

The Lived Experiences of Foreign-born Women: Influences on their International Working Lives.

Abstract

We explored the lived experiences of foreign-born women to discover influences on their international working lives. Life history narratives were collected in interviews with a sample group of participants (#12) in the United Arab Emirates. A phenomenological framework of content analysis was applied to these data, which resulted in identification of three emergent themes of influences on participants' working lives; becoming a new generation of expatriates; adjustment to socio-cultural change; centrality of womanhood. We discuss the implications of these themes for the human development and professional identity of foreign-born working-women. Insight arises from the study, for business practitioners and policy makers, about the actual and potential contributions of these women to a national workforce. The study contributes a new classification, the Foreign-born Working-Woman, to the body of academic knowledge on expatriate workers. A research direction is proposed for further study about the influences on the economic participation of foreign-born women.

Keywords: Arab Gulf states, expatriate, gender diversity and equality, foreign-women's economic participation

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Introduction

Female expatriates have been recognized as a ‘talent pool of highly skilled, highly educated women professionals’ (Van den Bergh and Du Plessis, 2012, p. 142). Yet, not all foreign-born working-women, whose nationality differs to their current country of employment, can be classified as expatriates nor as migrants. Thus, the actual and potential economic participation of these others has been somewhat overlooked in the extant literature (Ariss, 2010; Van den Bergh and Du Plessis, 2012). The purpose of this study was therefore, to investigate the lives of a sample of these women in one particular country.

A research question was formed to give direction to this study - how have the lived experiences of foreign-born women influenced their international working lives? It was important to answer that question because the central proposition of this research was that these female human resources are an emergent, yet under-investigated subset of the global labor market. The research question was addressed through the collection of life history narratives with a sample group (#12) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Madsen, 2007, 2010). A thematic interpretation of data, informed by a phenomenological framework, was conducted on transcriptions formed from recordings of personal interviews with these participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The study is significant in its potential contribution to existing theories about the influences on the human development and professional identities of foreign-born working-women beyond the geographical location of this research.

Firstly, the literature is reviewed to place the research question into theoretical and empirical contexts. We then justify the methodological approach of phenomenology for interpretation of collected data. The findings identify three emergent themes of influences on the international working lives of foreign-born women. The discussion considers the value of this study for academic knowledge, and for practitioners and policy-makers. Finally, the limitations of the current study are stated, and a direction for future research is offered.

Context

This section reviews the relevance of the geographical location, the demographic composition of the labor force, and the human development status of the UAE. The study was conducted in one of the Arab Gulf statesⁱ in the Middle-East region, because the UAE is of interest due to its location ‘at the crossroads of many cultural, religious, geographic, and economic influences’ (Crocco *et al.*, p. 107). Another reason for this study was the high percentage of foreign workers that are represented in the UAE labor force, where the population is comprised predominantly of foreigners (89 percent), and citizensⁱⁱ form a minority in their own country (11 percent) (UAE National Bureau of Statistics [UAE NBS], 2011).

Males dominate in that population (75 percent) because the economy is driven by various industries (e.g. construction, engineering and oil), which has led to a high demand for low-skilled and low-paid male foreign labor, and the majority of these employees are single or, if married, their wives remain in the home country (UAE NBS, 2011). That economic structure and workforce demographic partially accounts for a high human development score for the UAE (40th), and yet a low ranking for women’s equality (115th/142 countries) (United Nations Human Development Program [UNDP], 2014; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2014). Foreign women (20 percent of the total population) outnumber female citizens (35

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percent of the *Emirati* workforce), and the majority of the latter group work in the public sector with only one-two percent holding executive positions, 20 percent of administrative roles, and less than one percent own a business (NBS, 2011; Stalker and Marvin, 2011). As citizens are mainly employed in the public sector, there are opportunities for foreign-born women to be employed and to own businesses in the UAE private sector (Al-Ali, 2008; Eroglu and McCrohan, 2008).

Being a Foreign-born worker

Foreign workers have been categorized into expatriates and migrants in previous studies on international workers (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Van den Bergh and Du Plessis, 2012). The relevance of those classifications to the context of UAE foreign-born working-women is reviewed in this section.

A multinational company second the traditional expatriate worker to another country for a period of time (Harvey, 1997; Harvey, 1998; Newburry *et al.*, 2008). The value of international experience for employees was noted in a study of expatriates in the Arab Gulf state of Qatar (Scurry *et al.*, 2013). An alternative, or a supplementary arrangement for a company, is to employ independent foreign workers, the 'self initiated' (SIE) or 'private' expatriate, who works outside her/his own country of birth or permanent residency (Doherty *et al.*, 2013). The benefit of such an employment contract to a company is the reduced cost of an SIE, as she/he works on a temporary contract and personally carries the risk of employment/unemployment (Tharenou, 2009). A 'self-initiated foreign work experience' (Siljanen and Lambsa, 2009, p. 1468) may follow a decision to become one of the 'private expatriates who travel for personal reasons, relationships, adventure or interest in a specific country' (Stalker and Mavin, 2011, p. 277). Political insecurity and/or a lack of work in an underdeveloped country also causes workers to obtain employment outside their home country (Kharouf and Weir, 2008; Rehman and Roomi, 2012).

