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Article

Exploring Women's Leadership Experiences: Challenges, Successes, and the Role of Support Networks

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Abstract: This qualitative research study explores the experiences of three Emirati women who have achieved significant success in their higher education institutes in the (UAE). The study aims to understand how childhood and adolescent experiences shape the leadership development of these women, both positively and negatively. The study also includes interviews with family members and close colleagues of the participants to gain additional perspectives. The findings the importance of family support, role models, and mentors in shaping the leadership development of women in the UAE. The study also sheds light on the challenges and barriers that women face in leadership positions, including gender bias and discrimination. Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences of Emirati women in leadership positions and provides insights into how to support their leadership development.

Keywords: women leadership; leadership development; identity; experience; role model; narrative; social; culture development

Introduction

Despite the increasing leadership positions worldwide, women still face significant challenges and barriers in reaching and succeeding in these positions. While progress has been made in recent years, the glass ceiling still remains a significant obstacle for women in leadership.

One of the main challenges faced by women in leadership is gender bias (Babalola, du Plessis, & Babalola, 2021; Diehl, Stephenson, Dzubinski, & Wang, 2020). Studies have shown that gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained in our culture, and these stereotypes often influence the way people perceive women in leadership positions (Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli, Iannuzzi, & Savioli, 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Women are often viewed as emotional, irrational, and less competent than their male counterparts, which can make it difficult for them to gain respect and credibility in their roles as leaders (Post & Sen, 2020). This bias can also lead to discrimination and unequal treatment, such as lower salaries, fewer opportunities for advancement, and a lack of support from colleagues and superiors (Casad et al., 2021).

Another challenge faced by women in leadership is the lack of representation and mentorship (Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Women are often underrepresented in leadership positions, which can make it difficult for them to find role models and mentors who can guide them in their careers (Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). This lack of representation can also lead to a lack of support and opportunities for advancement, as women may not have access to the same networks and resources as their male counterparts (Alfred, Ray, & Johnson, 2019).

Additionally, women in leadership positions often face unique challenges related to work-life balance (Casad et al., 2021). Women are more likely to take on caregiving responsibilities, which can make it difficult to balance their personal and professional lives (Skinner, Betancourt, & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2021). This can lead to burnout, stress, and a lack of support from colleagues and superiors

who may not understand the challenges of juggling work and caregiving responsibilities(Uddin, 2021).

Despite these challenges, there are also many positive experiences that women can have in leadership positions(Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). For example, women often bring unique perspectives and leadership styles to their roles, which can lead to more collaborative and inclusive workplaces(Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Women may also be more empathetic and skilled at building relationships with colleagues and stakeholders, which can lead to more effective leadership and better outcomes for their organizations(Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

To overcome the challenges faced by women in leadership, it is important to address gender bias and promote greater representation and mentorship for women in all industries and sectors(Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). This can be done by implementing policies and practices that support gender equity, such as flexible work arrangements, mentorship programs, and equal pay initiatives(Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). It is also important to create a culture of inclusivity and respect in the workplace, where all employees are valued and supported regardless of their gender or background(Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is no exception, with relatively few women in senior leadership positions, particularly in the public sector.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has made significant progress in recent years towards advancing gender equality and increasing women's participation in the workforce(Al Hourani, 2023). However, despite these efforts, women in the UAE still face significant barriers to reaching senior leadership positions, particularly in the public sector.

The UAE has implemented a number of policies aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. These policies include the UAE Vision 2021, which includes a goal of increasing women's participation in the workforce to 30%, and the UAE Gender Balance Council, which was established in 2015 to promote gender balance in all sectors of society.

Despite these initiatives, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions in the UAE, particularly in the public sector. According to a 2019 report by the Dubai Women Establishment, women hold only 20% of leadership positions in the public sector, compared to 80% held by men(Jabeen, Friesen, & Ghoudi, 2018). In the private sector, women fare somewhat better, with women holding 28% of senior management positions, according to a 2020 report by McKinsey & Company(Strick, 2020).

There are a number of factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in the UAE. One major factor is cultural and societal norms, which often place greater value on men as leaders and decision-makers(Babalola et al., 2021). Women are often expected to prioritize their family responsibilities over their careers, and may face discrimination and bias in the workplace.

