WOMEN'S FACES IN MEN PLACES: THE CHALLENGING WORLD OF ARAB FEMALE EXECUTIVES

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Abstract - This study aims to assess the perceived facilitators and barriers of high profile Arab women executives throughout their careers. A questionnaire was administered to 99 female executives from Kuwait, Tunisia and Sudan. These countries capture some of the diversity of women's opportunities and challenges in the Arab region. The findings of the three samples were essentially similar and generally support Western findings barring the impact of patriarchy. The main career facilitators were self-efficacy, hard work and social support. The main barriers were lack of culture-fit and exclusion from networks. Compared to Western findings, the present sample assigned more importance to lack of culture-fit and less importance to work/family conflict and lack of mentoring as barriers. The findings were discussed within the Arab sociopolitical context. Given the scarcity of research on the careers of Arab women and paucity of Arab research with regional perspective, the value added of this research is addressing the literature gap.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 'Arab Spring' revolutions of 2010women have been rebelling not only against dictators but against a traditional, conservative mindset that fears women as agents of change. Yet, after the end of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprising still, simply making a connection between women and freedom provokes controversy in some groups and conflicts with tradition. In this respect, one Egyptian woman protester told Catherine Ashton, the EU Foreign Policy Supremo, during her visit to Tahrir Square: "*The men were keen for me to be here when we were demanding that Mubarak should go. But now he has gone, they want me to go home*." (The Guardian newspaper, April 23, 2011).

The Arab region, like other developing regions, is attempting to respond to a rapidly evolving, fast-paced technological world order that requires political, economic, and social modernization, stability and efficiency. However, the region as a whole faces daunting challenges, most notably political unrest, lack of freedom, lack of women's empowerment and underdeveloped human capacities and knowledge relative to income. UNDP(2013) indicated that overcoming those challenges would determine the future of the region, and that barriers to communities' empowerment, especially women's empowerment, had relegated the region to a position far behind others. With respect to women empowerment, available data - albeit inadequate - revealed disappointing progress in most indicators, particularly in female human capital utilization. The region had the world's largest gender gaps in economic and political participation and the region has the largest mismatch between levels of women education and work participation in the world (e.g., UNDP 2013). These results were often attributed to dominant gender prejudices about women's role in the public realm (KaramandAfiouni 2013).

Recent literature reviews (Kauser and Tlaiss 2011) revealed that the majority of the research on Arab women career advancement was from 2000 onwards and it was concentrated on few broad topics explaining societal norms that were responsible for women's economic status in some Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Egypt, and Lebanon. Very little data is available on low-income Arab countries and Arab Maghreb region. Also, most of Arab women's career barriers (socio-political, organizational and personal) arose from patriarchal culture-based gender roles and status (e.g., Karam and Afiouni 2013), and they were similar across the Arab regions but with different nuances from one country to anotherdue to gender ideology variances between and within Arab countries. As to women career facilitators, the few available studies revealed that family background and support, education, inner drive for success and self-confidence had positive effects on women's careers (e.g., Omair 2008); and that family background seemed to override the negative influence of patriarchy on women career progress (Karam and Afiouni 2013).

Further, previous studies used samples of professionals, lower-level managers and micro enterprise entrepreneurs, and omitted female executives of medium and large organizations. This may be due to scarcity of women at the executive suite. KauserandTlaiss (2011) and Alami (2013), indicated that given the theoretical shortcomings there was a need to continue to seek, at individual country and regional levels, more appropriate explanations for the token presence of women in executive positions – despite significant progress in their qualifications - so that the gender imbalance in management levels can be addressed.

