

## SUMMARY

In the increasingly globalized context of the UAE, women's leadership development programs have become high on the agenda of government, academic and private sector organizations. Accordingly, the UAE is an interesting location to examine the growth in women's leadership development programs and to better understand their evolution, goals and impacts. These programs vary greatly in levels of impact, some providing models to follow and continue building upon and others offering a learning opportunity on what works and what doesn't in the UAE particularly and the region more generally. With a roundtable discussion on women's leadership development as a backdrop, which brought together experts from three key sectors (private, public, academic), this policy brief reevaluates women's leadership development programs in the UAE. Through a diversity of perspectives, important questions regarding women's leadership development are posed with the ultimate goal to present key recommendations to policy makers in the UAE about how to improve and strengthen such programs.

# Rethinking Women Leadership Development Programs in the UAE

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## Women's Leadership Development in the UAE

Since the oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s, the rapid development in the Gulf, and in particular the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has been striking (Nederveen Pieterse & Khondker, 2010). The UAE is experiencing both globalizing and localizing processes simultaneously and these bring both opportunities and challenges for women in the nation (Al Dabbagh & Grey, 2011) and the Arab region more broadly (Doumato & Pripstien, 2003). In the increasingly globalized context of the UAE, women's leadership development programs have become high on the agenda of government, academic and private sector organizations. Accordingly, the UAE is an interesting example to look at and assess the growth in women's leadership development programs and to better understand their evolution, goals and impact.

At the core of the UAE government's strategy throughout the past decade has been the support and empowerment of women, and the recognition that they are crucial players in the nation building process. Much of the official discourse on the role of women focuses on their role in national development, international competitiveness and global success. Both private and public sector organizations acknowledge the key role of women's leadership in strengthening talent pools, promoting entrepreneurship, driving investment, cultivating dynamism and increasing organizational creativity and proficiency.

Clearly, the importance of women's empowerment and capacity building is well understood in the UAE—translating into much interest and work in women's leadership development and to the establishment of programs that push forward this agenda. In public organizations, private companies and academic institutions, there is a plethora of programs targeted at women, with "leadership development" at the core of their mandates. These programs take on various types and scales: national leadership development programs sponsored and led by the government; programs incorporated within university curricula; programs within private sector companies or non-governmental organizations as well as for profit consultancies and commercial centers offering customized and tailored women leadership training (for a comprehensive categorization, see Al Dabbagh & Assaad, 2010).



These programs vary greatly in levels of impact, running the gamut from success to failure, some providing models to follow and continue building upon and others offering a learning opportunity on what works and what does not in the UAE particularly and the region more generally. In light of this, the Gender and Public Policy Program, building on its on-going interest in women's leadership development programs, organized a roundtable discussion entitled "Rethinking Women Leadership Development Programs in the UAE," which brought to the table a highly select group of ten senior level managers, program directors and academics with diverse backgrounds and varying perspectives from the private and public sectors as well as academic institutions who have been involved in developing and running women leadership development programs. Critical questions were posed such as—What is actually meant by women's leadership development in the UAE? How do programs develop in the context of the global/local nexus in the UAE? From an applied perspective, how can women's leadership development programs be better designed in the context of financial constraints and institutional discontinuities? What lessons can be learned from recent experiments and in what ways can they be improved in the future? What challenges have leadership development programs faced and how can these challenges be overcome? – with the ultimate goal to present key recommendations to policy makers in the UAE about how to improve and strengthen women's leadership development programs.

This policy brief focuses primarily on programs which are explicitly labeled as women's leadership development programs. Three main types of programs are represented as follows:

*Government and semi-government supported women's leadership programs:*

These "national" programs are generally highly competitive and target local women from across the UAE who have demonstrated a

clear potential to become leaders within the government, helping to prepare them to hold key leadership posts in the public sector. This group also includes programs administered by semi-government institutions (such as chambers of commerce) which provide platforms for women to expand their networks and access resources to help push forward their respective business ventures and projects.

*Corporate leadership development programs for women:*

These are in-house programs within corporations that aim to create a sustainable environment for women's career progression and retention and to ensure that women reach top level management positions.

*Leadership development in academia:*

These programs institutionalize leadership education within students' academic experiences by including a "leadership" strand throughout curricula. Such programs take a holistic approach and aim to move beyond offering just the theoretical underpinnings of leadership, to provide practical opportunities for students to practice leadership.

