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Research Article

Institutional Agents: A Significant Facilitator of the Advancement of Women Leaders

الوكيل المؤسسي: ميسر رئيسي لتقدم القيادات النسائية

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Abstract

Research on women's employment in the Arab world has highlighted a scarcity of women in senior leadership positions, often suggesting cultural conservatism and embedded gender-segregation within organizational structures. While these perspectives are not unfounded, these views may not fully capture the varied lived experiences of women leaders in the Arabian Gulf, particularly in the UAE. This study examined the influence of institutional agents on the career advancement of women leaders. The authors employed a phenomenological approach to explore the professional experiences of highly educated, women Arab leaders. The focus was specifically on their perceptions of gender discrimination, networking opportunities, and access to institutional agents. A sample population was purposefully identified; as such these findings may not be generalizable to the broader population. Data were collected via open-ended interviews and analyzed through multiple stages of coding stages using Atlas.ti. The results of this study present certain contradictory evidence to the existing literature. Notably, the women in this sample reported that gender discrimination was not a significant barrier to their career advancement. Further, the institutional agents most frequently identified by this sample of women were men. These findings suggest emerging narratives of a more gender-inclusive work culture. Moreover, these results offer a unique perspective that UAE professional environments may be more inclusive than previously reported. The findings of this study suggest that a more educated and diverse workforce could be contributing to a more inclusive atmosphere, challenging traditional views of workplace dynamics in the region.

الملخص

تُبرز الأبحاث حول توظيف النساء في العالم العربي ندرة النساء في المناصب القيادية العليا، وتشير غالبًا إلى أن التحفظ المجتمعي والفصل بين الجنسين المتجذر في الهياكل التنظيمية قد يكونان من الأسباب الرئيسة لذلك. وعلى الرغم من أن هذه التفسيرات ليست بلا أساس، إلا أنها قد لا تعكس بالكامل تجارب النساء القياديات في منطقة الخليج العربي، ولا سيما في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. تناولت هذه الدراسة تأثير الوكلاء المؤسسيين على التقدم الوظيفي للنساء القياديات. وقد استخدم المؤلفون منهجية الظواهرية لاستكشاف التجارب المهنية للقياديات العربيات الحاصلات على تعليم عالٍ. ركزت الدراسة تحديدًا على إدراكهن للتمييز على أساس الجنس، وفرص التواصل المهني، وإمكانية الوصول إلى الوكلاء المؤسسيين. تم اختيار عينة البحث بشكل هادف، ما يعني أن النتائج قد لا تكون قابلة للتعميم على السكان بشكل أوسع. جُمعت البيانات من خلال مقابلات مفتوحة، وتم تحليلها عبر مراحل ترميز متعددة باستخدام برنامج Atlas.ti. تشير نتائج الدراسة إلى وجود أدلة تتناقض مع الأدبيات السابقة في بعض النواحي. ومن الجدير بالذكر أن النساء المشاركات في العينة أفدن بأن التمييز على أساس الجنس لم يكن عائقًا كبيرًا أمام تقدمهن المهني. علاوة على ذلك، أظهرت النتائج أن الوكلاء المؤسسيين الذين تم تحديدهم بشكل متكرر من قبل هؤلاء النساء كانوا من الرجال.

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تُلمح هذه النتائُج إلى ظهور سرديات جديدة تشير إلى بيئة عمل أكثر شمولية من ناحية جنس الموظف. كما تقدم الدراسة منظورًا فريدًا يشير إلى أن بيئات العمل في الإمارات قد تكون أكثر شمولًا مما ورد في الدراسات السابقة. وتُظهر النتائُج أن وجود قوة عاملة ذات تعليم عالٍ وتنوع أكبر قد يُسهم في خلق أجواء عمل أكثر شمولية، ما يشكك في الرؤى التقليدية حول أجواء العمل في المنطقة.

1. Introduction

Women's participation in professional spaces has been associated with the expansion of the workforce and overall economic development (Aytekin, 2019; Şahin, 2022). Despite the increasing number in the workforce, women are often underrepresented in senior management positions across multiple sectors (Catalyst, 2020; Hartman & Barber, 2020; Martín-Peña et al., 2023). This trend holds true globally, and regionally across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Assaad et al., 2020; Karshenas et al., 2016; Salameh-Ayanian & Hage, 2017). This disparity in senior management positions remains despite significant growth in the education of women across the MENA region. Although there are highly educated women in the workforce across MENA (Assaad et al., 2020), researchers noted that the senior management positions continue to be predominantly occupied by men (Afiouni, 2014; Afiouni & Karam, 2017; Seo et al., 2017). Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles due to a complex interplay of factors, including gender stereotypes, biases, societal norms, cultural expectations, and structural barriers (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Kalaitzi et al., 2017; Kulkarni & Mishra, 2021; Seo, et al., 2017).

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has identified gender inequality as a key contributor to the loss of human development and declared "gender equality" as a sustainable development goal (SDG) in the UN 2030 agenda (Bastian et al., 2019). Addressing gender disparities and promoting gender equality is crucial not only for empowering women but also for fostering inclusive and sustainable development within the MENA region. Addressing these issues requires both short-term and long-term measures to support women's advancement and change societal perceptions of gender roles in leadership (Rincón Diez et al., 2017). The UAE has taken several measures to support women's advancement such as the establishment of the UAE Gender Balance Council in 2015, running programs and campaigns that offer financial support, training, and mentorship opportunities to aspiring female entrepreneurs such as "100% Emirati Women-Owned Businesses" program and the "Mother of the Nation" campaign (Bolivar, 2023).

Multiple studies have highlighted the obstacles faced by well-educated women managers in the Middle East (Afiouni, 2014; Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015; Hansrod, 2019; Monson et al., 2023). There is still, however, a scarcity of research exploring factors that promote Emirati women's success in business (Abdalla, 2015; Matroushi et al., 2020; Shaya & Khait, 2017). There are even fewer studies that investigate possible courses of action that could aid women's advancement in the field of business. Despite the important

potential implications, the lived experiences of Emirati women have remained largely unexplored. As such, this study explores the experiences of highly educated Emirati women leaders, to add their various perspectives on institutional agents and networking for their career advancement to the literature.

