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Advancing Women In Leadership

Paradigm Shift: A Perspective on Omani Women in Management in the Sultanate of Oman

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Organizations need talented women in their core jobs, therefore, not only for reasons of social fairness, important though that is, but because many of those women will have the kinds of attitudes and attributes that the new flat flexible organizations need. If they screen out the women they will handicap their future.
Charles Handy

The entry of women into an all-male dominated profession may be one of the major transformations of the century. This recent and optimistic trend must not hide the serious fact that in most countries there is only a small percentage of women in management and related decision making positions. This is made clear from the United Nations official statistics and data on women indicating that while conditions for women have improved in various areas, particularly education, health and employment, women in general, and Arab women in particular, continue to face many challenges. This predicament, considered to be a violation of women's rights, has always been a main concern of the U.N. It was in September 1995, that the Fourth International Women's conference sponsored by the U.N. was held in Beijing. This undoubtedly reflects United Nation's relentless efforts in overcoming obstacles to women's rights and equality.

Women in Management

The obstacles to women in management are still formidable and, some would argue, growing more intractable. Significantly outnumbered by male colleagues, they are members of a minority group who have risen to positions of influence within systems which are best described as patriarchal (USIS, 1996; Dines, 1993; Vinnicombe, 1995; Adachi, 1989; Marshall, 1984).

Must society be constructed in such a way that intelligent, competent women are denied access to management careers, which are considered in many countries to occupy the highest levels in the social and

professional hierarchy? Must society be ordered in such a way as to generate extreme discrimination between men and women in certain employment sectors, and thereby to deprive itself of human resources sorely needed to solve its problems?

Women in management at the turn of the century is an issue that demands serious attention and a new urgency. In the West, particularly Western Europe and North America, although women constitute almost forty five percent of the workforce, they occupy only 10% of the management positions (World Almanac, 1997; USIS, 1996). This figure is much lower in the senior management positions (World Almanac, 1997; Vinnicombe & Colwill, 1995). In the past, the directives for women in the workforce were centered on Civil Rights Act, Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action (Dessler, 1994; Sherman & Bohlander, 1992; Marshall, 1984). Whereas such mandates have put pressure on business and government to employ more women in the workforce, especially in the service industry, not much has been done to break the glass ceiling for access of women to management positions (USIS, 1996; Korabik & Rosin, 1995; Vinnicombe, 1995; Hennig & Jardim, 1977).

Greenglass & Marshall (1997) in their special issue of Applied Psychology on women in management provide valuable insight into why and how women continue to be repressed and silenced in male dominated organizations, despite their possession of requisite qualifications for management positions. This special issue concludes that, globally, women continue to face major hurdles in their career progression to potential ranks of senior management, arenas of power and major decision making.

The above mentioned trends and practices ought no longer prevail in the current business world. Today clear business cases can be cited for increasing women's participation in management. As centralized leadership gives way to flattened hierarchy and employee empowerment, managers will be expected to have good communication and interpersonal skills, the ability to listen and relate to others, and be capable of working in self-managing teams (Cascio, 1992; De Cenzo & Robins, 1996; Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 1991). All these qualities tend to favor women managers.

Management experts on both sides of the Atlantic have realized that the management style of women fulfills the demands of new organizations better than their male counterparts. This is supported by an international survey conducted by the Sydney-based consultancy firm DDI Asia Pacific, which specializes in executive testing and selection. The consultancy surveyed 1,332 employees and managers working in companies based in Australia, the United States, Canada and New Zealand. Results from the survey indicated that women make better managers than men due to their feminine qualities and attributes that are better suited for the modern decentralized organizational structures with flattened hierarchies and empowered work teams (Oman Daily Observer, 1997).

These documented observations are appropriately summarized by management guru, Charles Handy:

For these jobs the organization wants quality people, well educated, well skilled and adaptable. They also want people who can juggle several tasks and assignments at one time, who are more interested in making things happen than in what title or office they hold, more concerned with power and influence than status. They want people who value instinct and intuition as well as analysis and rationality, who can be tough but also tender, focused but friendly, people who can cope with these necessary contradictions. They want, therefore, as many women as they can get. (1994, p.14)

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This case study addresses the role of Omani women in management positions in the Sultanate of Oman. This is highlighted by determining the factors that encourage women to pursue careers in management, the

obstacles hindering women's progress and the actions needed to be taken to help Omani women achieve greater strides.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Concern about the role of Omani women in national development is an issue that demands serious consideration. Omani women represent almost fifty percent of the Omani population, furthermore, an increasing number of educated women are seeking employment in the labor market.

Soliciting feedback from Oman's most valuable human resources, in this light, Omani female managers will supply the government and the private sector sound information for policy development and implementation regarding the profile and status of Omani women in the workforce.

The findings of this study could have policy implications for various institutions in the government such as: the General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, Omani Women's Society, Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Civil Service.

METHODOLOGY

To generate the needed information for this study, the researcher employed the following methods and procedures:

1. Carried a literature review pertinent to the study.
2. Designed a questionnaire.
3. Pilot studied the questionnaire on a sample of Omani female managers to determine whether the questionnaire elicits the needed information.
4. Distributed the questionnaire to a sample of Omani female managers.
5. Collected and analyzed the questionnaire responses to determine the driving and resisting forces to Omani women in management positions.
6. Interpreted the results and proposed possible practices and patterns for promoting Omani women in management in the Sultanate of Oman.

INSTRUMENTATION

For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire composed of a section with questions on biographical, academic and professional data followed by a section with three open ended questions has been designed. A cover letter explaining the purpose of the study along with a section ensuring confidentiality and anonymity was attached to each questionnaire. The respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire and to respond to the three open ended questions regarding the driving and resisting forces to Omani women in management and to suggest on what can be done to promote women in management in the Sultanate of Oman. ([Questionnaire](#))

SUBJECTS

Subjects of this study constituted a sample of Omani female managers working in the public (government) and private sectors. These subjects represent senior level of Omani women in the work force and occupy positions of directors, director generals, advisors to ministers, head of departments, assistant deans and

deans.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The researcher utilized descriptive and qualitative statistical methods to describe, analyze and summarize the characteristics of the data collected. Descriptive analysis was used to show the composition of the population in terms of age, marital status, number of children, academic qualification, place of post-secondary education, and total years of work experience. Qualitative analysis was used to summarize and present respondents' feedback on the open ended questions regarding resisting and supporting factors to Omani women in management in the Sultanate of Oman. Finally results from the data analysis and literature review was used to make recommendations on improving the status of women in management in the Sultanate of Oman.

A Perspective on Oman's Socio-economic and Educational Development

Hamoud (1993) writes, "the role of women in management cannot be treated in isolation from the general status of women in society, and from the general aims of economic, social and educational development" (p. 31). Education is the key to women's equality. This is particularly significant given that one out of three women is uneducated (UN, 1996). Therefore, prior to considering the role of Omani women in management, let us consider the fundamental question of opportunities for Omani women in the formal education. Access to education is one of the primary indicators of women's status in a given society, and therefore, is the root of women's emancipation. In this regard, the Sultanate of Oman is no exception.

Until 1970, Oman was a country that lagged behind socially and economically. The country lacked all sorts of public amenities and infrastructure such as modern schools, hospitals, tarmac roads, electricity and water. Twenty-eight years later, Oman has developed into a modern nation with both the infrastructure and the social organizations required to meet the needs of its people. The availability of oil revenues have made such a significant and rapid transformation possible. The vision and leadership for such a change was directed by one person - His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al-Said, ruler of the Sultanate of Oman since his accession in 1970. His Majesty has overseen the transformation of the Sultanate of Oman from a single economy, based upon rudimentary agriculture and fishing, to a modern and dynamic nation with a diversified economy.

A noteworthy catalyst for the above successful transformation is the development of education from primary to tertiary levels. Prior to 1970, education in Oman was confined to 3 primary schools with 900 boys, there was no provision for the education of girls. Following the accession of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in 1970, education has been made available to all Omani nationals (boys and girls on an equal ratio) under a program of continuous and rapid expansion, the most recent stage of which was the opening of the co-educational Sultan Qaboos University in 1986. The availability of education (from primary to tertiary) for women has undoubtedly played a crucial role towards the emancipation of Omani women. This achievement has attracted the praise of a number of international magazines on women's issues, one of which is the Indonesian Women's magazine (Observer, 1996).

Women in Management in the Sultanate of Oman

The implementation of socio-economic and educational plans during the renaissance period (1970-1998) has transformed the Omani society and economy. Undoubtedly, the development of human resources has been accorded particular importance in this transformation with the inclusion of women on an equal basis. This however, has not resulted in equal participation of women in the workforce, despite an equal percentage of women in Oman's population. The results of the official population census taken in 1993 showed the Omani population at 1,480,531. The statistics revealed that there were 755,071 male Omanies

and 725,460 female Omanis, giving almost a 50:50 ratio of men to women (Omani Census, 1993). The age distribution of the Omani population is consistent with that of developing nations with almost 54% of the total Omani population under the age of 15. The Profile of Labor force statistics during this period comprised of 274,411 Omani nationals of which only 24,007 (9%) are Omani women ([Table 1](#)).