Another factor is the lack of access to education and training opportunities for women. While women in the UAE have access to education and training, they often face barriers to pursuing higher education and professional development opportunities, particularly in fields that are traditionally male-dominated(Koburtay, Abuhussein, & Sidani, 2022).

Finally, there is also a lack of support for women in leadership positions, particularly in the public sector. Women in leadership positions may face isolation and lack of support from their colleagues and superiors, and may not have access to the same networks and opportunities for advancement as their male counterparts.

In summary, while the UAE has made significant strides towards promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, there is still a long way to go in terms of increasing women's representation in leadership positions, particularly in the public sector. Addressing the cultural and societal barriers to women's leadership, improving access to education and training, and providing support and opportunities for women in leadership positions are all critical steps towards achieving

gender balance and empowering women to reach their full potential in the UAE(Coe, Wiley, & Bekker, 2019).

Literature Review

The existing literature on women's leadership development in the UAE highlights the significant influence of cultural and societal factors on the leadership aspirations and behaviors of Emirati women(Howe-Walsh, Turnbull, Khan, & Pereira, 2020). These factors include family upbringing, cultural values, education, and societal expectations, which can both positively and negatively impact women's leadership development(Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).. However, while some studies have explored the impact of these factors, there is a lack of research on the specific experiences of women in leadership roles in the UAE.

To gain a better understanding of women's leadership journeys in the UAE, this paper aims to reflect on the positive and negative experiences of Emirati women in leadership positions(Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). By examining the personal stories and experiences of women in leadership roles, this paper seeks to identify common themes and challenges that women face in pursuing and succeeding in leadership positions in the UAE(Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

Some of the challenges faced by women in leadership roles in the UAE may include cultural and societal expectations around women's roles and responsibilities within the family and community, discrimination in the workplace, limited access to education and training, and a lack of support and mentorship opportunities.(Bullough, Guelich, Manolova, & Schjoedt, 2022) Additionally, women in leadership roles may face unique challenges related to balancing their personal and professional responsibilities, navigating cultural and gender-related biases, and managing their own leadership style and approach(Houjeir, Al-Kayyali, Alzyoud, & Ahmad-Derweesh, 2019).

Despite these challenges, Emirati women in leadership roles have also experienced significant positive experiences, including personal growth, empowerment, and a sense of accomplishment(Jabeen et al., 2018). By reflecting on these positive experiences, this paper aims to highlight the importance of promoting women's leadership development in the UAE and creating more opportunities for women to pursue and succeed in leadership roles(Al Naqbi & Samier, 2020).

Overall, the literature on women's leadership development in the UAE provides a foundation for understanding the cultural and societal factors that shape women's leadership aspirations and behaviors(Al Hourani, 2023; Birindelli et al., 2019; Houjeir et al., 2019; Nickerson & Goby, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). However, by examining the personal stories and experiences of women in leadership roles, this paper seeks to go beyond the existing literature and provide a more nuanced understanding of the positive and negative journeys of women in leadership. By doing so, this paper aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to promote women's leadership development in the UAE and to create a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology aimed at exploring the meaning and significance of childhood and adolescent experiences in shaping the leadership development of selected Emirati women in the UAE who have had significant career success. The study recruited 3 Emirati women in leadership positions, aged between 30 and 50 years, who had experienced diverse childhood and adolescent experiences (see Table 3.1).

Table (3.1). Demographic Data

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Marital status	# of children	# of siblings	Parents' Education	Hometown
Asma	39	Degree in Education Technology	Divorced	3	2	Both parents have a less than a high school education	Ras AlKhaimah
Hessa	35	Leadership and Management	Single	NA	13	Both parents have a Bachelor Degree	Fujairah
Reem	37	Master's Degree in Educational Leadership and administration	Married	1	5	Father completed high school Mother did not get the chance to go to school	Ras AlKhaimah

He interviews were conducted in Arabic and English and were transcribed verbatim. Document analysis was conducted on relevant policy documents and reports on women’s leadership development in the UAE. Diary writing was used to supplement the interview data and provide a more in-depth understanding of the participants’ experiences.

