The Development and Progress of Female Leadership
in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract: In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) seventy percent of university students are women (Madsen 2010). Yet, given this large percentage of females at universities, why is the ratio of female to male professionals in the workforce still very low? Why do these imbalances exist in a country as developed as the UAE? The UAE is frequently characterized as one of the most developed and westernized regions in the Middle East. This paper’s focus will address the challenges that impede future female leadership managerial development in this developed Arab country. The study conducts a meta-analysis of academic articles to provide quantitative and qualitative thematic points of reference with two recommendations to advance the development of female talent in the UAE. The educated female offers significant knowledge and understanding of the business world and is an untapped resource in the UAE and the Middle East. The last section of this paper focuses on observations made during the researchers’ visit to Dubai and Abu Dhabi in May 2008.

Key words: female leadership; United Arab Emirates; female leaders in business; females in the Middle East; females in the United Arab Emirates

JEL codes: O19, J1

1. Introduction

The political, economic and social reforms in the Middle East are slowly increasing, but not without challenges. This paper will focus on Dubai and Abu Dhabi. These two emirates are the largest in population and industry of the seven emirates in the United Arab Emirates. The Federation of the seven emirates includes Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman Umm-al-Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah. There will be for comparative analysis, references made to the Arab world. The Arab world refers to the term Arab League used by the United Nations. This consists of twenty-two countries in the Middle East linked by close geographic location and cultural similarities (Omair, 2008). The region is titled the Mena region.

In less than a generation, this small pearl town set world standards in engineering, the highest buildings, and the most spectacular malls that offer unprecedented activities in the desert. The development of a knowledge-based economy operates in a free trade zone. The Upend the two largest Emirates, Dubai and Abu Dhabi have blazed the trail in economic development.

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The UAE’s population doubled over the past twenty years with a population of approximately 5.7 million. Only twenty percent Emirates’ nationals with the other eighty percent represented by expatriates represent the UAE’s population. This limited number of nationals in the workplace further complicates identifying the actual growth of female leadership within the UAE.

One media source disclosed the number of Emirati women in the workforce was estimated at 15%; however, statistics are difficult to find and validate. The fact is that it is still rather taboo for Arab women to work alongside men, and attests to the progress needed to move women into leadership positions (Muslimah Media Watch, 2009). Women in management are frequently found in lower levels of management, which results in minimal access to impacting the decision-making process. According to Omair (2008), female managers are reported in many situations to be influenced by a self-imposed belief that a successful manager must exhibit male attributes (Omar & Davidson, 2001). In a report contained in the Gulf News, Eman Abdullah, President of the International Cultural Women’s Forum, stated that the latest statistics showed Emirati women represent 27.95 percent of the national labor force (Bitar, 2010).

While this research paper outlines many underpinnings of the challenges, constraints and barriers of women in the Middle East as a region and specifically the UAE, the objectives will be to validate the need for formal female mentoring and the value of a formal training and development program. The formalization of a corporate training and development program reinforced by formal and informal mentoring will facilitate the success and development of women Muslim leaders and managers, and, in so doing, reduce the limitation, constraints, and barriers that they continue to face. The objectives will be accomplished by (1) outlining the historical use of mentoring women within the Middle East and the UAE; (2) a rationale for the need of female mentoring presented through a sampling of scholarly research, literature review, and case studies; (3) a sampling of current mentoring and networking initiatives within the UAE; (4) a rationale for the need of formalized female training and development presented through a sampling of scholarly research, literature review, and case studies; and (5) sampling and review of current training and development programs successfully in place in the UAE.

In the last section of the research, the writers will share their observations and first-hand experience in speaking with various females while in Dubai and Abu Dhabi in May 2008 on an academic and global business trip. The intent of these observations is not to bring subjectivity into the research, but to serve as validated qualitative observations corroborating the barriers and progress of the female in the corporate business sectors.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Progress in the Development of Women from a Human Development Perspective

The UAE has progressed favorably in terms of improving the well-being of females in the area of healthcare, education and average incomes; the three variables represent the Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI index is a measurement used by the United Nations to measure the quality of life in nations (Hill, 2011, p. 61). Average income is often attributed to the progress of women’s salaries and positions in the United States and western developed countries. The three combined indicators for the UAE are 0.846, which gives the country a rank of thirty (30) out of 187 countries with comparable data. The HDI of Arab States as a region increased from 0.444 in 1980 to 0.641 today, placing United Arab Emirates above the regional average (United Nations Development Programs, 2011). The data collected by the United Nations reports the UAE with the highest
percentage of women holding ministerial positions in the Mena region. The UAE ranks second, together with Tunisia, in the number of women members of parliament (Ismail, 2011).

While great strides are being accomplished from an economic and political front, change has been slow to materialize within the Middle East with female growth and development within the multinational and private sectors. In general, government and politics support female advancement and empowerment, but social barriers and the way of thinking continue to impede the Emirati female’s growth at the top (Bitar, 2010). Government is successfully drawing focus to empowering women by education, providing leadership jobs in the government sector, which are positive trends. In many ways, the women embrace the governmental sectors for a variety of personal and family reasons. Namely, the pay scale is favorable, there is greater flexibility in personal time approvals, and the hours in general are shorter than the traditional work day in a multinational company.

In the UAE, the government sector employs forty percent of Emirati labor force and is overwhelmingly female based, with two out of three females who are government employees. As a result, the Emirati make up fifty-four percent of the employees in the federal ministries, but account for less than one percent of private sector (Hewlett S. A. & Rashid R. 2011).

According to Dr. Soaad Al Oraimi, a sociologist at UAE University, reported in the Gulf News (July 6, 2011) that:

The government played an important role in placing women in leading positions. The social values and traditional norms of the UAE prevent greater opportunities for women to pursue leadership roles out of the context of the government and ministries. Fortunately, the state has been instrumental in providing enriching careers.