This paper attempts to fill this gap by exploring the career barriers and facilitators of a scarce group of Arab women who made it to the executive suite of medium and large organizations. The study covers three Arab countries, namely Sudan, Tunisia and Kuwait which are strikingly different in their economic wealth, population size and education opportunities however, like the other 19 members of the Arab League, they share common language, region, culture and a sense of belonging to one nation(World Bank [WB] 2014).The general aim of this study is to contribute to the widerdiscourse of gender-equity and women career development which is considered an essential requirement for social and economic development (Karam and Afiouni 2013). The foundation of this research draws its initial focus from the questions: How did some Arab women make it to the executive suite in the most conservative region of the world? What is the perceived relative importance of their career facilitators and barriers? Are there between-country differences regarding the barriers/facilitators? What can we learn from their experiences? Given the findings of previous research which showed that the career barriers of Arab women were mostly similar to those of Western women and that the career determinants of Arab women managers seem to be relatively similar across the region (UNDP 2013), one could assume that there would be few differences between the work experiences of the Kuwaiti, Sudanese and Tunisian samples used in this study.

The rationale of the unique focus of this study is that it is women who successfully navigated the labyrinth and reached the executive suite who know what it takes to complete the journey within a patriarchical context. Given the fact that the experiences of this group is largely ignored by researchers (Kauser and Tlaiss 2011), there is a pressing need to explore it for theory development and practical reasons. Thus, the study is expected to offer information which may be of value to scholars, practitioners and young aspirant women alike. The following sections of the paper will present the research methodology, outline and discuss the findings and present relevant recommendations.

METHOD

***Sample*:** The 99 respondents were members of the executive suitesof medium and large organizations. Specifically they occupy the positions of minister, deputy minister, undersecretary, deputy undersecretary, president, vicepresident, CEO, managing director, senior divisional heads, ambassador, senior legislator, supreme and constitutional courts judges and their equivalent. Managers and owners of small businesses were excluded.

***Research instrument*:** The questionnaire was based on Gupton and Slick (1996),Lyness and Thompson (2000) and Broadbridge (2008) and adapted to suite the Arab situation. The questionnaires allowed for concise and quantitative responses as well as short answer and essay responses that were qualitative in nature.

FINDINGS

The small sample sizes (27-36 respondents)and the narrative responses did not allow for extensive statistical analyses. For the quantitative data Descriptive Statistics and One-Way Analysis of Variance were used to examine 'between-country-comparisons'. The results revealed few statistically significant differences between the three countries and hence it was decided to base the analysis on the aggregate sample.

The results supported previous research findings suggesting that patriarchical Arab culture and gender discrimination were entrenched in Arab organizations (e.g., Kauser and Tlaiss 2011). They also revealed the differential importance of the perceived career facilitators/barriers, e.g., 'self-efficacy' and 'drive for success' were the main facilitators and 'lack of culture fit' the main barrier. The role of 'mentoring' was minimal. The perceived influences of 'role models' and 'work/family balance' on their career success were moderate (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Career Barriers of Arab Women Executives

Perceived career barriers	Mean	Rank
Feeling like you are held to a higher standard than others	1.4	1
People tend to recommend and select people like themselves	1.4	1
Stereotyping and perceptions of women's roles	1.4	1
Feeling that you can't make mistakes and learn from them without threatening your job or your future	1.7	4
Limited access to informal networks	1.9	5
Difficulty getting access to opportunities	1.9	5
Organizational/internal politics	2.1	7
Not being considered when promotions for bigger jobs arise	2.2	8
Feeling pressure to fit in or adapt to the culture of the executive level	2.4	9
Not feeling comfortable asserting your views because of possible consequences	2.6	9