The results of this study may have far-reaching implications. These findings may contribute to a positive social and economic impact on overall society, enhance the economic autonomy of women, and improve public participation, overall (Hasanah & Pratiwi, 2020; OECD/CAWTAR, 2014). Further, an in-depth understanding of the importance of institutional agents in women leaders' career advancement could contribute significantly to the body of knowledge on women's career advancement in the UAE.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Women's employment in the Middle East

Women worldwide face an uphill battle on their way to secure organizational leadership positions due to sex-stereotyping and sex-based discrimination. These barriers can be particularly pronounced in certain sectors and cultures where traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained (Dhasmana, 2023; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Tabassum & Rafiq, 2023). The status of women in leadership positions started getting research attention in the late twentieth century with studies primarily being conducted in the developed Western countries (Schein & Mueller, 1992). However, given the cultural sensitivity of the construct of gender (Sidani, 2005), the findings of these studies cannot be generalized to countries with distinct cultures and religions. This suggests a need to explore this particular social phenomenon in different regions of the world.

While MENA has seen a remarkable rise in gender parity within education across primary, secondary, and to a lesser degree, tertiary levels, professional and economic barriers, however, continue to present challenges to career advancement, even among highly educated women (Abdalla, 2015; Assaad et al., 2020; Francis & Stulz, 2020; Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer et al., 2019; OECD/CAWTAR, 2014; UNESCO, 2012). Addressing this paradox, Haghighat (2013) argued that even though the MENA countries encourage women's education, on whole, women are discouraged from publicly displaying their competence. Indeed, sex-based discrimination in salaries, promotion opportunities, and representation in leadership roles (Abdalla, 2015; Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015; Assi & Marcati, 2020; Dalacoura, 2019; Haghighat, 2013) continue to persist across the region and to some degree, globally. While challenges remain present in the workforce, women across MENA are pursuing higher education at significant rates and improving their Labor Market Participation (LMP).

The MENA division of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that most of the countries belonging to this region have formed agencies, ministries, or departments working toward increasing gender equality (UNDESA, 2015). Such initiatives demonstrate the progress occurring at governmental levels in the region. However, there is still progress that needs to be made. It is reported that <35% of the countries of this region implement gender mainstreaming specifically related to governmental strategies, policies, and reforms that respond to the needs of both men and women.

Further, while 80% of other countries in the OECD practice gender analyses of their laws, only about half of the countries of the MENA region do so. Still, many researchers concur that with respect to women's education and healthcare, substantial progress has been made in the MENA region.

Based on their research studying tactics and strategies for career advancement, Laud and Johnson (2012) concluded that gender does not play a significant role in the career advancement of senior leaders. However, it is important to note that this finding was based on research conducted in the United States. On the contrary, studies conducted in the Arabian Gulf countries have found that gender remains a strong and pervasive influencing factor in the career advancement of women (Afiouni, 2014; Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015; Mozahem, 2021). Of note, as over half of business graduates in the UAE are women, undergraduate business studies are among the most preferred degree programs of women in the country (Alzaabi et al., 2021; Kemp, 2016).

As such, recognizing the unique challenge these women graduates are likely to face in securing jobs and, later, career advancement is critical to help equip graduate with pertinent skills to navigate these complex environments. In response to these challenges, women often pursue employment in the public sector, as they are likely to find better salaries, benefits, and working hours. Still, professional opportunities for business-oriented jobs are mostly available in the private-sector, though these positions may not include the same quality of compensation packages (Kemp, 2016). Securing a job in the private sector may be just the first of the many challenges, as researchers have reported that women commonly face gender discrimination at work (Abdalla, 2015; Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015; Njoki 2021), and often receive lower pay than their male coworkers for the same amount of work (Arayssi et al., 2023; Zheng, 2021). While women outnumber men at tertiary education, they are often presented with fewer opportunities for promotion and are expected to invest greater effort to be considered for the same promotions as men (Abdalla, 2015; Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015). As such, learning from the experiences of highly educated women in the UAE who have achieved senior managerial roles in business may help future women leaders gain important insights and skills to continue to pursue and advance their own careers.

2.2. Barriers and facilitators of career advancement

Generally, the strategies women employ to negotiate their personal and professional lives differ from those used by men. Women have reported that they struggle to keep a balance between these two spheres of their life. Indeed, maintaining a traditional role of a caregiver is a unique challenge for women, especially among women raised in cultures perceived to be socially conservative (Gregory-Mina, 2012; Hayo & Caris, 2013). The consistent challenge to keep a work–life balance that prioritizes a traditionally conceptualized caregiver may result in the exclusion of women from the workforce. Where women are engaged in work, informal socializations and networking often exclude women, as these events typically occur beyond working hours. This exclusion from networking and socializing opportunities may, perhaps inadvertently, limit women's career advancement (Erogul, 2011; Greguletz et al., 2019; Rahim et al., 2018). This is acutely true for women in culturally conservative cultures, which may present more gendered workplaces, such

as those found in the countries within the Arabian Gulf (Abdalla, 2015; Abdelrazek-Alsiefy, 2023; Ridgway, 2021).

Some societies across the MENA region, especially those within the Arabian Gulf, have a deeply embedded conservative culture (Afiouni, 2014). These societies often present a division of labor based on gender, and usually tend to favor men when appointing candidates to managerial positions. It should be noted that apart from national culture, organizational culture may also play an important part in facilitating networking. It becomes increasing difficult for women to network with their senior male colleagues in organizations that are gender-segregated and within gendered professional roles. These circumstances tend to be more common in the MENA region, and Arabian Gulf more specifically (Abdalla, 2015; Haghighat, 2013).

Laud and Johnson (2012) argue that networking is crucial for professional development, which is why a lack of networking opportunities for women in gender atypical fields poses a unique obstacle for career advancement. In gender atypical positions, women are tasked with overcoming gender stereotypes to advance in their careers (Afiouni, 2014). Many studies have suggested that women may be made to feel unwelcome by male colleagues inside the workplace, thus severely limiting any opportunity to network with those in leadership positions (Hall et al., 2019).

2.3. Institutional agents and social capital

Stanton-Salazar (1997) posits that social capital is a representation of relationships and networks between institutional agents and individuals. He defines institutional agents as non-familial individuals who have high status and authority in society or in an organization and could provide access to networks of access and resources that may otherwise be unavailable. While Stanton-Salazar developed this network-analytic framework to better understand the socialization and educational lived experiences of working-class, minority youth in the United States, parts of this framework could also be applied to the circumstances of highly educated women advancing their careers in the UAE. Notably, the importance of institutional and ideological forces that enable access to social capital and institutional support within organizational environments may prove problematic for women, especially in gender atypical fields.

Considering the sociocultural context of the UAE, men more commonly occupy positions of authority (Tlaiss, 2014; Kargwell, 2012). With this reality, coupled with potentially limited opportunities for networking, challenges to equal pay for equal work, and fewer opportunities for advancement, the role of institutional agents becomes ever clearer. Institutional agents may be able to provide access to opportunities that could increase women's access to resources, networks, and opportunities that may otherwise be unavailable. Numerous researchers have shown a strong, positive relationship between networking and career advancement (Laud & Johnson, 2012; Volmer & Wolff, 2018; Wok & Hashim, 2017).