Yet in 1980, which was the beginning of global business development in the UAE, women represented 3.4% percent of the labor force. By 2006, this number increased to 13.6% with the majority of university graduates being women. As a contrast, women in the Arab world constituted only 12% of the labor force in 1980. In 1995, this number increased to 30% (UAE in Figures, 2007). The United Nations Gender Report recently issued in July 2011, referencing the Mena region, reports that the UAE was third in the proportion of working-age women in the labor force at 42%. The leaders were Kuwait at 45% and Qatar at 50% respectively. The UAE also did not score far from the global average, where 53% of working-age women had jobs compared with 78% men (Ismail, 2011).

However, the gap between genders was larger in the UAE. Ninety-two percent of working-age men were in the workforce. The UAE also ranked third from the bottom in the Mena region in the gap category with Bahrain in the number of paid maternity leave days available to women, with 45 days (Ismail, 2011).

2.2 Religion and Networks

When researching and understanding the Arab states in general, researchers must not overlook the components of religion and culture. The UAE operates within a cultural framework of a patriarchal male-dominated society. The Arab culture and religious beliefs are firmly embedded in the Quran and Islamic law and how women working outside of the family home is considered by many to be in direct opposition. Even though a woman’s status is subject to a number of coded or unwritten social mores in the patriarchal male-dominated society, there has been remarkable success in females taking a position on modernization and a role in the business environment (Omair, 2008).

Literature is abundant with research that focuses on the religious perspective of women and the emphasis on strict adherence to the Islamic beliefs and practices, which may play a significant role in the lackluster advancement of females into top management and leadership positions. Although the religious followings of Islam
may indirectly impact a female’s progress, the issues are beyond religion and the Quran. The issues are gender, societal, organizational and cultures related to the guidance and development of the female in a male dominated patriarchal society (Elamin & Omair, 2010).

Religion has a marginal influence on the cultural characteristics of people and institutions. Islam influences the cultural makeup and shapes the material and spiritual activities in daily life (Metcalf, 2008). Smith (1980) argued that in many cases, one must recognize that Islam is not to be understood as a religion per se, but rather as a dominant identifying factor in a complex cultural milieu. Therefore, Islam cannot be separated from the culture of Middle East (Al-Hibri, 1982). It is important to distinguish between Islam, Islamic tradition, and culture. The purpose of this distinction is not to ease the confusion or conceptualization of Islam, but rather to facilitate an understanding of the line between patriarchy and Islam. Several writers seem to agree that the existing gender inequality is not due to Islam, but to a patriarchal interpretation (Metle, 2002; Kausar, 1995; Khattab, 1996).

Moreover, it is important to note that it is not so much the religion, but the interpretation of Islamic doctrines that has the most significant effect on its followers. In the Pre-Islamic era, Islam gave women equal rights with men to participate in social and religious activities. However, because most Middle East cultures are patriarchal, a subsequent segment of the various Arab societies have in fact separated women, placing them in a lower level role in work and family (Alajmi, 2001). It is also noted that local traditions and social trends were responsible for various interpretations for Islamic law. Most cases in patriarchal interpretations were to the detriment of women (Shaaban, 1988).

Therefore, it is not Islam, but how the patriarchal societies interpret Islam as to what is acceptable behavior for women. Patriarchal relations, it is argued, are the product of cultural practices, not of the teaching of Islam (Ahmed, 1998). This male interpretation of Islamic doctrines transcends into the public and private sectors in which multinationals compete and establish business entities. The nature of religion and institutional structures and relations shape business processes.

2.3 The Politics of the Social and Political Economy in the Corporate Business Environment

The political economy in the Middle East is characterized by Sheikho-capitalism (Metcalf, 2007). Sheikho capitalism acknowledges the existence of power structures based on tribal networks. Working relations continue to be guided by diwan and wasta (Metcalf, 2006). Diwan is a style of decision-making, which represents a process of making balance and justice (Metcalf, 2006). This style of working relationships emphasizes the personal component with a balance and understanding of the respected role of autocratic relationships in the environment. Wasta relates to the recognition that power in society is related to tribal and familial structures. The understanding that working relations in the Arab world are facilitated by recognizing how to move within relevant power networks is essential to successful career development. Historically, these power networks were limited to males. Globalization as a component of integrated technology through social media and access to greater communications networks is pivotal in the development of females’ networks.

There is an importance of informal relations and family networks on building trusting open relations. Employer-employee relationships are based on consensus and unity, balance and equilibrium, and high trust exchanges facilitated through family networks, which are quite unlike management environment in many European and U.S corporations. The Middle East context of management and social relationships are primarily embedded in the male of the family and decision-making networks. In the Middle East, structurally and culturally, the nature of work and family relations are organized around gender.
2.4 Cultural Context Affecting the Female Labor Force

Research suggests that different cultural values influence attitudes toward career mobility and the work environment (Al Bawaba, 2007). Within a nation, these differences are minimized by a shared culture. Before an organizational culture that fosters diversity and equality is possible, an understanding of the national culture is a key foundational core concept. The studies by Geert Hofstede’s (2001) on the different dimensions of national culture were initially conducted at Hofstede’s place of employment (IBM). The study was representative of 50, cultures and analyzed for cultural similarities and dissimilarities. The series of studies identified four key dimensions shaping national cultures. They are power distance (PD), uncertainty avoidance (UA), individualism versus collectivism (IDV) and masculinity versus femininity (MAS).

Management must understand the national workforce culture, before the organization can successfully promote diversity training and leadership programs. The UAE has the highest male to female ratio and the highest expatriate ratio to the national population. The mixes of the contrasting high ratios are direct opposites in Western countries. This disparate ratio may signify a greater demand for cultural understandings between UAE nationals’ and expatriates (Al Bawaba, 2007). Global leaders build successful organizations by understanding of the intrinsic value in organizational culture. Culture is the foundation, which impacts employees’ behaviors and with successful integration will improve the profitability and performance (Al- Lamki, 2000).

