

This is a pre-publication version of the following article:

Mattar, M., van Nieuwerburgh, C., Barr, M., & Jacob, Y. (2018). A role for coaching to support leadership development? The experiences of female Arab leaders: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 13(2), 78-87.

<https://shop.bps.org.uk/international-coaching-psychology-review-vol-13-no-2-autumn-2018>

A role for coaching to support leadership development? The experiences of female Arab leaders: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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Abstract

Objectives: This study aimed to explore how eight female leaders from four Arab countries experienced their leadership journey, and to consider a potential role for coaching in that developmental journey.

Design and Method: A qualitative design was applied to explore the participants' experiences. Data collection was through semi-structured interviews, and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data.

Results: Four themes emerged: (1) A continuous, exhausting struggle; (2) Fulfilment and pride in achievements; (3) Adoption of coping strategies; (4) Engagement in personal and professional development.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that coaching could be an appropriate intervention to increase the individual leadership potential of females in the Arab world.

Keywords: female leaders; Arab world; coaching; interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Introduction

The evidence from coaching research demonstrates the value of coaching as a significant tool for leadership development (Passmore, 2010, p. 8). There is also a high level of recognition of the growing need for coaches working internationally to integrate cross-cultural awareness into their practice (Rosinski, 2010; van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). This study contributes to cross-cultural awareness by exploring the experiences of eight female leaders from four different Arab countries during their transformation into their leadership roles. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. The implications for practice and future research are considered, including discussion about the potential role of coaching to contribute to the leadership development of females in the Arab world.

Literature Review

Status of female leaders in the corporate world

In their meta-analysis of contextual moderators, Paustian-Underdahl et al (2014) showed that there is essentially no significant difference between genders in leadership effectiveness. Yet women remain under-represented at senior levels in the corporate world and face barriers to advancement, despite the tremendous social progress and improvement in attitudes towards women in leadership in modern societies. For example, in their 2015 study of women in the corporate America workplace, LeanIn.org and McKinsey & Company concluded that women were still marginalised at all levels in the corporate world. The major findings of the study drew attention to several barriers for women progressing into leadership roles. These included: (1) The leadership ambition gap persists. (2) Gender diversity is not widely believed to be a priority. (3) There is still inequality at home. (4) Women and men have very different professional networks. The study was repeated in 2016 and extended in 2017 (Thomas et al, 2017), concluding ‘Until we treat gender diversity, and diversity more broadly, like the business imperative it is, true progress will be hard to achieve.

The progress of women leaders in the Arab world

When women’s progress in some Arab countries is compared with countries in Europe and North America, there are differences (Aguirre, Cavanaugh & Sabbagh, 2011); for example only about 36 per cent of women in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) work outside the home, compared with about 75% of women in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

However, gradually, women in Arab countries are securing more leadership roles. For example, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is ranked as a leader in gender equality in the Arab world, where women are empowered at all levels and play a significant role in society (Global Women’s Forum, 2016). The UAE has set a precedent in terms of gender balance, as women now constitute 66% of the public sector workforce, compared with the global average of 48%, with 30% in senior and decision-making positions. Women who run their own businesses and are

members of the chamber of commerce and industry, numbered 22,000 in March 2016 (Moran, 2016).

In a small scale study of women in senior positions in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates - a traditionally male dominant culture - Aguirre, Cavanaugh, and Sabbagh (2011) found that the women who had broken boundaries shared the following three characteristics: (1) Constant improvement, which manifests in unending development; (2) Studied discomfort: taking on new challenges with a willingness to go outside their comfort zone; and, (3) Quiet confidence: a certainty in their abilities. Elgamal's (2012) study of 101 successful experienced female leaders in Kuwait, Tunisia and Egypt noted that the female leaders were perceived as superior to male leaders with respect to cooperation, aggressiveness, competitiveness and concern about interpersonal relationships.

