

The lived experiences of foreign women: Influences on their international working lives

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The Lived Experiences of Foreign Women: Influences on their International Working Lives.

Abstract

The lived experiences of foreign women were explored to discover influences on their international working lives. Life history narratives were collected in interviews with twelve participants who were female, foreign (nationality differs to their country of employment), and employed or a business owner in the United Arab Emirates. A phenomenological framework of analysis resulted in identification of three emergent themes around life experiences that had shaped participants' working lives: becoming a new generation of expatriates; adjustment to socio-cultural change; centrality of womanhood. The implication of these themes was the influence from lived experiences on the development and professional identity of foreign working-women. Findings offer insight about influences on the actual and potential economic participation of foreign women for business practitioners and policy makers. A new classification of foreign worker, the 'Foreign Working-Woman' (FW-W), extends the body of academic knowledge. A research direction is proposed for further international study about influences from life experiences on the FW-W.

Keywords: Arab Gulf states, expatriate, gender diversity and equality, foreign-women's economic participation

Introduction

Foreign working-women remain somewhat hidden from view in academic studies. One reason is that the traditional 'expatriate' worker continues to be perceived as male and seconded from a western country (Harvey, 1997). Furthermore, it is more usual for men to be independent foreign workers, and their wives portrayed as dependent on them for the right to remain in a country (Doherty, Richardson and Thorn, 2013). A separation, rather than an intersection of gender and nationality is another reason for this paucity of knowledge (Holvino, 2010). As a consequence, the actual and potential economic participation of foreign women has been somewhat overlooked in the extant literature (Al Ariss, 2010; Van den Bergh and Du Plessis, 2012). Yet there is recent recognition that foreign women are a 'talent pool of highly skilled, highly educated women professionals' (Van den Bergh and Du Plessis, 2012, p. 142).

The definition of a 'foreign working woman' (FW-W) proffered in this article encompasses those who are female, business owners/employees, and whose nationality differs from their country of employment. The central proposition of this research is that these foreign women are a potential and emergent, yet under-investigated, subset of the global labour market. The researchers were particularly interested in addressing the research question; how have the lived experiences of foreign women influenced their international working lives? Therefore, the broad aim for this present study was to explore the experiences of a sample of these women that work in one particular country. This aim was addressed through the collection of life history narratives (Madsen, 2007, 2010) with a sample group of 12 participants in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

A thematic interpretation of data, informed by a phenomenological framework, was conducted on transcriptions formed from recordings of personal interviews with these participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The study is significant in its potential contribution to

existing theories about the professional identities and development of foreign working-women beyond the geographical location of this research.

The following section will present the reviewed literature placing the research question into theoretical and empirical contexts. The research method, qualitative with a phenomenological framework of analysis, will then be presented. The finding is of three emergent themes that influence identities and development of foreign working-women. The value of this study for contributions to academic knowledge and for practitioners and policy-makers is discussed. Finally, the limitations of the current study and ideas for future research are proposed.

Contextualising the study

This section reviews the relevance of the geographical location, the demographic composition of the labour force, and the human development status of the country. The study was conducted in the UAE, which is one of the Arab Gulf states in the Middle-East region (other states are Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Kuwait, Oman and Qatar). The country was selected for its interesting location ‘at the crossroads of many cultural, religious, geographic, and economic influences’ (Crocco, Pervez and Katz, 2009, p. 107). A secondary justification for the location of this study was the high percentage of foreign workers in the UAE labour force (89 percent); unusually the citizens form a minority in their own country (11 percent) (UAE National Bureau of Statistics [UAE NBS], 2011). Citizens, locals and nationals are terms used in reference to the *Emiratis* (i.e. the indigenous population).

The economy is driven by various industries (e.g. construction, engineering and oil) that are usually dominated by men. As a result, males are estimated to constitute 75 percent of the total population in the UAE (UAE NBS, 2011). There is a high demand for low-skilled and low-paid male foreign labor within construction, as well as for skilled men in engineering and the oil industry (Littrell and Bertsch, 2013). Most of these employees are single or, if

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3 married, their wives and children remain in the home country (UAE NBS, 2011). That
4 economic structure and workforce demographic partially accounts for a high human
5 development status for the UAE (ranking 40th), according to the United Nations Development
6 Program (UNDP, 2014), and yet a low ranking for women's equality (115th/142 countries)
7 (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2014).
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11 Foreign women are estimated to form 20 percent of the total population, and those outnumber
12 female citizens by a ratio of nearly 1:4 (UAE NBS, 2011). Emirati women usually work in
13 the public sector with only one to two percent holding executive positions, 20 percent of
14 administrative roles, and less than one percent own a business (UAE NBS, 2011; Stalker and
15 Marvin, 2011). As female citizens are mainly employed in the public sector, opportunities
16 exist for foreign women to be employed and to own businesses in the UAE private sector
17 (Al-Ali, 2008; Erogul and McCrohan, 2008). Therefore, this current research was planned to
18 obtain an 'insider' perspective of the more 'outsider' experiences of foreign women who
19 worked in the UAE private sector.
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35 **Being a foreign worker**