Studies conducted in the United States reiterate the positive relationship between availability of professional mentorship and women's professional development. Mentors provide guidance, training, growth opportunities that can help individuals experience success (Dashper, 2018; Levy-Tzedek et al., 2018; Tharenou, 2005; Vasquez & Pandya, 2019). It should also be noted that for women, benefits of

mentorship are higher if their mentor is also female (Ruff, 2016; Tharenou, 2005). A thorough review of the literature reveals limited studies exploring mentorship and/or institutional agents in professional contexts within the MENA region. Although the importance of having access to mentors is widely understood, organizations that offer mentorship programs are scarcely found within the region, and the few that are offering such programs may not specifically target women employees (Sultana, 2014).

In consideration of the literature highlighted above, the present study seeks to explore the perceptions of highly educated Emirati women business leaders on the barrier and facilitators to their career advancement. The researchers also explored the role of institutional agents and mentorship in the career advancement of this purposefully selected sample of women.

3. Methodology

This study employs a phenomenological approach, using an exploratory, qualitative method that make use of in-depth interviews with purposefully selected participants. This approach was selected as the researchers endeavored to elicit in-depth lived experiences of the participants. This was done through the development and implementation of a semi-structured protocol administered over two interviews with each of the 13 participants.

3.1. Operational definitions

The following four operational definitions were used for the purposes of this study, articulating its results and discussion.

(i) Institutional Agent: non-familial individuals who have high status and authority in society or in an organization and could facilitate access to networks in terms of (1) resources, (2) opportunities, (3) privileges, and/or (4) services that may otherwise be unavailable.

(ii) Networking: constructing and maintaining relationships for personal, social, or professional gain through mutual exchange of resources and information.

(iii) Sponsorship: support provided by a senior, influential person within an organization who uses their influence to help advance another individual's career by offering guidance, opportunities, and/or advocacy.

(iv) Sex-based Discrimination: unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their sex, leading to disadvantages in various social, professional, and personal contexts.

3.2. Research questions

The following two research questions were drafted following a thorough review of the available literature.

(i) What are the perceptions of women Emirati senior business leaders on barriers and facilitators to their career advancement?

(ii) What are the perceptions of women Emirati senior business leaders on the role of institutional agents in their career advancement?

3.3. Sampling

The present study sought to understand the experiences of highly educated Emirati women business leaders in the UAE. Accordingly, participants in this study were purposefully selected to ensure these individuals could speak to the nuance of the topic under study. While there is a substantial amount of empirical data on women's experiences in workspaces, broadly speaking, these generalized studies lacked nuance and depth related to the experiences of women in the UAE. That is, while these studies provide vital information, overall, such studies may universalize the experiences of women. As such, these studies may not fully represent the varying experiences of different sub-populations of women. The present study therefore sought to learn the perspectives of highly educated, women business leaders in the UAE, and all participants met the following criteria:

3.3.1. Inclusion criteria

The following criteria were used to identify participants for the purposefully selected sample in this study. The participants were required to meet all of the criteria listed as follows.

Criterion 1: Gender and Nationality

As this study sought to obtain a greater understanding of the experiences of women business leaders in the Arabian Gulf region, who either held or were pursuing terminal degrees in business, all the participants were female and citizens of the UAE.

Criterion 2: Terminal Degree

This study sought to explore the fields of study related to the career advancement of highly educated business leaders. As such, all the participants of this study either had or were pursuing terminal degrees in business administration, with the latter being in the last stage of completing their program, that is, all but dissertation (ABD). A terminal degree in business was a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in business administration or a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA).

Criterion 3: Business Leadership

This study was intended to gain a deeper understanding of the career advancement experiences of Emirati women business leaders. For the purposes of this study, a business leader was one who held a managerial position in a field of business. Women who held terminal degrees but were not currently employed in a managerial capacity were beyond the scope of this study.

Criterion 4: Leadership Work Experience

Given that this study sought to learn about the lived experiences of women advancing their careers, each participant possessed no less than five years of professional work experience at the level of a mid-level manager or higher.

Criterion 5: English Language Proficiency

Due to this study being conducted in English, all participants were highly proficient users of English, having earned their terminal degree from an institution where English language was used as the medium of instruction.

Criterion 6: No Evaluative Role

The researchers did not advise, teach, or hold any supervisory evaluative role in relation to the participant. This final criterion was crucial for ensuring that the participants felt free to share their views, perceptions, and experiences fully, free of any coercion.

3.4. Interview procedures and questions

An interview protocol was developed, and the procedures described as follows were employed across all interviews. The interview protocol was developed following a thorough review of the literature and adjusted following the pilot-testing of the protocol with three participants. The interview questions employed in this study are provided in Table 1.

3.4.1. Interview procedures

The researchers began by identifying candidates for interview using the aforementioned criteria. They contacted the candidates, provided an information sheet about the study, and invited them to participate in the study. Upon receiving confirmation of the participation, the researchers provided each candidate with an informed consent sheet to be signed and returned.

Upon receipt of the informed consent sheet, the researchers scheduled an interview time according to each participant's availability. The researchers then travelled to the participant's location to conduct a face-to-face interview that was audio-recorded. Each participant was interviewed twice with each interview lasting approximately 1 hr. If at any time the interviewee felt uncomfortable with a question, she was free to skip the question and/or exit the interview without repercussion. Following each interview, the raw audio data were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts from both interviews were then reviewed for accuracy and authenticity by each participant. This was done via email; the researchers emailed each participant their transcripts, and their responses were collected either via email or by phone. Any areas that required

Table 1

Interview questions.

Interview one
What motivated you to pursue a doctoral degree in business?
Why did you choose to pursue a career in the business sector?
How have you been promoted in your career?
In what ways, if any, has being a woman affected your career?
What do women entering the business sector need to know about the field?
Is there anyone at work you look up to?
Is there a person outside of work whom you look up to?
Has networking with other professionals helped you get a promotion?
What do women entering the business sector need to know about networking?
Interview two
What do you perceive to be the most important role of women in society?
If you are a mother, how has that role influenced your career?
In what ways, if any, has being a mother played a role in choosing to seek promotion?
What role do women business leaders serve in helping to promote newer women in the field?
Do you know someone who maintains a good balance between their personal and professional lives?
How do you balance your personal and professional life?
What do women entering the business sector need to know about balancing their personal and professional lives?

clarification were noted. Upon confirmation of accuracy, the raw audio data were destroyed to protect the anonymity of all participants.

In each interview, the researchers used semi-structured protocol to guide the conversation with each interviewee. Toward this end, the interviewer actively listened to, and showed respect for, the interviewee as she addressed each question.