Blocked career progress	2.7	11
Not being offered stretch assignments	2.8	12
Being unsure about how to initiate a job change	2.9	13
Difficulty getting access to critical developmental assignments (e.g., serving on highly visible task forces or committees)	3.0	14
Poor career plan	3.0	14
Not getting access to the right people (or not knowing the right people)	3.1	15
Not receiving enough meaningful feedback about your strengths and weaknesses	3.1	15
Commitment to family responsibilities	3.1	15
Not knowing what the criteria are for advancement	3.4	19
Not having a senior manager who facilitates your career progress	3.5	20
Not enough mentoring (e.g., counseling about career opportunities)	3.6	21
Being excluded from social events and informal interactions with colleagues during working hours	3.8	22
Feeling like you are an outsider	3.8	22
Not getting the right jobs early in your career (that you need for later advancement)	4.1	24
Difficulty getting international assignments	4.2	25
Lack of opportunities to move across functions or businesses	4.3	26
Needing to obtain international experience/education in order to advance	4.3	26
Not being considered for jobs that require relocation	4.3	26

Note: 1 – a serious problem and 5 – not a problem

Drive and Self-efficacy: The respondents attributed their career success mainly to themselves - drive for success,excellent track record portfolio, hard work, assertiveness, credibility with peers and strong work ethics, (Table 1). The qualitative research findings – based on narratives - substantiated the quantitative ones emphasizing the importance of 'job preparedness, working double as hard as men, successfully balancing family and work, being organized'. Also, very high self-efficacy was evident in several other parts of the questionnaire.

*Developmental opportunities:*Almost half of the respondents attributed their competitive advantage to their early and strong career start which included early promotions to leadership positions and/or access to novel assignment/education/training (Table 1).Conversely they reported serious overt and implicit gender-discrimination issues in education (50%) (e.g., quota admission to engineering and medicine programs in favor of men) and employment and developmental opportunities (83%). Also, civil/labor laws and outdated personnel practices were significant career barriers (72%) but these systems were gradually improving and increasingly opening doors for women's career advancement (65%).

Relationships: The following tactics seemed to have worked for the respondents: 'developing relationships with senior managers', 'their credibility with peers', 'support of strategic sponsors' and 'private sources of support' (Table 1), with family support, particularly male members support, playing vital roles in their success (65%). However, having unsympathetic fathers/husbands were major hindrances to the education and/or career development of some respondents; e.g., "father's decision to arrange her marriage before completing her education"; "father not allowing her to have higher education because it was not gender- segregated or it required travel but she managed to continue her education after marrying a supportive husband". Inadequate social networking with peers was seen as the second most important career barrier; e.g., they reported difficulties in accessing essential informal networks due to conservative cultures, boys' clubs and shortage of time to socialize with peers due to pressures of family commitments. However, they perceived the challenge of balancing family-work commitments to be moderate due to availability of house-help and the extended family support.

Lack of culture fit: Stereotyping, gender discrimination and aggression were considered the most important barriers and created a feeling of "culture misfit at the executive suite". Among the relevant items were: "Held to a higher standards than men"; "Seniors tend to recommend and select people like them"; "Cannot make mistakes and learn from them without risking one's job or future"; and "Sometimes felt that people were waiting for me to make a mistake and fall" (Table 2). Also, 41% of the

respondents reported that they were 'hitting the glass-ceiling' and having blocked careers; for example, a Kuwaiti banker stated, "Because of my gender there is no hope for me to be a board member". However, despite the obstacles, hostilities and the substantial personal sacrifices made (65%), most respondents were comfortable with their level of power in the organization (77%), highly contented with their careers and had no major regrets (69%). Only 7% felt alienated or psychologically separated from the rest of the immediate group.

Mentoring: 'Formal mentoring' systems are yet to be introduced in Arab organizations. In fact there is no Arabic equivalent for this term (Abdalla 2006). Hence, formal mentoring was not offered to the respondents but obviously they pursued/accepted guidance by seniors/peers (i.e., a sort of informal/unstructured mentoring). Interestingly, lack of formal mentoring was not perceived as a serious career barrier or facilitator (Tables 1 and 2).

*Role Models:*The influence of 'role models' on the respondents' career success perceivedas moderate (Tables 1 and 2); 87% had 'positive role models' 74% had 'negative role-models' whose characteristic/behavior they tried to avoid. Most of the role models were men who were personally known to them. Generally, they drew on partial role models; none of them sought 'total role models', i.e., single 'idealized' person.