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37 Foreign workers have been classified as expatriates, immigrants, and migrants in previous
38 studies on international workers (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Van den Bergh and Du Plessis,
39 2012). The situation for many foreigners who live and work in the UAE, and other Arab Gulf
40 states, is somewhat dissimilar to those classifications. The literature about the categorisation,
41 'foreign worker', is therefore reviewed in this section, and particularly for implications on
42 being a foreign working-women in the UAE.
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50 Multi-national companies second the traditional expatriate worker to another country for
51 them to gain international experience (Harvey, 1997; Harvey, 1998; Newbury, Belkin and
52 Ansari, 2008). The value of such international experience for employees has been noted in a
53 study of expatriates in the Arab Gulf state of Qatar (Scurry, Rodriguez and Bailouni, 2013).
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There is also an alternative, or supplementary employment arrangement for the independent foreign worker, who is the ‘self initiated expatriate’ (SIE), and outside her/his own country of birth or permanent residency (Doherty *et al.*, 2013). The benefit of such an employment contract to a company is the reduced cost of an SIE, as she/he works on a temporary contract and personally carries the risk of employment/unemployment (Tharenou, 2009). A ‘self-initiated foreign work experience’ (Siljanen and Lamsa, 2009, p. 1468) may follow a decision to become one of the ‘private expatriates who travel for personal reasons, relationships, adventure or interest in a specific country’ (Stalker and Mavin, 2011, p. 277). Political insecurity and/or a lack of work in an underdeveloped country also cause workers to obtain employment outside their home country (Kharouf and Weir, 2008; Rehman and Roomi, 2012). The SIE designation is most relevant to the experience of many foreign entrepreneurs, and middle and senior level employees in the UAE (Hutchings, Snejina and Edelweiss, 2013; Siljanen and Lamsa, 2009; Stahl, Miller and Tung, 2002; Stalker and Mavin, 2011).

In-country references, academic studies and government policies tend to refer to foreign workers as expatriates, but that is more in keeping to their status vis-à-vis their own country (Harrison and Michailova, 2012; UAE NBS, 2011). Whereas, in this study the term ‘foreign worker’ is retained as a more fitting descriptor in contrast to the conventional academic literature on the migrant or expatriate worker. That is because foreigners in the UAE are denied citizenship or permanent residency (migrant/expatriate status), as only a temporary right to remain in the country is granted for work purposes through Emirati sponsorship via renewable two or three year self-employed or employment visas (Zeffane and Kemp, 2012). Foreign workers are in somewhat of a precarious situation in the UAE because the political and economic drive is towards *Emiratisation*, i.e. full employment of the national population (Al-Ali, 2008; Kemp and Xhao, 2016).

The significance of this element of the literature review is that foreign working-women in other countries are also likely to be underrepresented in academic studies because they too remain outside those established categories of migrant and expatriate workers.

The ‘trailing’ status of foreign women

In this section, the literature is reviewed to understand the situation for women who live and work in a foreign country. There have been previous studies conducted on female expatriate workers over a period of at least 25 years, including older and more recent research on the working lives of western women in the UAE (Adler, 1987; Harrison and Michailova, 2012; Hutchings *et al.*, 2013; Stalker and Mavin, 2011; Tung, 1998). However, ‘female expatriates’ (Tung, 2004, p. 243), and specifically non-western women, remain as an underrepresented sample in the extant literature because they are an exception to the norm of male international workers (Elamin and Omair, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Metcalfe, 2008).

The phrase ‘trailing spouse’ has been coined in academic literature to describe ‘the spouse of the transferred employee’, i.e. the partner (usually the woman) who accompanies the other to live a traditional expatriate life (Harvey, 1998, p. 311). Cooke (2007, p. 47) referred to the loss of professional status for ‘trailing’ Chinese wives who followed their partners to the United Kingdom (UK). Western working-women in the UAE expressed irritation about the local law that designated their employed spouse as their sponsor for work (Stalker and Mavin, 2011). Particularly as the husband, in the role of sponsor, was required to give permission for his wife to work through the formal issue of a letter of ‘no objection’ to any subsequent employment (Stalker and Mavin, 2011). This policy is a gender issue as females are affected to a greater extent than males because women are more likely to be the trailing spouse. Besides such national employment policies, that may have a disparate impact on women’s equality in a country, there is also evidence of organisational policies that prevent the employment of foreign women internationally. There was a finding by Takeuchi, Lepak,

Marinova, and Seokhwa (2007) that international companies were reluctant to assign women to overseas appointments, even though ‘global management skills [are viewed as] critical for international firms to remain competitive’ (p. 928). Revealed in the literature review is a negative effect from governmental and organisational policies on women’s potential for international managerial jobs (Fitzsimmons, Callan and Paulsen, 2014; Harrison and Michailova, 2012).

The effect of socio-cultural norms for foreign working-women

The potential influences from socio-cultural norms on the working lives and professional identity of foreign women in the Middle-East are reviewed in this section. The socially acceptable version of womanhood in the culture is of interest because the majority of participants in this study were from countries within that region.

Crocco et al. (2009) defined patriarchy as dominance by men over women in both family and society. The Arab Gulf states are nations that form a ‘patriarchal belt’ in which a woman’s position is said to be severely inhibited because of accepted socio-cultural norms of ‘patriarchs, arranged marriages, dutiful daughters and obedient wives’ (Littrell and Bertsch, 2013, pp. 311-12). The ‘restrictive norms and values [that] hold back certain groups (such as women)’ in patriarchal societies was also expressed as a concern in a United Nations report (UNDP, 2014, p. 20). The Arab father (patriarch) is designated as head of the family, and ‘perceived as the main source of support, protection and social security’ for female family members (Sholkamy, 2010, p. 256). The acceptable norm in patriarchal societies is for the man to be in the public sphere, financially supporting female family members through employment, while women perform the complementary role as homemakers in the domestic setting (Elamin and Omair, 2010; Metcalfe, 2008; Omair, 2008).

The expectation that women performed only ‘stereotypical domestic roles’ was illustrated in the case of Pakistani female entrepreneurs (Rehman and Roomi, 2012, p. 209). Women in

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3 that Muslim country had to overcome the challenge of a societal acceptance of patriarchy to
4 start and succeed in their own business. The cultural norm of patriarchy in Islamic society
5 also continues beyond the original shores, a phenomenon found from a study of migrants to
6 Norway, in which immigrant Muslim women continued in their responsibility for the home
7 and children, while their husbands, sons, and/or brothers earned income to keep their family
8 in the new country (Predelli, 2004).

