arab countries. Instead, this study suggested that Arab countries should be studied individually so that the particular societies of can be highlighted, and common patterns can thus be discovered rather than assumed (Sidani and Gardner, 2000).

Objectives. Thus, this paper aims at discovering some of the various social and cultural factors that influence the career progress of women managers in the Middle East. Given the role that religion plays in the life of people in the Arab world (Jamali et al., 2005; Sidani and Gardner, 2000; Barakat, 1993; El Saadawi, 1997; Mernissi, 1991), this study will especially highlight the impact of the religious faith on the experiences of the Muslim Arab managers. The current study focuses on two countries within the Middle Eastern region, namely Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates. Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates have been chosen given their strategic role as key players in the political and economic advancement in the Middle Eastern region. While Lebanon has always been described as the gateway of the Arab world, which is considered today to be a major player in the world's economy (Abuznaid, 2006), the UAE is considered as the engine of the economic development in the Gulf. The significance of the Arab World to the Western world is also fuelled by it being the heartland of the Islamic faith as the majority of its population are Muslims (Weir, 2003), and thus understanding the culture and the people in this region is of international importance (Hutchings and Weir, 2006). Regarding the status of women in these countries, although women in the UAE have the highest rate of development among all other

Arab countries (Salloum, 2003) and Lebanon was among the pioneering country in the region that allowed women to pursue jobs and responsibilities outside the traditionally allocated roles (Sidani 2002), women in these countries continue to be under-represented in management. It is therefore important to understand the obstacles facing women managers, mainly the social hindrances, in an attempt to facilitate the advancement of women and eradicate discrimination.

Research design. Given the lack of previous research on the targeted context or audience, since the Arab world seems to be unreasonably neglected and the whole academic enterprise seems to have unclear implicit cultural biases (Weir, 2003); this study was categorized to be purely explorative in nature. Fuelled by the objective of understanding the experiences of women managers in this region and exploring the social, cultural, religious factors that impact their career progression, an interview based approach was used. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with twenty Lebanese and twenty Emirati women managers from different occupations were executed. The face to face interviews lasted at least one hour each, were tape recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic and content analysis.

Initial findings. In general, women managers in both countries described the various societal factors that impact their career progress and discussed the ways through which these societal factors influence their attempts for further managerial advancement. The majority of women managers described their society as patriarchal in nature, where men are perceived to be superior to women and therefore the majority of the decision making responsibilities were attributed to the male species. Notwithstanding the change that the United Arab Emirates has witnessed in terms of the huge increase in the number of women who are educated and who have joined the workforce, the Emirati women were more likely to emphasize the salience of the patriarchal ideology in their society and to attribute their under-representation in managerial decision making position to it. As for the Lebanese managers, although they

described their society as patriarchal, they were more likely to state that the patriarchal nature of their society was fading with time given their nature as a liberal country compared to the Arab countries in the region and the economic situation of the country that is driving people to focus on survival rather than to stick to the traditional ideologies.

This in turn can be used to differentiate the Lebanese culture from the Emirati one. The Lebanese women managers were more likely to say that their culture has been gradually abandoning the old traditions. While the Emirati women managers were more likely to emphasize their culture as adhering to the traditions in terms of perceiving the women as competent for the domestic responsibilities and for taking care of the children and perceiving the men as competent to be the bread winner, the Lebanese managers were less likely to have a similar perception. The Lebanese managers considered that the difficult economic situation of the country has been the main driver in this change as men and women were inclined to given up those traditional gender stereotypes to ensure their families a good life.

Moreover, and although the Emirati managers were more likely to draw the attention to the patriarchal culture and the traditional culture as limiting or hindering their career advancement attempts, they were less likely to describe their religion as hindering their managerial careers. Women managers in both countries were explicitly asked about of their religion as Muslims on their career progress. Although religion is a sensitive issue, it was important to ask the respondents about its impact given the important role that it plays in the daily life of its followers as highlighted by several previous studies including Weir (2004) and Tayeb (1997 and 1994), and its significance in Lebanon given that religion is an important criteria of differentiation (Barakat, 1977; Choucair, 2006) since its hosts Muslims and Christians in almost similar proportions. Unlike their Lebanese counterparts, the Emirati women were less likely to perceive Islam as an obstacle hindering their career progress given that it is the main religion of the country, unlike the situation in Lebanon. The Lebanese

