SUSTAINING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: EMERGING IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT FOR WOMEN IN THE UAE

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Introduction

Over the past four decades since the Federation of the United Arab Emirates, the country has undergone rapid social, human and economic development. The issue of sustainability of social progress has been at the forefront of recent meetings including the Federal National Council and the Dubai Women’s Establishment. Of significance also is the creation of various foundations with goals to research and develop social, human and economic agendas, women and youth issues, leadership and administration. In addition, the Emirates’ leaders and key educational authorities have been focused on administrative and curricular reform in the nation’s schools to ensure the sustainability of educational development. While there has been considerable research into educational leadership internationally, there has not been much attention paid to women in the Arabian Gulf, their culture, leadership and learning. Placing issues in the national context, this paper discusses the way UAE women’s identities and roles are developing within the framework of contested meanings, shifting with time and context. The developing identities of participants in the three projects were the result of their interaction between their internal values, beliefs and assumptions and the contexts in which they lived their experiences. This development parallels and is a vital factor in the sustainability of the broader social, economic and educational development that is shaping UAE society.

Identity development theories

Identity is a person’s self-understanding about who they are, who they say they are and trying to act as though they are who they say they are (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 1998). When anthropologists write about identities they are typically concerned with cultural identities formed in relation to society’s structures such as race, gender, nationality and so on. Traditionally identity has been regarded as something that is fixed and unchanging. However the main theories of identity that this paper considers stem from psychology, social identity theory, communities of practice and narrative analysis. This literature on identity views identity as ongoing and relational emerging in and through lived experiences. Thus the socio-cultural context shapes identity and informs the researchers’ understanding of how individuals perceive and categorise themselves as members of professional communities.

Similarly to Holland et al’s (1998) approach, we focus on the development of identities in a historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed frame of social practices in education where individual and collective behaviour are mediated by senses of self or identities. Drawing on social identity theories we regard identity as an ongoing process of interaction of person and context. As such interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences is necessary for individuals to understand who they are and who they wish to become (Beijaard, Meijer &
Verloop, 2004; Holland et al, 1998). Therefore, meanings that attach to certain identities shift with time and vary from place to place. Identities are shaped through the tensions between knowing and being, thought and action, theory and practice, and the objective and the subjective. According to Britzman (1991), these relationships are not neat or binary but rather are better expressed as dialogic because they are shaped as they shape each other. Produced because of social interaction, subject to negotiation, consent, and circumstance, inscribed with power and desire, and always in the process of becoming, these dialogic relations fashion the ways individuals understand their practices and the subjectivity that bestows this practice with identity (Britzman, 1991).

Wenger’s (1998) communities of practice model also emphasizes the dialogic nature of identity construction. In his model the development of leadership identities is an ongoing process that changes as an individual learns through lived experiences, shaping and reshaping meanings that result from the social nature of identity development in specific contexts. Wenger (1998) identifies seven ways that identities are constructed and emphasizes the complexity of identity construction as a result of life’s experiences. In his view, identities are configured by life and experience, negotiation, across ongoing lifespan experiences, through social experiences, by the incorporation of past and future into the present, at the nexus of current practices, and through the interplay of global and local contexts where those practices are located, and finally, through participation in varying communities and practices at different stages of life.

For Salling Olesen (2001) identity is a process of ongoing concern for the professional in a field. She identifies two main objective elements: work practices, with their more or less contradictory and coercive conditions, and the social interactions, missions and changes to which the professional has to and wants to relate; and the cultural institution consisting of the profession as an institution and a professional discourse. Learning and experience building is a process of subjective flexibility, in which a learning subject, meeting new and changing phenomena and social practices, redefines itself cognitively and emotionally (Salling Olesen, 2001).