Hofstede’s (1980) initial analysis defined the four dimensions of national culture positioned as an analysis of 40 countries. The survey analysis data collected at IBM of these first 40 countries was at the individual respondent level. The series of studies identified four key dimensions shaping national cultures. They are: power distance (PD), uncertainty avoidance (UA), individualism versus collectivism (IDV), and masculinity versus femininity (MAS). Hofstede’s model (1980) explaining national cultural differences and their consequences came at a time when cultural differences between societies had become increasingly relevant for both economic and political reasons. The study conducted by Hofstede’s in 2001 ranked dimensional variables in Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabic and the UAE. These countries were grouped individually and by region. The Arab countries as a regional group scored a high power distance (PD) of 80. The region ranked seventh highest score in this category out of 53 countries. This higher score reinforces literature and observations 6 and 93. This book also introduced the topic of organizational cultures as a separate and different phenomenon.

Thus the traditional females’ early years of development is a direct contrast to their male counterpart in the US. Females entering the workforce are assuming multiple roles compared to their male counterpart who is given the freedom to plan their careers and live more independently. A woman in the UAE and throughout the Gulf Coast Countries (GCC) is reported to be educated from a limited perspective and is to understand their role first as homemaker then a participant in the workforce. Men’s roles are emphasized early in their career that the man’s responsibility is to support and protect the female. Unfortunately, with the greater demands on family, women in the UAE sometimes feel they must compromise family for a leadership positions (Nazi, 2004).

Research addressing perceived attitudes to women’s roles and the boss/female relationships demonstrates the slowly changing universal trends that begin to place more emphasis on greater equalitarian positions and assuming more liberalism (Allen & Coltrane, 1996). Unfortunately, Arab societies are slow to change. Most Arab men consider households, child rising and domestic activities more suitable for women. Educationally, the male gender represented a greater economic value.

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2.5 The Role of Mentoring and Networking

Outside of the patriarchal attitudinal barriers and other social mores, there were three barriers that became visible to the researchers in the growth of Muslim women in the workplace. They are: the lack of formal female mentoring, networking, and training and development initiatives in the public, private and global companies. These three barriers hinder the continued growth of Muslim women within any various employment or entrepreneurial sectors and likewise contribute significantly to enhancing opportunities and skill sets. It is the objective of this portion of the paper to validate the need for formal female mentoring in promoting and facilitating the success and development of female Muslim leaders and managers. This objective will be accomplished by (1) outlining the historical use of mentoring women within the Middle East and the UAE; (2) providing an overview of the mentoring; (3) a rationale for the need of female mentoring presented through a sampling of scholarly research, literature review, and case studies; and (4) a sampling of current mentoring and networking initiatives within the UAE.

2.6 Historical View of Mentoring Women in the Middle East and UAE

There is a limited amount of scholarly research and information on the subject matter of formal mentoring of females in the Middle East and the UAE available for research or review. However, the limited amount of information confirms that historically there has been little formal mentoring, feedback, or support for women moving beyond the traditional confinements of home and family. Historically, the contributing factors to the lack of informal or formal female mentoring outside of the responsibilities assigned to a woman within the familial setting are: (1) it is unnecessary within this patriarchal male-dominated society where the focus of the Muslim female is caring for the family; (2) informal or formal female mentoring is a relatively new phenomenon within the Middle East and UAE; (3) few women role models in leadership or upper managerial positions exist; and (4) based on (1) through (3), female mentoring is not rated as a priority for the success of women in management or leadership positions and therefore of little or no value.

However, while there is a limited amount of scholarly research and information on the topic of formal female mentoring in the Middle East and the UAE, there is a vast amount of research on the role and influence of the father within this society and how through this conduit mentoring occurs. According to a study conducted by Madsen (2010), it was clear that the father’s influence was central to the availability of opportunities in their daughter’s life (i.e., educational goals, development, career, aspirations).

It has also been noted in various scholarly research and case studies that, while mothers are noted to be “strong”, they are not as influential as the father and offers little or no mentoring to enhance the daughter’s drive to work outside of the familial home. While many mothers are advocates of education and learning in general, their role is to teach their children Arab traditions and help their daughters learn how to “care for the men and children” (Madsen, 2010). Madsen further explains that:

Although the mothers did not have advanced education, they loved learning and participated in educational opportunities through travel, reading, and listening to their husband’s experiences, which most certainly were positive influences on their daughter’s learning and desire for continued educational opportunities.

Additionally, research and literature review corroborates that historically when a daughter arrives home, whether from school or working outside the home, their conversations are with the other female members of the
home regarding household issues, rather than what happened during the day outside of the home, or on workplace issues. Consequently, no feedback or support is provided on matters outside of the home.

In addition to the influences of the father and mother, brothers were noted to be important influences in helping emerging women to learn to interact and work with males (Madsen, 2008a; 2008b). While the influence and mentoring of brothers may be an acceptable practice with their female siblings, mentoring between non-family cross-genders outside the confines of the family comes with very strict rules regarding contact between a male and female who are not married. While this may be dealt with more harshly in other portions of the Middle East, direct contact and cross-gender mentoring continues to be approached with apprehension and fear within the UAE.

2.7 The Role of Mentoring in the Development of Muslim Females

“Traditionally, mentoring has been defined as an intense, dyadic relationship in which a more senior, experienced person, called a mentor, provides support and assistance to a more junior, less experienced colleague, referred to as a protégé, or mentee” (Haslet & Gibson, 2007, p. 385). Mentoring (as cited in Wang, 2009) shares some similarities to networking in that they both involve developmental relationships (Kram, 1983). However, they are different and encompass different models. In mentoring relationships, the mentor plays many roles to the protégé. On the other hand, in network relationships (as cited in Wang, 2009) there are fewer roles linking the individuals, and the relationship tends to be less intense and personal than a mentoring relationship (Ferret & Dougherty, 2004). According to Ehrich (1994), networking is a less powerful practice than mentoring. Kram (1993) hypothesized that mentoring has two wide-ranging purposes: (1) career development functions, such as sponsorship, coaching and visibility; and (2) psychological functions such as encouragement, feedback, and advice.