9
10 Marital status and family commitments have been shown to have a negative effect on
11 women's career development (Gibbons, Woodside, Hannon, Sweeney and Davison, 2011).
12 Those commitments were highlighted in a UAE study where it was concluded that women
13 have a choice 'between family and career or [can] opt for both' (Jabeem, 2010, p.209). This
14 quotation does seem to suggest that a woman could have a career, even though needing to
15 take into account the attitude of family members to her identity as a worker. However, the
16 quotation also poignantly suggests an expectation that women opt to have children, rather
17 than having any choice to abandon motherhood in favour of a career.

18
19 The theme that a woman's primary role is to remain in the domestic sphere was generalised,
20 in a study of international expatriate families, where the woman was referred to as a mother
21 and a wife, who was only undergoing an expatriate experience because of her husband's
22 work (Haslberger and Brewster, 2008). In an expatriate situation, 'the husband's working life
23 is continuous' said Haslberger and Brewster (2008, p. 325), whereas the wife's responsibility
24 was to ensure family members adapted to new jobs, schools, and different cultures (Harrison
25 and Michailova, 2012). Likewise, western women workers in the UAE claimed 'they were
26 expected to behave the same as local women as far as the traditional roles of 'mother' and
27 'wife' were concerned' (Hutchings *et al.*, 2013, p. 304). The expectation for women to
28 display a high level of commitment towards family responsibilities was also shown to have
29 prevented them from taking up international assignments (Selmer and Lauring, 2012, p.

2012). Such adherence to these socio-cultural norms of acceptable womanhood, as mother and wife first, was a reason she did not work nor attain senior positions in international contexts (Omair, 2010).

Studies of Arab working-women have tended to focus on gender inequality created by traditional social constraints, such as ‘how they [women] balance their work and non-work responsibilities’ (Omair, 2010, p. 122). But ‘a patriarchal interpretation of Islam’ is also fundamentally a barrier for acceptance of socio-cultural norms (Omair, 2008, p. 118). A taken for granted understanding in this cultural bias is that religion limits these women’s agency (Korteweg, 2008). To wit, interpretation of patriarchy as restrictive may have impacted on reports about women in Islam, through emphasis on their family role and modesty.

An alternative interpretation, to the aforementioned discourse, is that women’s independence has been recognised through a principle of equality between the genders within a tradition of patriarchy throughout Islamic history (Clark, Ramsbey, and Stier Adler, 1991). Conclusions from a study on Jordanian working-women was based on that principle, where it was found that male family members were ‘supportive and facilitative, rather than repressive and stifling’ (Kharouf and Weir, 2008, p. 316). Likewise, there was support from families for the education and employment of female citizens in the UAE, and those Emirati women ‘felt that their religious beliefs and stable families were important and influential elements of their personal development and overall upbringing’ (Madsen, 2010, p. 83). Religious beliefs had contributed to these women’s personal development, and the value of family (led by a patriarch) in that culture was an important influence on their lives.

Cultural norms of acceptable womanhood are also considered to have had a lesser impact on foreign women when compared to the affect for national women. This phenomenon was termed the ‘gaijin syndrome’ by Adler (1987, p. 186), following her study of expatriates in

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3 Asia; findings revealed that local women were expected to conform more to societal norms
4 than were outsiders. A term, 'halo effect', was also coined by Tung (2004, p. 246) that
5 identified an assumption by 'host country nationals' that foreign women must be
6 'exceptionally well-qualified' to be employed in international roles. Similarly were findings
7 in a UAE study that foreign women received 'privileged treatment in the workplace
8 compared to their host national women colleagues' (Stalker and Marvin, 2011, p. 274). These
9 foreigners were perceived as outside cultural bias and could be employed in roles deemed
10 unacceptable for local women. As a consequence, Harrison and Michailova (2012, p. 624)
11 concluded that

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23 in pockets of the Middle East, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Western female
24 expatriates appear to be finding great opportunities to effectively pursue interesting and
25 varied professional careers.
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27 The local view had privileged these foreign women as outsiders to societal boundaries of
28 cultural norms, which consequently gave them greater access to the workforce.
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31 The literature review has shown influences such as the implications of socio-cultural norms
32 on women's employment, and how these affect the economic participation of foreign women.
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34 Men numerically dominate in the UAE labour force because of the economic push towards
35 certain industries typically identified with male occupations. Gender inequality for women is
36 also a consequence of male dominance in a patriarchal society. Societal expectations of
37 acceptable behaviour for women affected female citizens causing their employment to be
38 mainly in the secure setting of the public sector. Foreign women are considered somewhat
39 outside society, which, to some extent may ease their work-force participation particularly
40 within the private sector. The literature review has recognised that socio-cultural norms affect
41 the lived and working experiences of foreign women.
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54 It is clear that this present research is internationally relevant because foreign women can be
55 identified as workers and potential workers in other developed and emerging markets (Scurry
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et al., 2013). Therefore, implications from this study of these women, in the geographical context of one country, can be argued to have international applicability. It is also clear that an exploration of phenomena about lived experiences, for this under-researched (and more unusual) group of workers, allows for findings to further understand experiences that shape foreign women’s international working lives.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate for this study in order to gain a ‘rich’ understanding about the meaning of their experiences from participants (Doz, 2011, p. 583). Following that premise, phenomenology was chosen as an appropriate analytic framework by these researchers, along with other authors, in the belief that a participant’s ‘experience of something’ is what matters for the findings (Ashworth and Man, 2006, p. 19). In addition, scholars have called for deeper examination of the experiences of work, through listening to, rather than attempting to explain, an individual’s subjective frame of reference (Birkinshaw, Brannen, and Tung, 2011; Gill, 2004; Wise and Millward, 2005). Phenomenology was also considered a useful analytic framework for this study because it has been successfully applied in other relevant studies on; employment decisions (Wise and Millward, 2005); individual working styles (Weidenfeller, 2012); daughters, and work/life balance for mothers (Gibbons *et al.*, 2011; Rehman and Roomi, 2012); participants’ sense-making of their life histories (Smith, 1996). Similarly, a phenomenological study was conducted with national women in KSA , whereupon sense was made of their working experiences through discovery about the influences of cultural norms on their personal identity (Jamjoom, 2010).