It can be observed from Table 1 that the Omani labor force structure is heavily male oriented. This however, should not mislead the reader into interpreting the gender inequity in the labor force for reasons of lack of education and or job opportunities for women. Analysis of the Omani labor composition attributes this gender discrepancy to several economic and social factors. Some of the fundamental factors include traditional culture and attitudes coupled with values and stereotypes of the Omani woman as a wife and mother as their primary role in the Omani society. Other factors relate to the type and nature of occupations which the labor market provides, the unsuitability of some of these occupations because of social customs and traditions, or the short supply of some jobs which women normally prefer. This situation is expected to change with projections of the increased role of women in the labor market caused by the steady increase in the education of girls and the expectation that thousands of girls will complete various stages of education in the coming years (Oman Statistical Year Book, 1996).

The profile of Omani women labor composition and employment structure is shown in Tables 2 and 3. This profile was prepared and presented by the General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. The statistics indicated that there were 17,946 women working in the government sector; 2,942 in the private sector and 3,119 who owned their own business. The profile of the government female employees indicates a heavy orientation towards the service sector with the majority (59%) concentrated in the Ministry of Education followed by (22%) in the Ministry of Health and remaining (19%) distributed among other government sectors ([Table 2](#)).

With regards to senior executive and decision making positions in the government sector, the Sultanate of Oman under the wise leadership and directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, has set precedence in the Arab Gulf region by appointing Omani women in senior government positions. This undertaking was epitomized by the recent appointment of four women in the 40 seat State Council (State Council, 1997) ([Table 3](#)).

Table 3 shows the distribution of Omani women in the government sector's top management and decision making positions. This includes 3 Deputy Ministers, 4 members in the State Council (Majlis Aldawlah), 2 members in the Consultative Council (Majlis Alshu'ra), 4 in Senior Advisory positions, 13 in special grade, and 261 in Grade One (equivalent to Director & Director General).

Tables 2 and 3 concludes that Omani women are represented in all employment sectors, be it government, private or their own business. Furthermore, unlike its neighboring Arab Gulf countries, the Sultanate of Oman has catapulted women to unprecedented heights by appointing them to senior political positions in Oman's Council and ministries. This reflects His Majesty's trust and confidence in women's ability to manage and execute senior government positions. Consequently, the representation of Omani women (13%) in the ranks of senior government positions surpasses Western standards.

To begin with, it would be helpful to address a list of generic forces as terms of reference in discussing the role of Omani women in management positions in the Sultanate of Oman. Such forces have been referred to quite frequently by a number of writers on women's issues, for example (Dines, 1993; Hammoud, 1994; Vinnicombe & Colwill, 1995).

The Driving Forces for Change in the Sultanate of Oman

There are ten major driving forces acting for change in the Sultanate of Oman: religion (Islam), national leadership, education, nationalization (Omanization), economy, General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs (Omani Women's Associations), women's leadership, favorable labor laws, family support and child care services, and changing women's attitudes. Each of these driving forces will be discussed and analyzed for its impact. Subsequently, strategies will be recommended to sustain and possibly strengthen the impact.

Islam

Islam accords equal rights to men and women alike. In fact, Islam is the key to women's emancipation and liberation. Islam does not forbid women from seeking an education or from pursuing work. On the contrary, Islam encourages women to be educated, work, own property and engage in business. It has elevated the value and worth of a woman to an unprecedented status in society. A role model to Muslim women is (Sitina) Khadija, the wife of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), who successfully fulfilled the roles of a businesswoman, a wife and a mother.

The Muslim nations have elected three women Prime Ministers, namely Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Khaleda Zia (presently Shaikha Hasina) of Bangladesh and Tansu Cillar of Turkey. These individuals were elected by male and female voters on their abilities as capable human beings, not as women. These elections have demonstrated the true essence of Islam towards the role of women. It has refuted the distorted myth construed by social taboo that a woman's place is in the house, and that it is socially unacceptable and dishonorable for a Muslim woman to work. In her address to the Fourth World Conference on Women, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto pleaded that "Muslim women have a special responsibility to help distinguish between Islamic teachings and social taboos spun by the traditions of a patriarchal society" (p.1).

Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) encouraged Muslims, men and women alike, to seek and pursue knowledge. The Holy Koranic verses and Hadiths can be cited to demonstrate this fundamental right to knowledge. "Say: My Lord, increase my knowledge" (Holy Koran xx: 1,14). "God will exalt to high ranks those who believe among you, and those who have knowledge" (Holy Koran lv 11: 11). "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" (Hadith). "The search for knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, male and female" (Hadith).

National Leadership

Since the dawn of the national renaissance in 1970, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has repeatedly stated that Oman's crucial resource is its national human resources. This appeal does not preclude Omani women as proclaimed by His Majesty in His speech: "The education of girls is never absent from our mind, since women form half of our society." In recognition of this fact, a full fledged commitment by the government of Oman has been undertaken to educate, train and develop its national work force as a measure towards nation building and economic development.

His Majesty's drive towards development of national human resources is not restricted to men, but applies equally to women. This is attested by equal educational and job opportunities. Omani women occupy different professions such as, medical doctors, lawyers, engineers, business leaders, and teachers. Omani women are found in the army and police, private and public sectors, and most importantly, in senior government positions.

To support the role of women, the Omani government has set a number of programs such as a network of modern health services and social services throughout the country aimed at improving the advancement of women. Undoubtedly, Omani women have been liberated and accorded their respect as equal partners in

Omani society under the leadership of His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos.

Nationalization (Omanization)

The government of Oman is committed to nationalization (Omanization), a program that has been initiated by His Majesty to prepare Omani nationals to take an active role in the workforce and to replace expatriates wherever possible. With a labor force of 690,000 comprising 55% expatriates and 45% Omani nationals, the Sultanate is highly dependent on expatriates. This predicament has always been a concern of the government, and rigorous training and development programs have been enacted to promote nationalization in the country.

The importance of developing the country's national human resources has been one of the main aims and policies throughout the Sultanate's five year development plans (Birks & Sinclair, 1980; Development Council, 1995). This aim is supported by several constructive policies and measures clearly documented in the development plan. For instance, the Fourth Five Year Development plan (1991-1995) has committed an initial allocation of Omani Rials 40 million for the implementation of the Omanization policies, in addition to appropriating the sum of Omani Rials 10 million to the Ministry of Civil Service towards Omanization programs in the civil service domain (Development Council, 1993).

To this effect, legislation concerning employment contained in the Omani Labor Law states that preference should be given to Omani nationals. This mandate is enforced by the Government's Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor by specifying the ratio of Omanization to be achieved by the end of 1996 in the private sector taking into account the number of Omani graduates graduating annually from the various educational institutes ([Table 4](#)).

Education

Education in Oman is a fundamental right for each and every Omani citizen. The importance of educating and developing the country's national human resources has been one of the main aims and policies of His Majesty's government. In accordance with His Majesty's directives, a network of modern primary and secondary education establishments for girls and boys has been extended across the whole country, catering to even remote villages. Educational progress has been phenomenal. By the 1994-95 academic year, there were a total of 947 schools at the three levels of general education (primary, preparatory, and secondary) with 474,288 students, half of which are girls. At the post-secondary level there are equal facilities for both males and females to pursue higher education and vocational training. This is provided both domestically and internationally. Higher education facilities in Oman include one co-educational university, Sultan Qaboos University of which more than 50% of the student body are female, twelve intermediate teacher training colleges, two specialized institutes of health and banking, six technical colleges and six vocational institutes (Sultanate of Oman Statistical Year Book, 1995). Higher education in Oman caters equally to men and women without discrimination. This educational development is indeed staggering and deserves a noteworthy recognition, given that prior to 1970 there were only three elementary schools for boys and no facilities for girls.

General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs

The development, advancement and participation of Omani women as equal partners in the country's socio-economic development has been supported by many factors, one of which is the General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs, formally established in 1985. Undoubtedly, a significant move has been made by the government to enhance the status and role of women in Oman's society. The Directorate, under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs & Labor, has setup a network of Women's Development Centers throughout the country, catering to rural and remote villages as well.

The general aims and mission of the Directorate is to set up programs for the care of mothers and children, the eradication of illiteracy, education, the development of traditional and modern handicraft skills, the promotion of healthy and hygienic environment, the teaching of survival skills, and the cultivation of women's minds and roles as citizens of a modern developing society.

Of significant importance and a positive precedent prior to the inception of the Directorate, is the voluntary social work of the Omani Women's Association, the first of its kind in the country founded in 1971. Managed as a not for profit organization, the Omani Women's Association acts in collaboration with the efforts and support of the government to carry out a great number of activities aimed at improving and enhancing the role of Omani women in society. Some of these activities include literacy classes, various handicraft skills, family care programs (day care centers, care for handicapped children, summer activities for girls, health awareness), social functions, organizing exhibitions to display the various work prepared by members of the association, intellectual and educational development through national and international women's conferences and meetings, and setting up workshops to promote social and professional development. It is envisaged that the Women's Association could be instrumental in providing a network for Omani women in management, and to offer the much needed support for their development in the workplace.

