

## Omani Women: Embracing New Identity

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### Abstract

*Like other women around the world, Omani women have always worked. In the past, they worked along their men, tending the herds, and bargaining at cattle souks. Now women are still working, but the nature of work has changed over time with the modernization and material aspiration. This qualitative study explores the perception of Omani professional women on being working and its association with their identity. Data from interviews and printed media revealed that being professional serves as means not only to meet ends but also to actualize self by embracing multiple roles.*

### 1. Identity Theory

Identity is defined as meaning an individual attributes to one's self in a role (Burke and Reitzes, 1981). Burke and Reitzes (1981) suggested that this definition infers three characteristics. First, identities are social products, where they are formed and maintained through social process. Second, identities are organized in hierarchy to produce the self; and third, identities are reflexive in character in the sense that people internalize an identity from responses of others upon performing their identity role.

One of the major discussions in identity theories is identity salience. This identity salience can be internalized and become a stable part of self or be an unstable one and changes to fit changing situation (Owens *et al.*, 2010). As people tend to have multiple roles, they tend to have multiple identities which are organised into hierarchy according to degree of salience. Based on this it can be understood that professional women with children may arranged their multiple roles - i.e. professional woman, mother, neighbour, friend etc. into hierarchy.

Social identity theorists argue that identity is a social-construct, as it is constructed through interaction with other members in a society (Owen *et al.*, 2010; Turner, 2013). An identity is reinforced and enacted as one engages in activities, and interacts with others in the environment (Bird and Schnurmann-Crook, 2005). Through interaction and engagement, people develop self-approval and seek approval of significant others in determining whether an identity intended to embrace is approved, and subsequently determining the position of the identity within the hierarchy of salience (*ibid.* p.146).

As such culture strongly influences how pyramid of salient identity looks like by prescribing priorities in life (Aycan *et al.*, 2005). Society also influences whether two identities are compatible or contesting (Rothbard and Edwards, 2003). If they are perceived incompatible, the less important one will be less committed to or - when threatened, will be sacrificed at once. In many countries around the world, careers that are related to caretaking, nurturing, and entertaining are deemed compatible to women's nature as emotional and sensitive.

Work-family literature reveals that home culture and work culture determine work-family experience. Supportive husbands, who share house chores, take turn to take leaves to attend children's school program, encourage wife to take up job assignment for promotion, help women to balance their domestic and professional roles. Supportive work culture in the form of supportive colleagues, understanding bosses, flexible work hour also provide an encouraging environment for women to perceive themselves as part of organisation and be committed to their career development. Subsequently balanced work-family roles enable women to maintain their domestic identity as well as retaining their professional identity.

### 2. Omani Professional Women

Among Arab patriarchy countries, Oman has constantly been described as the most flexible and tolerant in many aspects. Although gender-based identity is well-defined, gender-based household division is rather implicit and flexible (Al-Barwani and Albeely, 2007). Children are tended by both father and mother often with the help of extended family

members. Although women are the cook at home, men do cook when necessary. The rising of dual-earner families where both husband and wife work and earn money for family therefore do not pose any drastic change in this society. As such it is not a surprise when Oman was categorised as the least masculine society (Al-Twajiri and Al-Muhaiza, 1996).

Hofstede (1980) described that the dominant values for a high masculine country are success, money and things while the dominant values for a low masculine (or feminine) country are caring for others, and the quality of life, and people. While masculinity is associated with work prevails over family, femininity is associated with balance between family and work (Hofstede, 2011). Given this characteristic one might simply conclude that Omani society does not have any issue having their women working, and balance between home and work can easily be attained. However, the reality uncovers the opposite.

An official government report revealed a significant premature withdrawal from work among young Omani women professionals (MONE, 2011). Data in 2010 showed close to 50 per cent of female workforce between the ages 25 and 29 withdrew from work. As Omani women get married at the average age of 26, it explains their withdrawal as they reach 30's of age, which coincides with the timing when the family is growing. The report also revealed lack of facilities in the workplace as the factor of the retreat. This concurs with the findings by Bird and Schnurman-Cook (2005) that absence of facilities and family-friendly policies does hamper the development of professional identity.