3.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations taken during the process of this research included obtaining informed consent of the participants, ensuring confidentiality of information, and assigning pseudonyms to all sample participants to maintain anonymity. Furthermore, it was also ensured that the researchers did not serve as teacher, advisor, or supervisor to any of the participants, so that the participants may feel totally at ease while sharing their experiences and opinions.

All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and later transcribed in preparation for analysis. Following each interview, the researchers made a point of documenting any ideas and/or preliminary conclusions concerning the research questions. All transcripts from both interviews were shared with the participant via email for verification of accuracy and authenticity. Upon confirmation, the raw audio data was destroyed to protect participant privacy and anonymity.

3.6. Limitations

This study, given its qualitative nature and small sample size, does not seek to generalize its findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It should also be considered that the women who took part in this study were all highly educated and self-identified as successful. It is entirely possible that a different group of women may have different experiences and perceptions of sex-based discrimination and its influence on their career development. Still, the novel findings presented here may suggest a shift in professional climate for Arab women.

3.7. Data analysis

Given the phenomenological approach employed by the authors in this exploratory study, a rigorous analysis was undertaken utilizing the software, Atlas.ti. This software provides a robust platform for managing and analyzing qualitative data as well as efficient organization and retrieval of all codes.

Data were analyzed using content analysis with multiple stages of coding, facilitated by Atlas.ti software. Initially, all interview transcripts and field notes were uploaded into Atlas.ti. The researchers began with open coding, then formed axial codes from those open codes that have similar attributes, and finally derived selective codes from axial codes that appeared to be conceptually connected.

3.7.1. Coding process

The researchers began with open coding, systematically assigning initial codes to segments of the data within the software. These codes were then analyzed and grouped based on similar attributes, forming axial codes within the software. The researchers utilized visualization tools, such as code networks and code co-occurrence tables, to identify the patterns and connections between codes. Finally, selective codes were derived by merging those axial codes that appeared to be related theoretically, utilizing the advanced capabilities of Atlas.ti to ensure thorough and accurate analysis. The software's memo function was utilized to document theoretical insights and reflections throughout the coding process, ensuring a transparent and iterative analysis. This rigorous approach, supported by Atlas.ti's comprehensive features, enabled the researchers to derive meaningful and theoretically grounded conclusions from the data.

3.7.2. Saturation of data

The actual sample size of participation was dependent upon achieving saturation. Saturation refers to the point where responses from participants started to become similar and no new information was being shared (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process of reaching saturation involved continuous monitoring of the data for recurring themes and patterns. After conducting and thoroughly analyzing the interviews, it became evident that by the 13th participant, the responses had begun to show significant convergence. At this point, no new themes or substantial information were emerging from the data, signifying that saturation had been achieved.

4. Results

The results of the data analysis revealed two primary themes, one addressing each research question. Background information was collected from each of the participants. This descriptive information is important to contextualize the identified themes.

4.1. Participant background information

Table 2 highlights the background and pseudonym of each participant.

Table 2

Participant background information.

	Age (yrs)	Years of experience	Managerial level	Years in position	Marital status	Children
Khadijah	25–29	4–7	Mid-level	4–7	Married	No
Maymoonah	35–39	12–15	Mid-level	6–9	Single	No
Sawdah	35–39	12–15	Senior	6–9	Married	Yes
Zainab	35–39	16–19	Senior	6–9	Married	Yes
Aisha	40–44	16–19	Senior	6–9	Married	Yes
Hafsa	40–44	12–15	Senior	4–7	Married	Yes
Safiyah	45–49	20–24	Senior	6–9	Married	Yes
Mariah	35-45	10–14	Senior	6–9	Married	Yes
Asma	35-45	10–14	Senior	6–9	Married	Yes
Ruqayah	35-45	10–14	Senior	6–9	Divorced	No
Afnan	35-45	10–14	Senior	4–7	Divorced	Yes
Basma	35-45	15–19	Senior	6–9	Married	No
Dina	35-45	15–19	Senior	4–7	Married	Yes

4.2. Thematic analysis results

The analysis of the data revealed two primary findings in relation to the aims of this study. First, participants in this study suggested that sex-based discrimination did not inhibit their ability to networking in the workplace. Second, it was found that institutional agents played a significant role in the advancement of women's careers, particularly in terms of sponsorship.

4.2.1. Theme One: Sex-based discrimination was not a hindrance to networking

In addressing the first research question, the researchers found that female Emirati business leaders did not perceive gender discrimination as a barrier in way of their career success. It was also reported that gender discrimination was not just perpetrated by men, but by women too. Most of the participants who

had experienced it suggest that discrimination against women in the workplace may have occurred in the past but is no longer a factor they see in their professional spaces, nor an obstacle to their career development. Four women – Khadijah, Asma, Dina, and Maymoonah – reported that they perceived gender discrimination within their organizations. Seven other participants suggested observing isolated cases, and two participants, Safiyah and Sawdah articulated views that discrimination in workplaces has reduced over time. Safiyah reflected on her experience as a woman in the workforce over the last two decades:

> When I was younger, just starting out [in my career], there were very few women who worked full-time. We were just starting to get educated, you know. My husband was different than many other men. He really encouraged me. He believed in me. I faced many problems back then; so many people thought I couldn't do this or [couldn't do] that. But, you know, I just kept going. Alhumdulillah [praise and thanks be to God]. And you know, I have seen this mindset [of men] change. Today, men are much more supportive of women than in the past. Our leaders [of the country] will not tolerate discrimination against women. So, people have changed. This is good for everyone—men and women. It has improved a lot, you know. I do not see this attitude anymore. Maybe sometimes, but it's uncommon now. We all work together, and this has led to a lot of improvement.

In her quote, Safiyah articulates her thoughts about what she sees is a growing resistance toward the discrimination of women at work. While she clearly said that women have encountered discrimination, she also suggested that the climate of professional spaces has altered over the last two decades; that is, men tend to be more supportive of women than in the past. Safiyah specifically described how the mindset of some men, like her husband, was different from the other men; that is, he empowered her and supported her decisions to be educated and pursue a career. In doing so, she highlighted a comparison point for improvement. She also discussed the prevalence of mixed-gendered workspaces, suggesting that the integration of both sexes in the workspace has led to improvements in workplace culture.

Like Safiyah, other participants – Zainab, Aisha, Hafsa, Mariah, Asma, Ruqayah, Afnan, and Basma – report that discrimination occurs in isolated situations. These women argued that while discrimination against women may have been a factor in the past, they do not perceive this as a prevalent factor influencing either their workplace environment or careers. Zainab said, "It's not really an issue anymore. I only had one man who made a sexist comment at me. That was early on in my career; honestly, I have worked with so many more men who were supportive and encouraging—[Men] managers who promoted me and helped me learn." Aisha expressed a similar sentiment:

> I have never experienced this [discrimination]. The men around me are helpful and want me to be successful. It's like one man does something wrong, and we say men are sexist. That's not true. There are good and bad [men]. But really, there are more good ones.

