

Work and Equalities Institute Research Briefing

Privilege and disadvantage: lessons from women expatriates in the Middle East

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Summary

Expatriate workers play a key role in Middle Eastern countries, bringing their international experience and expertise to support economic growth. But their perceived position as a group of 'privileged professionals' is challenged by traditions and societal norms in these countries.

Our research explores how privilege interacts with social disadvantage to shape the experiences of expatriate women and concludes that the two factors cannot be separated when understanding their work and career experiences in this region.

This briefing paints a nuanced picture of life and work in the Middle East, showing how the forces of economic capitalism meet and coexist with strict regulations and patriarchal societal norms. We believe there is a role for organisations to act as a bridge in order to address the challenges women expatriates experience, as these countries continue to adapt to life after the discovery of oil.

Introduction

The promise of tax-free salaries, year-round sunshine and a new life abroad have been major pulls for expatriate workers moving to the Middle East. Over the past two decades, the Gulf Corporation Countries (GCC), which include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have developed into global economic centres driven by oil and gas, and populations have swelled to support their big ambitions.

Expatriate workers in the region now make up most of the workforce, with 89.9 per cent and 88.5 per cent in Qatar and United Arab Emirates alone (Gulf Labour Markets and Migration, 2017), and employment figures continue to outstrip other areas of the world. These jobs include, among others, bankers, lawyers, accountants, teachers and HR specialists. For many the overriding narrative is one of freedom of mobility and privilege, as they arrive from foreign shores with knowledge and skills that are highly valued.

But there is a tension between the economic ideals of this region and the traditions it continues to uphold. Our research focusing on the experiences of women expatriates working in the Middle East suggests their expertise as professionals commanding good salaries is colliding with patriarchal regimes where the role of women is restricted, unrecognised and undermined. As a result, a complex picture of life and work in the Middle East emerges, where the unfettered nature of globalisation coexists with these traditions.

“Their privilege comes from having expertise that is wanted and needed in these markets,” says Jenny Rodriguez, a Senior Lecturer in Employment Studies at Alliance Manchester Business School. “But even when the privileged expat bubble is seen to reflect the life of many, regulations are still enforced to highlight the fact that privilege and disadvantage co-exist. We need to stop putting individuals in fixed categories, or say they are either living the good life or are really oppressed. It’s important to understand the nuances of their work and employment experiences in these contexts.”

The research was conducted with 34 expatriate women working in Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. All of them had previous international experience, some in the GCC, and other Middle Eastern countries including Egypt, Israel and Yemen. In a series of semi-structured interviews, they were asked about their motives for moving abroad and how their professional and personal lives were developing. We were particularly interested to find out how their interactions in different regulatory settings – with immigration officials (state), other expatriates at work (organisational) and locals (societal) – had shaped their experiences.

“There have been other studies of expatriates focusing on gender, but these have mainly explored the differences between the numbers of men and women moving abroad to work. Our work taps into a discussion that remains largely under-researched,” says Rodriguez.

“First, we look at gender as part of a wider system of social relations that intersects with other social categories, like ethnicity and nationality, and explore how this shapes women’s experiences. Secondly, we develop our analysis, framing the discussion within institutional and societal dynamics, and how these come together to impact the women’s experiences,” she says. “A lot of the literature adopts a heroic tone when it comes to expatriates and there is not much written about the struggles and challenges. We interrogate the complexity of the situation.”

Privilege and disadvantage: the institutional context

The GCC is the region of the world most reliant on expatriate workers. As these figures have increased, so has the number of women in the labour market, but they still don't enjoy a similar social and professional status to men.

However, because there are growing numbers of women working across these economies, there has been an increasing focus on the influence of the structures and arrangements in place, on their experiences. The role of 'gendered institutions' (Acker, 1990) suggests that organisations operate as places that reproduce patterns of difference and discrimination between genders. In the Middle East, that means understanding how this creates distinctions between men and women.