Omani society therefore, is conservative at heart (Peterson, 2011). Men are regarded as the main breadwinner, and are responsible to go outside i.e. earning income, and providing house to live, and clothes and food for family. Women are in-charged of domestic matter i.e. providing home, preparing food and cleaning. Even when there is maid, it is women's area to liaise with the maid for house chores. In Omani family, father/husband is the most powerful figure. Women are consulted, and their opinion matters; but the last say is always men's (AlBarwani and Albeely, 2007). Men decide whether or not women should continue study, whether they should work, and what type of job and career they should and can have home (Al-'Omairi and Amzat, 2012).

To date, some Omani men still believe that women's place is at home (Al-'Omairi and Amzat, 2012) and to most Omani women their family identity (defined by Bird and Schnurman-Cook, 2005 as 'a combination of spousal and parental identities') is at the top of their identity hierarchy. Chatty (2000) wrote, 'In Omani society, as in the modern nation-states of the Middle East, ...women are perceived first and foremost as wives and mothers (p. 247). As such, wife and mother are the most salient identities in the identity hierarchy of Omani professional women. Any other identities especially when they are non-domestic are considered secondary and in some cases are considered a threat (Bird and Schnurman-Cook, 2005).

Being mothers and wives means they are expected to spend time most of the time at home. Jobs that require them staying outside home and away from family for long time are considered unsuitable for women. Although there is indication that younger women started not to limit their career options, in general women are still drawn to teaching and administrative positions. The arrangement of 7-8 hours a day and five days a week is considered ideal for women to balance their domestic and professional roles. Long working hours and jobs away from home are considered threatening women's identity as wife and mother. Embracing the identity as professional woman therefore does not happen without challenge.

### **3. Significance of the Study**

The study is significant for at least two reasons: First, Omani government is aiming to double their women's participation in the national workforce by the year 2020 (MONE, 2010). Knowing how the society at large perceives women as professionals gives the clue whether it is a smooth process or not. Second, it shed lights to many issues faced by Omani professional women. By understanding their self-perceived identity, one can understand their commitment and strategy to attain balance between family and profession.

### **4. Research Strategy**

This qualitative study has explored the perception of Omani professional women on being working and its association with their identity from identity theory perspective. This research borrowed ethnographic strategy considering its orientation towards cultural interpretation. Culture provides system of meaning that constructs social arrangements including life options for men and women (Bradley and Kor, 1993). As such, the research explored how Omani women embrace and construct their identity within the context of Omani culture.

## 5. Research Method

Investigation was carried out by conducting series of interview and collecting printed media articles. Ethnographic interviewing is distinct from non-ethnographic interviewing in the sense that it is more of 'series of friendly conversation' (Spradley, 1979, cited in Sorrell and Redmond, 1995). This friendly conversation often happens unarranged and spontaneous, thus deemed to provide more realistic account compared to information gathered from formal interview (Murchison, 2010). As such not all interviews were tape-recorded. However, to assure reliability, field notes were taken as soon as the conversation ended. This paper and pencil note-taking also was done in order not to discourage spontaneity and honesty from the research participants.

The second method is document and image analyses where local magazines and national newspaper will be the source of information. Among them are Y magazine, Oman Economic Review, Times of Oman, and Oman Observer newspapers. These magazines and newspaper portray current situation of Omani society which illuminates differences from the past situation. Coverage on achievement of Omani women in these printed media provides excellent description of identity of Omani professional women, as well as identity which Omani women aspired to become.

While interview provides powerful testimonials, visual data, as argued by Razvi (2006) have the potential to support and corroborate narratives. More importantly, images which are captured in cultural setting offer not only unique, but also authentic description of the phenomenon under study. Combining these two tools i.e. interview and document/image analyses is deemed to better able capture as comprehensive as possible the identity subscribed by Omani professionals, and prescribed by the society.

### 5.1 Participants

Sampling was selected purposely. Two participants were acquaintances to the researcher. They later suggested other participants. Some of the participants also were those the researcher met at shopping complex, dental clinic, and hospital.

### 5.2 Data Collection

Nine participants were interviewed. Face-to-face interview was done with seven participants, taking place at either the researcher's place, or the participants' workplaces. Four of them were lecturers at higher education, three were school teachers and one is a salesperson. Telephone interview was done with two participants due to their time constraint. One was salesperson, and another was an assistant at dental clinic. Both types of interview were open-ended and semi-structured. Among these participants, five of them were married with children, one was married without child, and three were not married.

