

NAVIGATING MATERNAL AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES: THE
INTERSECTION OF RELIGION, FAMILY DYNAMICS, AND
CULTURE FOR UAE MOTHERS RETURNING TO WORK

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ABSTRACT

In the light of progress and advancement, societies have come a long way in advocating for the rights of women to work, maternity leave, and career development. Even traditional and stringent societies have seen an influx of women entering various professions. Mothers often play a pivotal role in households, and their decision to return to work can have significant implications for multiple stakeholders. This decision often leads to an identity dilemma, where the combination of work and maternity confuses a mother.

The unique context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), shaped by both modern progressive values and stringent traditional and religious expectations, provides a compelling backdrop for this study. The purpose of this study is to explore the identity dilemma that UAE native mothers face as they navigate between their roles as mothers and professionals, considering the intersectionality of religion, culture, and family dynamics. This is an on-going developing study which will employ a qualitative methodology to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and challenges of these mothers.

INTRODUCTION

Identities of women are mainly shaped and forged based on the relationships they form and the connections they make (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016; Borovska, 2018). These relationships have the ability to let women define themselves based on how they are being viewed in a specific lens and refine their individual sense of self (Laney et. al, 2014, Avraamidou, 2020). Maternal identity does not exist in isolation rather it may be interactive through subsequent sibling identity, partner, friendship as well as career identity associated with it however, literature argues that in most cultures the maternal identity tends to trump all others (Buehler & O'Brien, 2011; Hennekam et. al, 2019; Hollway, 2015). Current understanding of motherhood, work and maternity have been largely developed in Western contexts based on Anglo-American values. There lacks critical examinations of how other institutions such as religion shapes a woman's work and motherhood.

The case of the United Arab Emirates makes a unique contribution to knowledge because mothers' identity is shaped by both modern progressive values and traditional family structures, religious views and cultural expectations to both genders (Hesketh & Williams, 2021). The current study is aiming to address the identity dilemma for working mothers in the UAE through the intersectional lens of work, family, culture and religion. The main identities being

considered are that of motherhood and career/work. This perspective is necessary because the majority of studies on motherhood identity and the return to the workforce in the west tend to take a broad view and ignore the unique experiences of women from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds (Gatrell & Cooper, 2016; Ashman et al., 2022). The current research will examine conflicts or coherence of work, family, culture, and religion for women from the UAE in order to fill the gap in knowledge (Schmidt et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the course of motherhood, the identity dilemma is a theme that becomes evident when the lines start to blur as to what was, what is and what will be (Sallee et al., 2016). The motherhood identity influences any future aspects that a mother may choose to involve herself in (Arnold-Baker, 2019). Literature argues time and again that no matter how a woman looks towards her identity through the various dynamics of her life the motherhood identity ends up taking the top place in the eyes of society (McMahon, 1995; Hennekam et al., 2019). This dominance of the maternal identity tends to diminish other facets of a woman's individuality, leaving her defined primarily by her role as a mother. This differential of perspective may push any of the other parts to her identity away or may end up placing her in a dilemma as to what is right or on priority (McMahon, 1995; Hennekam et al., 2019). This dilemma gains strength when demands from family, culture or religion try to dictate which identity should take precedence (Schmidt et al., 2023).

THE INTERSECTIONAL LENS OF RELIGION, CULTURE AND FAMILY IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

In the United Arab Emirates, women are expected to marry, have children, and raise them in accordance with Islamic and Emirati customs. These cultural dynamics surrounding motherhood and work are firmly ingrained in traditional roles and expectations (Sherif, 2013). These expectations, which are a continuation of cultural standards passed down through generations, are true regardless of the academic or professional endeavours that women may pursue (Dickson & Tennant, 2019). Due to government incentives and cultural pressure to assist nation-building initiatives, there is a particular emphasis on early marriage and childbirth (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2004; The National, 2024). Nonetheless, there has been a discernible change in perceptions of working mothers, demonstrated by a move in favour of encouraging women's career goals in the 1960s (Williams et al., 2013). Motherhood and religion are closely entwined in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country heavily influenced

by Islam. A mother's role is highly valued and regarded (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2016). Islamic teachings place a strong emphasis on the spiritual value of motherhood and the duties that come with raising and directing children (Bensaid, 2021). According to Heard-Bey (2021) these religious convictions influence cultural norms and uphold women's traditional roles as mothers and primary faith educators. There is a discernible shift in the way that women are seeking higher education and entering the workforce while maintaining their religious beliefs, despite cultural conventions and religious doctrines (Williams et al., 2013).