The SIE designation is most relevant to the experience of many foreign entrepreneurs, and middle and senior level employees in the UAE (Hutchings *et al.*, 2013; Siljanen and Lambsa, 2009; Stahl *et al.*, 2002; Stalker and Mavin, 2011). In-country references, academic studies and government policies refer to these foreigners as expatriates, but that is more in keeping to their status vis-à-vis their own country (Harrison and Michailova, 2012; UAE NBS, 2011). That is because foreigners in the UAE are denied citizenship or permanent residency (migrant/expatriate status), as only a temporary right to remain in the country is granted for work purposes through Emirati sponsorship via renewable two or three year self-employed or employment visas (Zeffane and Kemp, 2012). Foreign workers are also in somewhat of a precarious situation in the UAE because the political and economic drive is towards *Emiratization*, i.e. full employment of the national population (Al-Ali, 2008; Kemp and Xhao forthcoming).

We prefer to acknowledge these women as foreign-born workers in this study because they do not fit within the convention in academic literature of migrant nor expatriate workers. The significance is that foreign-born working-women in other countries are also likely to be underrepresented in academic studies because they remain outside those established categories.

The 'trailing' status of foreign-born women

In this section, we review the literature to understand the situation for women who live and work in a foreign country. There have been previous studies conducted on female expatriate workers over a period of at least 25 years, including recent research on the working lives of western women in the UAE (Adler, 1987; Harrison and Michailova, 2012; Hutchings *et al.*, 2013; Stalker and Mavin, 2011; Tung, 1998). However, ‘female expatriates’ (Tung, 2004, p. 243), and specifically non-western females, remain as an underrepresented sample in the extant literature because they are an exception to the norm of male international workers (Elamin and Omair, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Metcalfe, 2008).

The phrase, ‘trailing spouse’, has been coined in academic literature in reference to ‘the spouse of the transferred employee’, i.e. the partner (he or more usually she) who accompanies the other to live a traditional expatriate life (Harvey, 1998, p. 311). Western working-women in the UAE expressed irritation about a local law that designated the employed spouse as sponsor, who was required to issue a letter of ‘no objection’ to their employment because they were the accompanying (trailing) spouse (Stalker and Mavin, 2011). Females are affected to a greater extent than males by that government policy because they are more likely to be the trailing spouse. Although sponsorship is not necessarily a gender issue because it depends on the employment status rather than the gender of the employee (personal experience of the lead author). However, a further disparate impact on gender equality was reluctance by international companies to assign women to overseas appointments, even though ‘global management skills [are viewed as] critical for international firms to remain competitive’ (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2007, p. 928). Women’s potential for international managerial or leadership status is therefore, negatively effected by such governmental and organizational policies (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2014; Harrison and Michailova, 2012).

The effect of socio-cultural norms for working-women in the region

We now review the potential influences from socio-cultural norms on the working lives of foreign-born women. The expected and socially acceptable version of womanhood in the culture was of particular interest because the majority of female participants in our study were from countries within the Middle-East region.

The Arab Gulf states are nations that form a ‘patriarchal belt’, according to Littrell and Bertsch (2013, p. 311/12), in which a woman’s position is ‘severely retarded’ because of accepted socio-cultural norms of ‘patriarchs, arranged marriages, dutiful daughters and obedient wives’. The ‘restrictive norms and values [that] hold back certain groups (such as women)’ in patriarchal societies was also expressed as a concern in a United Nations report (UNDP, 2014, p. 20). Patriarchy was defined by Crocco *et al.* (2009) as dominance by men over women in both family and society. The Arab Father (patriarch) is designated as head of the family, and ‘perceived as the main source of support, protection and social security’ for female family members (Sholkamy, 2010, p. 256). An acceptable norm is for the male to be in the public sphere, financially supporting female family members through employment, while women perform a complementary role as homemakers in the domestic setting (Elamin and Omair, 2010; Metcalfe, 2008; Omair, 2008). A challenge emerged for Pakistani female entrepreneurs because of this cultural expectation that women were expected to perform ‘stereotypical domestic roles’ in that patriarchal society (Rehman and Roomi, 2012, p. 209). That cultural norm was also shown to continue beyond the societal setting in findings from a study of migrants to Norway, where immigrant Muslim women continued responsibility for the house and children while men earned income to keep that family (Predelli, 2004).

