Feminizing leadership in Arab societies: the perspectives of Omani female leaders

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Abstract

Purpose
The recent appointment of a number of women to leading policy making positions in the Arab Gulf State of Oman marks a significant departure from the traditionally exclusive male dominated decision-making arena, and ushers an end to an era of exclusive patriarchal dominance in leadership positions. This study aims to shed light on this evolving phase of women's empowerment in Oman, and attempts to capture their traits, experiences and challenges as women leaders in conservative, male dominated work environments.

Design/methodology/approach
The study analyzes the views of ten Omani women who achieved extraordinary levels of career success. In depth interviews were conducted using an interview guide purposely designed to solicit responses pertaining to their early socialization patterns; personal traits; work/family role conflict and their vision of the challenges facing working and professional women in Omani society.

Findings
Contrary to social perceptions and stereotypes, Omani women in leading positions are highly motivated and ambitious. Their successful transition to elevated positions can be attributed to their early socialization experiences which valued education, supportive parents (particularly the father), and equal treatment with their male siblings. They are challenged by the incongruence of their roles as female leaders relative to the prevailing social values and expectations towards women and their traditional role in society.

Research limitations/implications
The study does not investigate the extent to which such appointments may have transformed gender relations in Oman nor its impact on women's roles in Omani organizations.

Practical implications
Empowering women requires policies and human resource programs that support this goal. This paper has implications for gender policy development as well as diversity and leadership training for women.

Originality/value
Given the dearth of research on this topic, the study contributes to understanding the dynamics of female leadership in this increasingly important world region, and raises awareness among women (and men alike) regarding the unique experiences and challenges of Arab women leaders.

Keywords
Leadership Oman Women Cultural studies

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