The advancement of female professionals through the use of mentoring is noteworthy. As cited in Wang (2009), if the position of women in organizations is to improve and women are to break the glass ceiling (or the cement ceiling as it is referred to in the UAE), then mentoring will need to move from “an idiosyncratic and elitist practice, to one that is open, non-discriminatory” (Ehrich, 1994, p. 9). Empirical evidence suggests (as cited in Wang, 2009), that career support for women from female mentors translates most into advancement because female protégés may gain more from being sponsored, challenged, and coached by people most like themselves (Tharenou, 2005).

An exploratory study conducted by Hutchins et al. (2010), described three specific barriers that exist for women wishing to take international assignments that are of relevance to women in the Arab world. Namely, foreigners’ prejudice, corporate resistance, and female managers’ disinterest were provided, as well as a detailed description of each. They further articulate that “Recent research has also suggested a fourth barrier (although it is not actually defined by the authors as such), namely, there is a lack of social networking support” (p. 64). As further cited in Hutchins et al., the dearth of social network support available to female expatriates is also a significant barrier (Linehan, 2000; Linehan et al., 2001). This further corroborates the researchers’ literature review that the lack of social network support acts as a significant barrier that is systemic to the slow growth of women in several sectors of employment, and is consistent with the social-cultural mores of the Middle East and UAE that act as barriers and constraints to Muslim women in the workplace. It was also cited in the Hutchins et al. (2010) exploratory study that females commonly receive less career development and mentoring at lower levels of management (where selection may be made about international opportunities), where men are predicted to perceive more support compared to females (Adler, 1984a; Linehan, 2000; Harris, 2001). Thus, providing a social network of support (i.e., mentoring) by other females who have come before them would be beneficial to addressing this fourth barrier.
Linehan and Scullion (2008) found that “in the global management context effective mentoring for female managers is even more important than in the domestic context and that lack of effective mentoring is a key barrier to the development of female global managers” (p. 37).

Additionally, as cited in Linehan and Scullion (2008), while mentoring relationships may be important for men, they are even more essential for a women’s career development as female managers face greater organizational barriers to career advancement (Harris, 2006).

It is noted in the study conducted by Cotton (1999) and Victor (2001), that the benefits of formal mentoring programs in Anglo-Saxon counties are limited (as cited in Linehan & Sculion, 2008). However, this study clearly identified as follows:

The lack of senior female managers as a barrier to the effective development of female global managers and suggests that companies should encourage senior female managers to take on the role of mentors by providing incentives for those willing to undertake this role in addition to the significant challenges they already face in managing and balancing work, family and career pressures (p. 37).

On the topic of development and mentoring of females as global managers, Linehan and Scullion (2008) provided the following summarized sentiments of 10 managers:

“I wish I had a mentor in my career. It is important to have one. In early years in particular it was something that I could have done with. If I had a mentor it would have been more beneficial to my career.”

The point of view of the interviewees of this study also revealed that:

...while participating in international assignments mentors back “home” provided the contact and support from home organization, which in turn facilitated re-entry. ...

... the opportunities for them to partake in global assignments would have been partly attributed to mentoring relationships.

... in addition to improving self-confidence of protégés, mentoring increases their visibility in organizations increases their promotional prospects.

On the topic of the development and mentoring of females as it affects their international work opportunities in the international market, K. Hutchens et al. (2010) offers these respondents’ statements:

There are “general cultural perceptions of women’s inadequacy for managerial roles” (Oman 13), while others suggested it is a woman’s own belief in themselves that impacts on empowerment and advancement. As she proffered, “in the Middle East women mistakenly believe that they are weak, sensitive, and not able to handle sophisticated tasks. This common misconception is negatively influencing women in the workplace and is creating fewer opportunities” (p. 77). The most frequently cited issue for advancing women’s opportunities was the general need for belief in, and support for Arab Middle Eastern women in their roles in organization’s support of which needs to come from family, organizations and government (p. 77).

In a study conducted by Hewlett and Rashid (2010), data was collected on 4,350 college-educated men and women in Brazil, Russia, India, China (“BRIC”) and the UAE. The data was supplemented with qualitative research from focus groups, virtual strategy sessions, and interviews with hundreds of white-collar women. While the study found that education, ambition, and commitment of the women from the BRIC and UAE was not an issue, the authors noted that female talent is underleveraged in emerging markets (p. 2). Amongst other factors or problems found in the study that exist for women in emerging economies, “... the UAE professional women face a triple whammy of gender, ethnicity, and cultural attitudes” (p. 3).

This study clearly linked the hypothesis found in other research and literature reviews that in order for
companies to attract and retain well-educated and ambitious women within the UAE, companies must understand societal challenges those women face. One of the keys to facilitating these opportunities is the implementation and building of networking and mentoring relationships, both within and outside of the company.

K. Hutchins et al. (2010) also concludes their exploratory study by stating that one of the key actions that are necessary to be taken by organizations is “to provide mentors and role models for women to showcase the achievements of successful women within their organizations to provide the impetus to other women to aim for senior positions . . . .” (p. 81).

It is also noted that while the Linehan and Scullion (2008) study did have its limitations due to the focus on only one group (i.e., senior women executives), its findings confirmed that “female managers can miss out on global appointments because they lack mentors, role models, sponsorship . . . . all of which are commonly available to their male counterparts” (p. 29).

Further, there are women in positions of power throughout the Gulf Cooperation Council (“GCC”) and they can be a great inspiration for young women who are looking to have faith in their own ideas and abilities in the face of skepticism (Acquiree et al., 2011). “It is not enough for young women to admire their role models from afar; formal mentoring programs are a must”, says Jamal AlLail. Jamal AlLail went onto to state:

Professional development doesn’t really come from training. Mentorship addresses the personal, social, technical, and professional aspects of work. It develops the whole person. Leaders should support the employees in their institutions, and leaders in different institutions should work together to create mentoring programs (p. 5).

As cited in Arab Women, Leadership Outlook 2009-2011, with the vision of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum:

The UAE has taken a leading role in creating a culture that supports the enhancement of the role of women in society, by recognizing that women are a driving force behind the growth and advancement of a country in every sphere (p. 3).