women managers were more likely describe the teachings of Islam as limiting their managerial advancement attempts compared to their Christian counterparts whose religion is less likely to impose restrictions on in terms of social behaviour and dress codes. For example, when asked about the impact that the hair veil had had on their career progress, some of the comments were: “It had no impact; I mean we are Muslims and we are requested by God and by our religion to wear it so it is not a problem at all since all the Emirati women wear it” (An Emirati senior manager, Media and Television Sector). “The head scarf limited my career progress dramatically. I ended up working only in private Muslim schools as they were the only ones willing to recruit managers with head scarf ” (A Lebanese junior manager, Education Sector).

This can be attributed to the nature of the Lebanese economy as service based targeted towards everybody regardless of their religion. Therefore, the preference is always given to those whose dress code does not indicate their religious belonging. According to a female human resource manager in one of the leading banks in Lebanon: “I prefer to have female managers who do not cover their head as I am targeting the Lebanese population as a total regardless of religion. Therefore, I prefer having women managers who do not wear hair scarf so that my clients would not feel disadvantaged if the manager is from a different faith.”

Concluding remarks. Although the analysis of the interviews is still in progress, it is anticipated that the future findings will only confirm the initial ones presented in the paragraph above. The implications therefore highlight the need to establish a more clear understanding of the societies and the cultures of the Arab countries, in an attempt to understand the extent to which the advancement of managers in these countries, males and females, is impacted by the social and the cultural contexts. It is also hoped that this study will contribute to the on-going debate regarding the degree to which Islam, its teaching, and practices impact the believers. By addressing the Muslim faith of women managers from

different countries within the Middle Eastern Arab region, this study is aiming at enhancing the knowledge gap regarding the different ways that the Muslim religion is perceived by Muslims in different countries. This study will also hopefully highlight the role that religion and Islam in specific continue to exert on the life of people in the Arab region, in opposition to the rest of the world who have been more inclined to be more pragmatic.

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Presentation #4

Challenges Going Forward: How Middle Eastern Women Cope

Katty Marmenout, INSEAD, Abu Dhabi

Background. Throughout their careers women experience the tension between work and family related responsibilities (Greenblatt, 2002; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Collins, 2001), which may affect the role they can or are willing to play in the workplace. Work-family trade-offs are particularly salient at the onset of a career because a young woman's graduation from college typically coincides with important transitions in a woman's life, such as starting a family of her own (Baber & Monaghan, 1988). It has been argued that the way work is organized and experienced is defined by race, class and gender (Watts, 2007). Workplace settings and policies are in effect artefacts of underlying values and basic assumptions (Schein, 1984) and are therefore considered an integral part of a culture. Research about and conducted in Middle East cultures remains extremely scarce. Particularly little research has been conducted with respect to women in the workplace (Metcalf, 2006). With the ultimate objective of contributing to the advancement of women leadership in the Middle East, this study aims to establish a base for subsequent research. Particularly, the proposed study asks: *How do Middle Eastern women cope with challenges related to the management of their careers?* Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study was twofold, first identifying key challenges, second identifying patterns of responses to those challenges.

Methods. With the aim of giving something back to study participants volunteering to share their experiences with the researcher, the data collection took place as part of a one-day work-life balance workshop offered to Middle Eastern Women working in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. A total of 23 women (12 Emiratis, 5 Egyptians, 2 Jordanians, 2 Indians, 1 Pakistani and 1 Filipino) participated in the study conducted over 6 sessions. All women were informed at the time of enrolment that the workshop was part of a research initiative. Participants were

welcomed by the researcher and permission to audiotape was requested. Next, the researcher explained that the day would start as a discussion with other participants about their work and family lives. Each participant was requested to introduce herself, following the elements on the worksheet (geographical background, nationality, family background, father occupation, mother, brothers & sisters, education, work, current family situation, husband background, children, whether or not living with parents). These introductions set the stage for further discussion and questions guides by the researcher around the themes of education, work, family and future, which lasted for around two hours.

Findings. A number of themes emerged as challenges faced by the participants. The data analysis also revealed a number of interesting coping mechanisms.