Personalised developmental support options

Leadership development must incorporate a constellation of practices in order to be effective (e.g. Mintzberg, 2004, Mumford et al., 2000). Because leaders face unique challenges in different situations and at different stages of their development journey in various environments, it has been argued that 'one-size-fits-all' interventions are not an appropriate strategy for leadership development (Guillen & Ibarra, 2010). Leadership development interventions should be tailored to fit the goals, aspirations, potential and capabilities of each leader. Context is very important (Grint, 2005; Porter and McLaughlin, 2006). The best leaders select from a wide variety of available interventions and resources and make their choices about which options suit them as individuals, the cultures they belong to and the context (Passmore 2010). Given the unique challenges and opportunities faced by aspiring female leaders in the Arab world, executive coaching may emerge as an appropriate intervention to consider in this context.

Coaching

Passmore (2010, p. 7) proposes a range of ways in which coaching can contribute to leadership development: transferring learning from theory to the workplace; enhancing skills; developing greater self-awareness; enhancing motivation; developing confidence and self-regard; and improving wellbeing. A meta-analysis conducted by Theeboom et al (2014) highlighted that coaching has significant positive effects on performance and skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes, and goal-directed self-regulation. Their meta-analytic findings indicated that coaching is an effective tool for improving the functioning of individuals in organisations.

It has also been suggested that coaching is an important mechanism for supporting women in senior roles (Simpson, 2008), impacting positively on confidence. Simpson contends that the impact of the coaching with its resultant increase in the participants' confidence, led to new thinking, new tools, strategies and knowledge, and new behaviour.

Continued research into the effectiveness of coaching is needed (Grant et al, 2010), using a range of methods to deepen our understanding of coaching as a force for good in organizational and individual well-being (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). To move the evidence base forward, Grant (2012) argues for the need to increase the use of standardized outcome measures, to

augment other measures. In a discussion about the current state of research into coaching, Theeboom (2016) posits that research needs to shift its focus from the question ‘Does it work?’ to ‘How does it work?’, in order to uncover the causal mechanisms underlying effective coaching.

Method

This study aimed to explore the experiences of eight Arab females on their development journey into their current leadership roles.

The Participants

Homogeneity and intentional selection are crucial characteristics of samples, according to IPA methodology, whose participants have common experiences about specified conditions (Willig, 2008). The eight participants (Table 1) occupied middle to senior leadership positions in a variety of industries in Arab countries. Participants were recruited from the professional network of the researcher and through recommendations by clients. Having received a letter of invitation, participants signed a consent form prior to their interview, which was conducted at their office or via Skype.

Table 1 — Demographics of the participants

Participant	Ethnic Origin	Education Level	Leadership Position
P1	Arab – United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Master’s degree	Chief Executive Officer
P2	Arab – United Arab Emirates (UAE)	PhD	Senior Director
P3	Arab – United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Bachelor’s degree	Human Resources Specialist
P4	Arab – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)	Master’s degree	General Manager
P5	Arab - Jordan	Bachelor’s degree	Manager
P6	Arab - Jordan	MBA	Business owner
P7	Arab - Lebanon	PhD	Business owner
P8	Arab - Lebanon	Master’s degree	Business owner

Data collection

The participants engaged in a 30 to 45-minute semi-structured interview with questions designed to help them make meaning of their personal experience as female leaders in the Arab world. The questions covered: (1) Their experiences of their leadership journey and development; (2) Personal challenges faced as female leaders; and, (3) The kinds of support available to them for their leadership development. The questions were deliberately general and broad to allow participants to go into detail and provide specific examples from their daily experiences and life.

Despite all participants being native Arabic speakers, the interviews were conducted in English. Therefore, the participants were given ample time to express themselves freely. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, then transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 2009) was chosen as the most appropriate research design due to its suitability for gaining a rich idiographic account of each participant's experiences. It allowed the researcher and participants to engage in an analytic dialogue within the framework of double hermeneutics, known as the two-stage interpretation process (Smith & Osborn, 2008), where the interviewee is interpreting their own experiences as they speak, while the researcher is interpreting the participant's words.

During the data analysis stage, the researcher implemented IPA's systematic and practical principles (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Careful consideration was given to each individual participant's experience, as it represents a unique and new psychological world and at the same time offers distinctive voices within the shared experiences of the participants (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher listened at least twice to each recorded interview and read verbatim transcriptions at least three times to ensure that the semantic content of each response was captured, and that an active engagement in the social and mental world of each participant was accomplished (Smith et al., 2009).