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Marital status and family commitments have been shown to have a negative effect on women's career development (Gibbons *et al.*, 2011). Those commitments were highlighted in a UAE study through a suggestion that females have a choice 'between family and career or [can] opt for both' (Jabeem, 2010, p.209). A woman needed to take into account the attitude of family members to her working, and seemingly lacked a choice to opt out of becoming a mother to concentrate on a career. A study on international expatriate families referred to the woman as a family member, a mother and a wife, who was only undergoing an expatriate experience because of her husband's work (Haslberger and Brewster, 2008). In that situation, 'the husband's working life is continuous' (Haslberger and Brewster, 2008, p. 325), and the wife's responsibility was to ensure family members adapted to new jobs, schools, and different cultures (Harrison and Michailova, 2012). Furthermore, western women who worked in the UAE claimed 'they were expected to behave the same as local women as far as the traditional roles of 'mother' and 'wife' were concerned' (Hutchings *et al.*, 2013, p. 304). The expectation for females to display a high level of commitment towards family responsibilities was also shown to have prevented them from taking up international assignments (Selmer and Luring, p. 2012). Adherence to these socio-cultural norms of acceptable womanhood was a reason why women did not work nor attain senior positions in international contexts (Omair, p. 2010).

Studies of Arab working-women have though tended to focus on gender inequality created by barriers such as 'how they [women] balance their work and non-work responsibilities' (Omair, 2010, p. 122). But a negative focus on these socio-cultural norms was a barrier in itself because it was 'a patriarchal interpretation of Islam' (Omair, 2008, p. 118). To the extent that reports about women in Islam have emphasized their family role and modesty from a perspective that religion has limited their individual agency (Korteweg, 2008). An alternative interpretation was that women's independence has been recognized within a tradition of patriarchy throughout Islamic history because of the principle of equality between the genders (Clark *et al.*, 1991).

A study of female leaders in Israel pointed out that family, and particularly their husbands, had supported them in their working lives (Shallom-Tuchin, 2013). Kharouf and Weir (2008, p. 316) concluded, in a study from Jordan on working-women, that male family members were 'supportive and facilitative, rather than repressive and stifling'. Likewise, a study of leadership, in the United States of America (USA) (Madsen, 2007) and with female UAE citizens, revealed that families had ensured these women received high levels of education. The women themselves 'felt that their religious beliefs and stable families were important and influential elements of their personal development and overall upbringing' (Madsen, 2010, p. 83). Their religion had contributed to these women's development, wherein the value of family support was important to their education and working lives.

Cultural norms of acceptable womanhood were also considered to have affected the working lives of foreign women to a lesser extent than for national females. A study of expatriates in Asia identified a 'gaijin syndrome', whereupon local women were expected to conform more to societal norms than were outsiders (Adler, 1987, p. 186). Tung (2004, p. 246) also found a 'halo effect' for female expatriates because of an assumption by 'host country nationals' that these women must be 'exceptionally well-qualified' to be employed in international roles. A similar effect was found in a UAE study that enabled foreign women to take up employment unacceptable to local women, and to receive 'privileged treatment in the workplace compared to their host national women colleagues' (Stalker and Marvin, 2011, p. 274). As a consequence, Harrison and Michailova (2012, p. 624) concluded that

in pockets of the Middle East, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Western female expatriates appear to be finding great opportunities to effectively pursue interesting and varied professional careers.

A local view of foreign women privileged them as outsiders to societal boundaries of cultural norms, which provided a positive working environment for them (Thomas, 1996).

The economic participation of foreign-born women has been internationally and locally contextualized in this literature review. Males numerically dominate the UAE labor force because of the economic push towards certain industries, and gender inequality for women was a consequence of male dominance in a patriarchal society. Societal expectations of acceptable behavior affected both foreign and local women, but the former were considered somewhat outside society, which eased their participation in the work-force. The implications from this literature review were to recognize that socio-cultural norms affect the lived and working experiences of foreign-born women, and that opportunities exist for them to work mainly in the private sector.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate for this study because ‘rich’ understanding about the meaning of a studied phenomenon can be gained through the collection of data from participants (Doz, 2011, p. 583). We chose phenomenology as an appropriate qualitative research approach because it was a participant’s ‘experience of something’ that mattered (Ashworth, 2006, p. 19). Scholars have called for deeper examination of the experiences of work, through listening to, rather than attempting to explain, an individual’s subjective frame of reference (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2011; Gill, 2004; Wise and Millward, 2005). Phenomenology was considered to be a reliable research methodology for our study because it has been successfully applied in other relevant studies; employment decisions (Wise and Millward, 2005); individual working styles (Weidenfeller, 2012); daughters, and work/life balance for mothers (Gibbons *et al.* 2011; Rehman and Roomi, 2012); participants’ sense-making of their life histories (Smith, 1996). A phenomenological study conducted with national women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) found the influences of cultural norms and personal identity made sense of their working experiences (Jamjoom, 2010).