The projects (description & methodology)

The first project was carried out by a group of pre-service teachers using oral history methodology where they interviewed senior family members who had attended school in the 1960s and 1970s in the United Arab Emirates to get an inside perspective into what education was like at that time. Oral history is used in fields such as history, anthropology, and other disciplines that study the experiences of specific social groups. According to Martin (1995, in Torgusen, 2004), oral history tells what has not been told and what has been partially told about history. For the purposes of this paper oral history refers to the interviewing of participants in order to record their memories of their life experiences.

The project employed a range of processes: preparing for the interview; conducting the interview; transcribing the oral histories; translating the oral histories; turning the raw material into first person essays; identifying key themes across the essays, and writing the report. In addition to learning new research skills, the student teachers learned a great deal about schooling prior to federation and gained new insights into the lives of the participants.
The second project reported on in this paper focuses on local women educational leaders’ narratives of self, their learning and the development of their leadership skills. This project had three key aims:

- to recognize through the stories of lived experience the expertise and contributions of five Emirati women to the fields of education and educational leadership
- to provide exemplars of leadership for local UAE experience
- to demonstrate to younger generations what successes and challenges the previous generation of women faced in order to achieve their positions as successful women and members of the UAE, the region and the global community.

The first and second projects use forms of narrative inquiry. Narrative can be defined as a short or extended oral or written text that can be heard or elicited during fieldwork (Chase, 2005). Narrativists believe that human beings live out stories, are told stories and are storytelling beings (Stephenson, 2004). Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience that allows the complexities, challenges and ambiguities of our individual and social life experiences to be linked to experiential inquiry.

Our approach considers three critical narrative elements; experiential information significant to the participants’ story of their developing identity; the changeable nature of stories and their various negotiated meanings over time and third, the interactions between participant and researcher in the co-construction of stories (Squire, 2008). Drawing on experience-centered narrative research, the researchers believed that through story experience becomes part of consciousness where analysis is wholistic, rather than structural. According to Squire (2008, p.42) an experience centered approach assumes that narratives are sequential and meaningful, are a means of human sense-making, represent, and reconstruct and express experience and capture learning and change.

The researchers took a broad view of narrative and used a number of data collection strategies such as oral, written and visual texts including interviews, field notes, participants’ own commentaries, and records of significance. The use of ‘critical friends’ was also an important data collection technique. Similarly to researchers who study life narratives, the researchers used small numbers of interviewees and sampled on an opportunistic and network basis. Typically, interviews were unstructured or semi-structured and involved several meetings ranging from a few minutes to several hours. Notes on the interviews and their contexts were made simultaneously. The strategy of active listening was largely used along with probing comments to generate more depth of response. At times researchers were engaged in active narrative interviewing where interaction, in fact, becomes conversation/co-research (Squire, 2008). As such, researchers developed relationships beyond the traditional research-participant relationship sometimes leading to friendship. Another element for the undergraduate researchers was the deepening of family relationships as they discovered new perspectives about family members. The researchers had further post-interview interactions in order to empower participants and allow ownership over the materials.

The researchers adopted a basic/simple approach to analysis of the narratives, describing the interviews thematically to develop and test theories moving back and forward between the interviews themselves and the interpretation of them. The process of analysis was thus collaborative, multi-layered and ongoing. As a result multiple valid interpretations are possible.
However researchers mitigated this through the use of critical friends, continually checking their own evolving interpretations and going back to the participants for their validation/approval. For the oral history project, interview notes were provided, but participants were not involved in the transcribing and interpretation process (Hollway and Jefferson, 2003). For the third project the researchers did feedback interpretations to the participants for their information and comment, but did not necessarily change researcher interpretations as a result of this interaction. As such, the analysis process is both top down and bottom up and negotiated at different levels depending on the methodological context.

The first project uses oral history where autobiographical experiences and events are told to the researchers. The second project uses narratives of self and as such blurs methodological boundaries within the narrative inquiry tradition. For example it draws on oral history as defined by McMahan and Rogers (1994) where the focus is on the meanings that events and experiences hold for the participants. It also draws on narratives of self encouraging the reader to think and feel with the story, reflecting on their own lives in relation to others’ experiences unlike oral histories which are autobiographical stories told in the participants’ own words, narratives of self draw on writing techniques of fiction (see Richardson, 1999).

