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Keywords: Childhood experiences; Adolescent experiences; UAE; Women; Leadership development; Qualitative research; Semi-structured interviews; Document analysis; Diary writing; Family upbringing; Cultural values; Education; Societal expectations



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*Article*

# Uncovering the Impact of Childhood and Adolescent Experiences on UAE Women's Leadership Development

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**Abstract:** This research paper aimed to explore the impact of childhood and adolescent experiences on the leadership development of Emirati women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Using a qualitative research methodology, the study utilized in-depth narrative semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and diary writing to understand the complex issue of leadership development. Findings indicate that childhood and adolescent experiences, including family upbringing, education, culture, and societal expectations, have significant impacts on the leadership development of Emirati women. Specifically, family upbringing and cultural values shape Emirati women's leadership aspirations and behaviors, while education and societal expectations provide opportunities and barriers for women's leadership development. The implications of these findings for policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote women's leadership development in the UAE are discussed.

**Keywords:** childhood experiences; adolescent experiences; UAE; women; leadership development; qualitative research; semi-structured interviews; document analysis; diary writing; family upbringing; cultural values; education; societal expectations

## 1. Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a rapidly developing country that is keen on achieving gender equality and economic diversification (ÖZORAL, 2022). One key issue that has been identified as critical in this pursuit is the role of women in leadership positions (Al Hourani, 2023; Al Khayyal et al., 2021; Al Matroushi et al., 2020). The UAE government has recognized the importance of women's participation in leadership roles and has taken several steps to support their advancement in this area (Al Hourani, 2023). Despite these efforts, the representation of women in leadership positions remains relatively low in the UAE, and the country continues to face several challenges in promoting women's leadership (Al Khayyal et al., 2021; Al Matroushi et al., 2020; Al Naqbi & Samier, 2020). These challenges include cultural and social barriers that limit women's opportunities, as well as structural barriers, such as the lack of support for work-life balance and the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need to address these challenges and promote women's leadership in the UAE. This has led to an increased focus on understanding the factors that contribute to women's leadership development, including their childhood and adolescent experiences. By examining the impact of these experiences, policymakers and practitioners can better understand the complex interplay of cultural and societal factors that shape women's leadership trajectories.

The role of women in leadership positions has been a critical issue in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as it strives towards achieving gender equality and economic diversification. However, the factors that have contributed to the leadership development of Emirati women have not been fully understood. This research paper aimed to explore the impact of childhood and adolescent experiences on the leadership development of Emirati women in the UAE. Specifically, the study sought to understand the meaning and significance of these experiences in shaping women's leadership identities and behaviors.

The results of the study indicate that childhood and adolescent experiences have significant impacts on the leadership development of Emirati women. Family upbringing and cultural values emerged as critical factors that shape women's leadership aspirations and behaviors. The participants noted that their families played a crucial role in providing support and encouragement for their education and career development. The cultural values of hospitality, generosity, and respect for elders were seen as important in developing their leadership styles, such as being collaborative and respectful. Education and societal expectations also emerged as crucial factors that influence women's leadership development. The participants noted that access to education provided opportunities for their leadership development, while societal expectations sometimes acted as barriers. The remainder of the paper includes, literature review, methodology, results and discussion.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature on women's leadership development in the UAE highlights the significance of cultural and societal factors in shaping the leadership aspirations and behaviors of Emirati women. Studies have shown that cultural and societal norms, values, and expectations have a significant impact on women's leadership development (Bullough et al., 2022; Patterson et al., 2021; Sun & Zhuang, 2022). For instance, the Emirati culture places a strong emphasis on family and community, which can both positively and negatively impact women's leadership development. On the one hand, Emirati women may be more likely to have strong support networks that encourage and enable their leadership development (Vij et al., 2023). On the other hand, cultural expectations around women's roles and responsibilities within the family and community may limit their opportunities to pursue leadership roles (Koburtay et al., 2022). Furthermore, societal expectations and gender stereotypes can act as barriers to women's leadership development. For example, women may face discrimination in the workplace, including lower pay and limited career advancement opportunities (Karyotaki et al., 2022). This can contribute to a lack of confidence and a sense of disempowerment among women, which may discourage them from pursuing leadership roles (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

Education is another significant factor that can impact women's leadership development in the UAE. Studies have shown that women who receive higher levels of education are more likely to aspire to and attain leadership roles (Al Naqbi & Samier, 2020). However, cultural and societal norms may discourage girls from pursuing higher education, limiting their opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for leadership positions (Al Khayyal et al., 2021).