Hafsa further suggests that isolated incidents occur but are perpetuated further owing to stereotypes.

I really think that these cases are dying out. There may be a case here, another there. But I really think that people like bad news—bad stories. Stereotypes are a dangerous thing; one case here or there shouldn't mean we label all our men [Arab men] as sexist. They aren't. We need to stop this.

Like Safiyah, Sawdah perceives sex-based discrimination to be changing within the workplace. She even suggests that men are working hard to change the prevalent perceptions of sexism, and that women should help in changing this perception:

I feel like there are some men who have these traditional beliefs about women. [But] this is changing; men are changing. As women, we should help them. We shouldn't focus only on sexism; we should focus on support too. Discrimination is there, and there are consequences. We also need to talk about the good men too.

In addition to discussing a shift in workplace cultures, and highlighting professional women's ability to network with men, Maymoonah, Dina, and Khadijah assert the discrimination against women stems from both sexes. They suggest that level of education, rather than sex, is a mediating factor of such discrimination. Khadijah asserted:

There are some people who don't think a woman can do this. It's men and women though... It's not, you know, a big problem, but it's there... My supervisor is a man and always encourages me. You know, some people just don't know. They keep to saying these old things, but today the people are educated. They know women can do many things... this is the difference.

Maymoonah concurred when she expressed a similar sentiment:

There are people at work who think these things. It's not major, but it's there. A woman once told me, "She's always busy with her kids; she only got this position because she is a woman." Woman do it to each other. I work with men a lot, and most of them don't care. They just want to get their work done.

Dina explains that men do not engage with women in these types of discussions, "Men do not speak about these things. They do not ask me how many kids I have, or anything like that... only women do." While these women each point to incidents of discrimination, Asma indicates that these did not hinder her career development, "I have been offered promotions and I am success[ful]. It's not like men are always there trying to stop us. There are issues, sometimes, but these do not happen all the time."

Three women in this sample suggested that sex-based discrimination continues to persist within professional organizations. Two participants articulated how they feel society has evolved over time, with fewer instances occurring in the workplace today, and eight participants suggest that sex-based discrimination occurs in isolation and is not widespread due, in large part, to changing workplace cultures. Collectively, the participants in this study reported that they feel more supported by men at work than discriminated against and believe that sex-based discrimination plays a lesser role in women's professional lives today.

Table 3

Participant perceptions on sex-based discrimination, selected quotes.

Participant	Perceptions on sex-based discrimination	Selected quote
Khadijah	Present: Exists within organizations	*There are some people who don't think a woman can do this. It's men and women.*
Maymoonah	Present: Exists within organizations	*There are people at work who think these things. It's not major, but it's there.*
Mariah	Present: Exists within organizations	*For sure. Sometimes people do it behind you so they hide it. They say things to other people – not to your face. They think like this.*
Safiyah	Declining: Discrimination has reduced over time	*It has improved a lot, you know. I do not see this attitude anymore. Maybe sometimes, but it's uncommon now. We all work together, and this has led to a lot of improvement.*
Sawdah	Declining: Discrimination has reduced over time	*I feel like there are some men who have these traditional beliefs about women. But this is changing; men are changing.*
Zainab	Rare: Occurs in isolation	*[It's] not really an issue anymore. I only had one man who made a sexist comment at me.*
Aisha	Rare: Occurs in isolation	*I have never experienced this [discrimination]. The men around me are helpful and want me to be successful.*
Hafsa	Rare: Occurs in isolation	*I really think that these cases are dying out. There may be a case here, another there. But I really think that people like bad news—bad stories.*
Asma	Rare: Occurs in isolation	*I have been offered promotions and I am success[ful]. It's not like men are always there trying to stop us. There are issues, sometimes, but these do not happen all the time.*
Ruqayah	Rare: Occurs in isolation	*Maybe some people think this way... most people nowadays don't think like this.*
Afnan	Rare: Occurs in isolation	*Only sometimes. Women work in all places, now, and many are managers. It's not like the old times.*
Basma	Rare: Occurs in isolation	*There are managers, who are women. They are in many places, which is good. Some women, though, are hard on other women.*
Dina	Rare: Occurs in isolation	*Men do not speak about these things. They do not ask me how many kids I have, or anything like that... only women do*

4.2.2. Theme Two: Institutional agents help promote the career advancement of women

Although the participants of this study provided somewhat differing perceptions of prevalence of sex-based discrimination in the workplace (ranging from present, declining, and rare), there was an overwhelming consensus on the importance of the role institutional agents play in their career advancement. Every woman in this sample reported having an individual in the workplace who provided pertinent resources and/or support to help them advance their careers. In many of these instances, 69% of participants in this study, identified men as institutional agents.

Participants in this study discussed how these institutional agents helped them advance. These institutional agents are mostly, though not exclusively, men. Most of the participants, nine out of thirteen, named men as institutional agents. While these institutional agents differed in terms of the duration of their appointment in the organization, they were perceived to have several common characteristics. Each

institutional agent was highly educated, considered to be a risk-taker, respected among their peers and in society, and was considered to have an open-minded worldview. The institutional agents identified in this study primarily facilitated access to opportunities that may have, otherwise, been inaccessible to participants. The table below summarizes the key characteristics of institutional agents.

Table 4

Reported characteristics of institutional agents.

Characteristic	Identifier
Most reported sex	69% men and 31% women
Reported age range	Mid-40s+
Reported managerial level	Senior – Executive
Years in industry	20+ years
Reported language proficiency	Bilingual – Multilingual
Education level	Master's – Terminal Degree
Location of terminal degree	North America, Europe, UAE

In addition to helping the participants in advancing their careers, these individuals also created a lasting impression on the way in which these women function in their own leadership positions. Indeed, several of the women referred to their career institutional agents as their role model or teacher. For instance, Zainab referred to a male manager, who was newly appointed to her organization, in the following manner:

> *He was my role model. He really helped me; he taught me how to use what I learned at university at work and encouraged me to think outside the box. He was different somehow open, you know, because he studied in America. He wasn't afraid of being wrong; there wasn't a big. . . ego—not only with just me, all of us in the department; he wanted to try new things. He was the first person who really noticed that I was good at my work, and he wanted me to be better. He promoted me very quickly and made sure other people knew I was good too. Then, other people saw I could do things, and my career really improved.*

Hafsa also had a newly appointed male manager who helped her to achieve career advancement at a different organization:

> *I really look up to him. He was new, you know. . . I remember being nervous, because he was new, but he changed my career a lot. I started to think I was good enough to be manager. Before him, I always doubted myself. I remember how much he taught me and try to be like him to my employees. I always felt comfortable working for him, and that's how I want people to feel. He helped me get a better position at another company but also kept teaching me how to do my job better. He was really smart, but, you know, he was too [very] humble. Everyone loved him.*

Aisha describes a highly respected man who had worked in her organization for many years and facilitated her first managerial position at a different company.