Women's Leadership

Pursuant to the directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, nine Omani women have been appointed to senior government decision making positions. This includes: four women in the forty seat State Council (Majlis Aldawlah), two women in the eighty seat Consultative Council (Majlis Al'Shura) and three women for the positions of Deputy Minister. In addition, Omani women occupy positions of Senior Advisors, Director Generals, and Directors in the various government organizations. It is noteworthy to mention that Omani women are represented in the Faculty Profile (Academic Staff) of Sultan Qaboos University as well as representation of Medical Staff (Medical Doctors) in hospitals all over the country.

The Consultative Council was set up in November 1991 under the directive of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said. It holds the position of a parliament and is based on Islamic religious law and procedures. Since its inception, it has assumed a practical role in assisting the government in all important matters relating to social and economic issues. Although under-represented, with only two women among the eighty elected members, this is considered a major development for women and a great opportunity for Omani women to be a part of the decision making body representing the people of Oman.

In December 1997, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said inaugurated the Council of Oman comprising the newly formed State Council along with the pre-established Consultative Council. The forty seat State Council with four women representatives is yet another progressive step in the consultative (Shura) process, that works in conjunction with the Majlis Alshura for achieving the nation's social and economic goals (Majlis Aldawlah, 1997).

National Economy

Since the accession of Sultan Qaboos to power in 1970, His Majesty has pursued a vigorous policy for economic and social development which has been facilitated by revenues generated from oil export (Sultanate of Oman, 1975). Oman's economy has been transformed from one that was based mainly on subsistence agriculture and fisheries to one that is oil based with all the modern facilities and infrastructure. Subsequently, the Omani society emerged from one that was lagging behind socially, culturally and economically; to one that is educated, enlightened, and endowed with modern social facilities. The availability of oil revenues has made it possible for Oman to develop its economy, educate

its people and offer a relatively comfortable standard of living. This however, has not rendered a total reliance and dependence on oil revenues, rather the government of Oman has been pursuing economic diversification and privatization programs as a measure of maintaining a viable and sustainable economy for its people.

Favorable Labor Laws

Omani women are accorded favorable labor laws which serve to protect their rights and ensure equality in the workplace. Employment in Oman does not discriminate on gender and exercises a sound policy of equal employment opportunity and equal pay act. An entire section in the Oman Labor Law is dedicated to the employment of women. For example, Articles 80 to 82 in the Oman Labor Law clearly safeguard the rights and working conditions of Omani women (Oman Labor Law). These articles spell out special advantages and support granted to working women in areas such as maternity and widowhood leave entitlements (each is six weeks leave), and a special provision that allows working women to request leave of absence (up to four years) without pay to accompany a spouse who is posted abroad. Working mothers who return to work while continuing to breast feed are allowed to leave work an hour each day for six months to feed their babies.

The working hours in the government (public) sector are conducive to working women. Government employees work from 7:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. Saturday through Wednesday, and Thursday and Friday are days off from work. Such working hours allow parents, particularly working mothers, to spend time with their children.

Family Support and Child-care Services

Omani women enjoy a wide range of child-care support services. These range from family support to professional services such as affordable housemaid/nanny and child-care centers (nurseries). The Omani society is based on strong family ties. The centrality of the family accompanied by close relationships makes it possible for parents or parents-in-law of working women to help with child care.

Working women can also avail themselves with a host of day-care centers and nurseries. These facilities are available throughout the country with a higher concentration in the capital area to cater to the larger population of working women.

Changing Women's Attitudes

The aforementioned factors have contributed immensely in influencing women's attitudes towards their role in a modern developing Arab society. In an interview with ten top women managers in Bahrain and Dubai about their work and its challenges, Wilkinson (1996) affirms that "women who have succeeded in business anywhere are controversial figures, and the Arab Gulf is no exception to this rule (p. 22). These women who have successfully made it to top management positions either as entrepreneurs and owners of their business or managers of major companies have stated that the driving force behind their success includes: family support, educational opportunity, academic success, job opportunity, determination, inner drive for success, qualities and attributes conducive to successful management, ability to handle multiple tasks, and self-confidence. The challenges faced by these women were overt discrimination at work, cultural taboos, negative attitude toward working women, and lack of confidence and trust in women managers.

In Oman, the availability and accessibility to all levels of education along with equal opportunities in the job market has not only emancipated the Omani woman but equally accorded her individual rights and respect as an equal partner in the Omani society. This is substantiated by informal interviews with some of

the professional Omani women working in government and private sectors. These women who have successfully progressed to management positions attribute their achievements to accessibility to equal educational and job opportunities coupled with their perseverance in committing themselves to their jobs and career progression. In this regard, one of the respondents said, "Making it to the top is not easy. It takes a lot of hard work, patience, commitment, sacrifice and trade-off; however, the opportunity is there for those women who aspire to become managers and are willing and able to maintain multiple roles."

The Resisting Forces for Change in the Sultanate of Oman

This case study does not imply a presence of a "utopia" for women in the Omani society. Arab nations in particular, provide different forms of deterrents which prevent women's progress and development. Some of these deterrents include a generic stereotype of Arab women reflected by Muslim societies, particularly men, with regard to a woman's role as mother. Negative male attitudes also prevail among professional working women. There is an unspoken "silent" policy of discrimination against women at work, the presence of a "Glass Ceiling" preventing women's accessibility to top management positions, absence of a professional women's network, lack of professional management training programs for women, and lack of affirmative action for promoting and ensuring women's representation in the labor force as well as in management positions.

Traditional Attitudes and Stereotypes

Although gradually changing among the more educated modern Arab/Islamic societies, conservative Arab societies hold traditional socio-cultural stereotypes and attitudes about the role of women. These conservative and traditional attitudes highlighted in the literature of women in the Muslim world by Magharabi, Al-Dabbagh & Hayajneh, (1994); Bech (1994); and Al-Hatimy (1983) portray women's primary role as a wife and mother. Women are not necessarily looked upon as having the abilities and potential for developing professional careers. They are portrayed as being inferior to men, naturally emotional and unsuitable for leadership positions (Hammoud, 1993). Such conservative attitudes negate the concept of professional working women in traditional Arab societies, the idea of women working is degrading and a disgrace to some Arab men who consider that it is their responsibility to provide for their wives and family. Therefore, traditional Arab/Islamic societies maintain that first and foremost, women should prepare themselves for a domestic career of being a wife and mother. Work should only be considered as a last option under extraneous conditions and circumstances.

The above attitude tends to have a spillover effect at work, whereby male employers regard women as being less capable than men and unfit for responsible positions, claiming that their family obligations take priority; and hence, subjects them to lower productivity and absenteeism (Beck, 1994; Hammoud, 1993). This negative attitude and traditional stereotype towards women in Arab/Islamic societies has been, and still is, a major resisting force to progress for professional working women, particularly for those in management.

Portrayed Self-image of Women

The inferior self-image of women becomes difficult to overcome considering that it is ingrained and conditioned in their upbringing and social development (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 1991; Hennig & Jardim, 1977). In traditional Arab-Islamic patriarchal societies, the feminine gender is subordinate, while the masculine is superior and dominant (Magharabi et al., 1994; Bech, 1994; Hammoud, 1993; Allaghi & Almana, 1984; Gerner, 1984; Al-Hatimy 1983). Generally, men are held responsible for providing the necessities of life, thus to work outside the home. On the other hand, women are expected to serve their husbands and children at home, especially since women are not required by the Islamic law (Shari'a) to

financially support the family. In this subordinate position, women become victims of their own gender (Mernissi, 1985, Rassam, 1984). Hammoud's (1993) dynamic study on the role of women in higher education management in the Arab region confers that the most fatal obstacle which prevents women from realizing their utmost professional achievement is the self-image of a woman portrayed as inferior to men, incapable of being socially and financially independent, and hence depends on the man to care for and protect them.

Studies in the Gulf countries by Allaghi & Almaná (1984) and Osseiran (1989) reflect women's inferior self-image. Results indicate 50% of the female students surveyed believe that the husband should have the "final word", that women should obey their husbands, and that a husband's education should be higher than that of his wife. With regard to work, it was felt that women should only work in the traditional professions such as teaching and nursing. There was a strong preference towards jobs that do not require women to mix with men. The Khattab and El-Daif (1984) study in Cairo revealed that 66% of female students stated that women with children should stop work; 41% maintained that teaching and social work are the most appropriate jobs for women; and the majority believed that women should only work as an economic necessity.

Human Resource Policies and Strategies

The lack of proper human resource policies and strategies addressing women workers has proven to be a major obstacle to women's progress and development. For instance, in the USA, women's rights have not merely evolved from vacuum; rather, advocates of women's rights in America applied the Civil Rights law to fight sex discrimination at work and to demand equal rights. This struggle resulted in what is known as 'Affirmative Action' at the workplace (Vinnicombe, 1995; Hannig & Jardim, 1977).

