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Way forward for corporate sector of the Arabian Gulf**

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Gender and Career Success: Way forward for Corporate Sector of the Arabian Gulf

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Abstract

Careers of Arab women constitute an intriguing case as they make up a highly educated human capital yet are underrepresented in the work force. Though the Gulf region represents one of the most diverse pools of employees around the world however they fall short in women's workforce participation. With an ever increasing need to cultivate talent worldwide, it is essential to recognize the challenges pertaining to attracting and retaining women in the workforce in this emerging economy. Using qualitative methods and critical analysis of literature retrieved from secondary sources, this study analyzes the journey of Arab Gulf women with respect to career success. We identify major barriers for women to enter and remain in the workforce, and recommend key strategies to address these challenges. Our findings contribute to the scant literature by looking at the relevant themes, trends and findings in a comprehensive manner, and combining them in a single study. We highlight the key benefits that can be reaped with the optimal utilization of Arab women's talent at macro, organizational and individual level and propose practices that could promote their careers.

Keywords: Diversity, Career Success, Gender Gap, Gender Discrimination, Gulf, Arab Women.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary times, careers hold a significant place in everyone's life. Men and women, alike, seek professional growth, yet there are notable gender differences in career success (Eagly and Carli, 2007).

“Career” is a descriptive as well as an evaluative term (Abele, Spurk and Volmer, 2011). Descriptively the term denotes a person's occupational life track and the transformations taking place in this professional life path, for example changing jobs, times of unemployment, relocations, promotions, times of further education etc (Super 1990). As an evaluative term, it means upward development and climbing up the career ladder. The term “success” descriptively denotes progress, while as an evaluative term, it depicts affirmative appraisal of outcomes or development (Abele et. al, 2011).

The combined term of “career success” is defined by Judge, Higgins, Thoresen and Barrik. (1999, p.621) as: “The real or perceived achievements individuals have accumulated as a result of their work experiences”. In literature this ‘real’ achievement is widely cited as Objective career success, whereas the term Subjective career success is used for ‘perceived’ achievements. In this paper we are interested in objective career success as it is directly observable, measurable and verifiable by an impartial third party (Hughes, 1937). Two extensively utilized indicators of objective career success are pay and promotions (Seibert, Crant and Kraimer, 1999).

Though the careers and success of western women have been under spot light for years, not too much attention has been paid to the career advancement of Arab women. The purpose of this paper is to look into the careers of Arab women in socio-culturally different context of the Arabian Gulf and to give insights into crafting careers of such women to more successful ones.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Women constitute almost half of the world's total population (World Economic Forum, 2014), but are not treated equally especially in terms of career progression (why highly educated women) as reflected by their worldwide low workforce participation rates (World Bank, 2015). The criteria for inclusion and equality of women or any other group cannot forever be slave to

the idea that means have to justify ends of higher riches or profit maximization. For the betterment of humanity as a whole, if inclusion and equality demands sacrifice of some financial growth then the trade-off would be well worth it.

Provisionally, to the best of our knowledge there is no trade-off. There are numerous researches that show that inclusion and empowerment of women, be it in the market place, the office or the household, increases overall efficiency, well-being and the quality of decision-making (World Bank, 2016).

At the macro-economic level, development of female full labor market potential leads to enormous gains (Loko and Diouf, 2009). Boosting up the female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) to male levels, possibly will increase GDP in Japan by 9 percent, in the United Arab Emirates by 12 percent, in Greece by 45%, in Egypt by 34 percent and in EU by 30% (Aguirre et. al, 2012). In United States, the increased level of women employment has been attributed to be the basic cause of increased labor productivity (Scott-Jackson, Kariem, Porteous, Harb, 2010). The benefits of high FLFP can also be reaped in swiftly aging states by alleviating the impact of a lessening workforce (IMF, 2012). Women's paid as well as unpaid work can work wonders in reducing poverty in developing countries of the world (ILO, 2010).

At the organizational level the practice of gender equality at management and leadership levels alike will likely lead such firms ahead of those that do not (World Economic Forum, 2014). Such practice will enable organizations to take optimal benefits from existing talent pool, with numerous growth possibilities (Barsh and Yee, 2012). Though debatable, much research has proved positive implications of female presence on boards and in leadership roles on companies' performance (Elborgh-Woytek et. al, 2013). A number of studies show positive results and increases in Return on Investment, Return on Equity, and Earnings before Interest and Taxes (Smith, Smith and Verner, 2006; Krishnan and Park, 2005; Francoeur, Labelle and Sinclair-Desgagne, 2008). In addition more gender-diverse boards could improve corporate governance by contribution of wider range of perspectives (OECD, 2012). Therefore the organizations that do not attract retain and promote females' damage their long-term competitiveness. For those who do, the payback from diversity is evident.