People were a little afraid of him, because he didn't smile a lot, but he was very kind. He went to university in [the] UK. You know what, I learned more from him than I did at university. If you listened when he talked, you learned. He was serious about his work, and I liked that. One day, he just told me directly, "Aisha, you are ready to be a manager," and I said, you know, I felt shy with him, so I said, "Really, you think so?" He just looked at me and said, "yes." He helped me get promoted somewhere else. I was so sad when I left the company. I wanted him to come with me too.

Sawdah describes a woman who had made a positive impact on her career by assisting her in achieving advancement at another organization.

I didn't like her at all. I thought she was arrogant because she was smarter than everyone. She was very hard on people, very strict, you know? So, I was working really hard for her, and I thought she didn't do anything—just order us. One night, I had to stay late to finish some work and saw her when I left. I was shocked. She was like, "why are you still here"' I told her, you know, "you set a deadline for tomorrow, and I have to finish my work," and then I left. I was so surprised she was still there. Then, I submitted my work, you know, and she told everyone at the meeting, "Sawdah was here until 9:45 last night, and her work is almost perfect." Because, of course, nothing was perfect for her opinion. After that, I got to know her and, really, I loved her after that. She always talked about me to people and recommended me to be promoted as head of another department. I didn't get it, but she kept encouraging me and introduced me to a friend of hers, and he hired me as a manager.

Each participant in this study could describe one individual who had a positive impact on her career advancement and facilitated their access to an opportunity that would have otherwise been unattainable. Three women – Asma, Ruqayah, and Mariah – described institutional agents who facilitated access to resources, sponsorship that made a difference in quality of their workplace. Mariyah shared how her institutional agent ensured that she, and the rest of the team, received additional support:

She was amazing. She could see when I needed help or support, even if I didn't ask. We [were] having a problem using a new software. She did not criticize us or make [us] feel bad. She arranged for more training. This wasn't easy. The [training] company was outside [the organization], and they would spend more money. People liked her, though. She could make things happen. We were trying, but we needed help. You know, she said it was because she needed help. We knew she didn't; we did. But she never let us to feel that.

In sharing this example, Mariyah touched on how this institutional agent leveraged her own social capital to both arrange for additional training, while also absorbing the potential loss of face of the team. In doing so, the team felt protected from perceptions of embarrassment and received the help they needed. Like Mariyah, Asma also had a woman serve as her institutional agent in providing access to resources:

She was not my boss, but she was well known. The team was having a hard time. They never finish[ed] on time – [they were] always late. I wanted to quit or go to a new place. I told her, but she told me "No." She didn't let me leave. She helped me work with them. She taught me how to deal with difficult people. I followed her and I did better. The people also did better. I learned so much from her. She always encouraged me and made people feel that I was good [at my job].

In her quote, Asma describes how a woman in the organization discouraged her from quitting or requesting a new placement. Despite not serving as her line manager, she still took time to provide mentoring to a more junior colleague. In doing so, she lent her expertise to this participant and helped her better understand how to engage the team and improve their efficiency. Subsequently, this institutional agent provided her with encouragement and exposure by referencing her more publicly within the organization. Ruqayah also identified an institutional agent who facilitated access to resources to help provide professional training for the team she was leading.

I mentioned in a meeting that people did not know how to talk [to each other]. They were hard in talking and needed specific training. They told me there was only money for technical training. He emailed me later and said that he agreed and that he could help. He arranged an external company to train the team. It was very helpful – the team benefited a lot. Later, the people talked about how good we were. When we are at meetings, he always asks about our work, and told people that we work very well.

Ruqayah describes how a man within the organization recognized there was a need, and provided support that was otherwise unavailable. Since the organization did not see communication skills as a technical skill, there was little willingness to invest in strengthening these skills. Through the help of an institutional agent, Ruqayah was able to provide the training her team needed to improve the quality of their work.

In addition to facilitating access to resources within the organization, the remaining five participants – Khadijah, Zainab, Afnan, Basma, and Dina – identified individuals who helped them access opportunities within their organization.

Basma described a situation where she was not on good terms with her line manager. Having worked on a multi-unit presentation to the board of directors, she connected with individuals beyond her unit. One person with whom she connected was a supervisor of a different unit. She described:

My supervisor did not like me. I never got a chance to move up. There was another position in a different department. The man who supervised this had worked with me on a presentation. He knew I was unhappy and asked me to apply. I was much happier working for him. He encouraged me and helped me [grow].

Likewise, Dina described a senior-level manager who observed the quality of her work over a period of time, and leveraged his position within the institution to bring attention to the contributions that she and her colleagues were making to the institution. She credits this for helping her secure a promotion within the organization.

I moved from a supervisor role to head of a department. I worked really hard – I was always there, always met deadlines, always did my work in a right way. But I don't know why, my boss never cared. She never noticed or said anything. One day, her boss asked me for details on a report. When I went to him, he asked me about my work and education – things like that. After that he mentioned my team at big meetings and other things. [Some time] Later, I was promoted to the same level as my boss. You know, we [she and I] became friends after that!

Each participant in this study could describe one individual who had a positive impact on her career advancement and facilitated access to resources and/or opportunities that may have otherwise been unattainable. Selected quotes from each participant are included below in Table 5, which also indicates the sex of the institutional agent and corresponding type of access facilitated by the institutional agent.

Table 5

Participant perceptions on institutional agents, selected quotes.