A phenomenological framework was thus justified for this study of foreign working-women in the UAE. A research approach to yield overarching themes through an exploration of the

phenomena of life history events, in which participants' construction of their working experiences would be encapsulated (Stalker and Mavin, 2011; Omair, 2008).

Study sample

Participants were chosen for this study because they met four specific criteria; gender (women); foreign (nationality different to country of employment); working in the private sector (employed/self-employed); organisational role (middle or senior level positions) (Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

The participants joined the study having been promised anonymity, and pseudonyms were thus assigned to data to protect their identity. They were selected for the sample group through various methods; a snow-ball technique (Stalker and Mavin, 2011), where referral was made from one woman to another (e.g. Gillian referred Lulu); identified from websites of local businesses (e.g. Linda); personally invited after the lead researcher met them at exhibitions, conferences or networking events in the UAE (e.g. Nehal and Zelma) (Kemp, 2015). Most participants were aged between 30-39 years old, with an age range from 20-50+ years old. There was a cross section of nationalities (Bahraini, British, Iraqi, Jordanian, Lebanese, Mozambican, Palestinian, and Syrian) represented in the sample. These are listed in Table 1, according to participants' self-declaration, and classified into ethnic origins. Three-quarters of the sample group were educated internationally, i.e. they attended school or university outside the country of their birth or country of residence, and all, but one, of the participants had attained at least an undergraduate degree. The time the women had spent in the UAE varied from as little as one month (Robyn) to more than 30 years (Hayat), and nearly one-third of these participants lived in the UAE from a relatively young age. Two

participants were employed currently in a family business, which their fathers had originally started, and a third of the participants had started their own business in the UAE.

A sample of 12 foreign women from eight nationalities was studied. They worked in several industries, across a range of job roles at middle or senior level positions in the private sector of one country (UAE).

Data collection

The method of data collection, which was followed in this study, was previously used successfully in the UAE (Madsen, 2010) and in the USA (Madsen, 2007) to collect in-depth life history data from women. Demographic data were collected at the beginning of the interview, and then semi-structured and open-styled questions followed to collect data about participant’s early life stages (school years) through to maturity (college/university time), and up to their current professional stage (Madsen, 2010). Transcripts were typed up verbatim from the recorded interviews conducted, which lasted on average 90 minutes and ranged between 50 minutes and two hours (Wise and Millward, 2005).

In keeping with a phenomenological method, a semi-structured interview approach meant that participants were interviewed about their life history in a way that enabled them to focus on features and meaning that were important to them, while allowing the researchers to remain as open as possible for emergent themes using these ‘insider’s’ perspectives.

Data analysis

An explanation is now given on the steps that were taken to identify themes across these data. Firstly, these researchers separately read each of the transcripts, and took note of data that were similar, different to, and any new elements that emerged in comparison to the literature review (Gibbons *et al.*, 2011). Next, a series of research conversations took place between the

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3 authors, who have different and relevant background experiences and knowledge pertinent to
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5 this study.
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7 The lead author had a decade of working experience as a woman in the Arab Gulf states, and
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9 had previously studied women in employment in the region. The female co-author, while not
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11 having expertise in international research, has strong academic knowledge of women and
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13 paid work, in addition to qualitative methods expertise. It was interesting for both researchers
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15 to explore their differing viewpoints on the unique experiences of participants through
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17 discussions about data coding. Emergent themes around the life experiences were therefore
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19 identified through a process of individual analysis of each transcript, followed by collegial
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21 discussions between these researchers that stimulated deeper questioning to verify and agree
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23 on coding (Wise and Millward, 2005). As these authors revisited these data, singularly and
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25 together, the reliability of coding was tested, resulting in the identification of three
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27 substantive themes (Gibbons *et al.*, 2011; Wise and Millward, 2005).
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32 33 Findings

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35 The three emergent themes that were identified in the study are now considered in this
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37 section. In support of these findings, illustrative quotations were retrieved from the interview
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39 transcripts, and, although some editing of occasional words and punctuation has taken place
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41 for ease of reading, the illustrative quotations have remained as true as possible to
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43 participant's spoken words to capture their meaning (see Table 1).
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47 48 Theme 1: Becoming a new generation of expatriate workers

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50 A variety of circumstances reflected the contemporary social and political terrain in which
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52 these women lived and worked. Participants were part of a new generation of expatriate
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54 workers having experienced living, studying, and working outside the country as designated
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56 by birth, nationality or normal country of residency.
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The experiences women reported around past lives and current work situations were strongly influenced by close family members. The original stimulus for living and working in a foreign country for half of the sample was their father's decision to seek employment or business ownership in another country. Within the transcripts was evidence that participants felt decisions to relocate were forced upon families because of external circumstances. For instance, Zelma told how the political situation had driven her family from their homeland (Palestine) before she was born. Her father found work in a new country (Jordan), and then in KSA (where Zelma was born) (Table 1, quotation). Finally, the family moved to the UAE when Zelma was a teenager, as her father had bought the company for which Zelma was now Chief Corporate Affairs Officer.