Only nine percent (9%) of the Omani workforce are women. The majority of these workers are concentrated in the lower echelons of the organizational hierarchy with a small percentage in decision making positions. In Oman, the absence of human resource policies and strategies to promote the recruitment and development of female managers at work is a deterrent to gender diversity. The work environment and culture are not conducive to promoting women in management. This acts as a 'glass ceiling' preventing women's accessibility to top management positions. For example, there are no programs to facilitate the advancement of women as role models, absence of mentoring programs, lack of management training programs, and shunning of affirmative action.

Lack of Professional a Women's Network

The lack of a professional women's network in Oman creates a major void for women aspiring to professional managerial positions. The absence of a female mentor-protégé relationship makes it difficult for women to develop the requisite attitude, skills and abilities for leadership and management positions. This results in a disparate situation and a state of confusion; because after all, women are entering a male dominated domain coupled with a traditional value system and a culture that tends to shun women from pursuing management careers.

Presentation and Analysis of the Data

Sixty questionnaires were dispatched to a random sample of Omani Women in management positions in the Sultanate of Oman. The response rate was extremely slow and tedious. Except for a few, the majority of the respondents were not cooperative. Many repeated telephone calls along with reminders to solicit their feedback were necessary. This is quite understandable in this part of the world whereby information and research are a foreign phenomenon and not the norm. People are not necessarily comfortable with the idea of expressing their opinion honestly and freely. An element of inhibition exists. Therefore, of the 60

questionnaires distributed, 32 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 53%.

Personal Characteristics of the Respondents

A summary of the personal and professional characteristics of the respondents is displayed in Tables 5 through 11. The distribution of respondents by age is shown in Table 5. Of the 32 respondents surveyed in this study, the highest distribution of 15 (47%) were in the age bracket (35 - 44) followed by 11 (34%) in the (25 - 34) age bracket and 6 (19%) in the (45 - 54) age bracket ([Table 5](#)).

The distribution of respondents by marital status is shown in Table 6. The majority of the respondents 27 (84%) were married leaving 5 (16%) single ([Table 6](#)).

Table 7 depicts the distribution of respondents by number of children. The highest concentration was 18 (56%) having (1 - 3) children, followed by 8 (25%) with (4 - 6) children and 6 (19%) with no children ([Table 7](#)).

The distribution of respondents by academic qualification is shown in Table 8. Eighteen (56%) of the respondents received Bachelors degrees, followed by 9 (28%) with Masters and 5 (16%) with Doctorates ([Table 8](#)).

Table 9 summarizes the distribution of respondents by place of post-secondary education. Fifteen (47%) of the respondents received their post-secondary education in the Arab World (East) and 17 (53%) in Western universities (West) ([Table 9](#)).

The distribution of respondents by place of employment is shown in Table 10. The majority of 24 (75%) of the respondents worked for the government (public sector) and 8 (25%) worked for the private sector ([Table 10](#)).

Table 11 summarizes the personal opinion of the respondents on whether or not resisting forces outweigh driving forces to Omani women in management. Fifteen (47%) of the respondents felt that resisting forces outweighed driving forces to Omani women in management, while 17 (53%) felt that there were no such imbalances ([Table 11](#)).

Analysis of Respondent's Personal Opinion on Omani Women in Management

As indicated in Table 11, fifteen (47%) of the respondents felt that resisting forces outweighed driving forces to Omani Women in management positions. It appears that these women chose to be critical and sorted out this opportunity to voice their issues of concern on women in management in the Sultanate of Oman. In their comments, these women acknowledge and realize that the government of Oman has made available to Omani women an array of social and economic factors (driving forces) to improve their status in the Omani society, but it was felt that women still remain victims of discrimination (resisting forces) by the prevalent male dominated culture. For example, some of the respondents stated that "merely being a woman is a major obstacle towards professional development." Other comments include:

- "higher management is dominated by males who tend not to take women seriously professionally."
- "not having the social back-up nor the network needed to encourage and promote women in management positions."
- "feeling of inferiority complex towards men in the management cadre."
- "traditional values and culture discourage women from pursuing professional and management

positions."

- "conflicting roles of being a domesticated wife and mother, and that of professional woman."

In general, women in this category indicated that the resisting forces to women in management include: limited opportunities to higher education, discriminatory appointment and promotion practices, traditional attitudes of male bosses towards working women, male dominated domain, male resistance to women in management, absence of policies and legislation to ensure participation of women in management positions, lack of professional networking, lack of female role models, lack of professional management development programs, lack of sufficient number of quality day-care centers, dual responsibilities of traditional and professional roles, balancing traditional and professional roles, and family obligations as a wife and a mother for child-bearing and child-rearing.

Coincidentally, considerable similarity existed between the respondents' opinion and the generic resisting forces for change in the Sultanate of Oman. The most common issues of concern are related to cultural attitudes, traditional values and stereotypes of the status and role of women in Arab-Islamic societies. The respondents felt that the social and cultural perception of Omani women's role was that of a domesticated wife and mother with primary responsibility towards families.

On the other hand, the remaining seventeen (53%) of the respondents who have ruled out that resisting forces outweigh supportive forces to Omani women in management positions supported their views with the following factors. Women in this category felt that although resisting forces existed which are primarily male dominated traditional social and culture attitudes and stereotypes of Omani women, such forces were balanced out and in some cases outweighed by supportive forces. These women have concentrated on the positive factors attested by the following comments:

- "Omani women get best education as men so that they can work alongside men and their place is not limited to their homes."

- "Omani women have proven their abilities to succeed academically and professionally."

- "Omani women are more devoted to their duties and carry out their responsibilities diligently and conscientiously."

- "the government has set up the Directorate General of women and child affairs which has made steady progress in uplifting women socially, economically and educationally."

In general, women in this category indicated that the driving forces behind their success include: first and foremost family support from their parents and spouse, determination and inner drive for success, opportunities for access to all levels of education and academic achievement, self confidence, diligence and perseverance, job opportunities and potential for professional growth and development.

The entry of women into an all-male dominated profession may be one of the major transformations of the century. This recent and optimistic trend must not hide the serious fact that in most countries there is only a small percentage of women in management and related decision making positions. This is made clear from the United Nations official statistics and data on women indicating that while conditions for women have improved in various areas, particularly education, health and employment, women in general, and Arab women in particular, continue to face many challenges. This predicament, considered to be a violation of women's rights, has always been a main concern of the U.N. It was in September 1995, that the Fourth International Women's conference sponsored by the U.N. was held in Beijing. This undoubtedly reflects United Nation's relentless efforts in overcoming obstacles to women's rights and equality.

Women in Management

The obstacles to women in management are still formidable and, some would argue, growing more intractable. Significantly outnumbered by male colleagues, they are members of a minority group who have risen to positions of influence within systems which are best described as patriarchal (USIS, 1996; Dines, 1993; Vinnicombe, 1995; Adachi, 1989; Marshall, 1984).

Must society be constructed in such a way that intelligent, competent women are denied access to management careers, which are considered in many countries to occupy the highest levels in the social and professional hierarchy? Must society be ordered in such a way as to generate extreme discrimination between men and women in certain employment sectors, and thereby to deprive itself of human resources sorely needed to solve its problems?

Women in management at the turn of the century is an issue that demands serious attention and a new urgency. In the West, particularly Western Europe and North America, although women constitute almost forty five percent of the workforce, they occupy only 10% of the management positions (World Almanac, 1997; USIS, 1996). This figure is much lower in the senior management positions (World Almanac, 1997; Vinnicombe & Colwill, 1995). In the past, the directives for women in the workforce were centered on Civil Rights Act, Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action (Dessler, 1994; Sherman & Bohlander, 1992; Marshall, 1984). Whereas such mandates have put pressure on business and government to employ more women in the workforce, especially in the service industry, not much has been done to break the glass ceiling for access of women to management positions (USIS, 1996; Korabik & Rosin, 1995; Vinnicombe, 1995; Hennig & Jardim, 1977).

Greenglass & Marshall (1997) in their special issue of Applied Psychology on women in management provide valuable insight into why and how women continue to be repressed and silenced in male dominated organizations, despite their possession of requisite qualifications for management positions. This special issue concludes that, globally, women continue to face major hurdles in their career progression to potential ranks of senior management, arenas of power and major decision making.

The above mentioned trends and practices ought no longer prevail in the current business world. Today clear business cases can be cited for increasing women's participation in management. As centralized leadership gives way to flattened hierarchy and employee empowerment, managers will be expected to have good communication and interpersonal skills, the ability to listen and relate to others, and be capable of working in self-managing teams (Cascio, 1992; De Cenzo & Robins, 1996; Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 1991). All these qualities tend to favor women managers.