Participant	Institutional agent sex	Selected quote	Type of access provided
Khadijah	Woman	*She is amazing… She knows me and what I can do; she pushes me to do better… I got promoted because of her.*	Opportunity. Sponsorship.
Maymoonah	Man	*There wasn't a better position at the company, and he told me I could do better; he helped me move to another company.*	Opportunity. Sponsorship.
Sawdah	Woman	*She always talked about me to people… She kept encouraging me and introduced me to a friend of hers, and he hired me.*	Opportunity; Sponsorship.
Zainab	Man	*He was the first person who really noticed that I was good at my work… He promoted me very quickly and made sure other people knew I was good.*	Opportunity; Sponsorship.
Aisha	Man	*He helped me get promoted somewhere else. I was so sad when I left the company. I wanted him to come with me too.*	Opportunity. Sponsorship.
Hafsa	Man	*He helped me get a better position at another company but also kept teaching me how to do my job better.*	Opportunity; Resources.
Safiyah	Man	*It was harder then. . . He was so helpful. Always he talked about me and told people I was good; eventually, I got a better position somewhere else… because of him.*	Opportunity. Sponsorship.
Mariah	Woman	*The [training] company was outside [the organization], and they would spend more money. People liked her, though. She could make things happen… she said it was because she needed help. We knew she didn't; we did. But she never let us to feel that.*	Resources. Privilege.
Asma	Woman	*She was not my boss, but she was well known… I wanted to quit or go to a new place. I told her, but she told me 'No.' She didn't let me leave… She taught me how to deal with difficult people… She always encouraged me and made people feel that I was good [at my job].*	Resources. Sponsorship.
Ruqayah	Man	*He arranged an external company to train the team. It was very helpful – the team benefited a lot. Later, the people talked about how good we were. When we are at meetings, he always asks about our work, and told people that we work very well.*	Resources. Sponsorship.
Afnan	Man	*A position was available. I wanted to apply but knew there was another person who was close with the HR manager. He saw that I was good for this job. He spoke to the head of the department and pushed for me to be interviewed. Then, I got the job.*	Opportunity. Sponsorship.

Table 5

Continued.

Participant	Institutional agent sex	Selected quote	Type of access provided
Basma	Man	*My supervisor did not like me. I never got a chance to move up. There was another position in a different department. The man who supervised this had worked with me on a presentation. He knew I was unhappy and asked me to apply. I was much happier working for him. He encouraged me and helped me [grow].*	Opportunity. Sponsorship.
Dina	Man	*I moved from a supervisor role to head of a department. I worked really hard – I was always there, always met deadlines, always did my work in a right way. But I don't know why, my boss never cared. She never noticed or said anything. One day, her boss asked me for details on a report. When I went to him, he asked me about my work and education – things like that. After that he mentioned my team at big meetings and other things. [Some time] Later, I was promoted to the same level as my boss. You know, we [she and I] became friends after that!*	Opportunity. Sponsorship.

In short, all 13 women identified an individual within the organization who acted in the capacity of an institutional agent. These individuals share common characteristics, including (1) being highly educated, (2) earning terminal degrees in predominantly in Western countries, (3) possessing extensive work experience with at least 20 or more years, (4) working at senior – executive levels within the organization, and (5) were mostly men at 69%. Three women (Asma, Ruqayah, and Mariah) reported that institutional agents had, in different ways, facilitated access to various resources that helped them improve the quality of their work, the workplace, or their well-being. In these instances, these institutional agents frequently leveraged their own social capital, resources, and/or networks. Five of the women mentioned institutional agents who helped them get promoted within their organization: Khadijah, Zainab, Afnan, Basma, and Dine. Another five women – Sawdah, Hafsa, Aisha, Maymoonah, Safiyah –had institutional agents who helped connect them to individuals outside the organization, which they credit with helping them advance outside their organization. Ten of the thirteen participants perceived their institutional agents as having helped advance their careers.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of highly educated Emirati women business leaders on the barriers and facilitators to their career advancement. Additionally, the researchers also sought to investigate the role of institutional agents and mentorship in their career advancement. The findings in this study present certain contradictory evidence to some of the existing literature on working women in Arab countries. For example, there is much research that shows women report experiencing sex-based discrimination at their places of work (Abdalla, 2015; Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015; Assi & Marcati, 2020; Dalacoura, 2019; Haghighat, 2013). This phenomenology suggests that these experiences may not be true for all women. Indeed, the women in this sample reported feeling more supported by men than discriminated against. This can be related to the various initiatives the UAE takes in alignment with the United Nations' 2030 agenda for sustainable development goals (SDGs). These include the establishment

of the UAE Gender Balance Council in 2015. The Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak Women's Entrepreneurship Initiative, which provides financial and non-financial support to women entrepreneurs aimed at promoting gender balance and supporting women entrepreneurs (Peillex et al., 2023). The UAE strives to empower women in leadership roles and entrepreneurship by promoting women's representation in business and providing necessary support and resources. All these initiatives implemented by the UAE contribute toward creating a more inclusive and diverse work environment in line with the SDGs (Al Khayyal et al., 2020; Umar et al., 2020; Warner & Moonesar, 2021).

Another key area of contradiction is the view that workplaces are highly gendered. The results of this study suggest that this may be changing, and professional spaces may not be as gendered as previously thought (Tochhawng, 2019), while others argue that professional spaces are highly defined by gender conceptions and traditional power structures (Rebeiro, 2020). Research works such as Erogul (2011) and Metcalfe's (2011) suggest that gendered environments make it difficult for women to network and engage in public spaces. In recalling her lived experience, Safiyah shares how workplace cultures may have evolved to facilitate greater interaction and networking between and among both sexes.

As women reported feeling more supported by men than discriminated against, this may indicate that networking, for the women in this sample, may have been more accessible than has previously been reported (Erogul, 2011). Several women in the sample expressed a sentiment that a pervasive view of men as sexist is obstructive. Notably, Hafsa and Sawdah went as far as to suggest that women need to help men in overcoming this gender stereotype.

This notion that women are now the ones who need to help men could suggest that long-standing conservative attitudes toward women (Metcalfe, 2011; Moghadam, 2013) might be changing. Research suggesting sex-based barriers with respect to women's participation in public life are widely available (Abdalla, 2015; Erogul, 2011; Metcalfe, 2011; Moghadam, 2013; OECD, 2014; OECD/CAWTAR, 2014). However, certain other research works show an evolving interpretation of gender roles in the Middle East (Afiouni, 2014; Karam & Jamali, 2013; Karam et al., 2013). These researchers suggest that the traditional gender discourses are, to varying degrees, evolving in certain parts of the Middle East. Indeed, the UAE is the standout in the list of Arab countries that have adopted legislative gender quotas (Welborne & Buttorff, 2022). This finding, on the evolving nature of workplace culture and interactions among and between both sexes, would support these earlier findings of such research.

Another area of discussion centers on the support male institutional agents may provide to women seeking career advancement in the workplace. Notably, women in this sample primarily reported that these institutional agents provided support mostly in terms of mentorship and/or sponsorship to junior members of the organization. Kram (1985) delineated mentorship into two primary functions: psychosocial support and career support. Kram notes, along with other researchers, that mentoring focuses on career support, which includes sponsorship, visibility, protection, and coaching; psychosocial support, on the other hand, encompasses counseling, role modeling, and friendship (Beres & Dixon, 2014; Kram, 1985; Srivastava & Jomon, 2013; Tharenou, 2005). The career institutional agents named in this study primarily provided career support, especially in terms of sponsorship. That is, these individuals used their status as senior leaders to provide exposure and credibility to the women in this sample.