The interviews were conducted in English. It was not the researcher's intention to limit the study only to those who were able to speak English. However, those who did speak, or willing to speak English were more approachable and cooperative, compared to those who did not speak the language.

#### 5.2.1 Interview question

1. How do you feel being a working/professional woman?

#### 5.2.2 Probing questions

1. Can you describe your feelings about being a professional woman?
2. Does your family encourage you to work? What does your husband think about you working?
3. Is there any pressure for you to stop working?
4. If your family asks you to stop working, would you so?
5. Can you imagine yourself being unemployed?
6. Overall speaking are you satisfied/proud that you are working?

## 6. Analysis

The researcher utilized descriptive and ethnographic content analysis to analyse, describe, and summarize the collected data. Recorded interviews were transcribed, while field notes on the non-recorded interviews were analysed in order to derive themes.

## 7. Result and Discussion

Several themes were yielded from the interviews as well from the published media articles in regards to Omani women professional identity.

### 7.1 Domestic identity is the most salient in the hierarchy.

Domestic identity takes priority over other identities. To some, working in fact is part of being mother and wife, where they help their husbands by earning extra income for the family. A school teacher for example expressed,

*Now everything is expensive. Of course there are cheap and expensive stuffs. But at least if a wife is working, they [the family] have money to provide quality goods to the children....Not everybody can get to go to university. So if both parents work, at least they can send their children to private universities and colleges.*

### 7.2 Professional identity is a meaningful identity.

Many Omani women, irrespective of levels of education perceive career as enriching and professional identity as important to them. One of the lecturers uttered,

*I can't imagine myself stop working. To me, I am Noor, an English teacher. That's what I do. My child [is] first [priority]...[I am a mother] but that's not all I am.*

Haniah, a salesperson at high-end boutique in Muscat City Center with high school certificate shared,

*I love working. It makes me know who I am. I love meeting people. I like to try to speak English. If I sit at home I might get involve in wrong thing, or I will feel bored.*

In a group interview with three participants, they agreed that by being working their opinions matter more to their families. They were consulted for major purchases like cars and lands, and their advices were sought as to which college their younger siblings should be attending.

### 7.3 Family support is important in developing and embracing professional identity.

Many of the participants receive moral support from family, in fulfilling their responsibilities as mothers and working women. They live with their mother or mother-in-law who looks after their children when they are at work. From the participants, the researcher learnt that many Omani families understand when their daughters have to stay back at workplace to do extra workload. Fatimah, another salesperson with two children said that she was grateful her mother never complained when she had to work for long hours. Many days a week she left home at 9 a.m to arrive at work by 9.30 a.m. and stayed until 6 p.m. She confessed never worried about her children as they are in safe hands.

### 7.4 Husband's approval is a factor of success in professions.

Approval from husband is crucial in determining the course of Omani women's professions. Almost all married participants attribute their ability to juggle between domestic and professional identities to their husbands. Thuraiyya, a school teacher expressed her content to have a husband who is also a school teacher. She said they always talked about issues pertaining students and education. She expressed her wish to further study and teach in higher education, but concerned about having to teach in co-educational institution. Her husband did not mind of her intention to further study but discouraged her from working in mixed-gender environment.

Many Omani working women perceived that husband's approval of their career as significant. Many of them

expressed that they love their work but will stop working if their husband ask them to. Conforming to the husband's will is regarded as sign of love and obedience.

#### *7.5 Husband sharing domestic chores helps in retaining professions.*

Husbands' understanding and willingness to share household tasks are strength for professional women to keep their professional identity. Aseelah, a retiring school teacher with 5 children had been working for 20 years. Her husband had always helped with house chores like cooking and washing dishes, especially at times when they did not have maid. Noor, whose first baby was 5 months at the time of interview, expressed her gratitude for having a supportive husband. Her husband worked in the dessert and in a month, he worked for two weeks and stayed at home for another two weeks. During his stay, he would take care of the baby while Noor teaching in the college 70 kilometers from their home.

#### *7.6 Organizational support is a motivation for retention of professional identity.*

Support at workplace motivates commitment to profession as it enables balance between work and family. Aseela had a maid at home. However, sometimes it took time to get new maid when the previous one finished her contract. In this kind of situation, she always had to leave school early so she can cook and be at home when her children come back from school. Her head department and colleagues understood her situation and never complained of her early leaving as long as she informed them of the situation.