Each transcript was analysed individually. The researcher drafted initial notes in the right margin of the transcript. This interpretative note-taking on the use of language and key phrases helped the researcher become more familiar with the participants' experiences and stories (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Next, all words, phrases or sentences that would contribute to the emerging themes were identified and labelled in the left margin. The raw analytical data was reduced by connecting the emerging themes across participants within clusters, superordinate themes and sub-themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This process was repeated for each of the transcripts individually.

Ethical considerations

Throughout the study, the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) was followed. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of East London.

Reflexivity

Despite being an Arabic female leader, the researcher accepted participants as experiential experts, and concentrated the research focus on their statements by isolating her personal experience, feelings and biases (Merriam, 2002). The analytic process, however, necessarily reflected the mutual evaluation of both the researcher and the participants (Smith et al, 2009).

Results

The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 – The themes of the participants’ experiences

Themes	Quote
Theme 1: A continuous, exhausting struggle	“...even if you go for a business dinner, you are socially misunderstood, and you are not taken seriously....”
Theme 2: Fulfilment and pride in achievements	“...It was a wonderful experience on the personal and on the work side ... it made me stronger and better...”
Theme 3: Adoption of coping strategies	“You learn to accept it and find avenues of getting around it...”
Theme 4: Engagment in personal and professional development	“Coaching ... was one of the most important training I got because it was focusing on my personal skills and issues that I need to develop...”

As female leaders in the Arab world, all participants had experienced a challenging journey. Despite the challenges, two of the participants had also found their leadership journey to be fulfilling.

Theme 1: A continuous, exhausting struggle

Participants had found being a female leader in the Arab world to be exhausting, draining and difficult. They had experienced barriers in their current positions as female leaders, through the cultural boundaries imposed by society, for example their communities rejecting women leaders, and not acknowledging the importance of a woman’s career success.

“It’s been very exhausting...” [P6]

“This is a very harsh war...” [P1]

“You are harshly criticised by the community... even when I had to go and visit institutions you would be taken lightly by male counter[part]...even if you go for a business dinner, you are socially misunderstood, and you are not taken seriously....” [P6]

The participants’ work environments did not encourage female leadership. The participants in this study experienced a lack of co-operation from male colleagues. Some participants did not have basic facilities such as transportation and financial support.

“...maybe offline conversations happen that relate to work...culturally women don’t go out for lunch with their male bosses...so if my bosses go out for lunch with my peers who are men they have some conversations...they will say, oh we forgot to tell you we made this decision during lunch...” [P2]

All eight participants touched on the topic of marital status, hinting that being married may hinder their leadership progress as females in the Arab world due to the culture that imposes more family responsibilities on women:

“I got married and I now have responsibilities, and trying to have work life balance ... it's been extremely difficult to maintain my leadership role, and at the same time keep my family together and look after my child and my husband...” [P6]

Theme 2: Fulfilment and pride in achievements

Despite the struggles and the challenges they faced, two of the participants expressed pride in their exceptional achievements, which were a source of happiness and fulfilment.

“...as an entrepreneur I learned a lot, because I started from zero, I had no support whatsoever but I managed to establish a very successful business and it was the number one recruitment agency in the country for four years...” [P6]

“I was the only woman in the company...in that high position ... and after the first year I earned the respect from everybody because I...achieved above the target by 300%, which was an amazing thing to do and nobody did it before me... It was a wonderful experience on the personal and on the work side...it made me stronger and better... [P4]

Regardless of the difficult experiences that they had encountered, and the many hindrances they had faced during their development journey, participants had found ways to cope with and overcome the challenges. First, they had adopted a range of coping strategies and second, they had prioritised their own personal and professional development.

Theme 3: Adoption of coping strategies

Ways of coping included being determined to demonstrate their abilities and worth to male colleagues, learning to accept the challenges, and finding different ways to work around them. All participants believed they had proved themselves through high performance and positive results despite their circumstances.