For other women, their spouse's employment situation had shaped the move to another country. Hayat was Bahraini and had previously worked in New Zealand. She talked about how she came to the UAE because visa restrictions prevented her husband settling in other countries. Whereas, Gillian and Jane told the researchers how they had needed to resign from work in their home countries to accompany their husbands abroad, and later they obtained employment in that foreign country. Gillian (Table 1, quotation) gave up work in the UK to accompany her spouse to Russia and then later to the UAE. While continuing her role as mother and wife, she noted that a constant in life was her desire to work, and she was employed in both countries. Gillian was made redundant in the UAE two years ago, and, as the children were independent by then, she chose to use her severance money to start her own accountancy business with her husband. Gill became the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of that company.

Some women mentioned how their life experiences had been marked by their brother's supportive roles in their working lives. Linda (Executive Director and Board Member) was joint managing partner with her brother, and had started, and now independently managed, a

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3 branch of that business in the UAE. In addition, Robyn set up her translation business and her
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5 brother managed the branch of that business in KSA.
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8 For the majority of these participants (exception – Robyn), close family members (children,
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10 husbands, parents, and/or their siblings) were living and working in the UAE. It appeared that
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12 family situation had influenced, and continued to influence, the agency of participants in their
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14 choice to remain as foreign workers in this country.
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17 **Theme 2: Adjusting to the socio-cultural environment**

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19 Theme 2 emerged through the dominant talk by women in this study about how they
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21 experienced the changes and transitions, incurred because of their international experiences
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23 of education and employment.
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27 There were examples of stressors in the interviewees' stories of their lives, as these women
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29 did not necessarily experience a conventional 'ideal' of the stable home because of their
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31 international moves. For example, Linda talked about her experiences of being raised as a
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33 young daughter in war-torn Lebanon. It was of interest however, that these women did not
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35 necessarily talk about such events as being stressful, Linda focused on an appreciation of her
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37 parents for giving her a "good life" despite that conflict (Table 1, quotation). Participants re-
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39 presented stressors within a larger narrative of their international lives. Through adherence to
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41 the phenomenological principle, researchers considered participants' reality challenged any
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43 idea of these women passively experiencing stressors.
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47 Many of the participants told us that it was the women in the family who were responsible for
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49 adjustment of family members to their new socio-cultural situation. Jane (Human Resources
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51 Business Partner) was born in Kuwait, of a Lebanese family, and there was a subsequent
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53 move to Canada to obtain nationality. At that time the role for her mother was to settle the
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55 children into that new life in Canada, while Jane's father financially provided for the family
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57 through employment in the UAE. Another example was Nehal, from Syria, whose father
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owned a business in KSA, and he lived there alone for some years. The family then moved to KSA, when Nehal was in her early teens, and that decision, to bring the family geographically closer together, caused a period of adjustment. Nehal talked about her mother, who had owned and managed a boutique, having to adjust to a new role of full-time housewife because restrictions on women within the local culture prevented her from working. At the same time her mother was adjusting to this new life, she helped Nehal cope because she was not used to Saudi cultural practices of appropriate behaviour for adolescent girls. Nehal had experienced a change to her schooling at a critical time, but continued to receive a high level of education in KSA despite the international move for the family. Half of the sample participants (Gillian, Linda, Nehal, Robyn, Rola and Zelma) were privately educated. Private education for participants was an indication of their lives as foreigners, it was a benefit provided by their fathers' employment, and was a necessity, rather than a luxury, because free schooling was available only to citizens.

An aim for the interview was to solicit personal, insider accounts of participants' lives without restriction of too specific topics. For instance, these women were not asked about their religion. However, it became obvious that many of them had a strong faith that lent important meaning for understanding themselves and their lives. Jane and Shereen talked about their experience of being brought up as Muslims, and pointed out it was their personal choice to continue in that faith as older women (Table 1, quotations). Rola (Business Development Manager) was from Palestine, and said that she was able to continue with her Christian faith in the UAE, even as she appreciated the culture was determined by Islamic beliefs (Table 1, quotation). These women experienced adjustment to living and working in the UAE as being aided positively by both their own faith, and the acceptance of their religion within the socio-cultural environment.

In sum, adjustments to socio-cultural change were largely from mothers, who settled family members into a new life of education and work. For some of these participants, their faith was important in helping them to adapt to new socio-cultural norms.

Theme 3: Centrality of womanhood

The third theme identified in this study was the centrality of womanhood, which emerged through participants' ruminations about the experience of being a working-woman, and their roles as daughters, mothers and wives. This centrality of female identity manifested through simultaneous commitments to family life and their own professional lives.

Hayat was a wife and mother, who was financially responsible for the family as her husband's employment was minimal due to ill-health and visa restrictions. She had gained employment in New Zealand and had passed professional exams there. Hayat, as the family breadwinner, took the family on a long holiday to appreciate their life in New Zealand, before she moved them to the UAE and became Managing Director of her own company (Table 1, quotation). Nehal talked of her future work and how she wants to give back to society, and her wish to make a social impact was an element of her womanhood (Table 1, quotation). As well, Nehal's current priority was her children, and, when they are older and more independent, she would then have time to make a bigger impact on social issues.

The importance of being a woman, in terms of the role of mother, was paramount in the mind of Lulu, one of the British women, who was pregnant at the time of interview. She had married another foreign worker, and was planning to take maternity leave for a few weeks. Lulu's experience of a move to another country for work was different to other participants. She stayed with friends in the UAE for a holiday, saw opportunities for work in the country, returned home to the UK, whereupon she handed in her notice, and then moved to the UAE without a job offer. She commented that she had defied her friends' caution towards moving to another country without employment prospects (Table 1, quotation). Lulu quickly found

employment with a design company, and later started her own agency - her position was entitled 'Chief Surgeon' on her business card, and she explained that as a self-styled explanation of her working role. A sense of adventure had seemingly motivated Lulu to go to work in a foreign land.