The third project reported on uses a qualitative framework, where in-depth analysis of the process of ongoing individual professional learning is carried out by a retrospective analysis of data within the last four years from two undergraduate and graduate programs at Zayed University. We have completed an initial analysis of the first data set which comprises statements about leadership written by graduate students in the early stages of their leadership program. They were asked to draw on personal and theoretical views to reflect on their current leadership perspectives and philosophies in the context of their culture and religion. It is also planned to conduct semi-structured interviews with members of the research sample to build upon data collected in the document analysis. Data analysis for the third project uses a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The approach is well established in qualitative methodology and is primarily concerned with formulating a theory as it emerges from the data, following a consistent process to achieve this (Harold, 1996).

Themes

An analysis of data from the 3 projects indicated that there were 2 broad overarching themes emerging from the material. The first key theme was that of change (perspectives of women’s roles and women’s opportunities in society, balancing roles, the nature of education, patterns of support, impact of new theories).

Second there was a clear continuity of ongoing influences (parental support, the importance of family, impact of friendship, role models, influence of Islam and learning from previous experience). The following section expands on these influences and, following a sequential historical perspective, highlights the way that these women’s leadership identities have developed through the interplay between continuity and change over time and grounded in the local context.
**Change**

**Perspectives of women’s roles**

The oral history data clearly showed the impact of traditional roles and expectations on the education of the participants when they attended school in the 1960s and 1970s:

*Because of the traditions of the society and families toward girls’ education I was not able to continue my education immediately after grade five... Many people did not allow their daughters to go to school because of their beliefs toward girl’s education* (Alya).

*I have only high school certificate. I got married after finishing my high school, so I did not complete my study in the university* (Hamda).

*When I was five and it was the time to register me in a school my father refused and said that he didn’t want his daughter to go to schools* (Nahla).

Within the school system there were also restrictions on girls’ dress and behaviour:

*The administration of our school was very strict with us. They were restricting everything that girls could ever do. For example; Kohl and long nails weren’t allowed* (Hamda).

*The school’s polices included some specific rules. For example, we had to cut our nails and wear the uniform given and we were not able to use Henna on any occasion we had. It was not allowed and we were very sad because we considered it a symbol of happiness and tradition when we were celebrating at Eid and other special occasions* (Alya).

Nahla indicated in her story that opportunities for women were still relatively limited at that time:

*Education and work were not very common for women at that time, so there were not much working opportunities for women and even when they existed the social restrictions were very hard* (Nahla).

The five key female Emirati leaders attended school at a similar time to participants of the oral history project. However by the time they became adults they had contested the traditional role of women in the community by taking on specific leadership positions. Moaza, for example was chosen as headmistress when she was 23 years old, over 30 years ago. This was groundbreaking in the cultural context. She continued to challenge stereotypes of Emirati women as she became a more prominent leader and role model for young Emirati women. Her perspective is clearly shown in the following quote:

*I have a vision. [I want people to know that] the UAE has business women but to also change the misconception in the West about Middle Eastern women [that they are] neglected, on the shelf, in tents, on camels.... make it very clear that woman plays her role* (Moaza).
Not only did another local leader, Aysha, challenge the expected role of women at that time, she took on leadership roles and actively sought to shift the perceptions of other young women as she encouraged their development as educational leaders:

These [teachers] that I focused on, I realized they are flexible, ready to learn and [have] a strong personality [so] I gave them many things to do especially preparing... workshops with me. I [wanted] to give them responsibility [and set high expectations for leadership success]. The two [teachers] joined me and are now very successful in their jobs (Aysha).