Results

The study employed three methods of analysis—interview analysis, document analysis, and diary analysis—to explore the factors influencing the leadership development of Emirati women. The findings of the study emphasize the significance of family support, role models, and mentors in shaping the leadership development of Emirati women.

All participants reported having supportive families who encouraged their education and career aspirations. This highlights the importance of family support in facilitating the development of leadership skills in Emirati women. The presence of supportive families could be attributed to the emphasis on education and career development in the UAE, where education is considered a fundamental pillar of national development.

The study also found that role models and mentors played a critical role in shaping the leadership development of Emirati women. Participants cited specific individuals who had helped them navigate challenges and advance in their careers. This highlights the significance of having access to positive role models and mentors who can offer guidance and support in the face of barriers and challenges.

However, the study also revealed significant challenges and barriers faced by Emirati women in their leadership journeys. Gender bias and discrimination were identified as major obstacles to their advancement, with participants reporting experiences of being overlooked for promotions or not being taken seriously as leaders. This highlights the need to address gender bias and discrimination in the workplace to ensure that women have equal opportunities for leadership roles.

Cultural norms and societal expectations around gender roles were also identified as contributing to these challenges. Emirati women face societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, which can limit their career choices and opportunities for leadership development. Addressing these cultural and societal barriers requires a collective effort to challenge traditional gender norms and promote gender equality.

Discussion

The study offers significant insights into the experiences of Emirati women in leadership positions and sheds light on the various factors that shape their leadership development. One of the key findings of the study is the critical role played by family support, role models, and mentors in supporting the leadership aspirations of women in the UAE. The study participants emphasized the importance of having supportive families who encouraged their education and career aspirations, as

well as the role played by specific individuals who served as role models and mentors, helping them navigate challenges and advance in their careers.

At the same time, the study also highlights the various challenges and barriers that women face in leadership positions, including gender bias and discrimination. Many participants reported experiences of being overlooked for promotions or not being taken seriously as leaders due to their gender, while others mentioned cultural norms and societal expectations around gender roles as contributing to these challenges. These findings underscore the need for concerted efforts to address gender bias and discrimination and to promote gender equality in the workplace and society at large.

The implications of these findings are significant for policymakers, organizations, and individuals working to support the advancement of women in leadership positions. For policymakers, the findings highlight the need for policies and initiatives that address gender bias and discrimination and promote gender equality in the workplace and society. For organizations, the findings suggest the need to create supportive environments that foster the development of women leaders and to provide mentorship and role modeling opportunities. For individuals, the findings emphasize the importance of seeking out role models and mentors and building supportive networks to navigate the challenges of leadership. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Emirati women in leadership positions and offers practical recommendations for supporting their development and advancement.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the experiences of Emirati women in leadership positions and provides insights into how to support their leadership development. The study highlights the importance of family support, role models, and mentors in shaping the leadership development of women in the UAE. The study also sheds light on the challenges and barriers that women face in leadership positions, such as gender bias and discrimination. By exploring these factors, the study provides useful insights for policymakers, organizations, and individuals who are working to support the advancement of women in leadership positions.

Specifically, the study emphasizes the importance of family support in enabling Emirati women to pursue their education and career aspirations. The participants reported that their families played a critical role in encouraging and supporting their leadership development. This suggests that policymakers and organizations should consider ways to provide greater support to families in order to promote gender equality and empower women.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of role models and mentors in helping women navigate the challenges of leadership positions. The participants identified specific individuals who had provided guidance and support in their careers, suggesting that mentorship programs and networks could be effective tools for supporting women's leadership development.

However, the study also illuminates the significant challenges that women face in leadership positions, such as gender bias and discrimination. The participants reported experiences of being overlooked for promotions or not being taken seriously as leaders due to their gender. This highlights the need for greater awareness and education around gender equality in the workplace, as well as policies and initiatives to address gender bias and discrimination.

Overall, the findings of this study provide valuable insights for policymakers, organizations, and individuals seeking to support the advancement of women in leadership positions. By emphasizing the importance of family support, role models, and mentors, and addressing the challenges and barriers faced by women in leadership, the study offers a roadmap for promoting gender equality and empowering women in the UAE.

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