The need to work. When the question “to work or not to work?” was raised, none of these workingwomen indicated they even reflected upon this question. Answers were either “natural”, “of course” or “always wanted”. The emergent construct *the need to work* is thus seen as the means to self-realization and independence. However, several participants qualified their answer by adding “at the beginning”, meaning that they started out wanting to work but over time, with increasing financial obligations they feel now compelled to work, while they would some times prefer to work less, but not “not work”. Here it is interesting to note that even Emirati women (whose financial situation is far more comfortable thanks to generous government benefits) voiced this concern. *The need to work* appears to become a challenge especially when care for children is considered of prime importance (when children are little, when exams come up or broader educational challenges are faced).

Childbearing. Childbearing could be seen as a desire or a pressure, but was considered a challenge either way. In a collectivistic culture as the Middle Eastern, extended families and children are traditionally highly valued. Emirati women appear to face greater pressure (but may also be better able to cope with it – see below) for childbearing. They face

two kinds of pressures, one cultural, the other demographical. First, personal experience (they themselves were still raised with a large number of siblings) and tradition creates high expectations in terms of numbers of children. Second, their own people having over the past decades become a minority (less than 20%) in their own land, a high birth-rate is encouraged by the officials. As, large families are thus doubly well-regarded, Emirati women face additional pressures with respect to childbearing. Thus, discussions about having an additional (third or fourth) child appear to be common. Financial constraints are mentioned, but not solely the cause for reluctance, as women recognize it would mean less time for the others, themselves and their work.

Other themes were recurrent in the discussions, such as the “*children first*” idea. Despite the need to work (both for self-realization or financially) it was clear that children’s welfare was considered to come first in all cases. It was often voiced that if at any time career would intervene with the wellbeing of the children, the woman would prefer to put her career on hold. Fortunately many indicated it had not happened but feared it might at some point when they would lose a valuable domestic helper or when children would reach puberty. Finally stories indicated a number of common challenges heard of but “*not my case*”. These appear to be important to look at as it may hint on elements that were preferably not disclosed as personal experience or that could indicate a bias in the sample of workingwomen participating in the study. Those “not my case” stories included refusing promotion because not wanting to earn more than the husband, quitting a job because husband requested to. Also working longer hours than the husband seemed to be creating important frictions.

With respect to coping with these challenges, the discussions revealed a number of patterns, which included: *studying to fill gap of childbearing years, use of extended family (for better or for worse), preferring to work in public sector (foregoing more interesting work) and considering setting up ones own entrepreneurial activity.*

Conclusion. Findings indicate that Middle Eastern women working in the UAE have challenges that are largely similar to their counterparts elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, they also seem to face challenges that are particular to the region, such as the pressure to raise a large family, and the need to contribute financially to the household while not overshadowing the husband contribution. The data collected also showed some interesting patterns of coping mechanisms, such as further education, public sector employment and the contemplating the option of self-employment. It is particularly clear that women are strongly committed to their careers and personal development, but also to their families. The study also reveals that the challenges faced by expatriate women may be different from those of the Emirati nationals. Leadership development programmes for women in the region could benefit from taking note of these different challenges and learn from the ways women are currently coping with them. Leadership development could especially focus on influencing and coaching skills. Indeed, it seems that by developing others according to their vision and with the use subtle influencing tactics, women to leaders could be particularly influential in this region.

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SESSION FORMAT DESCRIPTION

The session format will be as follows:

1. The program chair will provide five minutes introduction and welcome to the session.
2. Each of the presenters will have 15 minutes to present their research.
3. The discussant will have ten minutes provide comments and insights related to the presentations.
4. The chair will invite questions from the audience for the final 15 minutes.

Total time: 90 minutes.

STATEMENTS AND RULE OF 3+3

I have received signed statements from all intended participants agreeing to participate in the symposium and letting me know they are not in violation of the “Rule of 3+3.”

Dr. Susan R. Madsen (January 11, 2009)
Mrs. Katty Marmenout (January 12, 2009)
Dr. Lynda L. Moore (January 11, 2009)
Mrs. Hayfaa Tlaiss (January 13, 2009)
Dr. Stella Nkomo (January 13, 2009)
Dr. Beverly Metcalfe (January 14, 2009)