Anood was older than the other key leaders and in her earlier life had tended to follow the more traditional cultural expectations for women. However education had always been important for her and even in retirement she still continued to develop her knowledge and skills:

[Because my role with the kids was over]I decided to learn to recite the Quran by heart. I am also learning Arabic language /grammar. I plan to continue at night school (Anood).

The graduate data indicated that for these young women, women’s roles in the current context were not seen as fixed. Majida, for example, commented the graduate program had impacted on her views of herself as a female leader:

[The course] created a shift in my ways of thinking about leadership, and encouraged me to be eager to explore more issues of leadership. Actually, it changed my concept and ideas of women as leaders...(Majida).

Alia was aware that opportunities for women were changing in the local context and she wanted to take advantage of that herself:

One of the things that I am concerned about is the role of women in the UAE. In these day women have taken their chance to hold different positions. In fact, we can see a woman as a [government] minister where before this position was only for men. These changes in our society make me want to develop myself in order to help my country in some way (Alia).

Majida’s experiences in the leadership course had focused her thinking in more specific ways and changed some of her views about opportunities for women leaders:

A new idea I am interested in is the idea of empowering women in leadership in the UAE. The course created a shift in my ways of thinking about leadership (Majida).

Like Alia she was aware of changes in society, but was also aware that more work needed to be done:

Women face unique challenges. The Quran stress that men and women are equal [but] I feel that [until recently] there weren’t training programs or study programs to engage and prepare women for leadership (Majida).
Balancing roles

In all of the projects the theme of balancing roles came through clearly. Many of the participants mentioned how this impacted on them. Although they valued education and work they felt their responsibilities as mothers very strongly and strove to balance between the two. Alya in the oral history project reflects the importance of parenting:

*I was not able to complete my grade twelve final year because of the family responsibilities as a mother for my children who needed me to be there with them…. I considered this experience was a great achievement from my point of view with all the hard responsibilities that I had and the different roles that I played* (Alya).

Mona, one of the key women leaders had to weigh up her dual role responsibilities before choosing to develop her leadership opportunity:

*It was 1987 – Mohammed was born. I already had 3 children and I was thinking about how I was going to leave [them] but [the book writing] was an opportunity to be taken. This started another chapter in my life.* (Mona).

Similarly, Anood understood the weight of responsibility in being a mother and a teacher but still managed to balance the two successfully:

*The nicest part of my [leadership] journey was seeing my children complete their education. Teaching and mothering were critical. I was a leader at home and in teaching the Quran. Life was so different before. What was important for me was to take things easy…teach the students [the Quran] and bring up my own children. I had double the work but I did it. I did not think it was too difficult for me* (Anood).

The nature of education

Across the projects the theme of the nature of education was also common. All of the participants had been successful in their schooling. As they reflected on past and present some of the oral history participants could see significant differences:

*Education before differs from education now because the whole system changed as a result of the development that the UAE went through. After comparing between education before and now, I noticed a huge change in the curriculum and its contents the school system, the teaching methods, the timing, teaching materials used and teachers’ status and position in the society now* (Shaikha).

*There are many differences in the system of the education in the U.A.E between past and now…. I believe that that essential goal of the education is helping people learn to use their minds well. In my opinion, the system of education in UAE is greater than before and it is still growing* (Hamda).
The women in the key female leaders’ project were critically aware of problems in the education system and strove to initiate change for the better. Aysha, for example, took a lead in professional development for teachers.

I was giving this feeling to teachers to encourage them but the feeling was not enough. There was a need to do more, so I started workshops and seminars and was involved in organizing the first English conference in the UAE at Zayed University in 1998 (Aysha).

Not only was she supporting the teachers in her own subject area, but she was actively involved in distributing leadership across other curriculum areas as well.

When we were training English teachers we were training them to give lessons to teachers from other subjects. I was building their characters without telling them feel that. Here my focus was on individuals. These teachers were leaders in the schools. You will find these teachers were everywhere like butterflies. They deserve somebody to support and back them (Aysha).