“...once you prove you are competent... they will start taking you seriously and accepting you as a leader...I work really hard, I put in an endless amount of effort, but at the expense of my health...I always meet the challenge and I always deliver regardless” [P6]

Participants had found other ways of dealing with the challenges, building trust and staying positive in an attempt to work around the hindrances. They also coped through their strong focus on moral values, courage, honesty and integrity.

“So I keep myself thinking positively and I try to find other ways to get what I want... You learn to accept it and find avenues of getting around it...” [P4]

“...one of the things that makes you a better leader are the moral values” [P1]

“... it's really important to take risks in order to achieve your goals, you need to have courage otherwise you cannot move forward, ...you have...to have some integrity, you have also to always tell the truth...” [P8]

Theme 4: Engagement in personal and professional development

Participants prioritised their personal and professional development as another strategy for responding to the challenges of their leadership journey. Continuous learning was experienced as important, with females needing to maintain an active personal interest in their own development to make sure they were up to date in this fast-moving world.

“...you always need more because everything moves fast... technology is moving so fast forward you have to attend training, you have to keep on developing yourself, your skills non-stop... It is a continuous learning journey...” [P8]

“...this is a personal interest, intrinsically...(you) need to stimulate yourself intellectually...” [P1]

A range of development opportunities were used, including reading, conferences, training sessions, open days and study. Almost all of the participants’ horizons were broadened through travel, as a means of accessing development opportunities which would not otherwise be available.

“I started going to conferences” [P2]

“I studied a lot...conferences, open days... executive coaching for me is part of this” [P7]

“I travelled frequently and that played a great part in my development...” [P6]

“...I consider it [*travel*] also as a good backbone since it gives you a lot of experience that you cannot earn in schools...” [P8]

Sources of support for development were varied. Some participants received little or no support from their organisation. Others were supported by their families, their employer, or through government sponsorship. Support from their employer included mentoring and learning ‘on the job’.

“I always have to dig up information about training, trips and workshops ...I have always had to fight for them to accept and to give me some time off to join those training sessions...I have to join in the evenings or during weekends... I financed all of them...” [P6]

“I was groomed for the next level...It was a lot of on the job development, I learned a lot on the job and as I was progressing...” [P2]

“I was sponsored by the government to be sent to the UK” [P1]

“The development initiative... some of it was by the organisation I worked for” [P8]

“I’ve had the support from my family... my bosses have always been supportive and they are men... I’ve been very lucky because I had leaders who were men and who believed in me” [P2]

Participants highlighted the benefits of coaching as a development tool. They were particularly struck by the impact on their personal skills, and by the ability of coaching to ‘unlock’ their inner resources.

“Coaching...it is amazing when you have someone who can help you to unlock your creativity and maximise your potential... how you can manage your life smartly...” [P6]

“Coaching...was one of the most important training I got because it was focusing on my personal skills and issues that I need to develop... I always knew that I had issues to fix...it helped me find my way and draw a map...it increased my self-confidence...” [P4]

Discussion

This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis to contribute to our knowledge of the experiences of female leaders in the Arab world. It sought to increase our understanding of female leaders' experiences, and the potential role of coaching to contribute to their leadership development.

The challenges

The findings of the IPA study revealed that the participants experienced significant challenges, which echoed the barriers facing women in corporate America (LeanIn and McKinsey & Company, 2015), of a persisting leadership gap, gender diversity not being a priority, and inequality at home.

Although the participants acknowledged the sense of fulfilment and pride in their achievements, they also highlighted significant difficulties and struggles experienced during their leadership journey. Despite the modest positive changes in the environment in the Arab world, the participants of this study still experienced a wide range of challenges, such as the cultural boundaries imposed by society, lack of co-operation from male colleagues, and difficulties with transport. In fact, the participants' description of the work environment implies a lack of trust in female capabilities, compounding the difficulties and placing more pressure on them because they feel unsupported. Another challenge that emerged was that marital status impacts female leadership progress, since women have to handle many other responsibilities within and out of the home, due to what LeanIn and McKinsey & Company (2015) have described as 'the persistent inequality at home'.