We considered that a phenomenological approach was thus justified for this study of foreign-born working-women in the UAE, as it would yield superordinate or main overarching themes through an exploration of the meaning of life history events that encapsulated our participants’ social construction of their working experiences (Stalker and Mavin, 2011; Omair, 2008). Our study is internationally relevant because that group of foreign-born female workers exists in other developed and emerging markets (Scurry *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, research validity arises from this study of these women in the geographical context of one country because of its international applicability.

Study sample

We chose to include participants for this study that met four specific criteria; gender (women); foreign-born (UAE resident); working in the private sector (employed/self-employed); organizational role (middle or senior level positions) (Table 1).

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[Table 1 about here]

The participants joined the study having been promised anonymity, and pseudonyms were assigned to each to protect confidentiality. They were selected for the sample group through various methods; a snow-ball technique (Stalker and Mavin, 2011) where referral was made from one woman to another (e.g. Gillian referred Lulu); identified from websites of local businesses (e.g. Linda); personally invited after the lead researcher met them at exhibitions, conferences or networking events in the UAE (e.g. Nehal and Zelma) (Kemp, 2015). The majority of participants were aged between 30-39 years old, with an age range from 20-50+ years old. There was a cross section of nationalities included in the sample, listed according to participants' self-declaration, which we then classified into ethnic origins. Three-quarters of the sample group were educated internationally, i.e. they attended school or university outside their home country, and all, but one, of the participants had attained at least an undergraduate degree. The time the women had spent in the UAE varied from as little as one month (Robyn) to more than 30 years (Hayat), and nearly one-third of these participants were born in, or moved to, the UAE at a relatively young age. Two participants were employed currently in a family business, which their fathers had originally started. A third of the participants had started their own business in the UAE.

We studied a sample of 12 foreign-born women from various nationalities who worked in several industries, across a range of job roles at middle or senior level positions in the private sector of one particular country (UAE).

Data collection

An interview framework was used in this study that was previously tested to collect in-depth life history data from women in the UAE (Madsen, 2010) and in the USA (Madsen, 2007). Demographic data were collected at the beginning of the interview in our study, and then followed semi-structured and open-styled questions about participant's early life stages (school years) through to maturity (college/university time) up to their current professional stage (Madsen, 2010). Transcripts were formed from the recorded interviews conducted in our study, which lasted on average 90 minutes and ranged between 50 minutes and two hours (Wise and Millward, 2005). The participants knew they were to be interviewed about their life history, and were unaware of any particular phenomenon that would later be explored. Indeed these researchers were aiming for any themes of phenomena to emerge as these data were interpreted.

Data analysis

An explanation is given for the reader to recognize the steps that were taken to identify themes across these data. Firstly, these researchers separately read each of the transcripts, and took note of data that were similar, different to, and any new elements that emerged in comparison to the literature review (Gibbons *et al.*, 2011). Next, a series of research conversations took place between the authors, who have different and relevant background experience and knowledge pertinent to this study. The lead author has a decade of working experience as a woman in the Arab Gulf states and has previously studied women in employment in the region. The female co-author does not have international experience, but has academic knowledge of working women. It was highly interesting for both researchers to explore their differing viewpoints on the unique experiences of these participants through discussions about data coding. Themes were therefore identified through a process of

individual analysis of each transcript, followed by collegial discussions between these researchers that stimulated deeper questioning to verify and agree on coding (Wise and Millward, 2005). As these authors revisited these data, singularly and together, a saturation point of three substantive themes was reached through this phenomenological approach (Gibbons *et al.*, 2011; Wise and Millward, 2005).

Findings

The emergent themes that were identified in the study are now considered in this findings section. In support of these findings, illustrative quotations were retrieved from the interview transcripts, and, although some editing of occasional words and punctuation has taken place for ease of reading, we have remained as true as possible to participant's spoken words to capture their meaning (Table 1).

Theme 1: Becoming a new generation of expatriate workers

We decided on the theme of a new generation of expatriate workers because the majority of these participants had been exposed to living, studying and working outside their home country due to a variety of family circumstances. Males and females, mainly close family members, were found to have strongly influenced these women's past lives and current work situations.

The original stimulus to expatriate for half of the sample was the result of their father's decision to seek employment or business in another country. Within the study there was some evidence of that decision being forced upon families because of external circumstances. A political situation had driven Zelma's family from their homeland (Palestine), her father then found work in a new country (Jordan), and finally the family had moved to the UAE, and she was now Chief Corporate Affairs Officer in the family business, which her father had started (Table 1, quotation).