While the recommendations are many on how to enhance the role of women in leadership positions, one of the key recommendations is to “incorporate mentorship programs (especially those focused on career development) led by Arab women leaders, in the education system of the region, as these programs have a key role to play in improving women’s employability in the region” (p. 77).

2.8 Current Mentoring Initiatives within the UAE

Despite the findings and benefits of mentoring, locating female mentors has been a major challenge for professional women. This has been especially prevalent for the female Muslim in the Middle East and UAE as historically women have not held leadership and upper-managerial positions and as such mentors and roles are scarce. However, several programs and initiatives have been initiated in an effort to advance the growth of female Muslims in leadership, upper management, entrepreneurship, and the opportunity of international assignments. The following are some key programs:

(1) Big Sister/Little Sister program launched in April 2011 by the Women’s Excellence Group and the Dhabi International Centre for Organizational Excellence. This initiative is the first of its kind and brings together women of different backgrounds and pairs them up based on their professional experience and career aspirations. The Big Sisters, or mentors, have already established their careers in senior management levels.

(2) The Abu Dhabi-based UAE Academy, an educational and training organization and subsidiary of the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry, will implement a Middle East Partnership Initiative (“MEPI”) local grant project to help place Emirati women within key leadership and decision making positions within the UAE
through developing and implementing a new training program called the Emirati Women’s Organizational Leadership Program. This Program will actively engage participants through lectures, case studies, research activities, mentoring and advising services, group discussions, networking sessions, and a synthesizing leadership tutorial project. A maximum of 20 candidates will be enrolled in the program that started in September, 2011. The program is open for Emirati females only with a minimum of BA/BS Degree that are currently working in a public, private or semi government sector (http://www.uaeacademy.ae).

(3) Accenture in the UAE provides two women’s programs:

(a) Mentoring Programs: The focus is to pairs female executives with senior executive mentors, includes virtual workshops, and provides networking tips to help ensure the advancement of women at Accenture.

(b) Women’s Network: A global internal website connects women across the company with one another and provides access to resources available both at Accenture and externally. The online forum offers women a place to share experiences, advice and insights (http://www.accenture.com/us-en/company/people/women/Pages/womens-programs-initiatives.aspx).

(4) The Mentorship Program in Dubai is supported by The International Education Institutions & Academies (“IBWG”). IBWG sources mentors from its Members. They look for ladies who are prepared to support, guide and act as mentors to students with career aspirations in their profession or industry. The mentors are required to have suitable competencies such as excellent communication, listening and counseling skills and indicate a willingness to devote time once per month to establish a relationship with and develop a mentee. Their current mentors are Entrepreneurs, Managers, Events Coordinators, Bankers and Professional Development Trainers (http://www.ibwgdubai.com/IBWGEventsFunctionsMentor.aspx).

(5) ABB is a global leader in power and automation technologies that enable utility and industry customers to improve their performance while lowering environmental impact. Since 2003, ABB’s commitment to promoting equal opportunities is reflected in its internal management structure in the UAE. At ABB Industries, the nine-strong senior management team includes three women–responsible for turbo charging services, financial controlling and human resources. In addition, ABB is involved in a plan to develop leadership potential in the UAE by providing direct mentorship for talented young men and women in a range of positions (http://www.mena.abb.com/).

(6) The Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development under the initiative Qudwa pair’s entrepreneurs with experienced mentors from various organizations in both public and private sectors. Started in 2011, it has successfully paired 11 Emirati, both male and female, with mentors, but still is in the pilot stage. According to their website, they are looking to add more female mentors as very few joined up for the Qudwa’s pilot phase.

(7) TechWomen is an initiative of the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs that brings emerging women leaders in technology sectors from the Middle East and North Africa together with their American counterparts for a professional mentorship and exchange program at leading companies in the United States. TechWomen works to empower women and girls through technology. It connects and supports the next generation of women in technology sectors by providing them the access and opportunity needed to pursue careers in technology. There are two types of mentors; namely, professional and cultural. Professional Mentors will provide guidance on the participants’ work. Professional Mentors will be matched with one Mentee; whereas, Cultural Mentors are selected and matched based on their diverse backgrounds, professional field and ability to spend time with Mentees and cultural interest. The main purpose of the Cultural Mentors is to support the Mentee’s professional and personal growth and adjustment to living and working outside of their home country (www.techwomen.org).
(8) The Emirates Center for Innovation and entrepreneurship (ECIE) was established in 2008 under the partnership with Abu Dhabi Water and Electric Authority and United Arab Emirates University. Its vision for mentoring is: To train and mentor UAE women with the necessary skills for future business ventures; provide training and mentoring of entrepreneurial business skills to facilitate new start-up business in the UAE; and establish community outreach programs and network opportunities for female UAE entrepreneurs (www.fbe.ac.ae/ecie/about_ecie.shtml).

(9) On the international assignment front:

(a) Siemens launched a program in 2010 to establish a network for its young, high potential managers in emerging markets;

(b) General Electric is piloting a version of its my-Connections talent-spotting and mentoring program in the UAE. Its goal is to help women connect with one another across levels and function in the company, recognizing how critical relationships are to career success.

2.9 The Role of Training and Development (a/k/a Human Resource Development)

The third barrier that continues to hinder the continued growth of Muslim women within various employment or entrepreneurial sectors is training and development, or as it is often referred to as human resource development. While mentoring and networking are the first two keys that could significantly enhance the opportunities and skill set of Muslim women, the objective of this section of the paper is to discuss the concept of training and development by providing a (1) historical view of training and development of women in the Middle East and the UAE; (2) rationale for the need of training and development presented through a sampling of scholarly research, literature review and case studies, and (3) examples of training and development initiatives within the UAE.