Patterns of support

As the stories emerged from the women’s experiences it was obvious that a key element in their development was the support of key people in the school, family and/or workplace. Whilst there is evidence of continuous support over time we have chosen to include this under the theme of change to highlight the new patterns of support that emerged as a result of contestation.

Alya for example reflected on how the support of teachers in her early years had impacted on her own support for her children’s learning:

I believe that what I had got in these years helped me to have a background on how to teach my children and develop their love and encourage them to love learning and education (Alya).

The key women leaders drew support from each other and from colleagues in the field:

My colleagues were always ready to help, for example at conferences. We were called the ‘gang’ – people called us to organize conferences (Aysha).

Whereas in the past support for education tended to come from other women (mothers, friends) comments of the key leaders and the graduates indicated that husbands were now providing this more frequently. This was something new in the culture as is reflected in the quote to follow.

Mona noted this as she spoke about an opportunity for leadership that had arisen when her family were still young:

Mr Mohamed said he would talk to the principal and my husband. That was my first step towards leadership. The principal was very supportive. My husband and parents were very cooperative and very supportive (Mona).
The graduate students also identified new patterns of support. Tahani, for example, mentioned both her parents as having initial positive leadership influences but then went on to also identify her husband as someone who had provided the impetus to continue to develop those earlier effects:

*My husband ... encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone to seek further knowledge and continue my education* (Tahani).

**Impact of new theories**

The graduate leadership program exposed the cohorts to a wide range of theoretical perspectives and models. The course’s focus on systems thinking, shared leadership and servant leadership undoubtedly influenced the way our graduates thought about leadership concepts. For example, the second cohort was introduced to more content about organizational theory and leadership and this was reflected in their comments about these topics. Several noted the importance for the leader to be able to have a broad understanding and knowledge of the organization in order to make changes and improvements:

*I think that the leader should understand the culture and the structure of the organization, should be aware of the contemporary imperatives, should formulate a vision, should create the proper atmosphere to enable change, and should enhance coherence between all the parts of the organization* (Sabah).

*A leader in an organization should clarify the organization’s role and responsibility in the society as well as modify the roles and positions of their team members. The leaders should be able to share their mission and vision to achieve their aim as team* (Afra).

Certain leadership approaches appealed to the graduate cohort as they developed their own identity. Distributed leadership was one of these as it aligned closely with the concept of Al Shura leadership (See Al Hinai & Rutherford 2002):

*I found myself [using] distributed leadership. Actually, I believe that [distributed] leadership is the best way of leading* (Alia).

*[Distributed] leadership is the most ...effective in the UAE community* (Ahlam).

However new ideas were not accepted uncritically as Ayesha showed in her comment:

*I don't think that distributed leadership works in the school. It may possibly work in the industrial sector [but] in my school there are actually three powers (principal- vice principal- supervisor) how can they have an equal strength of power in the school if they oppose each others’ ideas and decisions* (Ayesha).

The paper thus far discussed keys themes relating to change in the participants lived experiences as they develop their own leadership identities of self. The next section focuses on themes of continuity as they emerged from the data.
Continuity

The importance of family and parental support

Across the three projects, comments about the importance of family and parental support appeared consistently. Participants in the oral history project noted how there was a strong support from family members for education for girls. The following responses are typical:

My mother insisted that I get educated as she believed then that education will make us as girls stronger and more confident (Nahla).

My family was encouraging me continuously on my education, so I gave it all my time and attention and was always one of the best students in the school (Nahla).

I had the motivation to continue my study because I was the only daughter at home and my mother wanted me to continue studying instead of sitting at home without any purpose (Shaikha).

Mona too commented on how her parents supported her early education and development as a life long learner:

We were taught international values, honesty, respect, love. Taught at school and at home. Parents showed a lot of love and affection but did not live in a materialistic world. Parents wanted us to value and be grateful for what we had (Mona).