Their spouse's employment situation caused some of these participants to move to another country. Hayat came to the UAE because of visa restrictions that prevented her husband settling in other countries. Gillian and Jane resigned from work in their home countries to accompany their husbands abroad, and later obtained employment in that country. Gillian (Table 1, quotation) gave up work in the United Kingdom (UK) to accompany her spouse to Russia, and later to the UAE. While continuing her role as mother and wife, she noted that a constant in life was her desire to work, and she was employed in both countries. Gillian was made redundant in the UAE two years ago, and, as the children were independent by then, she chose to use her severance money to start her own accountancy business with her husband, and she became the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of that company.

Other women mentioned involvement by a brother in their working lives. Linda (Executive Director and Board Member) started a branch of her brother's business in the UAE because she could not find employment in her home country (the Lebanon), and the siblings were Managing Partners in that company. Robyn set up her translation business and her brother managed the branch of that business in the KSA. Close family members (children, husbands, parents, and/or siblings) for the majority of these participants (exception – Robyn) were living and working in the UAE. That family situation had influenced, and continued to influence, the agency of participants in their choice to remain as foreign-born workers in the country.

Theme 2: Adjusting to the socio-cultural environment

Theme 2 emerged as these female participants in this study talked about they coped with moving to other countries, and their international experiences of education and employment. We found examples of potential for stress in participants' life histories given that these women did not necessarily have a stable home because of their international moves. For example, Linda talked about being brought up as a young daughter in war-torn Lebanon, but she focused on an appreciation of her parents for her "good life" despite that conflict (Table 1, quotation). These women did not necessarily talk about those events as stressful, and we adhered to the phenomenological precept that it was these women's experiences of events that mattered.

It was the women in the family who were responsible for adjustment of family members to their new socio-cultural situation. Jane (Human Resources Business Partner) was born in Kuwait, of a Lebanese family, and there was a subsequent move to Canada to obtain nationality. At that time her Mother's role was to settle the children into that new life in Canada, while Jane's Father financially provided for the family through employment in the UAE. Another example was Nehal, whose father owned a business in KSA, and he lived there alone for some years. The family then moved to KSA, when Nehal was in her early teens, and that decision, to bring the family geographically closer together, caused a period of adjustment. Nehal talked about her Mother, who had to adjust to a new role of full-time housewife because restrictions on women within the local culture prevented her from working. At the same time her mother was adjusting to this new life, she helped Nehal cope because she was not used to Saudi cultural practices of appropriate behavior for adolescent girls. Nehal had experienced a change to her schooling at a critical time, but continued to receive a high level of education in KSA despite the international move for the family. Half of the sample participants (Gillian, Linda, Nehal, Robyn, Rola and Zelma) were privately educated. Private education for our study participants was an indication of their lives as foreigners, it was a benefit provided by their fathers' employment, and was a necessity rather than a luxury because free schooling was available only to citizens.

We did not ask the participants their religion, considering this question rather intrusive or leading. But it became obvious that many of the women had a strong faith as they did talk voluntarily about their religions. Jane and Shereen were brought up as Muslims, but pointed out it was their personal choice to continue in that faith as older women (Table 1, quotations). Rola (Business Development Manager) said that she was able to continue with her Christian faith in the UAE, even as she appreciated the culture was determined by Islamic beliefs (Table 1, quotation). Adjustment to living and working in the UAE was alleviated somewhat for these women by their faith, and the acceptance of their religion within the socio-cultural environment.

Evidence from our study had suggested that influences on adjustment to socio-cultural change were from mothers, who settled family members into a new life of education and work, and for some their faith also helped them to adapt to socio-cultural norms.

Theme 3: Centrality of womanhood

The third theme identified in this study was the centrality of womanhood, which emerged through participants' ruminations about being a working-woman, and their roles of mother

and wife. The centrality of womanhood manifested within these women's lives through these simultaneous commitments to family life and their own professional lives.

Hayat was a wife and mother who was financially responsible for the family as her husband's employment was minimal due to ill-health and visa restrictions. She had gained employment in New Zealand and had passed professional exams there. Hayat took the family on a holiday, before she moved them to the UAE and became Managing Director of her own company (Table 1, quotation). Nehal talked of her future work and how she wants to give back to society, and her wish to make a social impact was an element of her womanhood (Table 1, quotation). However, Nehal's current priority is her young children, and when they are older and more independent, then she would have time to make a bigger impact on societal issues.

Womanhood was paramount in Lulu's mind and actions as she was pregnant at the time of interview, having married another expatriate, and was planning to take maternity leave for a few weeks. Lulu's experience of a move to another country for work was different to other participants. She stayed with friends in the UAE for a holiday, and saw opportunities for work. She then returned home to the UK, handed in her notice and then moved to the UAE without a job offer. However, Lulu quickly found employment with a design company and then started her own agency, her position was entitled 'Chief Surgeon' on her business card, and she explained that as a self-styled explanation of her working role. She commented that she had defied her friends' caution towards moving to another country without employment prospects (Table 1, quotation). A sense of adventure had seemingly motivated Lulu to become a female worker in a foreign land.