CURRENT OUTLOOK FOR WORKING MOTHERS

The dynamics of the labour force in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have changed significantly in recent years, especially with regard to the participation of women (Clowes, 2017). Thanks to focused initiatives supporting gender equality and empowerment, women who were once restricted by traditional conventions to domestic responsibilities are now actively involved in a variety of professional fields (Shaya & Abu Khait, 2017; Youssef, 2020). Women's participation in the finance, healthcare, technology, and education sectors has increased significantly, indicating that this evolution—which has been fuelled by the leadership's acknowledgment of women's critical role in driving economic diversification—has produced significant success (Hojeij & Al Marzouqi, 2023). Some initiatives like the Early Childhood Authority's (ECA) "parent-friendly workplace" program highlight the value of meeting the needs of working parents by implementing laws pertaining to parental leave, flexible work schedules, and family wellness programs (Tabrez, 2022; The Parent-Friendly Label | ECA, 2023). Legislative changes, like the recently passed pension law, aim to address historical differences in benefits between male and female workers while guaranteeing that women's pension rights are undisturbed by career pauses brought on by childrearing or family responsibilities (Zawya, 2023). These policies support women's involvement in the labour force and advance gender equality in the workplace, both of which advance the economic and social development of the United Arab Emirates. Despite tremendous progress, obstacles still exist, such as juggling work and family obligations and dispelling social prejudices (Gallant & Pounder, 2008).

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Role Identity Theory posits that individuals develop their identities based on the roles they occupy in society and the expectations associated with those roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000). This theory is particularly relevant in the context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where

cultural, social, and religious norms significantly differ from Western contexts. Understanding the roles of motherhood and career within this framework requires consideration of the unique geographical and cultural insights specific to the UAE. In this society, the maternal role holds significant importance within the family and is reinforced by cultural and religious values that emphasize the importance of family and community (Kemp & Zhao, 2016). Women returning to work in the UAE must navigate their maternal role identity within this framework of religious, cultural, and family expectations, which differ markedly from those in Western countries.

Professional identity in the UAE is also shaped by religious, cultural, and family norms surrounding women's participation in the workforce. Emirati women have made significant strides in pursuing careers outside the home but face unique challenges related to cultural expectations and workplace dynamics. The UAE's geographical location as a hub for diverse communities further influences women's professional identities as they navigate various cultural and organizational contexts (Al-Othman, 2011). Intersectionality Theory is particularly relevant in this context, as it highlights how women's experiences are shaped by multiple dimensions of identity, including religion, family dynamics, and culture. These intersections of motherhood and professional identity with other aspects influence women's responses and coping mechanisms regarding the identity dilemma they face (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Janevic, 2001).

The identity dilemma faced by women returning to work in the UAE is influenced by cultural and societal pressures that prioritize traditional gender roles and family responsibilities. Emirati women experience heightened tension between their roles as mothers and professionals due to cultural norms that value religion, family, and community (Kemp & Zhao, 2016). Family dynamics play a significant role in shaping women's decisions regarding returning to work, with spousal support, parental attitudes, and extended family networks influencing their choices and experiences during this transition. In the UAE's multicultural context, families from diverse cultural backgrounds impact women's access to support systems and resources (Al-Othman, 2011).