Moaza’s comments highlight the continuity of family values and learnings from past experience:

Father … taught me to be a woman who works and cares for her family. A woman who cares for her family is the most important thing. The most important thing is success within the family. Therefore I concentrated on my children I have given them my life. Whatever I lacked I wanted my children to have (Moaza).

Anood’s comments also indicated continuity and family values grounded in the local context of Islam:

The first step was with my mother who insisted on my education. She took me to a lady who was teaching the Quran. I finished learning the Quran at 15 years old. I then had to teach my own sister (Anood).

Family pride was a critical element of support for Abla:

My parents just wanted us children to be successful. My mother was very proud of me… I felt that (Abla).

For the graduates the impact of parental support in developing their leadership identities was also clear as evidenced in the following comments:
Through [my mother’s] hard work and support we succeeded in finishing our graduate studies and each daughter became a leader in her own way (Tahani).

My mother’s personality was characterized by her strong perspective in leading and managing and solving problems in my life had a positive effect in the way she raised me (Mona).

Impact of friendship

The role friendship plays in Arabic culture is significant, particularly for women. Hamda’s comments (from the oral history) about her own schooling capture this well:

There was a strong relationship between students in the classroom and even outside the classroom. There were no barriers between us. We played, ate and studied together. We had a very simple life, not like nowadays. In my class, there were about 35 students. I cared about others in the class as they cared about me. We were like a family. After the third classes, we had break and it was the only one in a day. It was just 30 minutes. In this break, I sat with my friends, talked with them, or sometimes if we had homework for the next day, we sat together and did it. I loved my friends a lot and we still contact each other even now (Hamda).

The female Emirati leaders also valued friendship and the following comments show its importance in their lives from when they were children to their current work:

I have always kept my relationship with everybody that wherever we reach we never forget the old good days. [Since] I was 10 years old I[still] have the same friends as then. I don’t get into new relationships very easily. I am stable (Moaza).

I chose [to study] art because of my friends ... I just wanted to enjoy my school days – to be with my friends. Till now we are still friends from Grade 5 – always together –even in University most of us chose English – to share. This is something that told me to work in groups – teamwork – helping other as friends and colleagues. This was one of the good things in my life (Abla).

Laugh, eat, travel, together, many times traveling together. Writing books was not our field. Authors wanted to hear teachers’ ideas not just supervisors’ opinions, we learned how long it took to make one page. It taught us a lot. Seeing the reaction of the book, so much learning (Mona).

Role models

Role models significantly impacted participants’ identity formation over time and location. These roles models ranged from family mentors, to friends, colleagues, teachers and national and religious leaders. The oral history participants were attending school at the time of the federation of the Emirates and some spoke of the role of the new leader of the nation who valued education very highly:
At that time, some families didn’t send their children to school because they didn’t know how valuable education was. After 1972, Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan, may God bless his soul, motivated people to complete their study and let their children enter school (Shaikha).

Other women spoke of their own teachers as key role models for them as students:

Teachers were the models of education and they had a special status in the society. In addition to that, people noticed that there is nothing better than being educated (Shaikha).

Teachers had a great reputation in the society, and the teaching career was and still [is] considered the best profession for women (Nahla).

The female Emirati leaders in the second project also identified important role models who had impacted on their identity development. Moaza was influenced strongly by her parent’s character:

My role model is my father who is over 80 and still working. [He says] “I don’t want to retire”. I feel I have his genes…. I learnt from my father to be stable and to think on the matter (Moaza).

[My mother] taught me to be clean in my soul, to stick to my religion, to be honest and how to be a mother (Moaza).

In addition she drew strongly on religious role models as guides in the way she conducted herself with others:

The Prophet’s wife [who was] also a business lady [and] Prophet Mohamed [have been significant]. Prophet Mohamed was down to earth with people...never felt that he is somebody that people couldn’t talk to (Moaza).