Management experts on both sides of the Atlantic have realized that the management style of women fulfills the demands of new organizations better than their male counterparts. This is supported by an international survey conducted by the Sydney-based consultancy firm DDI Asia Pacific, which specializes in executive testing and selection. The consultancy surveyed 1,332 employees and managers working in companies based in Australia, the United States, Canada and New Zealand. Results from the survey indicated that women make better managers than men due to their feminine qualities and attributes that are better suited for the modern decentralized organizational structures with flattened hierarchies and empowered work teams (Oman Daily Observer, 1997).

These documented observations are appropriately summarized by management guru, Charles Handy:

For these jobs the organization wants quality people, well educated, well skilled and adaptable. They also want people who can juggle several tasks and assignments at one time, who are more interested in making things happen than in what title or office they hold, more

concerned with power and influence than status. They want people who value instinct and intuition as well as analysis and rationality, who can be tough but also tender, focused but friendly, people who can cope with these necessary contradictions. They want, therefore, as many women as they can get. (1994, p.14)

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This case study addresses the role of Omani women in management positions in the Sultanate of Oman. This is highlighted by determining the factors that encourage women to pursue careers in management, the obstacles hindering women's progress and the actions needed to be taken to help Omani women achieve greater strides.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Concern about the role of Omani women in national development is an issue that demands serious consideration. Omani women represent almost fifty percent of the Omani population, furthermore, an increasing number of educated women are seeking employment in the labor market.

Soliciting feedback from Oman's most valuable human resources, in this light, Omani female managers will supply the government and the private sector sound information for policy development and implementation regarding the profile and status of Omani women in the workforce.

The findings of this study could have policy implications for various institutions in the government such as: the General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, Omani Women's Society, Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Civil Service.

METHODOLOGY

To generate the needed information for this study, the researcher employed the following methods and procedures:

1. Carried a literature review pertinent to the study.
2. Designed a questionnaire.
3. Pilot studied the questionnaire on a sample of Omani female managers to determine whether the questionnaire elicits the needed information.
4. Distributed the questionnaire to a sample of Omani female managers.
5. Collected and analyzed the questionnaire responses to determine the driving and resisting forces to Omani women in management positions.
6. Interpreted the results and proposed possible practices and patterns for promoting Omani women in management in the Sultanate of Oman.

INSTRUMENTATION

For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire composed of a section with questions on biographical, academic and professional data followed by a section with three open ended questions has been designed. A cover letter explaining the purpose of the study along with a section ensuring confidentiality and anonymity was attached to each questionnaire. The respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire

and to respond to the three openended questions regarding the driving and resisting forces to Omani women in management and to suggest on what can be done to promote women in management in the Sultanate of Oman. (Questionnaire)

SUBJECTS

Subjects of this study constituted a sample of Omani female managers working in the public (government) and private sectors. These subjects represent senior level of Omani women in the work force and occupy positions of directors, director generals, advisors to ministers, head of departments, assistant deans and deans.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The researcher utilized descriptive and qualitative statistical methods to describe, analyze and summarize the characteristics of the data collected. Descriptive analysis was used to show the composition of the population in terms of age, marital status, number of children, academic qualification, place of post-secondary education, and total years of work experience. Qualitative analysis was used to summarize and present respondents' feedback on the open ended questions regarding resisting and supporting factors to Omani women in management in the Sultanate of Oman. Finally results from the data analysis and literature review was used to make recommendations on improving the status of women in management in the Sultanate of Oman.

A Perspective on Oman's Socio-economic and Educational Development

Hamoud (1993) writes, "the role of women in management cannot be treated in isolation from the general status of women in society, and from the general aims of economic, social and educational development " (p. 31). Education is the key to women's equality. This is particularly significant given that one out of three women is uneducated (UN, 1996). Therefore, prior to considering the role of Omani women in management, let us consider the fundamental question of opportunities for Omani women in the formal education. Access to education is one of the primary indicators of women's status in a given society, and therefore, is the root of women's emancipation. In this regard, the Sultanate of Oman is no exception.

Until 1970, Oman was a country that lagged behind socially and economically. The country lacked all sorts of public amenities and infrastructure such as modern schools, hospitals, tarmac roads, electricity and water. Twenty-eight years later, Oman has developed into a modern nation with both the infrastructure and the social organizations required to meet the needs of its people. The availability of oil revenues have made such a significant and rapid transformation possible. The vision and leadership for such a change was directed by one person - His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al-Said, ruler of the Sultanate of Oman since his accession in 1970. His Majesty has overseen the transformation of the Sultanate of Oman from a single economy, based upon rudimentary agriculture and fishing, to a modern and dynamic nation with a diversified economy.

A noteworthy catalyst for the above successful transformation is the development of education from primary to tertiary levels. Prior to 1970, education in Oman was confined to 3 primary schools with 900 boys, there was no provision for the education of girls. Following the accession of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in 1970, education has been made available to all Omani nationals (boys and girls on an equal ratio) under a program of continuous and rapid expansion, the most recent stage of which was the opening of the co-educational Sultan Qaboos University in 1986. The availability of education (from primary to tertiary) for women has undoubtedly played a crucial role towards the emancipation of Omani women. This achievement has attracted the praise of a number of international magazines on women's issues, one of which is the Indonesian Women's magazine (Observer, 1996).

Women in Management in the Sultanate of Oman

The implementation of socio-economic and educational plans during the renaissance period (1970-1998) has transformed the Omani society and economy. Undoubtedly, the development of human resources has been accorded particular importance in this transformation with the inclusion of women on an equal basis. This however, has not resulted in equal participation of women in the workforce, despite an equal percentage of women in Oman's population. The results of the official population census taken in 1993 showed the Omani population at 1,480,531. The statistics revealed that there were 755,071 male Omanis and 725,460 female Omanis, giving almost a 50:50 ratio of men to women (Omani Census, 1993). The age distribution of the Omani population is consistent with that of developing nations with almost 54% of the total Omani population under the age of 15. The Profile of Labor force statistics during this period comprised of 274,411 Omani nationals of which only 24,007 (9%) are Omani women ([Table 1](#)).

It can be observed from Table 1 that the Omani labor force structure is heavily male oriented. This however, should not mislead the reader into interpreting the gender inequity in the labor force for reasons of lack of education and or job opportunities for women. Analysis of the Omani labor composition attributes this gender discrepancy to several economic and social factors. Some of the fundamental factors include traditional culture and attitudes coupled with values and stereotypes of the Omani woman as a wife and mother as their primary role in the Omani society. Other factors relate to the type and nature of occupations which the labor market provides, the unsuitability of some of these occupations because of social customs and traditions, or the short supply of some jobs which women normally prefer. This situation is expected to change with projections of the increased role of women in the labor market caused by the steady increase in the education of girls and the expectation that thousands of girls will complete various stages of education in the coming years (Oman Statistical Year Book, 1996).

The profile of Omani women labor composition and employment structure is shown in Tables 2 and 3. This profile was prepared and presented by the General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. The statistics indicated that there were 17,946 women working in the government sector; 2,942 in the private sector and 3,119 who owned their own business. The profile of the government female employees indicates a heavy orientation towards the service sector with the majority (59%) concentrated in the Ministry of Education followed by (22%) in the Ministry of Health and remaining (19%) distributed among other government sectors ([Table 2](#)).

With regards to senior executive and decision making positions in the government sector, the Sultanate of Oman under the wise leadership and directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, has set precedence in the Arab Gulf region by appointing Omani women in senior government positions. This undertaking was epitomized by the recent appointment of four women in the 40 seat State Council (State Council, 1997) ([Table 3](#)).

Table 3 shows the distribution of Omani women in the government sector's top management and decision making positions. This includes 3 Deputy Ministers, 4 members in the State Council (Majlis Aldawlah), 2 members in the Consultative Council (Majlis Alshu'ra), 4 in Senior Advisory positions, 13 in special grade, and 261 in Grade One (equivalent to Director & Director General).

Tables 2 and 3 concludes that Omani women are represented in all employment sectors, be it government, private or their own business. Furthermore, unlike its neighboring Arab Gulf countries, the Sultanate of Oman has catapulted women to unprecedented heights by appointing them to senior political positions in Oman's Council and ministries. This reflects His Majesty's trust and confidence in women's ability to manage and execute senior government positions. Consequently, the representation of Omani women (13%) in the ranks of senior government positions surpasses Western standards.

A Generic Framework for the Driving and Resisting Forces for Change

To begin with, it would be helpful to address a list of generic forces as terms of reference in discussing the role of Omani women in management positions in the Sultanate of Oman. Such forces have been referred to quite frequently by a number of writers on women's issues, for example (Dines, 1993; Hammoud, 1994; Vinnicombe & Colwill, 1995).

The Driving Forces for Change in the Sultanate of Oman

There are ten major driving forces acting for change in the Sultanate of Oman: religion (Islam), national leadership, education, nationalization (Omanization), economy, General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs (Omani Women's Associations), women's leadership, favorable labor laws, family support and child care services, and changing women's attitudes. Each of these driving forces will be discussed and analyzed for its impact. Subsequently, strategies will be recommended to sustain and possibly strengthen the impact.