2.10 Historical View of Training and Development of Women in the Middle East and UAE

There is no doubt that Islam is the religion of the UAE. It is both a religion and a way of life which affects not only the perception and stereotyping of the female Muslim worker, but is also embedded in and affects businesses and organizational culture within the UAE in a multitude of ways (Wilkins, 2001). While female-to-female mentoring has been shown to provide a one-on-one relationship to assist Muslim women with successful assimilation into her chosen profession, career, or entrepreneurship, the concept of training and development can also be considered a key factor in facilitating a woman’s success, promotion and growth within an organization and its’ culture. One of the key challenges of the UAE was and remains the education, as well as training and development of the national human resource to enable it to continue to play an active role in supporting and contributing to the country’s continued growth (Randeree, 2009). However, despite the fact that the UAE has one of the largest and most diversified economies in the Gulf region, we are once again faced with little empirical data or research findings relating to the training and development strategies and practices of Emirati companies, especially in the area of a Muslim woman’s participation in training and development and advancement. Metcalfe (2007) aptly stated, “A glaring omission in Middle East management research is the critical examination of women’s working experiences and the organizational policies that can assist a woman’s development” (p. 54).

While many studies have been based on Western developed and secular economies (Metcalf, 2006), the plethora of research on gender, management and leadership, reveals little of the HRM dynamics in a region such as the UAE or Middle East where religion has a significant influence on economic and political organization, as well as on gender, human relations, the place of the Muslim woman within an organization, and the offering of
training and development (Metcalfe, 2007). However, it should be noted that although the female 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 the development of their managerial careers (Madson, 2009). This is further addressed by Princess Basma who said: “Many constraints faced by women are social or cultural and not the result of a discriminatory religion—as is often maintained by those who do not understand Islam in its original form, or those who wish to distort its message” (Thomas, 2000). However, once again there are contradictory opinions and interpretations that have also argued that religion is one of the many factors that may influence management processes (Tayeb, 1997) and perhaps the opportunities allotted to women for training and development. Studies have also shown that individualized management and leadership practices adopted as part of the UAE and Middle East IHRM strategies, such as training and development, while not directly associated with religious belief are inherently gendered (see Zanani & Jansons, 2003; Truss, 1999, Dickens, 1998). In a study conducted by Metcalf (2007), the equal and different philosophy (the equal but different philosophy underpinning Islam and labor market segregation) was most strongly evident in HR policies relating to training and development available to Muslim women and it was noted that this is the area that Muslim women felt that the scope for HR reform is needed (p. 65).

In Al-Lamki (1999), it was added that in Oman, the absence of human resource policies to promote the recruitment and development of female managers at work was a deterrent to gender diversity, something that is key to the continued growth of the UAE and the Middle East in the global market. As cited in Omair (2008), “. . . there is a lack of management training programs and active shunning of affirmative action” (p. 113). This despite that 92% of Arab CEO’s are aware of the importance of training for development, while 87% of CEO’s view training and development as a tool to retain staff.

2.11 Role of Training and Development in the Development of Muslim Females in the Workplace

In conducting the research for this section of the paper it has been a recurring theme that a Muslim woman’s inability to secure jobs and obtain training and development is many times not based on a woman’s qualifications and competencies, but opportunities and hiring practices that are based on an individual’s relations and family networks (i.e., wasta and naseeb). In the Western world, this phase is coined as not what you know, but whom you know. Additionally, due to the organizational culture embedded within many organizations, women reported in the Metcalf (2007) study, that training opportunities were given to men before women . . . . and women were simply excluded from applying (p. 65) for training and development opportunities. One manager in a petrochemicals company stated: “Training is reserved for men.” One contrary opinion is provided in Metcalf (2007) that this was not the case, but it was also noted by the respondent that her husband held a ministerial appointment in the Bahraini government. Thus, there are opportunities for a woman’s development, but these opportunities often tend to be linked with their family or husband’s business position (Metcalfe, 2006). Once again, we are confronted with the socio-cultural traditions that many organizations and professions continue not to be women friendly, women are not encouraged to enroll in what are considered male jobs, and, as such, and there are deeply engrained gender inequalities in training support. Metcalfe (2006) also suggested that while segregation policies are not “official”, they do place restrictions on deployment and ultimately on training and promotion opportunities of women.

In the same Metcalfe study, it was shown as following:
Table 1  Barriers to Female Managers in the Middle East

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business culture</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few female role models</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family commitments (children)</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited training opportunities</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family commitments (grandparents/other relatives)</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypical perceptions of women managers</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that at the national level, several Gulf States (including Oman and the UAE) have introduced women’s empowerment programs. While these programs assist in areas of credit counseling and business planning, as well as some skills development and confidence building, it is unclear if such programs are beneficial to the training and development of women within organizations, or provide any requirement for such initiatives within the public or private sectors.

It is noted in the Metcalfe (2007) study that:

A key HR development area that would complement training and development strategies would be to create formal mentoring systems within organization frameworks, although a limitation may be the lack of female professionals and role models to act as mentors and advisor.

In Jamali et al. (2005), it was noted that aside from cultural and attitudinal barriers, women managers identified numerous constraints for a structural nature; one of which is exclusion from corporate developmental assignments that are used to groom male managers for senior leadership in their companies. Without the training and development it was echoed by many Muslim women that they burden to prove not only their worth, but also their ability to deliver significant results. If one person seemed unsure that the woman could deliver what was needed, another may question that there was anything that a woman could do for them at all.