For the most part, these types of programs promote women's career advancements; however, some are more encompassing, including topics as diverse as ethics and values, self awareness, global awareness, familial relations and responsibilities, nutrition and healthy living, intercultural intelligence, volunteerism and community involvement, mental toughness, networking, identity, language, to name just a few.

## Summary of Roundtable

### Discussion

The strong conviction that women's leadership development is not only needed, but also important and highly impactful was evident from the discussion with practitioners from education, private sector and government. Women, as a group, are exposed to gender biases that often

times work against their career progression and overall advancement. Some of these biases are more obvious than others such as lack of role models and proper mentoring; commitments to personal and family responsibilities which often fall on the woman; exclusion from informal networks that may help with access to important information; lack of confidence of women to take on certain jobs (technical for example) that are not perceived appropriate for women; navigating a system that is predominantly male; cultural beliefs and traditions; lack of support from leadership for women's advancement; the glass ceiling etc.

Other less obvious biases are much more subtle and difficult to identify, often times referred to as "second generation" gender biases (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011; Sturm, 2001). One example is underlying stereotypes in which thinking of the word "leader" has people automatically (and most often unconsciously) thinking of a man. These stereotypes have implications on career scripts which often see women branch out to support roles (i.e. positions that will support the "male leader") that do not lead to the highest levels within organizations. Another example is workplace structures, practices and patterns of interaction that may inadvertently favor men, such as the way information flows about opportunities for leadership. If and how one has access to information through various networks (formal and informal) has a deep impact on upward mobility. The less transparent and the more ambiguous this process is, the higher the probability is for gendered outcomes. Furthermore, numerous studies conducted in the west have shown that when women negotiate, for example for a raise, they are often penalized; people actually report a disinclination to work with these women (Bowles & Babcock, 2009, in press; Bowles, Babcock & Lai, 2007).

There is a need to be more astute analysts on the situation of women in order to encourage environments that allow them to thrive to their

fullest potential. As one discussant put it, "... there are silver linings within the constraints [put on women]...our aim is to build our schema not just in our own mind, but in the collective consciousness of a diverse array of women leading. And I think that is where I see the essence of the goal."

The daily initiatives of the discussants are at the heart of this goal. Many of these women started conversations and programs within their organizations as part of their own personal initiatives. At a leading local university in the UAE, two professors led a "leadership conversation" in which they developed a conceptual framework for institutionalizing a leadership curriculum that acts as a resource for all colleges and departments. A partner at an international consultancy, who was heavily involved in recruitment efforts in the UAE, realized that the number of women entering the firm was very low. To address this shortage, she took it upon herself to introduce the Women's Initiative (which was part of the company's global agenda and was successful in other countries) and adapted it to the local realities of the UAE. This initiative—which included mentorship and networking, introducing women friendly policies and lobbying with leadership to make women's voices and demands heard—was highly successful and raised the number of women from three to seventeen in just three years. A board member at one of the local chambers of commerce businesswomen's councils initiated an incubator for young women artists by helping build their leadership capabilities. She utilized her own financial and personal resources to support the entrepreneurial ventures in jewelry design of these promising young women.

Although there were commonalities in the reasons why women leadership development programs were deemed necessary, the specificities within and diversities among the institutions made for different approaches in strategy, planning and implementation.

Even so, there were common “predictors of success” that were found to be mutual:

*Buy in from the top* was considered one of the most important predictors of success. When senior leadership makes the issue of women’s empowerment a priority, this opens up ample space to develop meaningful and impactful programs. When clear messages are continually reinforced by leadership that women are an important talent pool, this creates a culture within institutions that is supportive and encouraging of women and a more sustainable environment for their career progression. Buy in can take on different forms, some more explicit than others. In one case, messages from leadership were formally and clearly “spelled out” and were included among the “business imperatives” of the organization; consistently circulated for all to remember. These included the following: 1) We will not tolerate prejudice on the basis of gender; 2) We will focus relentlessly on providing our women employees and partners with every opportunity to progress; and 3) We will do this, not by creating quotas, or applying artificial affirmative action processes – but by measurement and awareness.

Providing a platform for communication among women on such issues helps to change mind sets and to push forward the women agenda within institutions.

*Networking and mentorship* was another key predictor of success. It imperative that institutions provide an environment which is “safe” to discuss women related topics, which can range from personal family issues, career paths and maternity leave to the matter of the glass ceiling at work.