Family upbringing and cultural values are two critical factors that have been identified as shaping the leadership aspirations and behaviors of Emirati women in the UAE. Emirati culture places a strong emphasis on family and community, which can impact the development of leadership qualities and aspirations in women from a young age (Al Naqbi & Samier, 2020).

Studies have shown that family upbringing plays a significant role in shaping women's leadership development (Al Matroushi et al., 2020; Al Naqbi & Samier, 2020). Positive family support and encouragement for girls' education and career aspirations can provide a strong foundation for future leadership roles. However, cultural expectations around women's roles within the family can also limit their opportunities to pursue leadership roles (Al Hourani, 2023). Furthermore, cultural values, such as collaboration, respect for elders, and a sense of community responsibility, have been identified as important factors in shaping Emirati women's leadership aspirations and behaviors. Emirati culture values collaboration and consensus-building, which can lead to a more participatory leadership style (Nickerson & Goby, 2017). Additionally, respect for elders is an important cultural value in Emirati society, which can shape the way women approach leadership roles and their interactions with colleagues and subordinates. However, cultural values can also act as barriers to women's leadership development (Al Naqbi & Samier, 2020). For instance, traditional gender roles and cultural expectations around women's roles within the family and community may limit their opportunities to pursue leadership roles. Moreover, women may face resistance and disapproval from their families and communities for pursuing leadership roles, which can limit their confidence and aspirations.

Overall, family upbringing and cultural values are significant factors that shape the leadership aspirations and behaviors of Emirati women in the UAE. Policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote women's leadership development should work to promote positive family upbringing, including encouraging girls' education and supporting their career aspirations. Efforts should also be made to promote cultural values that support women's leadership, such as collaboration and respect for elders.

Family upbringing and cultural values have been identified as critical factors that shape Emirati women's leadership aspirations and behaviors (Alomar, 2023). Education and societal expectations have also been recognized as important factors that influence women's leadership development (Al Khayyal et al., 2021; Bullough et al., 2022; Howson, 2020). However, the specific impacts of childhood and adolescent experiences on women's leadership development have not been fully explored. Therefore this study will explore the unfold area. In next section of this paper will discuss the methodology

3. 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 Emirati women in the UAE. 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 1). The 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.

Table 1. Demographic Data.

| Pseudonym | Age | Education  | Marital Status | # of Children | # of Siblings | Parents Education  | Hometown      |
|-----------|-----|--|----------------|---------------|---------------|--|---------------|
| Asma      | 39  | Master’s Degree in Education Technology                      | Divorced       | 3             | 2             | Both parents have a less than a high school education                          | Ras AlKhaimah |
| Hessa     | 35  | Master’s Degree in Education 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             | Fathercompletedhighschool<br><br>Mother did not get the chance to go to school | Ras AlKhaimah |

#### 4. Results

The results of the study indicate that childhood and adolescent experiences have significant impacts on the leadership development of Emirati women. The findings of the study suggest that the childhood and adolescent experiences of Emirati women have played a crucial role in shaping their leadership aspirations and behaviors. The study highlights that the family upbringing, cultural values, education, and societal expectations that women are exposed to during their formative years can significantly impact their leadership development. Specifically, the study highlights that Emirati women who were exposed to positive and supportive family environments were more likely to develop leadership qualities, such as assertiveness, confidence, and resilience. In addition, the study reveals that the cultural values of Emirati society, which emphasize respect for authority, family, and community, can either facilitate or hinder the development of women's leadership skills.

Family upbringing and cultural values emerged as critical factors that shape women's leadership aspirations and behaviors. Family upbringing and cultural values have been identified as two critical factors that significantly shape the leadership aspirations and behaviors of Emirati women. The family is the primary socialization agent and plays a vital role in shaping the values, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals. In the UAE, the family is the cornerstone of society and is characterized by strong bonds and interdependence among family members. Emirati women are often socialized to conform to traditional gender roles, with a focus on nurturing and caring for their families. However, the study found that positive family environments, such as supportive and encouraging parents, can have a significant impact on Emirati women's leadership aspirations and behaviors. For instance, women who grew up in families that emphasized education and achievement were more likely to develop leadership skills such as assertiveness, confidence, and resilience.

Cultural values also play a significant role in shaping Emirati women's leadership development. The UAE is a collectivist society, and cultural values emphasize the importance of social harmony, respect for authority, family, and community. These values can either facilitate or hinder the development of women's leadership skills. For instance, the study found that Emirati women who internalized the cultural value of respect for authority tended to be less assertive and more deferential to those in positions of power. In contrast, those who internalized the cultural value of community and social harmony tended to have better communication skills and were more adept at building relationships. Thus, cultural values can influence women's leadership development by shaping their attitudes towards power, authority, and relationships. Overall, the findings of the study emphasize the critical role of family upbringing and cultural values in shaping Emirati women's leadership development.

