CHAPTER 1: WOMEN, EDUCATION AND WORK IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

1.1 INTRODUCTION

"The means to develop a country and modernise its infrastructures is a magnificent burden that should not be taken up by men only. The loss would be huge, for women will be paralysed without any participation in productivity. It would lead to an unbalanced rhythm of life. Hence, women's participation in public life is required and we must be prepared for it" (His Highness [H.H.] Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahayan, President of the United Arab Emirates, as cited by Sayed, 2001:13).

Reinforced by the vision of the President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), national women by virtue of their education and employment opportunities are believed at present to be well-placed to have an effective impact upon the development of their country's political, economical, educational and social goals. A rising population with an increasing percentage of women, together with rapid educational opportunities, has coincided with gradual changes in traditional attitudes towards the role of women in society (ECSSR, 2002a:1). According to Al-Adhab (1992:1) the rapidly changing needs of the UAE require women who understand the broader world of work and who are prepared to participate actively in the planning of their careers.

In practise however, the pressures of a traditional society still inhibit most national women from working because society expects women to marry early and raise a family. National males may agree to female members of their family working, but social requirements like gender segregation may limit work environments resulting in "only a small percentage (of national women) going on to full time jobs" (American Embassy, 1993:3). In addition, many national women cease employment once they marry, while others do not continue their education after completing secondary school or after obtaining their first degree. The President of the Dubai Women's College Alumni Association of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) reports, that in 1996, of the 143

graduates only eight were pursuing further studies (ECSSR, 2002b:1). Therefore, cultural considerations limit career choices and career planning for UAE national women.

Private industries and government ministries in the UAE face problems when employing national women. Like many of their male counterparts, national women prefer living with their families sometimes in areas away from the cities. However, unlike men, it is deemed socially unacceptable for a woman to work and live alone away from her home and family. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs for example can hire women to work in the UAE but cannot post national women employees overseas (American Embassy, 1993:3). These traditional attitudes are changing as more women become educated and as a result of the government's active encouragement of female employment. As the role of women in the UAE shifts from that of a traditional housewife to that of an educated career professional, a national challenge concerns how to best retain the traditional Islamic philosophy and values while educating women to move into the workforce in roles that benefit them and their society (Al-Adhab, 1992:3).

Historically, a college education has been regarded as the road to both higher pay and more fulfilling employment (Al-Adhab, 1992:1). Therefore, a natural progression for educated UAE national women has been their entrance into the workforce. The number of working women increased from 5.3% to 13% of the total workforce from 1980 to 1995 (ADCCI, 2002:1). Many women are absorbed in the public sector particularly in female dominated occupation areas like education and health. Women accounted for 39.8% of total employees in the federal civil service by the end of 1993 (ECSSR, 2002b:1).

In some traditional occupation areas, the majority of employees are female. For example, in 2002, women accounted for "100% of nursery school teachers, 55% of primary school teachers, and 65% of intermediate and secondary school teachers" (ECSSR, 2002b:1). Of these, 74% of nursery school teachers, 38% of primary school teachers, and 32% of intermediate and secondary school teachers, were national female teachers (extracted from MOEY, 2002). In the health services, women are also playing a greater role than

men, with (national and expatriate) women accounting for 54.3% of the total number of employees (ECSSR, 2002b:1).

Education may, therefore, be viewed as a profession, which is female dominated. In this sector, women form the major proportion of practitioners, thus opportunities potentially exist for them to engage in career planning and to assume leadership roles. However, like women elsewhere, they face "the challenge of overcoming barriers which limit their progression into management" (Wirth, 2001:16). At the same time, effective and relevant training and mentoring opportunities are required for women to fully exploit their potential.

It has been suggested from international experience (Wirth, 2001; UNDP, 2002; Gold, 1996; Van Eck & Volman, 1996), that women who are in the education sector face barriers, which prevent them from assuming leadership roles. Women generally start their careers as teachers but find it difficult to progress into management. Sloan (1999 as cited by Holtkamp, 2002:2) suggests that this phenomenon is true internationally because, historically men have held leadership positions.

A major impetus behind this study is to identify and understand barriers, which limit national women's entry and career progression in the education sector. This knowledge will assist in the identification of methods that can be used to empower national female educators to seek and actively apply for leadership positions. A second stimulus for the research stems from the corresponding processes of change which take place when women actively seek and accept leadership positions. In doing so, they form an integral part of the workforce, therefore, their input in terms of leadership will be a key factor for the realisation of the UAE government's goal of Emiratisation. Both of these concerns provide the foundation for the research problem of this study.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

During the last 20 years, the UAE has undergone a dramatic transformation from a traditional country to that of a thriving modern nation-state. In parallel with this change

has been the equally challenging change in the position and role of UAE national women. Traditionally, national women's educational attainment was defined by their roles as housewives, therefore, they required only fundamental levels of reading and writing skills. The rapidly developing economy of the UAE has thrust women into the world of work, particularly in traditional areas like schools and hospitals, necessitating higher education levels. Consequently, post-secondary education is becoming a viable option for most UAE women (Al-Adhab, 1992:4). Of concern, however, is the question of comprehensive and systematic opportunities for women to explore career interests and possibly leadership opportunities within the traditional occupation areas that they presently dominate.

The problem statement can be reformulated as the research question of this study, namely,

How can national women in education be empowered and their leadership developed for Emiratisation in the United Arab Emirates?

In order to explore the research question, an aim and objectives are deemed necessary because these will provide context and direction to the investigation.

1.3 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

The aim of this study therefore is to determine how national women in education can be empowered and their leadership developed for Emiratisation in the UAE. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To identify barriers that make it difficult for national female educators to enter the education sector and/or progress in their careers;
- To consider the expectations and experiences of novice teachers entering the education sector;

- To explore the experiences and perspectives of national female educators in terms of career planning and career progression;
- To define the concept of leadership as perceived by national female educators;
- To consider the practise of leadership amongst female educational leaders in terms of leadership style; and
- To explore the participation of educational leaders in the decision-making process.