In general media in Oman highlights positive pictures of professional women. Their involvement in the workforce has repetitively been stressed in many printed media articles. Columnists in Oman Daily Observer newspaper like al-Balushi (18<sup>th</sup> February, 2013) and al-Suleimany (6<sup>th</sup> June, 2013) acknowledged the importance of women's participation in the workforce. Al-Balushi wrote,

*Today you hardly observe a shop, a mall medical centre, bank, insurance company, business, hotel, institute, education centre, sports, police and army without women. It means that women are playing a great part in building the state and its economy, with their hard work, creativity, innovation and co-operation. (p.27)*

Omani professional women were portrayed as vibrant and ambitious personalities. It is noteworthy however that as being successful mothers is important to this society, very often professional women are portrayed as successful both as mothers and professionals. Y-Magazine (Issue 260) for example published two articles of such story. One is coverage on a managing director whose ultimate ambition is to be 'the one-of-a-kind type of mother' (p.6), and another is on a business analyst, who is also a mother of two, in preparation for an International Antarctic Expedition. The column in which story on her was published printed with the title 'The Adventurer (and Mum)' (p.16). The success of a woman therefore is measured by her success in living up to her domestic identity. No matter how successful she is professionally, what validate her success is her success as wife and mother.

Although the atmosphere for Omani women as professionals is generally positive, there are some reservations against it. Some doubt on the motive of their employment in their first place. An Omani husband (Oman Daily Observer, 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2011) for example said, 'By her working she relieves me of some costs like her cosmetics and household item' (p.26). Although women professionalism is no longer strange, women are still expected to devote themselves to domestic traditional identity.

# ENLIGHTENED ENTREPRENEUR

**SHARIFA AL BARAMI, MD OF ALJAZ GLOBAL SERVICES & INVESTMENTS**

*Wade Pratt Frey Photo: Jerry Worchul*



Tell me about your career journey so far.  
I started out wanting to be an astronaut at the age of 11, a doctor at the age of 16 and a businesswoman at the age of 20. The astronaut dream turned into an obsession with astronomy and astrology. The doctor dream was realized into a Bachelor of Science with honours degree in Biomedical Sciences from the UK. And the third dream of owning my own business started when I resigned from the public sector to set up my own startup in 2007. I'm still learning how to perfect this vision, which keeps me motivated to continue.

You have been active in supporting SMEs and entrepreneurs in Oman - what needs to be done to boost private sector initiatives here?  
In my personal opinion, it is an issue of vision and trust. We need more entrepreneurs with a clear vision of what their services and/or products are. And we need more trust and faith from the private sector to really support these entrepreneurs on the ground. There are quite a few great private sector initiatives that support the SME ecosystem, like the OMIFCO "G&I Accelerator Initiative", OmanOle entrepreneurship in education initiatives and the newly launched "CEO's Mentorship Initiative" to name a few. What's needed now are more of these successful initiatives copied and distributed nationwide.

I noticed that you are an active Twitterer. What role do you think social media has?  
Social media is today's business in a little like the discovery of electricity for the industrial revolution. It's a game changer, a catalyst of positive change. It and when utilized innovatively to serve the advancement of mankind.

I'm always amazed by Oman's women's drive, ambition and intelligence - how can more women be empowered in the workplace?  
Women are already very empowered; perhaps it's time for us to focus on how more women can contribute in building the nation, shifting the focus away from gender and into action. Empowerment, in my opinion, comes from within. It's an internal process that only needs to be insulated with an external effect.

What single piece of advice have you been given that has helped you immensely either professionally or personally?  
A piece of advice signed into my yearbook at 10th grade by one of my teachers was: "Know one thing about everything and know everything about one thing." I still go by that advice, adding "and choose wisely" at the end of it. If time, money and responsibility weren't factors - what would be your ultimate ambitions?  
To be a great mother - the one-of-a-kind type of mother.

What do you do when you're not working?  
I read, listen to music and dabble with writing.

