Doing Diversity and Inclusion Differently:
Listening to and Learning from Emirati Women Leaders

As the scholarly and practical literature on leadership continues to broaden in the U.S., the topic of cross-cultural leadership is garnering increased attention. In the U.S. academy, research agendas continue to broaden within the topics of leadership, with cross-cultural leadership garnering increased attention. However, a gap remains in addressing leadership without privileging a Western point of view, and leadership scholarship struggles to stay current with the complex challenges of doing business in a global environment where limits of time, place, culture, and language are increasingly seen as problems of the past. Likewise, companies and consultants now struggle with the complexities of taking global diversity and inclusion strategies largely created from a Western perspective and adapting them to local practices. Leadership education and development programs remain heavily U.S.-centric, where research and best practices are based on the cultural norms of Western societies.[1] Without adequate contextualization, issues and challenges facing women leaders in non-Western, non-Anglo settings[2] cannot be identified; nor will the emerging canon of literature on international and global leadership, women leaders, and gender in organizations reflect a truly global view.

This *CGO Insight* intends to be useful for diversity and gender leadership scholars and diversity and inclusion practitioners, particularly those who design and implement gender diversity programs. We aim to bring visibility to and generate scholarly interest in an under-researched topic within the field of gender and diversity: the perspectives of women leaders from a non-Western society. We hope that our findings and insights encourage cross-cultural research partnerships and improved leadership education and development design and implementation. Our ultimate goal is to advance the state of knowledge and practice; we also aim to bring a more inclusive, contextual, and culturally sensitive lens to our scholarship and to education for all women leaders.

Increasingly, U.S. managers accept and even promote the business case for implementing best practices in diversity and inclusion. This acceptance is fueled, in part, by mainstream, practitioner-focused business literature connecting increased diversity with a healthier bottom line.[3] In fact, a recent Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) survey of global multinational companies shows that 55% of respondents say that their organizations "strongly promote" diversity and inclusion.[4]

In best practice, this diversity work both includes and reaches beyond gender diversity to include employees who identify in multiple and complex ways that increasingly supersede the Western-constructed, one-dimensional "check boxes" of sex,[5] gender, race, nationality, and sexual orientation. It is intersectional,[6] meaning the simultaneous processes of identity, institutional, and social practices of race, gender, and class.[7] Moreover, the practice of inclusion is both a critical and reflexive practice that examines multiple quantitative and qualitative indicators of success. Quantitative indicators of success are representation in hiring pools and on selection committees, representation and retention at the highest levels including the C-suite and Board of Directors, and measures of pay equity; qualitative indicators may explore difficult questions such as: *Who decides on indicators of success for diversity and inclusion efforts? How does the diversity of all employees shape work practices? Culturally, is profit the most central indicator of success? If there are financial costs to diversity and inclusion efforts, do we have an ethical obligation to make those efforts?*

> *How can non-Western knowledge—specifically knowledge from women leading in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—offer possibilities for knowing and doing diversity and inclusion differently?*

In this *CGO Insight* we critically examine the questions: *How can non-Western knowledge—specifically knowledge from women leading in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—offer possibilities for knowing and doing diversity and inclusion differently?*[8] *What are the implications for how diversity and inclusion, and specifically gender diversity, differ according to cultural context?*

To answer that overarching question we will briefly outline the scholarly literature with an eye towards adding to the practitioner literature and share our findings using a case study of Emirati women leaders. We will conclude with what we see as *critical guiding questions* for doing diversity and inclusion differently, specifically for conducting relevant contextualized studies of women leaders in cultures outside the U.S. Our insights, although derived from the specific context of women leaders in the UAE, are relatively generalizable and should be a useful starting place for diversity and inclusion practitioners and those responsible for the design and implementation of gender diversity initiatives and women's leadership programs in regions within and outside the U.S.