The benefits of gender equality go beyond the economic reasons. In light of straightforward and influential grounds of 'fairness', women being representative of one half of the global population, deserve equal access to health, education, influence, earning power and political representation. Humanity's collective progress and prosperity depends on this (World Economic Forum, 2014). In addition, career success and better professional performance boosts one's self esteem which in turns results in happiness (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and Vohs, 2003). Happier women will be better able to raise kids into better and successful human beings and contribute to a positive domestic atmosphere.

The results of this study will be significant in understanding the importance of socio-cultural context and other factors that may hinder Arab women's career success. In addition the results of this study will highlight the remedial actions that can be taken to advance the careers of Arab women into more successful ones, for obtaining economic, organizational and individual level benefits, through full utilization of available talent pool.

PROBLEM AREA

The Arab women even after being highly educated and skillful, does not optimally represent the work force. Female Labor Force Participation (FLFPR) rate in GCC stands at 26.9%, which is almost half of the world average (51.7%). The disparity is wider when contrasted with more developed nations like the US (58%), UK (55%) and Germany (53%) (AMCML, 2012). After spending years in getting higher education they either prefer not to work or are enforced to do so due the socio-cultural environment (Tlaiss, 2014).

Such trends not only infringe human rights requirements but hampers economic competence, especially while considering serious dependence of the GCC on expatriates (Abdalla, 2015). Numbers of expatriates are quite high in GCC with 66% in Kuwait, 78% in Qatar and 82% in Emirates. Therefore this region bears the maximum load of migrant labor from around the world (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2014).

However, despite of the underutilization of Arabian Gulf female talent, the sources of this dilemma were not often studied in literature. Omair (2008), in her analysis of existing researches

on Arab female professionals, found out that most of the limited related literature was published after the year 2000 and was emphasized on a few broad topics detailing social norms that were the cause of women's current state in public and private realm.

Because the financial and societal prosperity of the Gulf region depend on making full use of the available talent and involvement of all citizens including females, this study tries to explore the latest literature available and compile comprehensively the potential factors of lower female workforce representation and come to a conclusion whether socio-cultural factors are the sole reasons behind such trend in the Arabian Gulf. In light of findings we put forward recommendations and suggestion for crafting their careers into successful ones.

Such utilization will likely improve the overall national productivity, reduce dependence on expatriates, increase family incomes, reduce state dependences and help raise women's sense of self esteem and contribution to their countries.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The paper looks into the current literature and tries to explore the existing trends, reasons behind the trends and remedies to improve the current career situations of Arab women. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What role does socio-cultural background play on Arab women's career success?
- (2) How to craft Arab women's career into more successful ones for maximizing macro, micro and individual level gains?

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study tries to understand the current career status of Arab Women and find answers to the research questions by reviewing the limited literature including various journal publications, books and media reports. Some other secondary data sources like Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) policy manuals, official websites, documents and reports from international organizations on gender gap and women related issues were also consulted. Both electronic as well as the print media were conferred for identification, analysis and rectification of issues that act as impediments to career progression of Arab women. First the literature is reviewed to

identify pertinent themes and trends about women at workplace in the GCC region and then various arguments on these themes are analyzed, synthesized and critically evaluated to put forward our findings and suggestions. Based on these findings we draw our conclusions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Women, even in this modern age continue to face challenges especially with respect to career success (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The two most commonly used measures of career success are pay and promotion (Seibert, Crant and Kraimer, 1999). Women consistently lag behind men in both (Ever and Sieverding, 2013). Around 50% of world's total population consists of females. They represent 52% of the total enrolled at tertiary level education, yet only 24% make up the senior managerial roles, 17% constitute board position and only 12% are at Chief Executive Officer (CEO) level (Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015) Even those who make it to the CEO are paid less as compared to their male counterparts.