**SHARIFA'S WORK PHILOSOPHY:**  
1. Always meet problems with faith  
2. Don't listen to passive opinions only seek active advice  
3. Have fun

Article credited to Y Magazine, Issue 260 (2013), p.6

## THE ADVENTURER (AND MUM)



**O**n a first meeting Bathina Mahruqi, the steady spirit that lies behind her slight stature and softly spoken manner is not immediately obvious.

The only clue is the quote on her Facebook page: "You can do what you want to do. You can be what you want to be." One of the famous sayings of billionaire businessman David Thomas, a high school dropout who went on to found the Wendy's burger chain in the US.

Perhaps this has been the inspiration for the challenge that Bathina has just embarked on.

As you are reading this, the mother of two is somewhere in Antarctica, the coldest place on earth, where average coastal temperatures plunge to -30 degrees Celsius - with some of the most inhospitable terrain known to man (or woman).

It couldn't be further, both geographically and personally, to her life in Oman.

At home, she is a wife and mother to two young daughters, with a busy job as a business analyst at Petroleum Development Oman.

For the next two weeks, she will be living and working in the White Continent as part of the 2014 International Antarctic Expedition, designed to increase awareness of global climate change, becoming in the process only the second Omani woman to reach the icy outpost.

By today (March 6), the intrepid explorers should have reached the western coast of the Antarctic Peninsula, their home for the next week or so.

"I don't think my family or friends really believed that I was going to do this, they didn't take me seriously at first," admitted Bathina, talking before she left for the epic voyage.

"It's no over-claiming for me because it's a dream come true. It's taken me six months of hard work and two years of dreaming to get to this point."

She first heard about the expeditions to Antarctica in 2011 but missed out on becoming the first Omani woman to make it. That honour went to Zena al-Tawary last year.

After winning a place in this year's expedition, along with fellow Omani, Badar al-Lawati and Amour Abdulhameed, she raised the required \$57,000 (OMR 1,241) in sponsorship after knocking on endow doors, with FDI's putting forward half.

"My husband told me I could go if I raised the money. When I told him that I had, his jaw hit the floor. Once he realised I was going to go, he has been so supportive," she said.

During the expedition, the crew will stay on board a ship making short landings every day, where Bathina can expect to get up close and personal with some of the local wildlife, including penguins and whales. One night, they will sleep outside in a sleeping bag.

It will be far from easy going, though, in a land where 99 per cent of the surface is covered by ice.

Even harder going for someone who doesn't like the cold.

"It's going to be the most difficult thing I have ever done but also the most amazing," says Bathina. "When I first thought about going, I wasn't sure as an Omani lady whether the culture would accept it but it was in my heart, I had to do it. I want to be an inspiration for other women."

Her four-year-old daughter did not want her mother to go away. "I will tell her that one day, when she is older, she will be able to go to Antarctica just like me."

■ ■ I don't think my family or friends really believed that I was going to do this, they didn't take me seriously at first ■ ■

Article credited to Y Magazine, Issue 260 (2013), p.19



They are wives and mothers who are expected to do the daily chores and expecting husbands to share the chores at full scale is considered unacceptable. A columnist in Oman Daily Observer (7<sup>th</sup> May, 2013) wrote:

*If you have allowed the women to have the wings and go to where they have never been, then the men will have to do the house works and should not care if they are called 'lesser men' or 'inferior'. (p.31)*

He further warned the society that allowing women 'to go extra miles' might defy the traditional husband-wife identity. He asserted:

*The rise of the modern career woman will cause disastrous effects on many husbands who assume the traditional 'female' role hence the need to initiate some action points. If the women becomes 'too big headed' over their husbands, don't blame them or anyone because you allowed it to start. (p.31)*

For a woman therefore her professional identity is approved as long as it is not at conflict with her domestic identity, and it does not pose threat to her husband's identity as the prime breadwinner and head of the family.

## 8. Limitation of the study

The researcher views that it is important to note that interviews were conducted only with participants who were able to speak English. Analysis on media articles also was done on magazines and newspaper published in English. As such this study is limited. Perhaps, better understanding can be grasped if study was covering Arabic materials, and interview was conducted with Arabic-speaking participants.

## 9. Conclusion

It can be concluded that there is an ambivalent experience as well as reaction towards Omani women as professionals. They are partly celebrated, yet partly frowned upon either. What clear is, Omani women are slowly acknowledging their contribution to their family and society by being professionals.

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