The centrality of womanhood manifested for Robyn as a single woman in another Arab Gulf country (Qatar). Robyn had experienced an impoverished social life in Qatar and that was a factor for her move to the UAE to take up a senior position as Company Secretary in a local bank. Robyn revealed that being a woman was of professional value because of the impact of her presence on male co-worker practices in the working environment (Table 1, quotation). The narrative presented Robyn's experience of being a working-woman as a beneficial one for all, since she contributed more (through being smarter than the men), and ensured better behaviour between colleagues. While Robyn questioned whether these experiences were about her being a woman or about 'her', she could not disentangle those two identities in the recounting of her experiences.

When the story of Nawal (Assistant Sales Officer) is regarded at the point when the interviewer (first author) had asked her why she gave up her job in the country of her birth (Pakistan). Her response was that it was because of the profound experience of insecurity for her as a woman working in that Muslim country (Table 1, quotation). Nawal travelled to work in the UAE for personal and professional reasons, as a result of her womanhood being under attack while working in a dangerous country for women. Samia's thoughts on women in the region (Table 1, quotation) conveyed the centrality of womanhood for working-women. She was employed in a role, Marketing/Business Development Manager, and in an industry, international scaffolding, that were both non-typical for an Arab Muslim woman. Samia's employment was contrary to the conventional image of women in this geographical

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3 region, which she said was an outdated stereotype anyway due to women's professional
4 achievements.
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7 The life experiences that shaped the working lives of these women were not easy to separate
8 one from another. It was only when their working lives were interpreted through a
9 phenomenological research approach, from within the personal and professional experiences
10 of participants, that some sense could be made of these data and the complexities also
11 acknowledged (Jamjoom, 2010; Smith, 1996). In sum, this study has revealed that the
12 rationalé for foreign women's working lives was embedded in their lived experiences.
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20 21 22 **Discussion**

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24 The three themes identified in this study are now discussed for implications to understand
25 foreign working-women's professional identity due to influences from their life experiences.
26 In this section, the contributions of this study to academic knowledge are discussed, as are the
27 resulting implications for business praxis and policy-making.
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33 The study has contributed to academic knowledge through the identification of a *new*
34 *generation of expatriate worker*. Findings contrasted with previously accepted definitions of
35 the expatriate worker because those have failed to fully capture the diverse experiences of
36 foreign working-women (Doherty *et al.*, 2013; Harrison and Michailova, 2012; Harvey,
37 1997). This sample did not fit within stated criteria for expatriate workers and the
38 designation, trailing spouse, for these foreign women was also negated in this study (Cooke,
39 2007; Harvey, 1998). The decision to work outside their country was not directly initiated by
40 the women in this sample because, for the majority, their fathers or husbands had originated
41 the decision to move their families to other countries (Stalker and Mavin, 2011). The findings
42 agreed with Tharenou (2009, p. 78) that 'career and family may differentially affect
43 relocation for work by men and women'. Only two participants (Lulu and Newal) originated
44 their foreign-working life, and therefore, could be considered as SIEs in their own right
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(Selmer and Luring, 2012; Silijanen and Lamsa, 2009). The SIE designation, could, arguably, be applied to these study participants because as mature adults they had made an agentic decision to be employed or start their own business in the UAE. However, that decision was taken within the context of the family circumstances for these participants; married to expatriates who work in the UAE; parents currently live in the country; some were employed in a family business.

The sample group had *experienced social-cultural adjustment* through changes in family circumstances within different socio-cultural environments. The adjustment process is important for the settlement and retention of spouses and children in the expatriate experience (Shah and Lund, 2007). Similar to the findings of Madsen (2010) about UAE female citizens, these participants talked of caring parents who, despite family upheaval, made their childhoods stable. This study has also extended previous findings about western female expatriates to other foreign women; there were few difficulties experienced by these participants in their adjustment to working in the UAE (Harrison and Michailova, 2012). These study participants never referred to the UAE employment sponsorship system, it was perhaps such an accepted arrangement that they did not consider it worth referencing. They continued to remain as foreign workers because of the UAE governmental policy that allowed them only residential and not citizen, expatriate or migrant status in the country.

The majority, exceptions were Lulu and Nawal, had previous overseas experience because they were born, raised and/or worked in another country to that of their nationality. Adjustment to working in the UAE was probably minimised for these women because of those prior experiences. In this study, earlier findings from research on expatriates have been extended through recognition of these women's 'cosmopolitan identity' because they had lived, studied and worked internationally (Hutchings *et al.*, 2013, p. 292).

All of the foreign women worked within the private sector, and, as mentioned in the literature review, working-women in Arab societies were usually employed in the public sector as school-teachers and nurses or in low level positions as secretaries (Jabeen, 2010). In contrast, the sample group was similar to a previous study of female expatriates in the UAE, as they held middle/ senior management positions or owned businesses (Stalker and Mavin, 2011). These participants held dual minority in the workforce because they were both women and foreigners (Tung, 1998). They were unusual in the labour force because of their difference to the male norm of the foreign worker, which was considered to somewhat have offered them advantages in the workplace (Adler, 1987; Hutchings *et al.*, 2013; Siljanen and Lamsa, 2009; Stahl *et al.*, 2002; Tung, 1998, 2004). Foreign relocation had been a positive experience for these women, and that had manifested through their adjustment to socio-cultural norms with family support and through their own agency.