To reiterate, when researching the current processes and need for training and development of women in the workplace within not only the UAE, but the Middle East, it is noted that the socio-cultural underpinnings of the Muslim culture plays a much larger part than the perceived restrictions and constraints of the Quran and Islamic law in the organizational culture in which training and development occurs. In order to understand the part that an organization’s culture plays in the development and/or implementation of any training and development initiative it would be beneficial to understand the key element that an organization’s culture plays in any change that training and development attempts to invoke whether in the West, the UAE or Middle East. While from a Western point of view, a widely accepted definition of an organizational culture is defined by Edgar Schein’s (1985) and contains three levels of cultural phenomena: “basic assumptions, values, and artifacts”. First, basic assumptions are the circumstances taken for granted in an organization as the “correct” way of doing things. They lie at the deepest level of culture and are the hardest to change. Second, the values of the organization are at the next higher level of culture, and are referred to as a sense of what “ought” to be (the overt behaviors and other physical manifestations of culture). This level usually can be observed directly and is easier to change than an assumption or values. Third is the level of artifacts that include, among other things, procedures followed, technology used, and ways of communicating. Unfortunately, changing the artifacts generally does not yield a change of culture. Another more simple way of looking at organizational culture is to view it as a group's general reaction to stimulus. An organizational culture is a group of people who have been trained, or who simply have learned by those around them, how to act in any given situation. In this way, corporate culture functions just as any social learning does. Based on case study and the United Nation datasets, Metcalfe critiques the social, cultural and
economic reasons for women’s limited advancement and training in the public sphere and states: “These include the prevalence of the patriarchal work contract within public and private institutions, as well as cultural and ethical values which strongly create gender roles” (p. 85). As cited in Metcalfe (2008) there have been significant achievements in advancing women in leadership and management roles, but there are still institutional and cultural barriers embedded in business systems within which training and development occurs. Even though general, yet complex within the UAE and Middle East, as stated in Schein (1985) all three levels of the organizational culture are present and perhaps are an impediment to the training and development of women in the UAE and Middle East and should be thoroughly examined in each instance.

It should be noted that socio-cultural traditions and the values of Islam are not solely barriers to local UAE and Middle Eastern organizations in the development of HR systems. These barriers also represent challenges to the business culture for multinational corporations wishing to expand or work in the Middle East and Islamic regions. It is suggested in Metcalfe (2006) that the following policies be considered as a means to address these challenging issues:

(1) HRM Statistics: The measurement of women’s advances could be evaluated through the establishment of recruitment monitoring and training statistics and further promote the importance of management education and development for women.

(2) Women’s Management Training: One area that would complement existing business culture is the development of sector-led management education and development of programs for women.

(3) Cultural Training: Cultural orientation programs should introduce the philosophy of Islam and highlight the importance of the connections between work-related values and religion. This training should also introduce the complex nature of men and women’s different roles and highlight cultural variation in societal construction of gender.

(4) Mentor Programs: Develop mentor programs that include and promote positive role models of women.

There are multiple factors facing HRD within the UAE and Middle East. The most evident barriers the impede the training and development of women and HRD efforts are: preference of male participation over female employees; resistance to women working outside of the home in various professions due to socio-cultural traditions and interpretation of the Quran and Islamic law; sex-segregation beliefs; travel restrictions for corporate training; belief that women cannot manage men due to patriarchal upbringing; budgetary restrictions and “return-on-investment” due to the unreliability of women to remain in the workplace; and work-life balance issues. What the researchers of this article have not taken into consideration are the additional challenges in the UAE and other parts of the Arab region will play on the formation, or expansion of, HRD departments and the policies and procedures required. However, it is noted in multiple studies and in Wilkens (2001) that:

Training and development professionals working in the UAE are operating in a unique cultural and economic situation, although the research of others indicates that the UAE does share many aspects of a common Arab culture which emphasizes the importance of religion, family, education and success (Dakhil, 1998; Terpstra & David, 1991; Abdalla & Al Homoud, 1995; Al Bahar et al., 1996; Agnaia, 1977). It is important that training and development professionals fully understand the social and cultural environment in which they are working to avoid causing offense to their colleagues, to comply with legal requirements, and to maximize the productivity and effectiveness of the workforce (p. 164).

2.12 Sampling of Training and Development Initiatives within the UAE

There have been an increasing number of women organizations in the Gulf region that are dedicated to advancing women in politics and leadership roles. Specifically these organizations contribute to women’s development in progressive ways through the provision of literacy programs, raising legal awareness about
employment and personal status rights, providing training programs for work-related skills (Metcalfe, 2008). An example of this would be the Bahrain’s Women Society. Other organizations unite professional women and offer development forums for enhancing women’s knowledge and skills. *The Jordan Forum for Women and Business’ vision is “empower women’s participation . . . through education, advocacy, networking, training and professional support” (World Bank, 2005). However, there is no data that addresses whether these independent efforts will transcend into an organization or provide a cultural shift.

There was little or no viable information regarding specific organizations and the systems of training and development of Muslim females within the workplace.

3. Observations

In reflecting on the business visits in Dubai and Abu Dhabi in May 2008, the researchers’ train of thinking and analysis reflected a Western ideology. In hindsight our preliminary research and preparation in no way prepared us for what we would observe and experience.

Our first observation was one that quickly validated that Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum has continued to advance his father’s extraordinary vision for Dubai; However, one is astounded when arriving in Dubai by the modern infrastructure, cleanliness, outward show of a brisk economic climate that perhaps has gone far past his father’s initial vision. It was evident at each stage of our journey in Dubai that the Sheikh’s visionary leadership skills are the foundation for the state of the art infrastructure that continued to favorably attract new foreign investment in all sectors. Although the Sheikh’s goal of developing a tourist destination that could co-exist with a knowledge-based economy would ultimately facilitate the growth and presence of the Muslim female, it was distinct observation during the business visits that the male gender continues to be responsible for the leadership and management within the organization. In only one of the seven business visits in Dubai and Abu Dhabi was there a woman that was charged with the task of conducting the business meeting. In this particular situation, it was apparent that her responses to questions regarding the organizational structure or leadership were guarded and general in nature. We later learned that she was an expatriate. Perhaps we had, once again from a Western view, thought that only the female Muslim worker was reserved, but in reality even though Dubai is viewed as having a less fundamentalist view of Islamic customs, the social mores of women in the workplace are borderless and remains at the forefront of its business environment.