Like Moaza, Anood took much from a parent as a role model. For her, her mother’s influence was strong:

My father was a pearl diver (gone for 3-4 months a year) so m mother took on the mother and father role. [As a result] I learned how to be strong [from her] …I learned many things from my mother…generosity, patience…her doors were open all the time. She tried to be with all her relatives. In Islam if relatives are in need, first give to them, then give to strangers (Anood).

Moaza herself had been a role model for Abla when the latter first started her teaching career:

My principal was Moaza in Itihad (only secondary school).I was so lucky to be with that lady…. She taught me what leadership is…. my first lesson was how to encourage, how to choose the right person in the right place, how to build something in her character. I still
remember – she used to send me to represent the school (others too). She gave me the first lesson in leadership (Abla).

Participants from the graduate study had identified influential people from their work environment and several had mentioned principals as having an impact on their views of leadership:

I remember a principal who encouraged teachers to do what she wanted and they really did it with happiness by her persuading and convincing them. She was very personable. What most I appreciated about her is how she delegated the workload. If there was a problem, she would sit down to speak to the person in private. She was always teaching me new things (Majida).

Others cited their father as an early influence. Tahani and Kaltham identified specific traits that they admired:

My father, who practiced medicine, was my first role model. He was charismatic, honourable, straightforward and honest. A man with a vision who had a lot to offer (Tahani).

I grew up to see my father as a leading figure. He used to work in the military, and he always told me “if you want to grow up and be a leader you should gain others confidence through your good manners and never ever force your opinion on others … use negotiation and compromise to reach your goal…” (Kaltham).

For both cohorts the leadership examples set by local leaders were frequently cited as having had an influence on their own views. Here they mentioned particular leaders and designated them as transformational and charismatic leaders:

One of the great transformational leadership examples is what we are experiencing by living here in Dubai. This style is represented through HH Shaikh Mohamed Bin Rashed Al Maktoum’s vision to transform Dubai to rank as one of the first cities in the world (Tahani).

**Influence of Islam**

An ongoing and pervasive influence for all of the participants was their strong belief and lived experiences of Islam as they negotiated their identity development. This was evident from their earliest days of schooling as mentioned by Alya:

I entered school for the first time in 1963 when I was six years old. The first stage of my days of school was from grade one to grade five. In the afternoon time we went to study and recite the holy Quran with a teacher who was named “Al Mutawa” (Alya).

The female Emirati leaders also commented on the place of Islam from childhood:

I’d recite the Quran before school…. I did very well in reading and reciting the Qu’ran and was helping my friends (Abla).
I stopped teaching [the classes then] so that I could teach my own kids Islamic Studies. This was very important for me to do (Anood).

They went on to endorse its impact on their current leadership practices and values:

[Leadership] is a gift from God firstly…(Moaza).

God dominates everything – it happened for me to have to do something in this life (Abla).

The influence of Islam was a similar theme within the graduate data on leadership. For some it was simply a given:

My own conception of leadership is based on a combination of my beliefs and Islamic values (Asia).

Throughout history people have been trying to define leadership at it has evolved. Therefore, I will choose the holiest definition by our Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) when he said: "Each of you is a guardian, and each of you will be asked about his subjects (Majida).

Several reiterated the importance of moral and ethical values and behaviour that was inherent within Islam and that formed an implicit element of leaders’ work:

In the Holy Quran and the Hadith, a great emphasis is given to moral and ethical values in Islam. These ethics and values are not just a set of rules to be followed, they are a whole lifestyle and this comprises the foundation of my personal beliefs and values (Tahani).

In Islam, leaders are encouraged to implement their Islamic principles and values by creating an ethical institution, practicing authority in ethical ways and applying it in daily practices and challenges (Asia).