Robyn moved to the UAE because, as a single woman, she suffered from a lack of social life in another Arab Gulf country (Qatar). She had recently taken up a senior position, Company Secretary, in a local bank, and revealed that her womanhood aided her because of the impact of her presence on her working environment and male co-worker practices (Table 1, quotation). While Robyn questioned whether these experiences were about her being a woman or about 'her', she could not disentangle those two identities in the recounting of her experiences. The narrative presented Robyn's experience of being a working-woman as a beneficial one for all, since she contributed more (through being smarter than the men), and ensured better behavior between colleagues.

Nawal (Assistant Sales Officer) travelled to work in the UAE for personal and professional reasons that resulted from working in a dangerous country as a woman. The interviewer (first author) had asked Nawal why she gave up her job in her home country (Pakistan), and her response was that it was the result of insecurity for women working there (Table 1, quotation). Samia was employed in a role, Marketing/Business Development Manager, and worked in an industry, international scaffolding, that was non-typical for an Arab Muslim woman. Her thoughts on women in the region conveyed the centrality of womanhood for working-women, and she claimed that the image of women in this geographical region was now outdated because of their professional achievements (Table 1, quotation). These study participants had revealed womanhood was central to their lives, as their development was a consequence of past experiences, and their attitudes to their current working roles revealed their considerations about being a working-woman.

The influences on the working lives of these foreign-born women had not been easy to separate one from another. It was only when the working lives of these women were interpreted through a phenomenological research approach, i.e. from within the personal and

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professional experiences of participants, that some sense could be made of these data (Jamjoom, 2010; Smith, 1996). This study has revealed that the rationalé for foreign-born women's working lives was embedded in their life histories.

Discussion

The three themes identified in this study are now discussed for implications on foreign-born working-women's professional identity and human development. In this section we discuss the contributions of this study to academic knowledge, and the resulting implications for business praxis and policy making. Our interpretation of the transcripts had positioned these women's professional identities as the result of their quite unique lived experiences in their early and later years. Their experiences were of adjustment to changes in family circumstances within different socio-cultural environments. Central to these women's human development were their experiences of womanhood.

The study has contributed to academic knowledge through the identification of foreign-born women as a *new generation of expatriate workers*. Our study findings were in contrast to previously accepted definitions of the expatriate worker because those have failed to fully capture the experiences of foreign-born working-women. This sample did not fit within stated criteria for expatriate workers, and the designation, trailing spouse, for these foreign-born women was somewhat negated in this study (Harvey, 1998). The findings agreed with Tharenou (2009, p. 78) that 'gender role theory explains how career and family may differentially affect relocation for work by men and women'. The decision to work outside their country of birth was not directly initiated by the women in this sample because, for the majority, their fathers or husbands had originated the decision to move their families to other countries (Stalker and Mavin, 2011). Only two participants (Lulu and Newal) originated their foreign-working life, and therefore, could be considered as SIEs in their own right (Selmer and Luring, 2012; Siljanen and Lambsa, 2009). The designation, SIE, could, arguably, be applied to these women as mature adults because of their agentic decision to be employed or start their own business in the UAE. But that decision was taken within the context of the family circumstances of these participants, e.g. married to expatriates who work in the UAE, parents currently live in the country, and some of whom are employed in a family business. We have added to the previous body of knowledge on migrant/expatriate workers in recognition of the female foreign-born worker (FFW) whose circumstances were influenced by their past and current family situations.

The sample group had *experienced social-cultural adjustment* to a foreign environment. Similar to the findings of Madsen (2010) about UAE female citizens, these participants talked of caring parents who, despite family upheaval, made their childhoods stable. We have extended earlier findings from expatriate studies through recognition of these women's 'cosmopolitan identity' because they lived, studied and worked internationally (Hutchings *et al.*, 2013, p. 292). Our study has also extended previous findings about western female expatriates to other foreign-born women because there were few difficulties experienced by these participants in their adjustment to working in the UAE (Harrison and Michailova, 2012). Women in our study never referred to the UAE employment sponsorship system, it was perhaps such an accepted arrangement that they did not consider it worth referencing. They continued to remain as foreign-born workers because of the UAE governmental policy that allowed them only residential and not citizen, expatriate or migrant status in the country. In our study, these women, apart from Lulu and Nawal, had been brought up in another country to their birth, or had previous overseas experience, and/or had previously worked in

another country. Adjustment to working in the UAE was probably minimized for these women in our study because of those prior experiences.