In comparison to that of Dubai, it was apparent that Abu Dhabi was far more conservative in its interpretation of the Quran and view of Islamic culture. Gender segregation could be observed easily at public places, as well as within our business visit. During our business visit in Abu Dhabi to a large quasi-governmental business, the Director of Human Resources and her assistant greeted us. Both were fully clothed in the traditional Muslim dress, as were the other female workers that we observed. It was also unmistakable from our interaction with the Director that there was a distinct underlying code of conduct between the genders. We were greeted by a female Muslim who appeared to hold an upper-managerial director’s position, the visit was quickly taken over by the male gender and all questions and direct contact were with the male managers and leaders of the company. As further evidence of the gender separation, males and females are transported in separate elevators and it appeared that there might have also been separation of gender with females working on different floors than males.

While we acknowledged that our frame of reference is from a Western point of view, we witnessed from our business visits that there remains keen cultural biases within both Emirati infrastructures and little outward signs
of providing females with stretched opportunity within management and leadership positions in the sectors we visited (i.e., private, public, quasi-governmental, university and international organization within the tax-free zone). What was also evident even from afar was that the women we came in contact with were well educated. However, there was a lag between ability, status and the empowering skills necessary to move them forward in a rapid changing global environment and society.

In hindsight, and through our research for this paper, the question that keeps surfacing is whether the Muslim female is considered the invisible leader and perhaps due to the young age of the UAE, she is facing many of the issues, challenges, and barriers that women around the globe have faced in the past. However, it should be noted from our observations and research that cultures transcend and it should not be assumed that the female Muslim is one monolithic group who are striving to take over the male gender in their society, but are moving forward with a desire to share their education and become an integral member of the management and leadership team. As one woman stated:

The solution is not education, we have education. We lack ownership. And while quotas for nationals can be helpful, I am against the concept because it could lower our credibility in the workplace as “less than” (individual anonymous personal communication, May 2008).

4. Limitations

This research report focused on a meta-analysis of research from the past 10 years. The UAE is a young country with a history of less than 40 years. For a country to go from a tribal desert society to a modern country with state of the art infrastructure signifies that change has been fast when implementing economic development projects. Culture and nationality are what draws people together to form a national culture. Culture is a bond that societies hold onto since it represents the values, norms and folkways of the country. Change is not rapid when there are specific changes to role models and organizational structures and philosophies. In the case of the UAE, the positive contributions are the commitment from the government to improve the quality and degree of women in the workforce. What we must consider is what obstacles in reality do these UAE female nationals consider that are hindering their progress, what is their visions for the future, and how do they define success.

The first future research trends are the development of a base line set of interview questions that address the above issues. The challenge with this type of research is the acceptance from the organizations that continue to be male dominated in executive positions. In global companies, senior management must first approve a majority of surveys, which in most cases are males. This same situation occurs when conducting surveys within universities and organizations in Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

The second future research trend is to gain insight from females who are participating in network groups as noted in this paper. It is also vital to gain access to a number of the key female business and leadership professors in two to three prominent UAE universities. The quantitative interviews can be structured with similar questions and these comments can be summarized into three specific areas with approval of quotes from females to add additional validity to the research.

A third future research trend is to conduct a comparative analysis of the expectation and required transformative learning of younger females in college versus females in the workforce. This research focus would serve as an interesting historical and current analysis of future expectations from females in the UAE corporate business world.
5. Discussion

Whether women are in the UAE, Middle East, Western World, or other parts of the globe, there are always going to be challenges or barriers when trying to break the glass ceiling (or cement ceiling as it was referred to in many articles on the topic of the female Muslim in the workplace within the Gulf region) in a male-dominated patriarchal society. The UAE was established in 1971 and as research confirms it has made great strides and progress in supporting women in the workplace, but still encompasses many of the same foundational issues as other parts of the Middle East. However, whether it is through the interpretation of the Quran, Islamic law, or socio-cultural issues that men are positioned with at birth (bread winner, decision maker, more talent, skills etc.), or the socio-cultural issues that women are positioned with at birth (caring for the family, nurturer, etc.), women have continued their quest to be part of the decision making processes and ability to pursue their passion outside of the familial setting. While social stigmas remain regarding a women making in-roads into certain professions that were previously considered taboo, or female inappropriate, the Muslim women remain cognizant of the social stigma that is attached to the men in a patriarchal society such as the Middle East and the forwarding thinking UAE (no longer the bread winner, shame, less than the eyes of his peers and/or family). It was noted in the researchers’ review that the mind-set of the patriarchal figure, and his peers, is somewhat “softening” and becoming more open-minded to Muslim women (i.e., wives, daughters etc.) pursuing their education and work outside the accepted professions and the home. Some contributing factors to this “softening” is clearly generational, but it is also noted that the younger generation of men through education and their own opportunities are more accepting and willing to work side-by-side with women in the workplace. It should also be noted that it was emphasized in many studies, that men are not opposed per se to working with Muslim women, but that it is considered against Quran and Islamic law; However, while there was a constant foundation, the interpretation was somewhat differing from region to region.

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged in the area of mentoring, networking, and training and development as this is an emerging topic and one that is facing many challenges due to the limited number of successful female role models. While this was an attempt by the researchers to unravel and delve into the areas that challenge and impede future female leadership and managerial development in this emerging region of the UAE, it should not be interpreted as an attempt to over-generalize or include all Muslim women into one monolithic group. Given the serious gaps in the literature, this is a promising area for future research. Additional topics of research that came to mind during our research were: how will Arab spring ultimately effect and perhaps add additional challenges to the advancement of the female Muslim in this Gulf region; will work quotas established by the UAE for nationals help or hinder; and will social networking, social capital and e-mentoring grow and become a tool that will further enable the growth and advancement of the female Muslim in her leadership and managerial role. It is important to note that whatever the topic of future research one should be remain sensitive and ever vigilant to the deep foundation and part that the patriarchal society, the Quran, and Islamic beliefs play in the movement and growth of women in this region. It is a new day for the Muslim female. However, as one interviewee stated:

However handled, the women acknowledge that change will come slowly to these Middle Eastern countries, which have already marched through decades of stunning change. We are understood and appreciated by our societies, and we are developing our own path. There can’t be a fast-forward; this has to come gradually. But we can make sure that the next generation doesn’t face the obstacles that we faced.
References:
The Development and Progress of Female Leadership in the United Arab Emirates