The theme, *centrality of womanhood*, was important to these women's life development and lay at the core of their professional identity. Therefore, this research further illuminates the importance of attending to experiences of womanhood in research about women and work. It is through this attention that the complexities of gendered identities and relations can begin to be mapped. Identities are more than fixed 'labels', but also reflect the time and location where they are experienced. This finding is particularly apposite for foreign women whose working lives are often changing as they move through space and time. These women's experiences of working life was found to be moderated by their roles as wife and/or mother, which, similar to findings by Hutchings *et al.* (2013) did fit within the cultural expectations of being a woman. The women in this sample talked about male relatives (brothers, fathers, and husbands) as supportive of their educational and employment progress, which was also similar to the findings of Kharouf and Weir (2008) and Madsen (2007, 2010). As well, the life stories collected from this sample group did not map neatly to a narrative of seeming

negativity about the cultural and religious values linking Islam with patriarchy against working-women (Hasan, 2012). Although also acknowledged was that these life histories do not detract from the stories of other women who may experience patriarchy as restriction for labour market entry and progress.

This article has provided an understanding of what these women do (i.e. their agency). These participants' working experiences and commitment to family were a constant in their lives, and employers need to recognise them as 'part of a family system' (Shallom-Tuchin, 2013, p. 71). Existing recruitment, retention and promotion policies need to be revisited to ensure these foreign women's access and contributions to a national workforce. Entrepreneurial activity extends the economy of a nation, and findings have offered insight for labour force policy to attract foreign women towards business ownership. Business practitioners and policy makers can recognise the actual and potential economic participation of these foreign women to expand the choice of human resource talent in a global labour market.

Interpretation of the transcripts had positioned these women's professional identities as the result of their quite unique lived experiences in their early and later years. It is considered from these findings that the actual and potential contribution of foreign women to the global labour market has been overlooked. An addition to a previous body of knowledge on migrant/expatriate workers is made, to wit, recognition of the foreign working-woman (FW-W) whose circumstances are influenced by their past and current lived experiences. This new term also captures more fully the identity of a foreign woman as a worker in her own right.

Limitations and future research direction

The study was limited by data collected from a relatively small sample of participants from different countries who worked in the UAE. The high proportion of foreign workers in the population in one country formed a contextual boundary to this study. Those factors were limitations for generalisability of these results, and also open up opportunities for future

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3 studies. These limitations support a move by academicians towards further study of foreign
4 working-women for connections to their experiences of family, gendered family
5 relationships, roles and identities.
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9 Data collected did not allow for a more nuanced focus on the situational and time bound
10 accounts of being a woman (i.e. how space and time changed her experiences). Instead the
11 focus remained on a broader phenomenon of life histories, and how these shaped the
12 international working life of foreign working-women. Findings did indicate that there maybe
13 a difference between conventional understanding of women working in the UAE and their
14 actual lived experiences. Modernity and changing notions of womanhood suggest more
15 opportunities for foreign working-women to work internationally. Therefore, it would be
16 interesting and helpful for this gap in understanding to be explored in a similar geographical
17 context. These findings are worthy of consideration in their own right by business
18 practitioners and policy makers because of implications for management of the workforce
19 and business ownership. These researchers would like to focus on that in future research to
20 enable a more complex and perhaps theoretically interesting account of the contextual
21 geography of womanhood.
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25 It is clear from the findings that future research may benefit from examining more closely the
26 intersection between both gender and national identities. This research did not set out to
27 explore a more complex analysis around intersectionality, which is becoming a key feature in
28 wider 'gender' interested research. Some authors (e.g., Acker, 2011) argue that organisations
29 are not only gendered they are also raced, aged, and geographically and historically bound.
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31 The shaping of these identities from experiences of transition and age (e.g., younger women
32 did talk about how motherhood and how the imperative for it would impede their careers in
33 future) amongst other social identities are also worthy of further investigation. Participants
34 very much focused on experiences that led to their current working lives, but they also spent
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less time talking about organisational structures and processes that may help them to transition to work or higher positions. Clearly this is now an imperative for future research to clearly see where organisations can aid the transition and experience of foreign working-women in the UAE and similar geographical contexts.

Conclusion

Foreign working women have been somewhat under acknowledged in academic literature (Harrison and Michailova, 2012; Harvey, 1998; Hutchings *et al.*, 2013; Stalker and Mavin, 2011). These women were understood previously to have followed a spouse to foreign assignments (Harvey, 1998), and the focus was on socio-cultural barriers to women working internationally (Omair, 2010). The existing literature on the expatriate situation for women has negatively affected readings of their professional identity. Missing from the extant literature were studies about the lived experiences of these women that positively effected their human development in an international environment.

This study has filled a research gap identified in the literature by providing an investigation of the life histories for a sample group of 12 foreign working-women in the UAE. By following a phenomenological framework of analysis, three themes of influences were identified for the development and shaping of professional identity for foreign women in international contexts. The three identified themes were; becoming a new generation of expatriates; adjustment to socio-cultural change; centrality of womanhood. These themes are related to each other through the lived experiences of these foreign working-women. These women are a new generation of expatriates because they have chosen to remain in a country due to their womanhood i.e. as daughters, mothers and wives of male expatriates. To succeed in that environment, these participants have had to adjust culturally and help their family members to do so.

The limitation was recognised that a study of foreign working-women in the UAE was of local or regional interest, but that the location itself was insufficient in providing a further contribution to international studies of working-women. However, the findings from this study are sufficient to advance future research conversations of what is, and is not yet understood, about foreign working-women's professional identity and human development. Recommendations for further research, to move this study beyond the limitations of a reduced sample, are to replicate with a larger sample size in the UAE and to conduct the study in other countries in the Arab Gulf states where there are large expatriate populations. Furthermore, given the diversity of populations globally, it is necessary to compare the findings of this study with those of another country outside the Arab Gulf region.