All these foreign-born women in our study worked within the private sector, replicating the wider UAE context where it is usually national women who work in the public sector. A previous study had discovered that working-women in Arab societies were usually school-teachers, nurses or secretaries (Jabeen, 2010). In contrast, the women in our sample were similar to a previous study of female expatriates in the UAE, as they held middle/ senior management positions or owned businesses (Stalker and Mavin, 2011). Our sample group were entrepreneurs or middle and senior level employees, and held dual minority in the workforce because they were both female and foreigners (Tung, 1998). They were unusual in the labor force because of their difference to the male norm of the foreign worker, which we considered somewhat gave them advantages in the workplace (Adler, 1987; Hutchings *et al.*, 2013; Siljanen and Lamba, 2009; Stahl *et al.*, 2002; Tung, 1998, 2004). Foreign relocation had been a positive experience for these women, and that had manifested through their adjustment to socio-cultural norms with family support and through their own agency.

The *centrality of womanhood* was identified as an influence on these women's professional identity. Similar to the findings of Hutchings *et al.* (2013), we found that these women's experiences of working life were moderated by their roles as wife and/or mother, which fitted within the cultural expectations of being a woman. The women in our sample talked about male relatives (brothers, fathers, and husbands) as positively supportive of their educational and employment progress, which was similar to the findings of Kharouf and Weir (2008) and Madsen (2007, 2010). Those life stories we heard did not map neatly to a narrative of seeming negativity about the link between Islam and working-women, and patriarchy based on cultural and religious values (Hasan, 2012). Although we also acknowledge that these life histories do not detract from the stories of other women who may experience patriarchy as restriction for labor market entry and progress.

As a consequence of these findings, we suggest that the actual and potential contribution of foreign-born women to the global labor market has been overlooked. We found these participants' working experiences and commitment to family were both a constant in their lives, and agree with Shallom-Tuchin (2013, p. 71) that employers need to treat female employees as 'part of a family system' to support their attainment of senior positions. Existent recruitment, retention and promotion policies need to be revisited to ensure these women's continued contribution to a national workforce. Entrepreneurial activity extends the economy of a nation, and our findings have offered insight for labor force policy to attract foreign-born women towards business ownership. Business practitioners and policy makers can recognize the economic participation of these foreign-born women for their potential to expand the choice of human resource talent in a global labor market.

Limitations and future research direction

The study was limited by data collected from a relatively small sample of participants from different countries who worked in the UAE. We recognized that the high proportion of foreign workers in the population in one particular country was a contextual boundary to this study. These were limitations for generalizability of these results, which opens up opportunities for future studies. These findings support a move by academicians towards study of foreign-born women, who own businesses or are employed, as closely connected to experiences of family, in particular gendered family relationships, roles and identities. These

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findings are also worthy of consideration by business practitioners and policy makers because of implications for management of the workforce and business ownership.

Conclusion

Foreign-born working-women have been somewhat under-acknowledged in academic literature (Harrison and Michailova, 2012; Harvey, 1998; Hutchings *et al.*, 2013; Stalker and Mavin, 2011). These women were understood previously to have followed a spouse to foreign assignments (Harvey, 1998), and the focus was on socio-cultural barriers to women working internationally (Omair, 2010). The existing literature on the expatriate situation for women has negatively effected readings of their professional identity. Missing from the extant literature were studies about the lived experiences of these women that positively effected their human development in an international environment.

This study has filled that research gap through an investigation of the life histories for a sample group of 12 foreign-born working-women in the UAE. By following a phenomenological framework of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), we identified three themes of influences on the human development of foreign-born women that affected their professional identity in international contexts. We recognized the limitation that a study of foreign-born women in the UAE was of local or regional interest, but that the location itself was insufficient as a contribution to international studies of working-women. However, we consider the findings from our study are sufficient to advance future research conversations of what is, and is not yet understood, about foreign-born working-women's professional identity and human development.

This study has contributed to academic knowledge through addressing the research question on how the lived experiences of foreign-born women have influenced their international working lives. These women had melded the centrality of womanhood (as daughter, mother, and wife) with their professional identity (as employee, entrepreneur, leader, and manager) through adjustment to the socio-cultural norms in a foreign country. Furthermore, we have added to the previous body of knowledge on theories about expatriate and migrant workers through the addition of the FFW as a potential new classification of expatriate worker to stimulate a future research direction. As well, the study findings have offered insight for business practitioners and policy makers about foreign-born women's economic participation, and the significance of their inclusion in a national labor force for increased human resource potential in the global labor market.