Revealing Relevant Research Trends: What We Know about Gender and Leadership in the Middle East

Ongoing literature reviews reveal a paucity of research connecting the interwoven issues of women, leadership, and culture in geographic localities in the Middle East, including the UAE.[9] The dominant management and leadership knowledge continues to persist as a non-generalizable product of studies of North American and Western European scholars conducted in Western societies.[10] Scholarship that examines the intersection of gender with other dimensions of identity remains sparse.[11]

Studies of women managers in international contexts often perpetuate the same exclusionary Western bias: women leaders with racial/ethnic and socioeconomic privilege are those most often studied, without acknowledgement of the degree to which this exclusionary lens of Western and majority culture identity dominates.

While studies of the experience of Western women's leadership are on the rise, they continue to be inadequate in accurately portraying today's leaders, their challenges, and their successes.[12] For the most part this existing body of research focuses on a restricted number of challenges related to entry, advancement, and penetrating the now-clichéd glass ceiling or teetering on the glass cliff[13] or breaking through an elaborately constructed "firewall";[14] often the experiences of women are seen in opposition to male norms, especially in the area of leadership qualities. Furthermore, these leadership narratives most often depict women leaders with multiple privileges including having white-skin privilege, being from economically secure backgrounds, speaking English as their first language, being cissexual (i.e., "people who are not transsexual and who have

only experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned"[15]), and ablebodied and neurotypical (i.e., people who are not on the autism spectrum[16]). For the most part, this research contributes to a gender silo; that is, this research focuses on a female leader's experience as a woman with a few exceptions that are explicitly intersectional.[17]

Moreover, although some studies exist of women managers in international contexts,[18] specific national and cultural studies of non-Western women leaders have only recently emerged. Studies from organizations such as the World Economic Forum, Catalyst, McKinsey, PWC, and Society for Human Resource Management, among others, identify statistics about women in management and cultural factors impacting women's advancement and document a select group of quantitative indicators of success.[19] Furthermore, these studies often perpetuate the same exclusionary Western bias: women leaders with racial/ethnic and socioeconomic privilege are those most often studied, without acknowledgement of the degree to which this exclusionary lens of Western and majority culture identity dominates.[20]

Specifically, our research looked to identify literature that authentically portrayed women leaders in the UAE. What we found was an unsatisfying body of literature with the Middle East being subsumed under generic analyses of the "Arab World."[21] This research has characterized the Gulf region as a homogenous economic, cultural, and social bloc,[22] when in fact it is a highly diverse group of 22 nations. Most recently, scholars of the Middle East have investigated the status of women in society and a small body of literature has emerged that begins to examine the issues related to gender and management in the Middle East.[23] In 2010, the Dubai Women Establishment and PricewaterhouseCoopers published the first "Arab Women Leadership Outlook," which identifies the leadership attributes of Arab women and makes recommendations for Arab women's leadership advancement.[24]

Case Studies: The Context and Voices of Local Women Leading in the UAE

Through the process of researching the leadership narratives of nine women business leaders in the UAE, we attempt to both generate new knowledge about leaders and leadership and provide principles for designing women's leadership programs in non-Western cultures. Our research process included previous research,[25] a wide-ranging literature review, an exploratory study conducted in the UAE,[26] and a contextualized analysis carried out between the researchers.

Over a one-year period in 2007, women participated in in-depth interviews with author Moore. All were Arab, with eight of nine being Emirati;[27] all were Muslim; most were married; all had relative socioeconomic class privilege; all had undergraduate degrees with three of nine having Master's degrees; and all were Managing Directors, Presidents, or CEOs with the majority (seven) leading family owned busi-

nesses, which is the dominant form of business in the region. Moore's exploratory qualitative research supports previous research that identifies the authentic voices of women[28] and a socially responsible ethic of care infused through the research participants' leadership.[29] This research revealed a complex, inseparable set of religious and cultural influences. Further, a contextualized analysis helped to illuminate the intersectionality of identities that Emirati women business leaders fully embody. The women interviewed described their leadership effectiveness as consistent with their simultaneously existing identities as women, Muslims, and leaders. Weir's characterization of Arab management styles as consultative, open-system, networked, and personalized aligns with current definitions of effective leadership as a networked process.[30] This research and the subsequent analysis revealed a complex set of religious and cultural influences on the identity of Emirati women business leaders. The combination of Islamic values combined with their pioneering female status created team-oriented, ambitious, well-educated leaders with multiple definitions of success. Importantly, these cases created local and contextualized knowledge specific to the UAE where previously none has existed.