Just four participants, or 31% of respondents (Khadijah, Sawdah, Safiyah, and Aisha) cited women as their career institutional agents. This underrepresentation of women career institutional agents may suggest a lack of female senior leaders who can provide the same level of career support. This coincides with assertions made in other studies that suggest that a lack of senior female leaders could not only hamper women's professional growth but also perpetuate the cycle of underrepresentation at the top levels of management (Abdalla, 2015; Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015; Barkhuizen et al., 2022; Kram, 1985; Tharenou, 2005). To enhance the representation of Emirati women in leadership positions, the official portal of the UAE government was Launched in 2023, the National Policy for Empowerment of Emirati Women - 2031 aims to facilitate equitable and comprehensive participation of women in all sectors and enhance the quality of life in the society (National Policy for Empowerment of Emirati Women, n.d.).

Some of the literature available on career advancement in the UAE suggests that women often find career advancement opportunities by changing their organizations (Al Imam & Pinto, 2023). The findings of this study confirm this is true for this purposeful sample of women, as well. Five of the women got promoted within their organization, while eight achieved their career advancement outside their organizations.

out of note, eight of the thirteen women describe men as institutional agents in their careers. For the context of this sample, this may suggest that networking within a culturally conservative context may not be as great of a barrier as previously thought (Erogul, 2011) and could show that gender discourses are changing in certain contexts (Karam & Afiouni, 2013).

Sex-based discrimination in the workplace and gendered work environments are both considered to be barriers with respect to networking (Erogul, 2011; Metcalfe, 2011; Moghadam, 2013). The findings of this study present some contradictory evidence to this claim. Most of the women in this sample reported they did not perceive discrimination to be influencing factor on their career advancement. They also suggested that their workplaces are not strictly gendered. Taken collectively, this may indicate that these barriers to networking are less significant for this group. The participants of this study found networking with individuals who could facilitate access to certain career advancement opportunities to be both possible and effective. These findings indicate professional discourse may be changing. It is also important to bear in mind, however, that this sample is highly specific and small when compared to the greater population. As such, these findings certainly cannot be generalized to the broader population of women in the UAE.

6. Conclusion

Gendered workspaces, often associated with conservative cultural influences, have been identified as significant barriers for women (Abdalla, 2015; Erogul, 2011), as it hinders them from networking with fellow professionals. However, the participants of this study have suggested that workplaces may no longer be as gender-segregated as previously reported. In fact, a majority of the sample, 69% of the participants, named men as their career institutional agents. These institutional agents contributed significantly to their professional development, by acting as their institutional agents and offering them access to opportunities, resources, exposure, and credibility. This may present contradictory evidence to the claim of Tharenou (2005) who was of the view that mixed-gendered mentor–mentee associations aren't optimal. This

contradiction could indicate a greater willingness of both men and women to engage in professional mentor–mentee relationships among the current study's sample. It could also be simply a result of a scarcity of female mentors in the organizations and indicate a need for more women in senior-leadership positions who are willing to mentor other women.

Another important facet worth noting is that the networking referred to by the participants was strictly within professional contexts, and there was little to no mention of informal networking outside the workplace. Several research studies have found that women across countries are rarely involved in informal, after-hours socialization and networking with their colleagues (Erogul, 2011; Greguletz et al., 2019). Since this informal networking was not a direct point of focus of this study, these results can neither confirm nor contradict these assertions.

This research attempts to contribute to the emerging body of literature concerning the lived experiences of working women in the Arabian Gulf. Existing research in this domain may provide somewhat generalized views and perspectives of women professionals. These often suggest that the nature of societies in the Arabian Gulf are riddled with socially constructed gender roles and work cultures which present unique obstacles that hinder women's advancement. While these assertions are not baseless, they do not show a complete picture of the widely differing experiences of women. This study brings to light lived experiences of highly educated, well-paid, successful, and professionally motivated Emirati women. By doing so, this study seeks to put forth the presence of multiple narratives of lived experiences to join those from the MENA region. This difference in perspective is crucial to enhancing the knowledge concerning working women in the Arabian Gulf and Middle East more broadly. The findings presented here, in conjunction with pervious literature, offer diverse narratives and discourse, which can better enable decision makers understand and make use of this knowledge to implement more responsive actions for the empowerment of all women.

The findings of this study challenge the previously established notion that sex-based discrimination as a predominant obstacle for women advancing their careers into leadership positions. While this finding is certainly true for this small sample of women, it also calls for further investigation with a much broader sample size in the UAE to test for generalizability. The findings also highlighted the importance of male institutional agents in the career advancement of Emirati women. The present study used only a single source for data collection, however. It could be worthwhile to investigate the role of male institutional agents in the career using multi-source data, which also includes the accounts of institutional agents.

Future research could contribute to this body of work by exploring the degree to which successful Emirati women business leaders, who have been mentored or sponsored by institutional agents, later engage in mentoring emerging female professionals. The importance of institutional agents has been established in areas of the literature. The findings of this study offer further support to the significance these individuals have in the career advancement of women. While not all women reported they had advanced in their careers, all participants could identify someone who assisted in the career in some way. The specific ways in which these institutional agents (who are predominantly men) facilitate women's career development are largely unexplored in the context of the Arabian Gulf. As such, it requires research attention to better understand the career advancement and professional lives of women.

Acknowledgements

Funding Information

Competing Interests

There are no competing interests to declare.

Author Biography

Dr. Alexandria Proff is an Assistant Professor of Education at the American University of Ras Al Khaimah where she teaches courses in leadership, research, and change. She was born and raised in southern California, USA, where she earned her Bachelor's, Master's, and teaching credentials. She earned her doctoral degree from the University of Southern California in 2018 after many years in the field. Dr. Proff currently serves as the Department Chair of Humanities and Social Sciences. She is an experienced educational leader who has served in senior positions at primary, secondary, and tertiary education settings. Successfully leading change initiatives in schools and universities, she has developed an extensive track record as a leader of positive change for performance improvement. Whether training teachers, coaching leaders, or speaking with the public, Dr. Proff emphasizes the need to put theory into practice and provide individuals with tools they need to improve their performance and achieve their goals.

Ms. Rasha Musalam is an experienced professional in the field of education with a career spanning over 23 years in educational administration. Throughout her journey, she has lent her skills and expertise to various educational institutions. In addition to her administrative expertise, Rasha has also served as a research assistant at the esteemed American University of Ras Al Khaimah (AURAK) for over three years. During this time, she has actively engaged in research activities, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the field of education. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Educational Policy and Leadership.

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