Table 1. Study participants

Pseudonym Age (Yrs.)	Nationality Ethnic origin	Education School Qualifications	Work Owner/ Employee Job title	THEMES <i>Illustrative Quotations (coding)</i>
<i>Gillian</i> 40-49	British	Private - UK BSci (Acct.) Prof. qual. (Acct.)	Business owner CFO	<i>When I was first there, I got quite involved with school because you could just walk to it. And I did quite a few expat. things, I did some courses like Russian architecture, Russian music, Russian lessons, I did some Thai cooking. There was a big international women's group and they had all these kinds of things and I tried to do it. But I also wanted to work, but I couldn't really see where it was going to come from at all.</i>
<i>Hayat</i> 55	Bahraini	State - USA Master of Finance	Business owner MD	<i>So basically we immigrated twice, to Dubai and New Zealand, so I did my accounting and finance, worked there, research assistance, and made more money, and my husband was in the library, and, after I finished, which was December 2000, so we went around New Zealand.</i>
<i>Jane</i> 40	Lebanese	State - Canada BA (Economics)	Employee HR Bus. Partner	<i>This is a personal choice that was not enforced or anything by my parents, I mean I don't come from this sort of family; we're left to make our own decisions in life.</i>
<i>Linda</i> 32	Lebanese	Private - Lebanon Undergraduate degree EMBA	Business owner Exec. Dir. & Board Member Managing Partner	<i>I lived all my life in Lebanon, so this means, I lived all the wars in Lebanon.. I was born during the war, lived the war and the ones, in the 80's we had war, in the 90s and even in 2006, but my parents managed to give me a good life.</i>
<i>Lulu</i> 37	British	State - UK High school only	Business owner Chief Surgeon	<i>What happens if it doesn't work out attitude of others.</i>
<i>Nawal</i> 30-35	Pakistani	State - Pakistan Master of Physics, Master of IT Higher Dip. in World Trade	Employee Assistant Sales Officer	<i>There are a couple of cases, they threaten the woman and they even killed one of the ministers in *. So it was time to switch over to some other destination where I can work, and maybe I can exercise my abilities and skills in a safer and supportive environment.</i>

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Pseudonym Age (Yrs.)	Nationality Ethnic origin	Education School Qualifications	Work Owner/ Employee Job title	THEMES <i>Illustrative Quotations (coding)</i>
Nehal 31	Syrian Arab	Private - USA Master of Business Administration (MBA)	Employee Previously a family business, recently publicly listed MD for Strategy	<i>I can make a social impact at a higher level when it is issues related to facilitating entrepreneurship at a government level. where any of these things can make a huge impact. And being a woman, especially an Arab woman, my calling is to do something social to start with, and it has an impact on the generations to come. So I'd like to put my efforts in that area... I don't think it is my time until my kids grow up.</i>
Robyn 33	Lebanese Arab	Private - Lebanon Bachelors in Legal Translation	Employee Co. Sec.	<i>I'm not sure if it's being a woman or if it is about me, but when the senior management of the bank are together. and I am present at the meeting, they become more polite. Discussions are different, more concentrated on my presence on board, they value a lot my opinions. I always joke with them because they have to bring a woman on board because women are smarter and they have more valuable opinions. I think a women presence within the senior management helps as women are more organized than men.</i>
Rola 25	Palestinian Arab	Private - UAE Bachelors Studying for MBA	Employee Family business Business Dev. Mgr.	<i>I love to speak about religion. I am Christian but [that is] only 10% of the whole Middle East world. In my society when I say culture, culture is influenced by Islam.</i>
Samia 33	Iraqi Arab	State - Iraq BA (Eng. Lit.)	Employee Marketing/ Business Dev. Mgr.	<i>The notion of Arab women conjures up an image for many people of Arab women cloaked in long covering garments, restricted in freedom and movements. But the achievements of Arab women around the world now lead us to rethink about this image because of what we achieved in the society. We have to think about what the women have, what this achievement means and we have to increase the power, we have to increase the confidence. We have to change the image of Arab women.</i>

Pseudonym Age (Yrs.)	Nationality Ethnic origin	Education School Qualifications	Work Owner/ Employee Job title	THEMES <i>Illustrative Quotations (coding)</i>
<i>Shereen</i> 40-45	Mozambican African	State - UK BA (Hons) (Economics)	Business owner CFO	<i>So today I am able to say to you I am a Muslim because I feel I am a real Muslim at the end of the day because I do believe that Islam is a way of life, I do believe it is a true religion.</i>
<i>Zelma</i> 29	Jordanian Arab	Private - UK MBA (Finance concentration)	Employee Family business Chief Corp.Affairs Officer	<i>I am originally Palestinian, but I of course you know after my family got kicked out of Palestine in '48 so, we made Jordan our home.</i>
20-29 (17%) 30-39 (50%) 40-49 (25%) 50+ (8 %)	African (8%) Arab (67%) Asian (8%) European (16%)	Int. edu. (75%) Undergrad. (92 %) Postgrad. (50 %)	Employee (41%) Family Bus. (17%) Bus. owners (42%)	Becoming a new generation of expatriates Adjusting to socio-cultural environment Centrality of womanhood

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ⁱ The other states are Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Kuwait, Oman and Qatar.

ⁱⁱ Also referred to as *Emiratis*, locals or nationals.