Though such gender gap exists all around the world, the situation is alarming in the Arabian Gulf. Human capital is being underutilized all across the Middle East and Gulf region (Al-Yahya 2010), especially the female talent pool of the Arabian Gulf (UNDP, 2005). According to the World Economic Forum's report, the GCC countries are well placed in women's educational attainments, yet they lag behind consistently on the basis of economic participation and opportunity (World Economic Forum, 2014). It seems as if the high educational accomplishments are not being transferred to the workplace (Marmenout and Lirio, 2014).

The Trends

The Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) include six states including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman, with a collective population of around 50 million with male female ratio of 60:40 (World Bank, 2015). The female participation rate in work force is less than 20% and only one fifth of the total labor force is female. Due to a healthy investment and strategic initiatives of various GCC governments like extensive public sector investment in health and education have been important in bridging the gender gap in respective countries. The total number of females enrolled at tertiary level now outnumbers the male enrollments, with female enrollment figures of 66% in Bahrain, 52% in

KSA, 67% in Kuwait, 59% in Oman, 88% in Qatar and 76% in UAE as compared to males. In contrast, the figures for female workforce participation stand at only 32%, 20%, 35%, 26%, 35% and 34% respectively (World Economic Forum, 2014). Current overall statistics for the GCC also show that girls are equal to boys in primary education at 93% each and have overtaken over male students rates at secondary education where 90% girls are enrolled as compared to 88% boys. At tertiary-level education, enrolled females constitute 40% as compared to males at 23% (Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015).

A large number of such women pursue arts, social sciences and humanities as their subjects of preference and not science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. This is largely because of deep-rooted cultural ideologies about suitable educational pathways and career tracks for women, despite their interest or aptitude (AMCML, 2015). According to the Dubai Statistics Centre, 33% of females enrolled at tertiary level like to study business subjects, followed by foundation (19%), media and design (13%) and humanities (10%). The figures for more technical fields remain low with Information Technology and Law at 6% each, medical and education at 5% each, engineering at only 1% and natural, physical science and others remain at less than 1%. The figures in Qatar also show more or less the same trend where females enrolled in art and sciences make up to 47%, followed by admin and economics (14%), education (12%), Islamic education (11%), engineering (10%), law (2%) and others (4%) (Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015).

Because of such trends the IT illiteracy rate is significantly high for Arab women in Gulf region (ICDL GCC Foundation, 2009) and therefore ICDL has requested GCC states for increased funding for initiation of digital awareness program for improving female's role in socio-economic development.

Despite, the fact that Gulf women are underemployed or unwilling to pursue paid work, their share in World wealth remain significantly high. Women in the Middle East controlled 22% of the region's total Assets in 2009. According to the "World Ultra Wealth Report 2014", in 2013, GCC countries Saudi Arabia and the UAE together accounted for 105 Ultra High Net Worth females with about USD22 billion of wealth (ACMCL, 2015).

Those Arab women who are employed in the GCC, according to research conducted by Bayt.com, titled “The Status of Working Women in the Middle East,” are largely working in the private sector, which makes 80% of the total females in employment in the GCC (ACMCL, 2015). In Kuwait the ratio of women private to public sector participation is around 90:10, followed by Oman, Bahrain and UAE at 80:20, KSA (70:30) and then Qatar (65:35) (Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015). Most of these working women drop off the workforce sharply around mid-career, the phase where several females leave to have their first baby. The dilemma is that the return rate is so low that they only make up less than 20% of the total workforce in the GCC. The disparity is even more noticeable at board level where directorships held by women are still under 2% in the region, though they do a little better in junior managerial roles, and in legislative and government positions, where the average participation rate is between 7 to 14% (Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015). On the contrary, males in GCC region get well-paid jobs in the public sector (such as government or military) without even going to a university (ACMCL, 2015).

Factors affecting women workforce participation and career success in GCC

In literature the low female workforce participation is attributed mainly to socio-cultural factors and religious sensitivities yet while having a look at the trends and statistics we come across several other factors that play a part in this expanding gap between female participation in education and paid work. Lack of motivation is one of the biggest factors (ACMCL, 2015).

Economically, the Gulf is considered to be one of the most developed regions in West Asia and ranks among the world’s wealthiest nations with one of the highest per capita GDPs and GNI (World Bank, 2015). Therefore, the economic factor is the most significant, amongst the factors that persuade women’s choice of employment. Because of higher household incomes in the Gulf and liberal benefit system, females are not fascinated by low paying jobs. Additionally though most Arab men and women have a preference for public sector jobs, women are mostly employed in the private sector (Golkowska, 2014). This inclination is simply because of the job security, superior benefits, lesser office hours, and high pay without a performance review. Except for Qatar where the ratio of female private-public sector employment is around 60:40, in

the rest of the Gulf state this ratio is around 80:20, with Kuwait at 90:10 (Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015).