The aim and objectives of this study necessitate a qualitative research design, because qualitative research, is "multi method in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter…(and) qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of phenomena in terms of meaning people bring to them" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:2).

1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

Social phenomena are viewed holistically in qualitative research providing broad panoramic views rather than a micro-analysis. Many facets of a process or a central phenomenon aid in establishing a holistic picture (Creswell, 2003:182). In qualitative research the researcher refrains from assuming the role of the *expert*, instead the participants are the *experts* and interaction with participants dictates an evolving design. The data obtained from a qualitative design consists of words in the form of rich verbal descriptions.

A purposeful sampling technique was used because it involves the selection of "information rich cases for study in-depth" (Patton, 1990 as cited by McMillan & Schumacher, 1993:378). Samples were drawn from national female educators who are employed by the Ministry of Education and Youth (MOEY). These educators were divided into three groups according to different career stages, namely,

- Educational leaders – National female educators in management or leadership positions;

- Experienced teachers – National female educators with five or more years of teaching experience; and

- Novice teachers – Recently employed national female educators with less than a year's teaching experience.

Data collection techniques used in this study consisted of planned observations, focus group sessions, individual interviews and document analysis. The information gathered was analysed holistically using phenomenology where the researcher constructs a picture that takes shape as he or she collects data and examines the parts (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993:376). The phenomenological method is an inductive, descriptive research method with which the researcher wishes to investigate and describe all phenomena, including human experience in the way these phenomena appear, "in their fullest breadth and depth" (Spielberg, 1965:4). Phenomenology provides an understanding of a concept from a participant's perspective and from his/her view of social reality.

A more detailed account of the methodology, data collection and data analysis procedures is provided in chapter four.

1.5 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It is important to recognise that a number of boundaries or delimitations exist within the scope of this study, namely,

- UAE national male and expatriate educator perspectives were not considered in this study;

- National female educators participating in this study were from the Emirates of Abu Dhabi, Al-Ain, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al-Khaimah and

Ajman only. There were no participants from Umm Al-Quwain and Fujairah;

- The participants in this study were national female employees in the public sector. Employees of private schools in the UAE were not considered in this study; and

- Data were collected in English with the help of a translator because Arabic is the mother tongue language of the UAE. Nevertheless, language difficulties in comprehending or understanding the questions asked or the answers given may have occurred during sampling, data collection and data analysis with the possibility of nuances being missed or misconstrued.

1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS

For the purpose of this study the following key terms are conceptually and operationally defined:

- *Barriers* – Invisible rules, situations or problems that prevent women from entering the workforce and/or attaining leadership positions. The term barrier is comparable to the glass ceiling, which was coined in the United States in the 1970s.

- *Careers* – The progressively developing sequences of related occupational roles or work experiences through which individuals move during their working lives, often with increasing prestige and rewards. Also the intended sequence of such roles established by individuals as part of their life plans.

- *Culture* – The shared background, social norms and methods of expression of a group of people (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952 as cited by Al-Sawad, 1991:18).

- *Cultural attitudes* – Accepted beliefs within a culture with regards to what is considered acceptable behaviour (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952 as cited by Al-Sawad, 1991:18).

- *Educational leaders* – National female educators in a management or leadership position.

- *Experienced teacher* – National female educators with five or more years of teaching experience.

- *Emiratisation* – A multi-level process through which dependency on the expatriate labour force is reduced and UAE nationals are prepared to take up jobs performed by expatriates. Such preparation entails enabling UAE nationals to perform their jobs equally well if not better than expatriates (Abdelkarim, 2001:9).

- *National women* – Female citizens of the UAE, holders of the UAE passport.

- *Novice teachers* – Recently employed national female educators with less than a year's teaching experience.

- *Traditional* – Beliefs or customs or ways of doing something that has existed in the UAE for decades. For example, the concept of the *traditional housewife* refers to ideas about the roles of women, which have been accepted and promoted by society in the past (Al-Adhab, 1992:14).

- *United Arab Emirates* – A federation of seven Emirates established on December 2, 1971 and located on the southeastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula. The Emirates are Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al-Quwain, Ras Al-Khaimah and Fujairah. Six of the Emirates are bounded on the North by the Arabian Gulf, the seventh (Fujairah) is on the Gulf of Oman. On the west, the UAE is bounded by Saudi Arabia, on the east by Oman and on the south by Rub Al-Khali (the empty quarter) of Saudi Arabia. The United Arab Emirates is approximately 83 000 square kilometers with a population of 2.41 million (1995 census).

1.7 ORGANISATION OF THE STUDY

The first chapter introduces the study and presents the problem formulation. It also provides the aim and objectives and an explanation of the main concepts.

The second chapter presents historical and recent information about the UAE and, in particular, examines factors which have influenced and continue to affect the position and role of women in UAE society. In addition, the concept of Emiratisation and how it is currently being implemented in the UAE workforce is explored.

The third chapter provides a review of the literature relating to women and work, gender inequalities and leadership in general and pertaining to female educators in particular. This literature review contains information within both international and Middle Eastern contexts.

The fourth chapter presents a detailed account of the research design. It includes the methods and procedures used in the sampling, collection of data and analysis of the collected data. In addition, ethical considerations for the use of human beings as subjects are discussed.

The fifth chapter presents the findings of the study as a result of data analysis and triangulation with literature. The findings are interpreted in relation to the aim and objectives of this study.

The sixth chapter presents a summary of the study, draws pertinent conclusions, makes recommendations and identifies areas for future research.