Some participants referred to the leadership of Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) as an exemplar to guide them in their own approach to leadership. Often they referred to specific messages from the Holy Quran to reinforce this:

Prophet Mohamed founded one of the world's great religions, and became an immensely effective political leader. Today, thirteen centuries after his death, his influence is still powerful. He is surely right and we love the prophet Mohamed (peace and blessings be upon him) as he lives with us and we always find him a great leader who has all the necessary qualities for success in every aspect of life (Suhaila).

I believe that there is no better example of leadership than Prophet Mohammed (blessings be upon him). His character shows all examples of effective leaders in one. He was the leader, the teacher, the soldier and all Muslims love him and have great
faith in him. The greatest successes of Prophet Mohammed’s life were affected by sheer moral force (Shaima).

A further aspect of leadership practice that was connected with Islam by some participants was that of personal change:

Change from inside must come first. In the Holy Quran in Al Ra’ad, part 13, page 250 it says “Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls)” (Shaima).

Learning from previous experience

One theme that came through predominantly from the female Emirati leaders was that of learning from previous experience:

Yes, I did make mistakes. There is no person w/out mistakes. A human should make mistakes and from these mistakes they learn. In my personality, before I sleep I always reflect/question myself and evaluate/judge my daily performance in life. When I start my next day I try to overcome those mistakes through constant analysis. Yes, I am very focused and organized (Moaza).

I bought all the discipline I learned their e.g. punctuality, exactness, perfection, atmosphere of working in a family environment … The skills that I had in management in school allowed me to run the business. The skills transferred (Moaza).

Gradually all neighbours brought their kids to me to learn the Quran. I learned how to be patient from them (Anood).

As their parents had done before, what these women had learned as they developed their own leadership identities was something that they were passing on to their own children thus continuing the cycle of parental supporting:

I have supported myself and my family with money from my hard work. Now I am teaching my family the same thing…. The children have been taught to depend on themselves (Moaza).

When raised that way and you ‘feel leadership’ you feel you always want to be on top. I try to do it with my daughter. I believe – when you put a child [there] at the beginning – he will always be leading in his life (Abla).

Conclusion

These three projects have focused attention on women in the Arabian Gulf, their culture, leadership identity development and learning. The examples given highlight the way UAE women’s identities and roles are developing within the framework of contested meanings, shifting with time and grounded in the region’s communities, culture and religion. The identities of participants in the three projects developed through an interplay between continuity and
change and were the result of their interaction between their internal values, beliefs and assumptions and the contexts in which they lived their experiences. This development parallels and is a critical factor in the sustainability of the broader social economic and educational development that is shaping UAE society. These broader societal developments challenge the stereotypes and preconceived notions held by outsiders about women in the region. A recent article (Gulf News, November 12, 2008) about new roles for women in Emirati society stated the following:

- **There are now four women in the UAE Cabinet compared to 2 previously, the largest number in the Arab world. Nine out of 40 Federal National Council seats are taken by women, or 22 per cent which is among the highest anywhere in the world’s legislative bodies.**
- **President His Highness Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahayan has also appointed Kholoud Jua’an Al Daheri as the first ever female judge in the UAE.**
- **Shaikha Najla Al Qasimi and Dr Hussa Al Otaiba were recently named as the first two UAE female ambassadors in the UAE’s history being appointed to Sweden and Spain respectively.**
- **UAE women now account for 66 per cent of the governmental workforce and hold 30% of senior jobs at the decision-making level. They also account for 15% of the teaching staff at the UAE University.**
- **Women account for 60% of the workforce in medical care, education, nursing and pharmacies. They have also joined the Armed Forces, police and customs. Following the establishment of the Business Women’s Council they have also begun to make their mark in business. The council now has 12,000 members managing 11,000 investments estimated at Dh 12.5 billion. Women also account for about 37.5% of the workforce in the banking sector which is one of the pillars of the UAE economy.**

Although the development of Emirati society has been very rapid and women still face a number of challenges, our research has shown that they and can and will continue to sustain their entry into all levels of leadership within their society and as a result their individual and collective leadership learning will continue to support their communities and culture.

**References**


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