
Breaking gender stereotypes in the Middle East



By Karen Cho

Contrary to popular belief, women in the Middle East are not strictly marginalised in society and the workforce. That is to say, they are not necessarily as oppressed or victimised as is often perceived. This is according to a working paper by INSEAD research fellow Katty Marmenout, who is based at the Centre for Executive Education and Research in Abu Dhabi.

Her paper, ‘Women-focused Leadership Development in the Middle East: Generating Local Knowledge’, which investigates gender stereotyping among men and women in two separate studies, has shed light on a few common misconceptions: first, that Middle Eastern men are not more biased against women than their counterparts in the UK; and second, that women do not have a more stereotyped view of management characteristics than their Western counterparts. In fact, they scored higher than German and Japanese women, believing that leadership roles are more attainable.

Marmenout was “happily surprised” by the findings. “It confirmed to me the idea that men are not necessarily so biased, and it confirmed to me that women are much more willing to take up those leadership roles. It confirmed

what I kind of hoped for, and qualitatively what I have sensed,” she told INSEAD Knowledge.

Yet, there appears to be a disconnect in that female participation in the workforce of the United Arab Emirates ranks lower than in neighbouring countries such as Egypt and Lebanon. And while three out four local university students in the UAE were women, only 14.7 per cent of Emirati women were reported to be in full-time employment in 2003, with the majority employed in the public sector as teachers or clerical workers.

While Marmenout says there are many reasons why women are less represented in the workplace in the region, she rules out gender stereotyping as one of them. She cites the need to preserve tradition and the pressure to raise a large family as major contributing factors, but adds that they need not necessarily impede the progress of women there.

‘Coping mechanisms’

Marmenout lists a few “coping mechanisms” to help these women realise their potential, yet without overstepping boundaries. The first is what she calls “shadow leadership”, where women who have the know-how lead from behind the scenes. These women wield much influence and have the ability to push ahead with their vision, but with much subtlety.

Marmenout says, however, there are “mixed feelings” about the concept of shadow leadership, with the greatest resistance from young women in their teens and early 20s, whereas women in their 40s tend to be more accepting.

She likens this to a journey that women take and in which many will come full circle. “What I sense more and more is that there is a gradual move. As women grow older, they see somehow the benefits of their society and their tradition; feeling more mature, they feel less of a need to oppose to that.”

Another successful and practical coping mechanism is entrepreneurship, which involves women starting their own businesses, because it is convenient on so many levels. “It’s convenient,” Marmenout says, “because women can organise the type of work they want to do, work from home, hire the people they want, work with women if they prefer; they are master of their own time and working environment.”

“It doesn’t threaten the husband as much as a formally-held (senior) position, especially in government, because it is not perceived by others as

being high status or high income. No one knows how much the wife earns if she is doing her own thing.”

Marmenout adds that women, “major drivers in the enterprise business”, already have a natural advantage here as they used to running large households of up to a dozen children.

Public sector employment is also another area in which Emirati women can excel, without compromising on tradition or their family. For example, work hours are much more flexible, with a typical day starting at 7am and ending at 2pm. And while private sector employment is likely to be more challenging and interesting, women seeking a healthy work life balance may be more suited to the public sector. Other incentives include attractive pay packages and status, as government jobs are also highly regarded.

A new dawn

Perhaps what’s lacking currently are the female role models to inspire and lead the way, although this too seems to be improving. Marmenout says that while many female undergraduates did not have role models while growing up; increasingly, she has noticed a trend that older sisters, aunts and other relatives have stepped in to fill that gap. These, she explains, would be women a half generation ahead of the young woman; that is, women who are 10-15 years age older.

Marmenout points out, however, there is a large pool of women, in their mid-30s or older, who are coming into their own. Also emerging, she adds, are younger role models below the age of 30, who have risen very quickly through sheer drive, ambition and talent, achieving high senior positions in the public sector.

Progress though has not been consistent in the region. In Saudi Arabia for example, work is still largely segregated and it’s the exception rather than the rule where men and women work together.

“Generally we cannot endorse this way of working because it must be sub-optimal. There are links in communication that need to be made that are not there,” says Marmenout.

“But at the same time, it empowers women also, in the sense that if you have an all-women’s organisation, women have to take places at all levels: at the bottom and at the top, and they can see themselves moving up the

ladder. Whereas if you have (a scenario) like in Japan, a traditional organisation where all women are coffee ladies or secretaries, they get stuck in what we call 'pink collar jobs' which do not exist in Saudi Arabia.”

Nevertheless, Marmenout believes that lifting the veil on these long-held stereotypes about Emirati women (and men) is a harbinger of good things to come. “This is also a parameter for change, meaning that, with sufficient belief, women are more likely to achieve these (leadership) roles.”

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