In Middle East states, scholars have identified four gender/familial norms as pervasive. First, the family is the central unit of society. Second, the man is recognized as the sole breadwinner of the family. Third, women, by adhering to a code of modesty, are responsible for upholding a family's dignity. Lastly, family laws uphold a heteronormative and unequal gender balance of power in society, with men having power over women in decisions such as travel and employment. These norms result in barriers to women's economic participation and advancement including childcare and household duties remaining the almost exclusive responsibility of women, a lack of affordable childcare facilities, narrow interpretations of Islam restricting the full participation of women in the workplace, and men holding most management positions.[31]

In UAE workplaces, these norms are seamlessly united with religious tradition and rules of the state. Labor laws are partial to *Urf* (custom) and Islamic law.[32] Moreover, *Wasta* determines power or authority secured and sustained by personal relationships with powerful others, and limits access to important business networks.[33] *Surah* (humility and benevolence) is a factor in both how women are protected in business and how attire and workspaces are regulated. The values of *Quiwama* (protection and care) and *Hadith* (learning, knowledge, and development) factor heavily into the roles of leaders, especially women leaders through their consultative approach and employee-centered practices. The interviewed leaders blended both tradition and contemporary roles in complex ways to successfully navigate leadership opportunities and challenges.

Within the Middle East, the UAE's official policies are progressive, with an emphasis on educating girls and women, creating career opportunities for women, and encouraging the public lives of women. However, in practice, the UAE fails to capitalize on these policies as evidenced by the UAE ranking 107 out of 132 economies, according to the World Economic Forum's 2012 Gender Gap Index.[34] The UAE remains a traditional Muslim society, retaining its implicit assumptions about the public and private roles of Emirati women and their responsibilities to their communities and to their extended families.

Importantly, the social construction of leadership of men and women in the UAE is influenced by Islamic and tribal notions within a traditionally patriarchal and Sheikocractic[35] leadership legacy. An important interpretative factor involves gaining familiarity with the construction of gender relations and the equality agenda through an Islamic philosophy of gender separation signifying respect rather than subordination, as it would be interpreted in the West.[36] Thus leadership studies of women in the region taken within this context should interpret gender segregation as source of leadership strength rather than oppression or marginalization.

Understanding integrated identities makes for more complex research

> *The women in this study speak to common themes including philanthropy, the desire to advance the roles of women, and the deprioritization of personal financial gain. Additionally, Islam was described as a support system and critical to developing a sense of self-efficacy, integrated roles, and identity as a Muslim woman.*

but leads to a more accurate and authentic narrative. We chose to include direct quotes from the women in our case study to present their authentic voices and to honor their multiple, integrated identities rather than ascribing a single identity group to each quote. The women in this study speak to common themes including philanthropy, the desire to advance the roles of women, and the deprioritization of personal financial gain. Additionally, Islam was described as a support system and critical to developing a sense of self-efficacy, integrated roles, and identity as a Muslim woman. The women interviewed stated that Islam defined and was vital to their success. It follows that measures of success included long-term, non-monetary factors such as reputation and peace with one's self. One leader remarked, "It isn't about how much you earn but about how comfortable and peaceful your life is."

Another leader remarked, "My legacy will be that I would like people in my society to remember me as a person who worked for the society and spent a lot of effort to build an image for women in this society and to change the misperception of the West to Eastern Women, especially the Arab and Muslim women in this part of the world." Another spoke of a vision shaped by her sense of roles and faith: "Every woman is a leader in her own way, raising a family is much more difficult than making a business work" and "I don't think of myself as a leader… it is my responsibility, to my family, my country." These definitions of success challenge the normative Western notions of power and financial gain as markers of success, described by some as more representative of women's socially responsible leadership and ethic of care.[37]