For women, marriage and motherhood are central to giving them social prestige, recognition and societal approval. Men, on the other hand, are viewed as pivotal in social and economic life, which means they are likely to be favoured for jobs. Expatriate women face situations where their knowledge, skills and expertise sustain forms of privilege, but are met with disadvantage, based on social and relational structures.

The research findings mirrored this dichotomy: women described their arrival into the Gulf using words like 'challenge', 'different world' and 'adventure', while at the same time showing limited awareness of the inequalities in society and how they would be affected. One participant, Daisy in Abu Dhabi, was confident that as an educated expatriate she "would get a job and it would be okay". However, on arrival to the country with her husband, the immigration official classed her as a "housewife".

She describes feeling "really embarrassed" and that "I've worked really hard at my education and now it says I am a housewife on my passport". The practical implications, as is the case of many women in the Middle East, meant Daisy's choices would need to be 'authorised' by her husband – she would need permission, for example, in order to undertake any paid work or employment.

The social status of women, based on their marital status, also makes it harder for single expatriate women in the GCC. Krithika in Doha describes how "back home you can walk, take public transport... and do whatever you want to. You have to follow the rules here. It's a good place for a family, but for a single person it's hard." As a result, others reported acting cautiously around local men, so comments or behaviours weren't misinterpreted or taken the wrong way.

While single women are unable to live in a GCC country without a job, married women can be sponsored by their husbands and receive a visa stamped as 'housewife'. Some of the women shared Daisy's concerns of being put in a social position that didn't recognise their individual accomplishments, but others acknowledged the benefits of living in this way. "I really enjoyed the element of being a bit of a housewife," says Kelly in Abu Dhabi, who described playing a supportive role to her husband, while accepting "it had a lot of stigma for me".

"The way in which patriarchy operates in these societies means that women are, in effect, sponsored by men," says Rodriguez. "The importance of male figures in authorising women's activities is fundamental because it frames women's life and work identities in particular ways." At the same time, she also argues that the research shows the "importance of agency" – where the expatriate women find ways to navigate these dynamics.

"In their own way, people take action. Some of the women come from places where there are stronger equality frameworks, so in coming to these countries and facing so many restrictions and challenges – and choosing to stay – could we argue what they are getting is ultimately so much more than what they are losing?"

Privilege and disadvantage: organisations and networks

While the large numbers of expatriate workers show their willingness to work and stay in the Middle East, the business world in these countries amplifies tensions experienced by these women – even if they are married. The research highlighted the challenge of navigating dual careers, and the demands of the family, in the context of a lack of support from employers.

One participant, Cara in Doha, describes travelling to the region ahead of her husband to arrange schooling and secure accommodation. “I’d worked in the UK business for such a long time and having had two children there... was to a certain extent complacent about the amount of flexibility I had,” she says. While she had been able to work part-time, she was told there was no part-time working in the Middle East. After arriving and being told her time was 100 per cent billable, she describes a shock to the system with two children under the age of five and a very difficult decision to make. “Do I carry on doing this and make it work, or do we just say no, it’s not for us, and leave?”

This apparent lack of support shows organisations are unfamiliar with the needs of these women, says Rodriguez, who explains that this is unsurprising. In Qatar, for example, there are very low levels of women in the workforce so historically there has been little need to accommodate their needs. But as policies supporting local women to take up roles increase, she argues there is still limited support for expatriates (Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014).

This is partly the result of “the narrative of localization, which is linked to policies that look to bring more locals in the workforce and gradually replace all expatriate workers,” says Rodriguez. “On the one hand, the drive to hire expatriates sends the message that they are needed, but the policies of localisation create no incentive for organisations to develop and support expatriate workers.” Because of this, there is a lot of negativity from expatriates themselves, as they feel their careers can stagnate (Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014).

For a lot of women, their ability to gain employment was made more complex by the way networks are established and developed in the region. The Arabic concept of *wasta* – which translates as ‘influence’ – is developed through connections sustained by family and kinship. According to Rodriguez, this translates into job opportunities developing through networking, rather than formal processes of recruitment and selection. Daisy in Abu Dhabi says: “I think job hunting was really difficult and... everybody tells you it’s all about who you know. The annoying thing is when you arrive you don’t know anybody.”