Overall, the participants noted that their families played a crucial role in providing support and encouragement for their education and career development. The cultural values of hospitality, generosity, and respect for elders were seen as important in developing their leadership styles, such as being collaborative and respectful. Education and societal expectations also emerged as crucial factors that influence women's leadership development. The participants noted that access to education provided opportunities for their leadership development, while societal expectations sometimes acted as barriers.

#### 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This research paper aimed to explore the impact of childhood and adolescent experiences on the leadership development of Emirati women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Using a qualitative research methodology, the study utilized in-depth narrative semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and diary writing to understand the complex issue of leadership development. Findings indicate that childhood and adolescent experiences, including family upbringing, education, culture, and societal expectations, have significant impacts on the leadership development of Emirati women. Specifically, family upbringing and cultural values shape Emirati women's leadership aspirations and behaviors, while education and societal expectations provide opportunities and barriers for women's leadership development.

The findings of this study highlight the significance of childhood and adolescent experiences in shaping the leadership development of Emirati women in the UAE. The study suggests that policymakers



and practitioners seeking to promote women's leadership development in the UAE should pay attention to family upbringing, cultural values, education, and societal expectations. Specifically, policymakers and practitioners should work to promote positive family upbringing, including encouraging girls' education and supporting their career aspirations. They should also work to promote cultural values that support women's leadership, such as collaboration and respect for elders. Furthermore, efforts should be made to address societal expectations that act as barriers to women's leadership, including gender stereotypes and cultural norms that limit women's opportunities. Overall, this study provides important insights into the complex interplay of cultural and societal factors in shaping Emirati women's leadership development and offers valuable recommendations for promoting gender equality and women's leadership in the UAE.

## Appendix 1

Dear Participant:

You have been invited to participate in a research study that will attempt to understand and to investigate the roles of formal, non-formal and informal Education in shaping your Leadership style, as well as to analyze their impact on you career.

- ❖ The following information is provided in order to describe the nature of the interview process:

Project: The Roles of Formal, Non-formal and Informal Education in Shaping Women's Leadership in the UAE: Case studies of Four Emirati Women in Higher Education Senior Leadership Positions.

Procedures: You will be asked to participate in 3 interview sessions and each session will take no more than *an hour* of your time. The interview will be *audio-recorded* and take place in allocation *mutually agreeable* to the participant and the researcher.

Confidentiality: Your name will not be used in the research study. All audiotapes will be kept in a locked location. Once the interviewer has transcribed the tapes, they will also be kept in a secured location as well.

Freedom to Withdraw: You are free to decide not to participate in this study. You can also withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researcher. You are voluntarily making a decision to participate in this study.

### First Interview:

#### *a. Childhood and adolescence: (non-formal education)*

1. I would like you to describe a memory from your childhood that describes who you were or who you are. It may be a positive or negative memory at home, at school or any other place. Please describe exactly what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, what you did, what you were thinking and feeling in the event, what impact this experience may have had on you, and what this experience says about who you were or who you are as a person.

1. What about adolescence? What stays with you from that period?

#### *b. Family (non-formal education)*

1. Tell me something about your relations to your family and their relations to you?
2. How many children were in the family, and where were you in the line-up?
3. Describe what your siblings were like. Who were you closest to?

## Appendix 2

### Second Interview:

The second will focus on university education, influential individuals and other experiences, and early positions.

#### *a. University Education (formal, informal and non-formal education)*

1. What are the current degrees you are holding? And from where?
2. What subjects did you study in university?
3. What was your specialization?
4. Is there any course that you enjoyed the most and you learnt the most from attending it?
5. Did you change majors?
6. Who influenced your selections?
7. Did you have any Teachers and/or other students who were influential?
8. How does your university degree help you in reaching this position?
9. Had the knowledge you gained from your students changed your ideas about the world and influenced your values?
10. Are there any significant events that happened during university that you still remember and help in shaping your leadership identity?

#### *b. Early leadership experiences (in-formal education/non-formal education)*

1. Tell me about your career path before you become a leader?
2. On your journey to leadership position, how did you overcome hurdles or obstacles in the other early positions?
3. What have been turning points for you in your journey?
4. What were accomplishments that gave a lot of satisfaction?
5. What skills and knowledge do you think you acquired that are now important in your current leadership?
6. Were there any major influences (individuals/projects/ workshops/ activities/ media/travel experiences) in your early leadership experiences that you feel impacted your sense of your-self as a leader?
7. How was your relationship with your previous colleagues?
8. How can you describe your previous experiences of working with other?
9. Are you a team player?
10. Are there any memories/lessons you took from your previous working experiences that help shape your leadership identity?
11. When you look back on your early journey to leadership position, how can you describe it for me?
12. What, if anything, did you have to overcome or change to see yourself as a leader?