Guiding Questions: From Research to Action

Increasingly, leaders grapple with effectively building and sustaining diverse and globally inclusive organizations and international teams, consultants struggle to advise clients whose success is tied to global core competencies, and researchers attempt to responsibly inform both theory and practice in the area of leadership. Our work represents a deliberate attempt to fill a largely unmet need to understand women's views, beliefs, and practices of effective leadership styles within a particular culture. Moreover, our work is informed by early feminist work[38] and further accelerated by emerging interdisciplinary work that puts forward new ways of thinking about identity and leadership. From this work five questions to guide inquiry and design emerged, which should prove helpful for those responsible for and involved in diversity and inclusion programs:

> *Understand how your assumptions lead to diagnosing (or misdiagnosing) a workplace problem, which leads to the creation of a "solution." Regardless of your own background, tease out how Western and/or dominant theories might influence your knowledge generation.*

1. What are the relevant contextual issues? Take the time to understand the historical, religious, political, and other cultural factors that both contribute to and confine communities' or organizations' leaders. Know that, even within your "home" culture, your understanding will be incomplete because of the limits of your own experiences, and understand and acknowledge that your construction of relevancy will be influenced by your own point of view. Use key informants and local partners to understand the "differences that make a difference" and to efficiently distinguish prominence from relevancy. For example, in our case studies, religion and family status emerged as more relevant than educational pathways, something that as U.S. researchers we could have easily misprioritized if we had not received local feedback. Context should influence practice—a complicated proposition in a global environment.

2. How does understanding intersectionality guide my practice? Earlier feminist research has sometimes used the term "unpacking" as a way to examine both a "subject's" identity and, at times, a researcher's identity in relation to the topic or individual. The Emirati women interviewed made the impossibility of responsible "unpacking" exceptionally clear. Their definitions of leadership, motivations, decision-making styles, and definitions of success are better attributed to their *simultaneous* identities as Arab, tribal, and Muslim women. The best diversity and inclusion practices recognize that identities are sometimes foregrounded (or backgrounded) but always simultaneous.

3. What am I missing? Question your questions. Quite simply, understand how your assumptions lead to diagnosing (or misdiagnosing) a workplace problem, which leads to the creation of a "solution." Regardless of your own background, tease out how Western and/or dominant theories might influence your knowledge generation. This takes time. Sometimes you must go slowly to go fast.

4. Am I avoiding the hard conversations? Self-reflexive work often requires challenging convention and authority—and making mistakes—and awkward moments. For example, is onsite childcare (a costly proposition) what will make a real difference in recruiting women in certain countries? If so, are you willing to trade short-term profit for potential long-term diversity (and, in turn, potential profit involved with retention and diverse opinions)? Do you have the political capital now to have hard conversations, or do they need to wait?

5. How am I measuring success? Looking at the numbers—how many women are hired, how many stay, pay equity—is the first step in knowing that you have created a truly inclusive workplace. However, more qualitative measures of success should be researched to capture the culturally nuanced definitions that motivate diverse employees and as metrics of a company's diversity and inclusion success. Is, for instance, "giving back" a key measure of success?

6. Who isn't at the table? If you are not a local researcher with indigenous knowledge, identify and partner with one who shares your desire to implement these best practices, infuses the work with local cultural knowledge, and (if you are not working in your own culture) challenges your bias. Global research is best accomplished when the specificity of local leaders and contexts are explored and understood. Moore, having shared preliminary research questions and

transcripts with native Emirati women, was able to develop a research design that made sense both in and outside of the UAE and provided more accurate cultural interpretations that informed research design and answers to interview questions.

Conclusion

These five guiding questions may well prove useful to researchers who wish to be more inclusive and culturally sensitive in their studies and to practitioners who seek best design principles for adapting their global diversity efforts, specifically gender diversity, to become more local and context-specific. Specific anticipated outcomes may include a more courageous exploration of the complexity of intersectional identity in today's global and multicultural workforce; a critical questioning of the dominant body of diversity, inclusion, and leadership literature; and increased research capacity developed through global research partnerships and shared agendas. By centering the culturally specific needs of participants, our intent is to further a global and intersectional research agenda while assisting practitioners in the design of organizational gender diversity initiatives and women's leadership programs. Our aim is that our practices – and those of our colleagues – are inclusive and sustainable.

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