“Those networks are not built independently,” says Rodriguez. “The connection is not you, it’s the male head creating a connection for the family. As the sons grow, they can perpetuate that. And if not sons, then male cousins or uncles. For these expatriate women it’s not only the fact they have no *wasta*, but that they are not able to gain any because in a labour market that prioritises local men for top jobs they are expected to be in gender segregated spaces. So their ability to develop networks is structurally limited.”

The traditional power of the family and male figures serves to influence employment in other ways, too. For expatriate women this is usually in the form of needing their husband's approval to work. "My husband had to say he consented to me having a job, and having a driver's license," says Kelly in Abu Dhabi. "I think it's quite an eye opener having your husband sign a 'no objections certificate' to say you are allowed to work and drive." While some women found these procedures were mainly 'paperwork' and of little consequence, for Rodriguez they show another institutional mechanism that frames the identities of expatriate women: taking away their independent professional standing and shaping their ability to make decisions about their work and careers.

Once in jobs, there were also reports of behaviours which confirm these norms and hierarchies. Acker (2012) says that structures around gender help to reproduce societal beliefs in work settings, and Rodriguez believes the treatment of expatriate women in the workplace is consistent with how women are kept at a 'respectful distance' by men. Amy in Doha says: "Men tend to look at you as a secondary citizen. They feel they are stronger, and you are not able to do your job as well as them." But she also notes: "We are still treated with a level of respect. I have been treated well."

Rodriguez believes organisations appear reluctant to address this dynamic, adding: "Most participants in our Qatar sample didn't have friendships or socialise with any locals, so there is no dialogue about diverse understandings of gender roles and expectations. The organisation they worked for didn't really do anything about this and instead, ignored it, structuring the employment relationship with those workers in a very transactional way.

"They pay them a very good salary but that's all; they are on their own," she adds. "There is no consideration that the experience of work and employment for an expatriate is also mediated by the national context, its institutions and the dynamics they produce and reproduce."

Conclusion

The research set out to explore how privilege and disadvantage shape the life and work experiences of women expatriates in the GCC. While the majority of studies adopt a starting point that expatriates are privileged, this one challenges this notion and shows that privilege and disadvantage coexist within a spectrum, and require constant negotiation.

We conclude that the two factors are inseparable when it comes to understanding the experiences of women expatriates. Their perceived elite status is linked to being desirable in the global labour market, yet it is subject to institutional regulations, organisational structures and social rules at the national level. The study also provides further nuance to the debate about success or failure, proposing a more dynamic understanding of expatriate work experiences, which is subject to tension and conflict.

We reflect on the bigger picture represented by this tension. As Rodriguez says: "There is much talk about the impact of the rapid development of oil capitalism in the Middle East, but perhaps the most important question is how this development is sustained. There has not been an effective country-level skills development strategy and, as a consequence, there are skills shortages that lead to the over-reliance on foreign skilled labour."

Ultimately, as oil capitalism continues to thrive under these circumstances, there is disconnect between the pressures of economic globalisation and cultural and societal norms. Rodriguez adds: "The reality is that when it comes to globalisation, countries appear to have very little power to pick and choose. In this case, the tensions play out in the way groups – which have historically not been part of local labour markets, like women – are treated. In a way, they find themselves as the site for a symbolic battle between globalisation and localisation."

Against this backdrop there are signs that things could be changing. A recent announcement in Qatar, for example, suggests that expatriates will be able to become residents. Rodriguez believes there is a role for organisations to use this as an opportunity to address the work and employment condition of expatriates in the region, especially women.

She says further investigation is needed with companies to understand how these challenges are understood and could be addressed. "The next step is to speak to HR managers based in these countries. Expatriate women have told us how multi-dimensional and nuanced their experiences are, and I wonder what HR managers see as the problem. From our perspective, the problem is structural and operating differently across a number of dimensions, but is this how they see it?"

References

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