The participants' experiences of these challenges confirm that they faced a steeper path towards growth than women in some other societies. Barriers include: a society that does not encourage female leadership; the unwelcoming working environment; and conditions that add extra constraints because gender diversity is still not widely believed to be a priority for many organisations.

Leadership development

It was evident that personal development was a personal interest initiated by the participants themselves. They demonstrated a certain passion for learning that gave them a sense of fulfilment and motivation. Learning through travelling gave exposure to other cultures, and learning about best practices in different countries.

As they recalled their experiences to the researcher, the participants commented that younger Arab females were now enjoying better conditions for development than the participants had experienced. They also spoke of their disappointment that in school they had not been encouraged to adopt leadership roles.

Almost all participants highlighted coaching as their preferred tool for development, and participants spoke of their disappointment that they had not engaged in coaching at an earlier stage in their leadership journey. Participants explained the direct impact of coaching on their leadership skills and development. They spoke of increasing self-awareness; space to self-reflect, to overcome their fears and weaknesses, and to increase their self-confidence by reflecting on their ability to perform and become a better person. They had experienced the coach as someone pushing them to get the best out of themselves, and helping them to find a way, so that together with the coach they could draw a map to achieve their goals. These experiences are consistent with Passmore's (2010 p.7) proposals for ways in which coaching can contribute to leadership development: transferring learning from theory to the workplace; enhancing skills; developing greater self-awareness; enhancing motivation; developing confidence and self-regard; and improving wellbeing. The experiences are also compatible with those in Simpson's (2008) study, where the participants' increased confidence from coaching led to new thinking, new tools, strategies and knowledge, and new behaviour.

Implications for practice and future research

This study illuminated the experiences of eight female leaders in the Arab world. Similar research could be conducted to study the experiences of other self-identified groups. The study also highlighted the need for personal and professional development opportunities to support female leadership. Coaching is identified by some of the participants as an appropriate and positive intervention in this context. It is clear that the eight female Arab leaders in the study faced significant challenges, which go beyond the challenges of their male counterparts and involve barriers specific to their culture and societies. We therefore tentatively propose that coaching has the potential to contribute to the leadership development of female Arab leaders. Coaching may give individual female leaders the opportunity to craft their own 'one-size-fits-one' roadmap at an early stage of their development journey.

Further research is needed on the role of coaching in increasing the individual leadership potential of females. In particular, it may be valuable to conduct qualitative research about the experience of using Ershad coaching, a model of coaching proposed by van Nieuwerburgh & Allaho (2017) for coaching in Islamic cultures, which may allow female leaders to grow and develop in ways that are appropriate for faith and society.

Limitations

This study is the first published interpretative phenomenological analysis of the developmental experience of female leaders in the Arab world, and a number of limitations and weaknesses should be acknowledged. The language barrier was a limitation in the study. All participants were native Arabic speakers who were given the choice of conducting the interview in Arabic or English. All participants chose English. During the interviews participants took their time to

answer some of the questions. Because the interviewer is an Arabic speaker, occasionally she found it difficult to prevent herself from prompting the participants to find their words in English. Therefore, it is possible that participants' answers to the questions may have been different if the interviews had been conducted in their first language. In addition, the participants were successful female leaders recalling their experiences, so there may have been an element of hindsight bias (Evers Browsers & Tomic, 2006).

The use of IPA is a consideration, rather than a limitation. It was appropriate for interpreting the participants' accounts of their experiences, and it enabled the researcher to gather idiographic accounts. However, IPA researchers focus on the particular rather than the universal (Smith, 1995), and IPA does not permit generalisation. Therefore, we should be cautious when coming to conclusions about implications for practice and future research.

Conclusion

Through an exploration of the experiences of eight female leaders in the Arab world, this study tentatively concludes that coaching may be a useful intervention to support aspiring female Arab leaders. Evidently, aspiring female Arab leaders are having a positive impact despite perceived challenges. Further consideration and new research into the social and cultural factors and workplace challenges identified by the participants may provide valuable insights and suggest culturally-appropriate practical adaptations that will unlock the potential of female leadership in the Arab world.

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