At the same time, there is no doubt that socio- cultural factors and established gender roles like marriage, childbirth and domestic responsibilities also play a significant role in women's employment trends in Gulf (Golkowska, 2014). For a woman the primary role is still a familial one, so the clash among work responsibilities and getting adequate time for partners, children, extended family members, and societal duties is apparent as a tough one. This concept also known as double burden syndrome is also highlighted by Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, (2015) as the most important barrier to female's career progression.

To further describe the situation, the Gulf region is characterized by masculinity, patriarchy, and collectivism (Hofstede, 1994). The masculine aspect of the Arab culture focuses on the strict definition of and differentiation between gender roles (Hofstede, 1994), emphasizes the reproductive functions of women (Tlaiss, 2013) and draws a sharp distinction between the primary commitments of men (i.e. to their careers) and women (i.e. to their families and children) (Al-Ahmadi, 2011)

Whenever women professionals are forced to prioritize home or career, they go for home, whereas men choose the career. It is more a case when work is more demanding, high-ranking, and involves high levels of accountability. Female professionals usually opt for roles that permit them to spend more time with their family. According to a research the most important factor pointed out by Arab women for rejecting a promotion was that it required sacrifice in work-life balance and they wanted to spend more time with their family and children (Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015).

Because of the women's priority to spend more time with children they are not able to make professional networks. The findings from a study indicated that the main barriers were lack of cross-gender social network and support (Abdalla, 2015). Entrance in to networking atmosphere is a predicament for Arab women because the societal norms and cultural values in GCC region make it difficult for males and females to socialize externally outside professional settings. For

instance, it is not possible for Arab women to go to or take part in *majlis* or *diwaniya*, culturally significant societal get-together where men unofficially chat and enlarge their networks (Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015).

Not only family life becomes a barrier towards success of women, but when they try to move forward in their professional careers, especially in management, they come across numerous organizational structural and attitudinal barriers (Tlaiss, 2013).

In a research conducted by Bayt.com, majority of GCC Arab women testified identical treatment at the workplace with respect to office timings, training and development, recruitment and selection, and benefits. The women, though, suffered from unequal treatment when it came to career success in the form of pay and promotion (AMCML, 2015). According to a report by Pearl initiative, women do not witness any real dedication from their employers to support more women role models in the place of work. Only a third thinks that males are agreeable to work under or even at same level with a woman (Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015).

Similarly, Tlaiss and Kauser (2010) state that the glass ceiling exists for women in Arab countries. It is defined as an invisible barrier, similar to concrete ceiling that is impassable and prevents the advancement of women to senior levels of management (Tlaiss and Kauser 2010). It is argued by Tlaiss and Kauser (2010) that a more severe glass ceiling is faced by Arab women; which initiates at a lower managerial level. Therefore it can be inferred that glass ceiling inhibits the growth and promotion of Arab female professionals at not only senior levels but also at lower and middle management positions.

Some tangible barriers also play a significant role in advancement of Arab women's careers. There are not enough amenities to permit females to work properly including childcare facilities, separate cloakrooms, common rooms and prayer rooms as well as flexible working practices and distance from workplace (Dunlop, Schreiber and El-Attar, 2015).

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the discussion above that Arab women's improved human capital has not eliminated gender disadvantages in the career perspective. Based on our review of literature we can safely construe that there are numerous limiting factors ranging from social, cultural, economic, demographic and personal reasons that inhibit the professional growth and career success of Arab women. Keeping in mind such factors, the female employment rate of less than 20% does not come as a surprise.

A number of previous studies on Arab women (Omair, 2008; Golkowska, 2014; Tlaiss, 2014, 2013) presented multiple factors serving as barriers to their career success and reduced workforce participation rates. After having a detailed look at these and other studies, we group such factors into macro, organizational and individual factors and come to a conclusion that though socio-cultural factors play a significant role in inhibiting Arab women's career progress; there are a number of other growth inhibiting factors including organizational constraints and personal motivation and preferences.