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mentorship databases were created, where volunteers at various levels mentor the younger employees. In others, formal networks within institutions were created to push for various changes. For example, in one of the global private sector companies, the following internal networks were established within the overall Women’s Program:

- 1) *Women to Women*, which has an internal focus, connecting women in one country with those in another;
- 2) *Women to Leadership*, also with an internal focus which concentrates on engaging leadership on issues important to women;
- 3) *Women to Clients*, which has an external focus, looks to connect women within the company to clients who express an interest in working with women; and
- 4) *Women to Community*, in which women are connected with their communities through corporate social responsibility projects and initiatives.

*Champions for the cause* was the third common predictor of success and was found to be necessary for the above mentioned two. Through networking and mentoring programs, identifying “champions” who are passionate about women’s issues and who are in high or influential positions is fundamental to pushing forward the cause. This bottom up approach, which identifies strong persons to take these initiatives to the top, not only helps change the culture, making it more “natural” to discuss women’s issues, but also translates to positive changes on the ground.

Similar to having shared success factors, there were also a number of shared concerns. Despite much progress and positive outputs in running women’s leadership initiatives, there are also challenges to overcome– many of which are common.

*Assessing impact and benefits* was a main challenge. Quantifying and measuring the impact

that programs have, and rethinking models to increase this impact on women's leadership is neither an easy nor clear cut process. As one participant stated, "What is it that we are ultimately trying to achieve and how do we measure it? What are the key objectives when it comes to women's leadership development? What are we all trying to change and influence? What is going to work best for the UAE? Is it focusing on the women? Is it focusing on culture and society? Is it making impact on organizations? These are the big questions that do not have a single answer and that will continue to evolve over the years." At one organization, which focuses on women's leadership development training courses, they consider the "hierarchy of culture, society and economy," and look at the different "layers" that influence or affect leadership opportunities for women in the UAE and through this approach try to measure impact. These layers include government, where they study regulations, laws, policies or programs that set the structural framework for the UAE; organizational structures within corporations, which can make or break opportunities for women; and the individual, the woman herself, what are the tools and resources that help her attain her goals and potential.

*Lack of region specific resources and tool kits* was a second challenge. Many resources which act as guides for people establishing or running women leadership development programs are available, and easily accessible through websites, blogs, workshops and conferences, and through specialized networks. Similar support resources which are region specific are not readily available in the UAE and in the region more generally—the need for developing "tool kits" that are not just imported from the west, but are actually tailored to the specificities of the region, was clearly identified.

*Managing diversity in the UAE* is particularly challenging and an issue which many struggled with. The large number of expatriates in

the country, who actually outnumber the local population at approximately 70% (Mirkin, 2010 & World Bank, 2011), makes for a highly diverse community. It is not uncommon that young Emirati students at local universities are primarily taught by English speaking international professors, or that a leadership training course has over ten nationalities represented. It is fundamental to move beyond the idea that "one size fits all," and to take this diversity into consideration when planning leadership development programs. Emirati participants recognized the benefits of learning from "Western models"; however, they also stressed that a learning oriented dialogue is crucial to develop indigenous conceptions of women's leadership that are relevant to local realities. The findings of a one year "leadership conversation" at a local university showed leadership as being multilayered and very complex, reflecting the complexities of the UAE. A need for more lived experience, more clinical practice and more engagement with diverse groups and a focus on cultural and global awareness should underlie leadership education at the university level. A women's leadership specialist working in the government reiterated the need to move beyond merely importing theories from the international literature and teaching them to students. Stating that, "there is a gap between theories in academia and practices on the ground, and this gap is getting much bigger, and bridging it is very important," she stressed the importance of intersectoral dialogue between government, private sector and academia.

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## Thematic Analysis

### *Leadership Development as Process versus Outcome*

It was found that very little room was made for evaluation and experience sharing on women's leadership development programs and that a context in which practitioners come together to discuss processes and compare notes on outcomes is missing in the UAE. The limited access to information on best practices and lack of critical reflection on what has worked and what has not has resulted in scarce resources and knowledge accumulation, (such as for example tool kits, case studies, research) that is based on region specific experiences. While this is not unique to women's leadership development (Al Dabbagh & Assaad, 2010), it is certainly evident.