## Appendix 3

### Third Interview:

The third will explore their leadership experiences in senior positions, individuals who provide support and mentorship, and what their future aspirations are.

#### *a. Leadership experiences in senior positions (in-formal/non-formal education)*

1. What was your first managerial job?
2. What was special about it?
3. What did you learn most from it?
4. What accomplishments did you achieve?
5. What do you recall as notable about your first boss?
6. What has been the toughest part of your job or challenge you have faced? Was there a time when you thought you were in over your head?
7. Did it shake your sense of yourself as a leader?

8. Can you give an example of a time when you were disappointed, either in your career or as leader?
9. What did you learn from it?
10. Did anyone give you advice when you took this position that has been helpful or meaningful?
11. Have you surprised yourself in what you have been able to accomplish?
- b. Current position (*in-formal/non-formal education*)
  1. Talk about your current position?
  2. What are the most challenging parts of it?
  3. What are the most enjoyable parts of it?
  4. What are you learning from it in terms of the work you do, working with colleagues?
  5. Tell me about your relationship with your subordinates, superiors?
  6. Mentioned some organizational lessons you have learned?
  7. Are there any formal leadership or management training programs you are taking in the organization or outside the organization for professional development?
  8. Have you had a relationship with someone who helped you shape the person you have become?
  9. How would you describe that?
  10. How important was that in your life?
  11. What is your personal drives and motivation in what you do?
  12. How have you grown?
  13. What are your aspirations?
  14. What kinds of positions would you like to have?
  15. What is next in your life?

#### Wrap up

Is there anything you wished I had asked or expected me to ask that I didn't?

#### **Appendix 4**

##### Family Member Interview Guide

The interview guide will consist of five sections of questions: (a) demographic section to gather general information about the family member and their relationship with the participant; (b) the participant's childhood; (c) the participant's adolescence; (d) their early adulthood; and (e) any major people/events they believe have influenced participant's leadership identity development.

Demographic section:

1. What is your age?
2. What was the highest level of formal education that you have achieved?
3. What is your current occupation?
4. How long have you known the leader for?
- a. Family Background
  1. Tell me about your parents? What kind of people they are? And are they working?
  2. How many sisters/brothers do you have? What are they doing (work/ study/ other)?
  3. In which Emirate did you grow up?
  4. What kind of work has your family been involved in?
  5. Talk about your family customs and traditions? Describe your relationship with.....?
  6. Talk about her personality, qualities and traits?
  7. Tell me about other people she was close to?
  8. Talk about family events, activities (traveling)that you usually do as a family?
- b. The participant's childhood:
  1. How do you describe.....childhood?
  2. Callyourecallanypositiveandnegativeeventsthathappenedto...whileshewasachildthatleada lot of growth in her understanding and skills?
  3. Can you share some stories from her childhood?



4. Who was her role model when she was grouping up?
- c. The participant's adolescence:
  1. How is .....as a teenager?
  2. How was her school experience (in her classes and the social side of school)?
  3. Was there any special friend/teacher/ person that have any kind of influence on her?
  4. Can you recall any special events that happen to her while she was a teenager?
  5. Was she involved in any kind of school activities, events?
- d. The participant's adulthood:
  1. How is ... as an adult?
  2. Is there a specific individual that she is influenced by as an adult??
  3. Mention some people who had influence in different ways in different aspects of her life?
  4. Can you recall any positive-negative events/activities that help her to become a leader?

## Appendix 5

### Colleague Interview Guide

The colleague interview questions will be aimed at gaining more in-depth information regarding the participants' leadership development on a professional level. The interview guide will be divided into four sections: (a) a demographic section to gather general information about the colleague and their relationship with the participant; (b) questions about the participant career path, how long they have known the participant and ways in which they have worked together; (c) the participant's personality and leadership styles; and (d) stories about any major people/events at work they believe have influenced the participant's leadership identity development.