Islam

Islam accords equal rights to men and women alike. In fact, Islam is the key to women's emancipation and liberation. Islam does not forbid women from seeking an education or from pursuing work. On the contrary, Islam encourages women to be educated, work, own property and engage in business. It has elevated the value and worth of a woman to an unprecedented status in society. A role model to Muslim women is (Sitina) Khadija, the wife of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), who successfully fulfilled the roles of a businesswoman, a wife and a mother.

The Muslim nations have elected three women Prime Ministers, namely Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Khaleda Zia (presently Shaikha Hasina) of Bangladesh and Tansu Cillar of Turkey. These individuals were elected by male and female voters on their abilities as capable human beings, not as women. These elections have demonstrated the true essence of Islam towards the role of women. It has refuted the distorted myth construed by social taboo that a woman's place is in the house, and that it is socially unacceptable and dishonorable for a Muslim woman to work. In her address to the Fourth World Conference on Women, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto pleaded that "Muslim women have a special responsibility to help distinguish between Islamic teachings and social taboos spun by the traditions of a patriarchal society" (p.1).

Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) encouraged Muslims, men and women alike, to seek and pursue knowledge. The Holy Koranic verses and Hadiths can be cited to demonstrate this fundamental right to knowledge. "Say: My Lord, increase my knowledge" (Holy Koran xx: 1,14). "God will exalt to high ranks those who believe among you, and those who have knowledge" (Holy Koran lv 11: 11). "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" (Hadith). "The search for knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, male and female" (Hadith).

National Leadership

Since the dawn of the national renaissance in 1970, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has repeatedly stated that Oman's crucial resource is its national human resources. This appeal does not preclude Omani women as proclaimed by His Majesty in His speech: "The education of girls is never absent from our mind, since women form half of our society." In recognition of this fact, a full fledged commitment by the government of Oman has been undertaken to educate, train and develop its national work force as a measure towards nation building and economic development.

His majesty's drive towards development of national human resources is not restricted to men, but applies

equally to women. This is attested by equal educational and job opportunities. Omani women occupy different professions such as, medical doctors, lawyers, engineers, business leaders, and teachers. Omani women are found in the army and police, private and public sectors, and most importantly, in senior government positions.

To support the role of women, the Omani government has set a number of programs such as a network of modern health services and social services throughout the country aimed at improving the advancement of women. Undoubtedly, Omani women have been liberated and accorded their respect as equal partners in Omani society under the leadership of His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos.

Nationalization (Omanization)

The government of Oman is committed to nationalization (Omanization), a program that has been initiated by His Majesty to prepare Omani nationals to take an active role in the workforce and to replace expatriates wherever possible. With a labor force of 690,000 comprising 55% expatriates and 45% Omani nationals, the Sultanate is highly dependent on expatriates. This predicament has always been a concern of the government, and rigorous training and development programs have been enacted to promote nationalization in the country.

The importance of developing the country's national human resources has been one of the main aims and policies throughout the Sultanate's five year development plans (Birks & Sinclair, 1980; Development Council, 1995). This aim is supported by several constructive policies and measures clearly documented in the development plan. For instance, the Fourth Five Year Development plan (1991-1995) has committed an initial allocation of Omani Rials 40 million for the implementation of the Omanization policies, in addition to appropriating the sum of Omani Rials 10 million to the Ministry of Civil Service towards Omanization programs in the civil service domain (Development Council, 1993).

To this effect, legislation concerning employment contained in the Omani Labor Law states that preference should be given to Omani nationals. This mandate is enforced by the Government's Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor by specifying the ratio of Omanization to be achieved by the end of 1996 in the private sector taking into account the number of Omani graduates graduating annually from the various educational institutes (Table 4).

Education

Education in Oman is a fundamental right for each and every Omani citizen. The importance of educating and developing the country's national human resources has been one of the main aims and policies of His Majesty's government. In accordance with His Majesty's directives, a network of modern primary and secondary education establishments for girls and boys has been extended across the whole country, catering to even remote villages. Educational progress has been phenomenal. By the 1994-95 academic year, there were a total of 947 schools at the three levels of general education (primary, preparatory, and secondary) with 474,288 students, half of which are girls. At the post-secondary level there are equal facilities for both males and females to pursue higher education and vocational training. This is provided both domestically and internationally. Higher education facilities in Oman include one co-educational university, Sultan Qaboos University of which more than 50% of the student body are female, twelve intermediate teacher training colleges, two specialized institutes of health and banking, six technical colleges and six vocational institutes (Sultanate of Oman Statistical Year Book, 1995). Higher education in Oman caters equally to men and women without discrimination. This educational development is indeed staggering and deserves a noteworthy recognition, given that prior to 1970 there were only three elementary schools for boys and no facilities for girls.

General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs

The development, advancement and participation of Omani women as equal partners in the country's socio-economic development has been supported by many factors, one of which is the General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs, formally established in 1985. Undoubtedly, a significant move has been made by the government to enhance the status and role of women in Oman's society. The Directorate, under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs & Labor, has setup a network of Women's Development Centers throughout the country, catering to rural and remote villages as well.

The general aims and mission of the Directorate is to set up programs for the care of mothers and children, the eradication of illiteracy, education, the development of traditional and modern handicraft skills, the promotion of healthy and hygienic environment, the teaching of survival skills, and the cultivation of women's minds and roles as citizens of a modern developing society.

Of significant importance and a positive precedent prior to the inception of the Directorate, is the voluntary social work of the Omani Women's Association, the first of its kind in the country founded in 1971. Managed as a not for profit organization, the Omani Women's Association acts in collaboration with the efforts and support of the government to carry out a great number of activities aimed at improving and enhancing the role of Omani women in society. Some of these activities include literacy classes, various handicraft skills, family care programs (day care centers, care for handicapped children, summer activities for girls, health awareness), social functions, organizing exhibitions to display the various work prepared by members of the association, intellectual and educational development through national and international women's conferences and meetings, and setting up workshops to promote social and professional development. It is envisaged that the Women's Association could be instrumental in providing a network for Omani women in management, and to offer the much needed support for their development in the workplace.

Women's Leadership

Pursuant to the directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, nine Omani women have been appointed to senior government decision making positions. This includes: four women in the forty seat State Council (Majlis Aldawlah), two women in the eighty seat Consultative Council (Majlis Al'Shura) and three women for the positions of Deputy Minister. In addition, Omani women occupy positions of Senior Advisors, Director Generals, and Directors in the various government organizations. It is noteworthy to mention that Omani women are represented in the Faculty Profile (Academic Staff) of Sultan Qaboos University as well as representation of Medical Staff (Medical Doctors) in hospitals all over the country.

The Consultative Council was set up in November 1991 under the directive of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said. It holds the position of a parliament and is based on Islamic religious law and procedures. Since its inception, it has assumed a practical role in assisting the government in all important matters relating to social and economic issues. Although under-represented, with only two women among the eighty elected members, this is considered a major development for women and a great opportunity for Omani women to be a part of the decision making body representing the people of Oman.

In December 1997, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said inaugurated the Council of Oman comprising the newly formed State Council along with the pre-established Consultative Council. The forty seat State Council with four women representatives is yet another progressive step in the consultative (Shura) process, that works in conjunction with the Majlis Alshura for achieving the nation's social and economic goals (Majlis Aldawlah, 1997).

National Economy

Since the accession of Sultan Qaboos to power in 1970, His Majesty has pursued a vigorous policy for economic and social development which has been facilitated by revenues generated from oil export (Sultanate of Oman, 1975). Oman's economy has been transformed from one that was based mainly on subsistence agriculture and fisheries to one that is oil based with all the modern facilities and infrastructure. Subsequently, the Omani society emerged from one that was lagging behind socially, culturally and economically; to one that is educated, enlightened, and endowed with modern social facilities. The availability of oil revenues has made it possible for Oman to develop its economy, educate its people and offer a relatively comfortable standard of living. This however, has not rendered a total reliance and dependence on oil revenues, rather the government of Oman has been pursuing economic diversification and privatization programs as a measure of maintaining a viable and sustainable economy for its people.

Favorable Labor Laws

Omani women are accorded favorable labor laws which serve to protect their rights and ensure equality in the workplace. Employment in Oman does not discriminate on gender and exercises a sound policy of equal employment opportunity and equal pay act. An entire section in the Oman Labor Law is dedicated to the employment of women. For example, Articles 80 to 82 in the Oman Labor Law clearly safeguard the rights and working conditions of Omani women (Oman Labor Law). These articles spell out special advantages and support granted to working women in areas such as maternity and widowhood leave entitlements (each is six weeks leave), and a special provision that allows working women to request leave of absence (up to four years) without pay to accompany a spouse who is posted abroad. Working mothers who return to work while continuing to breast feed are allowed to leave work an hour each day for six months to feed their babies.

The working hours in the government (public) sector are conducive to working women. Government employees work from 7:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. Saturday through Wednesday, and Thursday and Friday are days off from work. Such working hours allow parents, particularly working mothers, to spend time with their children.