This study has contributed to academic knowledge through addressing the research question on how the lived experiences of foreign women have influenced their international working lives. These women had melded the centrality of womanhood (experiences of being daughter, mother and wife) with their professional identity (as employee, entrepreneur and manager) through adjustment to the socio-cultural norms of a foreign country. Furthermore, the previous body of knowledge on theories about expatriate and migrant now has the addition of the FW-W as a potential new classification of foreign worker. As well, the study findings have offered insight, for business practitioners and policy makers, about the influences for foreign women's economic participation. There is significance in this research for increased human resource potential in the global labour market from the inclusion of foreign women in a national labour force.

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Table 1. Study participants

Pseudonym Age (Yrs.)	Nationality Ethnic origin	Education School Qualifications	Work Owner/ Employee Job title	THEMES <i>Illustrative Quotations (coding)</i>
<i>Gillian</i> 40-49	British	Private - UK BSci (Acct.) Prof. qual. (Acct.)	Business owner CFO	<i>When I was first there, I got quite involved with school because you could just walk to it. And I did quite a few expat. things, I did some courses like Russian architecture, Russian music, Russian lessons, I did some Thai cooking. There was a big international women’s group and they had all these kinds of things and I tried to do it. But I also wanted to work, but I couldn’t really see where it was going to come from at all.</i>
<i>Hayat</i> 55	Bahraini	State - USA Master of Finance	Business owner MD	<i>So basically we immigrated twice, to Dubai and New Zealand, so I did my accounting and finance, worked there, research assistance, and made more money, and my husband was in the library, and, after I finished, which was December 2000, so we went around New Zealand.</i>
<i>Jane</i> 40	Lebanese	State - Canada BA (Economics)	Employee HR Bus. Partner	<i>This is a personal choice that was not enforced or anything by my parents, I mean I don’t come from this sort of family; we’re left to make our own decisions in life....so that started me thinking [its] okay being a Muslim and being an Arabic women.</i>
<i>Linda</i> 32	Lebanese	Private - Lebanon Undergraduate degree EMBA	Business owner Exec. Dir. & Board Member Managing Partner	<i>I lived all my life in Lebanon, so this means, I lived all the wars in Lebanon.. I was born during the war, lived the war and the ones, in the 80’s we had war, in the 90s and even in 2006, but my parents managed to give me a good life.</i>
<i>Lulu</i> 37	British	State - UK High school only	Business owner Chief Surgeon	<i>What happens if it doesn’t work out attitude of others.</i>

Pseudonym Age (Yrs.)	Nationality Ethnic origin	Education School Qualifications	Work Owner/ Employee Job title	THEMES <i>Illustrative Quotations (coding)</i>
Nawal 30-35	Pakistani	State - Pakistan Master of Physics, Master of IT Higher Dip. in World Trade	Employee Assistant Sales Officer	<i>There are a couple of cases, they threaten the woman and they even killed one of the ministers in *. So it was time to switch over to some other destination where I can work, and maybe I can exercise my abilities and skills in a safer and supportive environment.</i>
Nehal 31	Syrian Arab	Private - USA Master of Business Administration (MBA)	Employee Previously a family business, recently publicly listed MD for Strategy	<i>I can make a social impact at a higher level when it is issues related to facilitating entrepreneurship at a government level. where any of these things can make a huge impact. And being a woman, especially an Arab woman, my calling is to do something social to start with, and it has an impact on the generations to come. So I'd like to put my efforts in that area... I don't think it is my time until my kids grow up.</i>
Robyn 33	Lebanese Arab	Private - Lebanon Bachelors in Legal Translation	Employee Co. Sec.	<i>I'm not sure if it's being a woman or if it is about me, but when the senior management of the bank are together. and I am present at the meeting, they become more polite. Discussions are different, more concentrated on my presence on board, they value a lot my opinions. I always joke with them because they have to bring a woman on board because women are smarter and they have more valuable opinions. I think a women presence within the senior management helps as women are more organized than men.</i>
Rola 25	Palestinian Arab	Private - UAE Bachelors Studying for MBA	Employee Family business Business Dev. Mgr.	<i>I love to speak about religion. I am Christian but [that is] only 10% of the whole Middle East world. In my society when I say culture, culture is influenced by Islam.</i>

Pseudonym Age (Yrs.)	Nationality Ethnic origin	Education School Qualifications	Work Owner/ Employee Job title	THEMES <i>Illustrative Quotations (coding)</i>
Samia 33	Iraqi Arab	State - Iraq BA (Eng. Lit.)	Employee Marketing/ Business Dev. Mgr.	<i>The notion of Arab women conjures up an image for many people of Arab women cloaked in long covering garments, restricted in freedom and movements. But the achievements of Arab women around the world now lead us to rethink about this image because of what we achieved in the society. We have to think about what the women have, what this achievement means and we have to increase the power, we have to increase the confidence. We have to change the image of Arab women.</i>
Shereen 40-45	Mozambican African	State - UK BA (Hons) (Economics)	Business owner CFO	<i>So today I am able to say to you I am a Muslim because I feel I am a real Muslim at the end of the day because I do believe that Islam is a way of life, I do believe it is a true religion.</i>
Zelma 29	Jordanian Arab	Private - UK MBA (Finance concentration)	Employee Family business Chief Corp.Affairs Officer	<i>I am originally Palestinian, but I of course you know after my family got kicked out of Palestine in '48 so, we made Jordan our home.</i>
20-29 (17%) 30-39 (50%) 40-49 (25%) 50+ (8 %)	African (8%) Arab (67%) Asian (8%) European (16%)	Int. edu. (75%) Undergrad. (92 %) Postgrad. (50 %)	Employee (41%) Family Bus. (17%) Bus. owners (42%)	Becoming a new generation of expatriates Adjusting to socio-cultural environment Centrality of womanhood