#### Demographic section:

1. What is your age?
2. What was the highest level of formal education that you have achieved?
3. What is your current occupation?
4. How long have you known the leader for?
- a. Relationship with the participant:
  1. How long have .....been with your organization?
  2. What is her current role? And what are your previous roles?
  3. How do you describe your relationship with.....?
  4. How long have you known her for?
  5. How did you first meet?
  6. Have you worked together before? Give some examples?
- b. The participant personality and leadership style:
  1. How do you describe.....personality?
  2. How do you see..... as a leader?
  3. What do you think the reasons for her success?
  4. What are some of.....traits and qualities as a leader?
  5. What style is her leadership?
  6. How do you describe her relationship with subordinates, peers and superiors?
  7. How does she handle challenges conflict as a leader?
- c. Influential people/events
  1. Is there a specific manager/leader that she was influenced by?
  2. Can you describe any events/activities that have influenced her as a leader?
  3. What are the most important values and ethics that are demonstrated by ..... as a leader? Give me an example of these in practice.
  4. Where do you see her going in her future career path?

## Appendix 6

### Diary guide

#### Purpose of the research:

The focus of the thesis is to investigate the roles of formal, non-formal and informal education in shaping the leadership style of Emirati woman working in senior leadership positions in Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates, as well as to analyze the impact of these aspects on their career.

#### Purpose of diary:

I have been researching this area and I am interested to know more about the events and activities that you encounter in your daily life or at work that you feel help in developing your leadership skills.

When completed, your work diary will provide me with important information about the events/activities, and the people who are involved in them, how you feel about these experiences, and in what ways you think they have affected you.

#### The daily diary:

It would be very helpful if you could make entries into this diary for the next two month from .....to.....

#### Diary themes guidelins:

*For the first day or two, some of these elements below may not seem to be obvious, but after 2-3 diary writing sessions, these elements will be more observable and come to the surface. It is important to also capture any of these that you feel allow you to exercise leadership, or challenged your leadership, or limited your leadership. This can also include leadership lessons that you learned in the process.*

1. Events and activities: identify any significant events and activities, no matter how small, that you believe influence your skills, knowledge, and conception of yourself as a leader (leadership identity). This includes both negative and positive experiences. These can include meetings, conferences, organizational events and celebrations, team activities involving teaching, research and administration, etc. It is important to identify the type of session and its purpose involved in each that you are recording.
2. The people involved: this can include key figures or peripheral individuals, as well as group experiences. These can also include negative and positive interactions either with you or among the group. The range of interactions can be with one other person or in a group setting.

*The diary entry can also capture organizational culture elements (from Schein) in describing the events/activities and interactions such as:*

- d. Artifacts like furnishings, pictures, posters, documents, refreshments,
- e. Espoused beliefs and values: speeches, comments or arguments that are made, mission and goals statements, strategic plans, briefing notes, codes of conduct, etc.
- f. Basic underlying assumptions that are not consciously or explicitly presented or verbalized: behaviors, styles of interaction, communication styles, ways of organizing

And delegating work and decision-making, consultation and collaboration, etc., including any cross-cultural experiences.

*It is important to this study to also capture formal, informal and non-formal (from Mocker and Spear) leadership practice and growth experiences which could include observations of experiences others are going through that are instructive:*

- a. Formal: any certificate or diploma programme, working on a doctoral programme.
- b. Informal: workshops, individual courses, professional development sessions, conferences, colloquia, etc.
- c. Non-formal: cultural events, family gatherings involving a leading role, sessions with any role models or other leader, informal meetings with colleagues to discuss issues, etc. This category can also include films, documentaries and individual reading of novels, travelogues, history, biographies, etc.
  4. What were your duties around the house as a child? What were the other children's duties? How did duties break down by gender? What activities did the family do together?
- c. Schooling (*formal education*)
  1. What was school like for you as a child and a teenager? What did you like about it? What was hard about it for you?
  2. Who were your friends at school?
  3. Who were your favorite teachers?
  4. What was your favorite subject?
  5. Were there any historical or non-historical individual that you learned about in school whom you admired? Why?
  6. What school activities you enjoyed the most?
  7. Did you like taking a leading role in group activities or did you do a lot of individual activities?
- d. Influential individuals/events (*non-formal education*)
  1. Who were important people for you, both in childhood and adolescence?
  2. When you look back, can you describe some significant events?
  3. Can you give an example of someone whose leadership you have admired or who you try to emulate?
  4. Were there any women that you knew or heard of who were going through higher education, professional training and appointments?
  5. What qualities in others did you admire while growing up?
  6. While growing up, were you influenced by media—TV, movies, newspapers, books?
  7. Is the way you see yourself now different from the way you saw yourself in the past?
  8. What led to the changes?
  9. What changes have you seen in the UAE during the time they were growing up?
- e. Early formative experiences (*in-formal education*)
 

Did you get any chance to travel outside UAE?

Mention some important places that you visited in the UAE or outside UAE that you still remember?

Did you take part in any students association e.g. Student Council, clubs? what was your role? Are there any other activities, workshops that you found very useful and helped you to reach this position?

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