Family Support and Child-care Services

Omani women enjoy a wide range of child-care support services. These range from family support to professional services such as affordable housemaid/nanny and child-care centers (nurseries). The Omani society is based on strong family ties. The centrality of the family accompanied by close relationships makes it possible for parents or parents-in-law of working women to help with child care.

Working women can also avail themselves with a host of day-care centers and nurseries. These facilities are available throughout the country with a higher concentration in the capital area to cater to the larger population of working women.

Changing Women's Attitudes

The aforementioned factors have contributed immensely in influencing women's attitudes towards their role in a modern developing Arab society. In an interview with ten top women managers in Bahrain and Dubai about their work and its challenges, Wilkinson (1996) affirms that "women who have succeeded in business anywhere are controversial figures, and the Arab Gulf is no exception to this rule (p. 22). These women who have successfully made it to top management positions either as entrepreneurs and owners of their business or managers of major companies have stated that the driving force behind their success

includes: family support, educational opportunity, academic success, job opportunity, determination, inner drive for success, qualities and attributes conducive to successful management, ability to handle multiple tasks, and self-confidence. The challenges faced by these women were overt discrimination at work, cultural taboos, negative attitude toward working women, and lack of confidence and trust in women managers.

In Oman, the availability and accessibility to all levels of education along with equal opportunities in the job market has not only emancipated the Omani woman but equally accorded her individual rights and respect as an equal partner in the Omani society. This is substantiated by informal interviews with some of the professional Omani women working in government and private sectors. These women who have successfully progressed to management positions attribute their achievements to accessibility to equal educational and job opportunities coupled with their perseverance in committing themselves to their jobs and career progression. In this regard, one of the respondents said, "Making it to the top is not easy. It takes a lot of hard work, patience, commitment, sacrifice and trade-off; however, the opportunity is there for those women who aspire to become managers and are willing and able to maintain multiple roles."

The Resisting Forces for Change in the Sultanate of Oman

This case study does not imply a presence of a "utopia" for women in the Omani society. Arab nations in particular, provide different forms of deterrents which prevent women's progress and development. Some of these deterrents include a generic stereotype of Arab women reflected by Muslim societies, particularly men, with regard to a woman's role as mother. Negative male attitudes also prevail professional working women. There is an unspoken "silent" policy of discrimination against women at work, the presence of a "Glass Ceiling" preventing women's accessibility to top management positions, absence of a professional women's network, lack of professional management training programs for women, and lack of affirmative action for promoting and ensuring women's presentation in the labor force as well as in management positions.

Traditional Attitudes and Stereotypes

Although gradually changing among the more educated modern Arab/Islamic societies, conservative Arab societies hold traditional socio-cultural stereotypes and attitudes about the role of women. These conservative and traditional attitudes highlighted in the literature of women in the Muslim world by Magharabi, Al-Dabbagh & Hayajneh, (1994); Bech (1994); and Al-Hatimy (1983) portray women's primary role as a wife and mother. Women are not necessarily looked upon as having the abilities and potential for developing professional careers. They are portrayed as being inferior to men, naturally emotional and unsuitable for leadership positions (Hammoud, 1993). Such conservative attitudes negate the concept of professional working women in traditional Arab societies, the idea of women working is degrading and a disgrace to some Arab men who consider that it is their responsibility to provide for their wives and family. Therefore, traditional Arab/Islamic societies maintain that first and foremost, women should prepare themselves for a domestic career of being a wife and mother. Work should only be considered as a last option under extraneous conditions and circumstances.

The above attitude tends to have a spillover effect at work, where by male employers regard women as being less capable than men and unfit for responsible positions, claiming that their family obligations take priority; and hence, subjects them to lower productivity and absenteeism (Beck, 1994; Hammoud, 1993). This negative attitude and traditional stereotype towards women in Arab/Islamic societies has been, and still is, a major resisting force to progress for professional working women, particularly for those in management.

Portrayed Self-image of Women

The inferior self-image of women becomes difficult to overcome considering that it is ingrained and conditioned in their upbringing and social development (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 1991; Hennig & Jardim, 1977). In traditional Arab-Islamic patriarchal societies, the feminine gender is subordinate, while the masculine is superior and dominant (Magharabi et al., 1994; Bech, 1994; Hammoud, 1993; Allaghi & Almana, 1984; Gerner, 1984; Al-Hatimy 1983). Generally, men are held responsible for providing the necessities of life, thus to work outside the home. On the other hand, women are expected to serve their husbands and children at home, especially since women are not required by the Islamic law (Shari'a) to financially support the family. In this subordinate position, women become victims of their own gender (Mernissi, 1985, Rassam, 1984). Hammoud's (1993) dynamic study on the role of women in higher education management in the Arab region confers that the most fatal obstacle which prevents women from realizing their utmost professional achievement is the self-image of a woman portrayed as inferior to men, incapable of being socially and financially independent, and hence depends on the man to care for and protect them.

Studies in the Gulf countries by Allaghi & Almana (1984) and Osseiran (1989) reflect women's inferior self-image. Results indicate 50% of the female students surveyed believe that the husband should have the "final word", that women should obey their husbands, and that a husband's education should be higher than that of his wife. With regard to work, it was felt that women should only work in the traditional professions such as teaching and nursing. There was a strong preference towards jobs that do not require women to mix with men. The Khattab and El-Daif (1984) study in Cairo revealed that 66% of female students stated that women with children should stop work; 41% maintained that teaching and social work are the most appropriate jobs for women; and the majority believed that women should only work as an economic necessity.

Human Resource Policies and Strategies

The lack of proper human resource policies and strategies addressing women workers has proven to be a major obstacle to women's progress and development. For instance, in the USA, women's rights have not merely evolved from vacuum; rather, advocates of women's rights in America applied the Civil Rights law to fight sex discrimination at work and to demand equal rights. This struggle resulted in what is known as 'Affirmative Action' at the workplace (Vinnicombe, 1995; Hannig & Jardim, 1977).

Only nine percent (9%) of the Omani workforce are women. The majority of these workers are concentrated in the lower echelons of the organizational hierarchy with a small percentage in decision making positions. In Oman, the absence of human resource policies and strategies to promote the recruitment and development of female managers at work is a deterrent to gender diversity. The work environment and culture are not conducive to promoting women in management. This acts as a 'glass ceiling' preventing women's accessibility to top management positions. For example, there are no programs to facilitate the advancement of women as role models, absence of mentoring programs, lack of management training programs, and shunning of affirmative action.

Lack of Professional a Women's Network

The lack of a professional women's network in Oman creates a major void for women aspiring to professional managerial positions. The absence of a female mentor-protégé relationship makes it difficult for women to develop the requisite attitude, skills and abilities for leadership and management positions. This results in a disparate situation and a state of confusion; because after all, women are entering a male dominated domain coupled with a traditional value system and a culture that tends to shun women from pursuing management careers.

Presentation and Analysis of the Data

Sixty questionnaires were dispatched to a random sample of Omani Women in management positions in the Sultanate of Oman. The response rate was extremely slow and tedious. Except for a few, the majority of the respondents were not cooperative. Many repeated telephone calls along with reminders to solicit their feedback were necessary. This is quite understandable in this part of the world where by information and research are a foreign phenomenon and not the norm. People are not necessarily comfortable with the idea of expressing their opinion honestly and freely. An element of inhibition exists. Therefore, of the 60 questionnaires distributed, 32 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 53%.

Personal Characteristics of the Respondents

A summary of the personal and professional characteristics of the respondents is displayed in Tables 5 through 11. The distribution of respondents by age is shown in Table 5. Of the 32 respondents surveyed in this study, the highest distribution of 15 (47%) were in the age bracket (35 - 44) followed by 11 (34%) in the (25 - 34) age bracket and 6 (19%) in the (45 - 54) age bracket (Table 5).

The distribution of respondents by marital status is shown in Table 6. The majority of the respondents 27 (84%) were married leaving 5 (16%) single (Table 6).

Table 7 depicts the distribution of respondents by number of children. The highest concentration was 18 (56%) having (1 - 3) children, followed by 8 (25%) with (4 - 6) children and 6 (19%) with no children (Table 7).

The distribution of respondents by academic qualification is shown in Table 8. Eighteen (56%) of the respondents received Bachelors degrees, followed by 9 (28%) with Masters and 5 (16%) with Doctorates (Table 8).

Table 9 summarizes the distribution of respondents by place of post-secondary education. Fifteen (47%) of the respondents received their post-secondary education in the Arab World (East) and 17 (53%) in Western universities (West) (Table 9).

The distribution of respondents by place of employment is shown in Table 10. The majority of 24 (75%) of the respondents worked for the government (public sector) and 8 (25%) worked for the private sector (Table 10).

Table 11 summarizes the personal opinion of the respondents on whether or not resisting forces outweigh driving forces to Omani women in management. Fifteen (47%) of the respondents felt that resisting forces outweighed driving forces to Omani women in management, while 17 (53%) felt that there were no such imbalances (Table 11).