Career planning:'Formal career planning' is not practiced in Arab organizations. Most of the respondents did not have career plans, but they appreciate its value now. Usually, they used approaches based on self-trust, optimism and a conviction of destiny.

Table 2: Career Facilitators of Arab Women Executives

Perceived career facilitators	Mean	Rank
Having a good track record	1.2	1
Hard work	1.2	1
Being assertive	1.2	1
Self esteem	1.3	4
Certain job moves	1.3	4
Job competence	1.3	4
Strong work ethics	1.7	7
Attracting top level support	1.8	8
Support from family and private networks	1.8	8
Ambition	1.8	8
Assistance and coaching by other inside and outside the organization	1.9	11
Credibility with peers	1.9	11
Being offered key job assignments	1.9	11
Wide span of assignments or experiences	2.1	14
Willingness to take risks	2.4	15
Information about organizational politics	2.7	16
Having role models	3.1	17
Having a mentor or someone who provides good advice on career opportunities	3.2	18
Access to informal networks	3.4	19
Career planning	3.6	20
Help from your mentor in establishing key relationships	3.9	21
Advice from your mentor about how to solve difficult business problems	4.1	22

Note: 1 = a very important facilitator to 5 = not a facilitator

DISCUSSION

The career facilitators and barriers reported here were very similar to those reported in previous studies in other regions in addition to patriarchy and overt or legalized discrimination (e.g., Broadbridgeand Simpson 2011; Kauserand Tlaiss 2011). However, the relative importance of some of those factors in the Arab world was different from that reported in Western studies. For example, 'lack of culture fit' at the executive suite was the main career inhibiter in the Arab world while it was of moderate importance in the West, 'work/family balance' was a main hindrance in the West and it was of moderate

significance in the Arab women; 'formal mentoring and career planning systems' do not exist in Arab organizations and 'role models', although they were very scarce, were not perceived as major career barriers.

Women executives depicted semi-hostile work environments (negative feelings, attempts of cognitive distortion and lack of sympathy) caused by stereotyping, gender discrimination and social exclusion. A Tunisian woman executive stated that, "*If you are a man you can fail, if you are a woman you are not allowed to*". Another executive stated that, *"… there were an awful lot of men in senior executive positions who were far from brilliant, yet as soon as we talk of women elites in politics or business, everyone's asking about competence ...*". Karman said, after receiving 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, "*The way I feel about it is that people are not taking us seriously as women in the Middle East. This is the rest of the world taking us seriously. …. Now the world is watching ….*" These results are consistent with the literature, (e.g., Broadbridge and Simpson2011), which stated that non-communal behavior needed at the executive suite got positive results for men but got negative outcomes for women. The "one best way" of leadership makes anyone who is different "can only be worse", and hence people might resist women's overt influence, particularly if they were forceful, assertive and working in a conservative environment (Budworth and Mann 2010). Another challenge was the 'old boys'' networks which were considered a primary reason why women were ignored and indeed discouraged from seeking top jobs. The negative effects of the abovementioned factors were augmented by the dominance of 'Wasta'(an Arabic term for nepotism), patriarchy and the overtly sexist laws and HRM practices. These practices have led to a culture which encourages men not only to recruit/promote men like them but to give preference to their friends and relatives (Kauser&Tlaiss, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings showed that despite the enormous burden of heritage, custom and the difficult hurdles Arab women are facing, today's women made significant victories owing to education, entry to work, awareness, access to foreign cultures, liberationist and human rights thought. Thus, now the modern Arab women have far more options. However, studies of the Arab world revealed meager women's successes, as women are still largely absent from the political domain, only thinly present in the social welfare sector, shadowy in the civil and cultural spheres, insignificant in the economic domain, and almost completely missing from the official religious domain.

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