### *Leadership Programs Working in Silos*

Organizations from within similar industries tend to work separately, but an even larger gap is found intersectorally, between academia, the private sector and the government. Furthermore, there is a difference between programs offered to local UAE women and expatriate women. Local women primarily receive their training in state universities and through government employment for the most part, while expatriates are usually exposed to programs from within the private sector. This separation results in a disconnection among the women as well as the learning and development opportunities offered. Closing these gaps is a crucial step for ensuring a more inclusive and productive context for women's leadership development in the UAE in which the different sectors both learn from and complement each other.

### *Negotiating the Local/Global Nexus*

Different views exist on the "local" versus the "global." Some practitioners believe that leadership programs should be developed from within the local contexts. In other words, the "local" should be the base from which leadership theory is developed and accordingly, the pro-

grams should reflect this, whereby local voices emerge. In this view, leadership development must take into consideration the specificities of the local context, with a strong consideration and presence of tradition and culture which are to be held in high esteem. Other practitioners assume that the point of leadership development is to "go global," arguing that the UAE is a highly globalized society, and that being competitive and successful in this setting is dependent on acquiring a global leadership skill set. In this view, practitioners believe that programs should promote Western models of leadership despite the local— that global models and ideals of women's leadership development need not adhere to local traditions and concepts in order to be effective. In both cases, a binary of local versus global is assumed and practitioners were concerned about how these 'two spheres' should be negotiated effectively. What is actually needed, however, is the creation of more complex models which embrace hybridity and do not assume one perspective (global or local) over the other, and which in turn better reflect the reality of lived experiences in the UAE.

### *Outreach and Exposure to Local Role Models*

There is a substantial lack of outreach and exposure of young people in the UAE to female role models from the country and the region more generally. These role models should not be limited to highly accomplished and famous individuals, but rather younger successful Emiratis who have faced and overcome challenges in their careers with whom upcoming generations can actually identify and relate with. Encouraging this type of interaction is not only essential to expanding young women's aspirations, but also to advancing models of culturally authentic leadership.

## Key Recommendations

### *Buy in from Leadership at the Policy Level*

One of the fundamental success factors for women's leadership development is buy in from

senior management and leadership within institutions and organizations from all sectors. Clear messages and incentives from leadership on the importance of women's leadership development have contributed to changing mindsets and organizational culture to be more inclusive and supportive of women. In light of the success that "buy in" has brought within organizations and institutions these should be expanded. The UAE government has already made significant strides in supporting women's leadership and empowerment programs, but these engagements can be both deeper and broader in scope (Al Dabbagh & Grey, 2011). For example, a more thorough understanding of public policies needed to support women's career advancement across the life span or addressing problematic areas in personal status law reforms that may limit women's decision making ability are two examples of policy areas that need further government commitment. A government-industry task force, which is inclusive of academics, policy makers and private sector representatives can help inform this process.

#### *Creating Safe Spaces for Productive and Sustainable Engagement*

Discussions about women's leadership in the UAE, which take place in a context where the global and the local are often seen as binary opposites and where negotiations about the two are gendered (Al Dabbagh & Grey, 2011) means that these discussions are both contentious and polarizing. Conversations about women's leadership are by default conversations which touch on: what leadership means, why are we conducting leadership development and for whom? These are questions fraught with political impli-

cations and any substantive discussion requires the provision of a "safe space" which brings together women from different backgrounds and who have different affiliations that can find ways to discuss women's leadership development and exchange views liberally, with more openness and less self-censorship. This requires non-governmental intervention/funding and an affiliation that is not restricted to a particular organization to ensure genuine exchange. Government support for this can come through ensuring that regulations are friendly to establishing NGOs and that women are provided with a space for engagement on leadership issues.

#### *Networks for Theorists and Practitioners*

Reconciling the tensions between perceived notions of the 'local' and the 'global' is an interdisciplinary and intersectoral process which is highly complex. It is not enough to import western centric models for women's leadership development programs and assume they will work in the local context. Models for women's leadership development programs must include an authentic voice and emerge from local realities, while also being compatible with the globalized context of the UAE. It is important to create intersectoral and collaborative local, regional and international networks of theorists and practitioners from different backgrounds (public, private and academia) to exchange knowledge, share experiences and critically reflect on work beyond their respective institutions. Although these networks will engage in wider global dialogues, their focus should be on the local realities of the UAE and the region more broadly to come up with women's leadership development models that emerge from within.

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