Analysis of Respondent's Personal Opinion on Omani Women in Management

As indicated in Table 11, fifteen (47%) of the respondents felt that resisting forces outweighed driving forces to Omani Women in management positions. It appears that these women chose to be critical and sorted out this opportunity to voice their issues of concern on women in management in the Sultanate of Oman. In their comments, these women acknowledge and realize that the government of Oman has made available to Omani women an array of social and economic factors (driving forces) to improve their status in the Omani society, but it was felt that women still remain victims of discrimination (resisting forces) by the prevalent male dominated culture. For example, some of the respondents stated that "merely being a woman is a major obstacle towards professional development." Other comments include:

- "higher management is dominated by males who tend not to take women seriously professionally."

- "not having the social back-up nor the network needed to encourage and promote women in management positions."
- "feeling of inferiority complex towards men in the management cadre."
- "traditional values and culture discourage women from pursuing professional and management positions."
- "conflicting roles of being a domesticated wife and mother, and that of professional woman."

In general, women in this category indicated that the resisting forces to women in management include: limited opportunities to higher education, discriminatory appointment and promotion practices, traditional attitudes of male bosses towards working women, male dominated domain, male resistance to women in management, absence of policies and legislation to ensure participation of women in management positions, lack of professional networking, lack of female role models, lack of professional management development programs, lack of sufficient number of quality day-care centers, dual responsibilities of traditional and professional roles, balancing traditional and professional roles, and family obligations as a wife and a mother for child-bearing and child-rearing.

Coincidentally, considerable similarity existed between the respondents' opinion and the generic resisting forces for change in the Sultanate of Oman. The most common issues of concern are related to cultural attitudes, traditional values and stereotypes of the status and role of women in Arab-Islamic societies. The respondents felt that the social and cultural perception of Omani women's role was that of a domesticated wife and mother with primary responsibility towards families.

On the other hand, the remaining seventeen (53%) of the respondents who have ruled out that resisting forces outweigh supportive forces to Omani women in management positions supported their views with the following factors. Women in this category felt that although resisting forces existed which are primarily male dominated traditional social and culture attitudes and stereotypes of Omani women, such forces were balanced out and in some cases outweighed by supportive forces. These women have concentrated on the positive factors attested by the following comments:

- "Omani women get best education as men so that they can work alongside men and their place is not limited to their homes."
- "Omani women have proven their abilities to succeed academically and professionally."
- "Omani women are more devoted to their duties and carry out their responsibilities diligently and conscientiously."
- "the government has set up the Directorate General of women and child affairs which has made steady progress in uplifting women socially, economically and educationally."

In general, women in this category indicated that the driving forces behind their success include: first and foremost family support from their parents and spouse, determination and inner drive for success, opportunities for access to all levels of education and academic achievement, self confidence, diligence and perseverance, job opportunities and potential for professional growth and development.

DISCUSSIONS

The following have been extrapolated from this study. First, Omani women's labor force participation rates are very low, representing only nine percent (9%) of the Omani labor force and only four percent

(4%) of the total laborforce. Analysis of the gender inequity in the labor force attributes this discrepancy to a number of social and cultural factors. Some of the primary deterrents include traditional values and attitudes towards women. These attitudes portray women's primary role as a wife and mother. Other factors relate to the type and nature of occupations which the labor market provides, the unsuitability of some of these occupations because of social customs and traditions, or the short supply of some jobs which women normally prefer (Oman Statistical Year Book, 1996). This situation is expected to change with projections of the increased role of women in the labor market caused by change of attitudes towards working women as well as accessibility to jobs in the various sectors of the market.

Analysis of respondents' personal opinions on Omani women in management in the Sultanate of Oman indicated the presence of an array of resisting forces (obstacles) to management positions. All respondents confirmed that resisting forces to management positions exist for Omani women. Forty seven percent (47%) of the respondents confirmed that resisting forces outweigh driving forces, whereas the remaining (53%) indicated that while resisting forces exist, it was felt that the driving forces balanced out, or at times outweighed, the resisting forces to Omani women in management positions.

In summary, some of the primary resisting forces to Omani women in management are related to cultural and traditional values coupled with traditional stereotypes on the status and role of women in Arab-Islamic societies. Respondents indicated that the cultural perceptions of women's roles were those of a domesticated wife and mother with primary responsibility towards family. They felt that this traditional attitude towards women tends to have a spillover effect at work, whereby predominantly male employers regard women as being less capable than men and unfit for responsible positions, particularly those in management. Other resisting forces (obstacles) to women in management include limited opportunities for higher education, discriminatory appointment and promotion practices, the unspoken "silent" policy of discrimination against women at work, traditional attitudes of male bosses, male dominated domains, the absence of policies and legislation to ensure participation of women in management, lack of professional management training programs for women, lack of professional networking, lack of female role models, and the balancing of traditional and professional roles.

On the other hand, respondents who claimed that the driving forces balance out resisting forces to Omani women in management supported their position with the following comments:

- "support and encouragement from national leadership."
- "equal access to education and employment opportunities."
- "family support and child-care services."
- "self-confidence."
- "determination and inner drive for success."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study clearly indicate that while in principle, women in Oman have been accorded equal educational and employment rights; in practice, discrimination against women exists in the workplace. This situation is made more difficult for women who aspire to be in management positions. Several of the respondents have articulated that "merely being a woman" is a major obstacle to professional development. The majority of the respondents, confirmed that much more needs to be done to overcome barriers to the full participation of Omani women in management positions.

In view of the literature review and this case study analysis on Omani women in management positions,

the following strategies have been recommended to promote women into management positions.

Access to General and Higher Education

First and foremost, it is recommended that the government continue its efforts to maintain and sustain equal access to educational opportunities at general and post-secondary levels. Since education is the major driving force for the improvement of women's status, and since links between employment and professional qualifications are decisive, it is urged that educational opportunities to Omani women should never be compromised, but rather be improved. Meanwhile, special measures should be undertaken to encourage and promote women's access to scientific, managerial, technical, and vocational disciplines in order to develop the requisite skills and extend their opportunities for employment in non-traditional occupations.

Women represent fifty percent (50%) of the Omani population, therefore, the government is urged to tap this vital resource in order to capitalize the full potential of contribution towards national economic development and prosperity.

Positively Influence Traditional Attitudes and Stereotypes

Attitudinal change needs action on the fore-front. Traditional attitudes and stereotypes received highest attention by the respondents, and was unanimously considered a primary resisting force to women in management positions. There is a dire need to positively influence male traditional attitudes towards women in modern developing Arab-Islamic societies. Consequently, there also is a need to significantly change the attitudes of senior male managers who are apt not to take women manager careers seriously. Hence, a professional career should be viewed according to individual merit, i.e. aptitudes and qualifications, and not on the basis of gender. Women have already proven their success in many professional endeavors. Special efforts are needed to modify these attitudes through social awareness programs promoting a woman's legal right to study, work, and participate in all aspects of development at all levels.

Human Resource Policies and Strategies

Given that only nine percent (9%) of the Omani labor force are women, there is a need to promote and encourage Omani women to join the work force through a mechanism of affirmative action and equal job opportunities. It is necessary to institute awareness programs of employment opportunities and benefits to Omani women in all the different regions of Oman. This can be achieved through the utilization of the local media as a means for promoting the role of working women in the workplace. At the international level, utilization of international media such as "Arabsat" can be used to transmit programs that promote the value and roles of Arab women in a changing society and their integration in the development process. Other measures include enacting policies and legislation to ensure the representation and participation of Omani women in management positions, as well as setting up quota systems to ensure the employment and representation of women in the workforce. Accordingly, it is recommended to establish Human Resource Policies and Strategies to execute and orchestrate the recruitment, training & development, and promotion of Omani women to management positions.

Professional Women's Network and Leadership

The General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs along with the Omani Women's Society should play a proactive role in encouraging and promoting professional Omani women through awareness of female role models in leadership positions, organizing professional management & leadership training programs, and establishing a network for Omani women in management (for example, Omani Women

Management Society). Subsequently, it is important that these professional women's associations work on overcoming the inferior self-image of women in traditional male-dominated patriarchal societies. There is a need to instill a feeling of security, self-esteem and credibility amongst women. Omani women should be made to feel confident in themselves and to be able to persevere against all odds. They should be accorded self-respect and trust in their ability and capacity to fulfill domestic roles as well as professional roles. There is a need to highlight and discuss the inherent feminine leadership qualities of women and their favored application in today's decentralized and flattened hierarchical organization structures.

Support Facilities and Infrastructure

It is difficult to dispute the hardship and challenge of managing multiple roles. Professional women are faced with the challenge of maintaining housework and family and a professional career. In response to such challenges, special attention should be directed to the provision of a social infrastructure that will enable women to work, such as professional day care centers on site, kindergartens, and adequate maternity leave. The availability of such support services is a tangible expression of organizational recognition of the needs of professional women. Consequently, it undoubtedly can make a great difference to the capacity of women to manage multiple roles.

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