The macro factors behind lesser women workforce participation in Gulf include demographics, for instance population ratio where males make up the 60% of total population; economy where Gulf women and citizens being already financially well off does not need paid employment; women's choice of subjects at tertiary level being focused in arts, humanities and social sciences that make it difficult for them to find employment as these field are already saturated; social factors of patriarchal environment where males consider themselves as head of family and working wives make them feel inferior; religious where some of the sects considers women working outside home as wrong and considers mixed gender environment of workplaces as forbidden; and cultural, where gender discrimination and conservative gender roles prevails as a norm.

The organizational factors include inflexible work arrangements which hinder work-life balance, gender stereotyping and glass ceiling effect that inhibit women's career growth and prevent them from being promoted at higher levels of the organization. On the personal level, it is the lack of motivation on part of Arab women and preferences of child care and family concerns that make

it difficult for them to take out ample time for efficiently completing job requirements and make professional networks that can help them grow in career at a faster pace. Additionally lack of tangible facilities like separate common rooms, cloakrooms, day care facilities also hinder in career progression.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings maintain that careers undeniably unfold in a multidimensional perspective, within the national economic, demographic, religious, cultural, individual, social and organizational settings, as they arise from the interaction of individuals with organizations and society. Given these barriers, study recommends some solutions to the identified barriers Arab women face in their careers which will not only help them to take a more active role at work, but also contributing to the economy, their own selves and society at large.

Maximizing women's employment through work from home, flexible working hours and providing entrepreneurial initiatives may resolve a number of professional growth inhibiting factors and will help Arab women utilize their potential. Work from home as well as flexible working arrangements will help women maintain a better work life balance. It does not mean working less rather we propose that time spent at the office should not matter as long as the employees are able to complete their assigned tasks and targets. The quality of work should matter the most while considering the candidates for promotion rather than their gender. Telecommuting, efficient use of technology and trust between the management and employees lie at the heart of such solutions.

Additionally steps should be taken for increasing awareness and interest of Arab women in study fields other than social sciences and humanities, for instance, in pure sciences, computer sciences, medical, mathematics and engineering that can foster economic growth of Arab regions at a faster pace. Career counseling and network building strategies must be reinforced.

Creating a balanced corporate culture can help reduce the organizational barriers that Arab women face. Everyone from top to bottom must be aware of what role is expected of them and if they fulfill these expectations then they must be given access to all opportunities. In general, the

focus should be on supporting women in middle management because these are the times where many women leave the workforce due to the maximum pressure of balancing work life responsibilities.

Staffing, pay, and promotion should be 'gender blind', and based solely on skills, and qualifications rather than bias towards masculine characteristics or leadership styles. On-site child day care facilities are another area worth considering. When women are on maternity leave, ways should be looked into, to facilitate them in keeping up to date and involved in the organizational affairs, through regular communications on new developments and opportunities in organizations, as well as the chance to continue their professional development while on leave, thus reducing the adverse effects of career breaks.

Companies should focus on adapting their HR policies to address the particular issues faced by women in a segregated workplace – this includes office layouts, communications, and other practical issues such as transportation to and from meetings.

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APPENDIX

| <i>SUMMARY AT A GLANCE</i> | | | |
|---|---|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| | <u>Macro Level</u> | <u>Organizational Level</u> | <u>Individual Level</u> |
| <u>Benefits of optimal Female Labor Force Participation:</u> | Increased GDP | Increased ROI | Fairness |
| | Increased Labor Productivity | Increased ROE | Self esteem |
| | Mitigating effects on ageing populations | Increased EBIT | Happiness |
| | Poverty alleviation | More Skilled labor force | Well-Being |
| | | Wider range of perspectives | Better Upbringing of children |
| | | Transformational Leadership | Positive domestic atmosphere |
| | | | |
| <u>Barriers to Career Success:</u> | Social <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles • Expectations • Norms | Gender stereotyping | Choices of subjects |
| | Cultural <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masculine • Collective | Organizational structure | Preferences for family and child care |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patriarchal | | |
| | Religious | Bias and discriminated policies for pay | No importance given to networking |
| | Lack of infrastructure in line with social norms | Glass Ceiling | |
| | | | |
| <u>Recommendations:</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career Counseling/ Networking strategies • Increasing interest of women in Science and technology subjects • Home based working • Flexible work arrangement • Effective use of technology • Proper infrastructure and in building childcare centers • Pick and Drop services • Gender blind HR procedures • Mitigating the effects of career breaks through continuous updating of skills and keeping in touch during breaks | | |