Additionally, cultural values and societal expectations in the UAE significantly impact women's experiences of returning to work. Traditional gender roles, religious beliefs, and family values shape women's perceptions of themselves and their roles within society. The UAE's geographical location as a crossroads of cultures and civilizations enriches its cultural

landscape, influencing women's experiences of balancing work and family responsibilities (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Janevic, 2001). Religious beliefs and practices, particularly within the Islamic context prevalent in the UAE, also play a crucial role in women's decisions regarding returning to work. Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of family and community, shaping women's perceptions of their roles and responsibilities. However, Islamic principles also support women's education and participation in the workforce, provided it aligns with their duties as mothers and wives (Bensaid, 2021). Incorporating geographical insights into the theoretical framework enriches our understanding of how cultural, social, and religious factors intersect to shape women's experiences of returning to work in the UAE. Applying Role Identity Theory and Intersectionality Theory within this context will provide valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women navigating the intersection of motherhood and career in the UAE's diverse and dynamic society.

PHILOSOPHICAL STANDPOINT

The interpretivist viewpoint is a philosophical approach that focuses on people's behaviours and individual feelings (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). According to Pulla & Carter (2018) the interpretivists school of thought caters to the subjective opinions of the participants of research, this is particularly important in the current study as this is an attempt to understand the point of view of current and past situations. The approach will allow the researcher to comprehend how mothers feel in this dilemma and these experiences are impacting their future now. The philosophical school is also essential to the current study because it is vital to consider mother's differences and viewpoints and interpretivism allows for that (Curry, 2021). The function of an interpretivist is that of a perfect interpreter who uses a variety of in-depth tools to learn everything there is to know about the subject at hand.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study will adopt a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of Emirati mothers returning to work in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The choice of qualitative methods is based on their ability to capture the nuanced and context-specific nature of individuals' experiences, providing a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the identity dilemma faced by these women (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through qualitative inquiry, the study will delve into the subjective meanings and interpretations that Emirati mothers

attribute to their dual roles as mothers and professionals, thereby generating rich and insightful data for analysis.

To achieve this, purposive sampling will be employed to select first-time Emirati mothers who have resumed work after maternity within the past year. The selection criteria will include factors such as age, educational background, employment sector, and family structure to ensure a diverse representation of experiences among participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The study aims to recruit 30 Emirati women from various sectors, including government, private, and non-profit organizations, to capture a wide range of perspectives. Sampling will continue until data saturation is reached, ensuring a thorough exploration of the phenomenon and representation of diverse experiences. Notably, this study will exclude participants from low-wage employment sectors to maintain a focus on professional roles.

Semi-structured interviews will serve as the primary method of data collection. Conducted in a conversational style, these interviews will allow participants to freely share their experiences, perceptions, and emotions. The interview guide, developed based on the theoretical framework, will cover topics such as maternal and professional identity, motivations for returning to work, challenges faced, religious expectations, cultural influence, and family dynamics (Seidman, 2006). Probing questions will be used to explore participants' responses in depth, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant institutional review board before commencing data collection. Informed consent will be sought from all participants, emphasizing voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants will be informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions (Liamputtong, 2006).

Data analysis will follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis. Transcribed interviews will be analysed iteratively to identify recurring themes and patterns related to maternal and professional identity, challenges, motivations, and family dynamics. Initial codes will be generated from the data, and themes will be developed through an iterative process of coding and interpretation. Researchers will maintain reflexivity throughout the analysis process to ensure transparency and rigor. The geographical context of the UAE will be central to interpreting the data, as cultural norms, religious beliefs, and societal expectations unique to the UAE significantly shape Emirati women's experiences of returning to work (Al-Othman, 2011). Sensitivity to cultural nuances and local norms will be paramount, with researchers contextualizing participants' narratives within the broader socio-cultural landscape.

of the UAE. This approach will consider the complex interplay of family dynamics, gender roles, and religious beliefs in shaping the identities of Emirati women, providing an accurate and comprehensive interpretation of their experiences (Kemp & Zhao, 2016).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

This research aims to contribute to the academic understanding of the intersection between motherhood, work, religion, culture, and family dynamics. Practically, it provides valuable insights for policymakers, organizations, and societal stakeholders. For policymakers, the findings can inform the development of policies that support flexible working arrangements and parental leave, tailored to the unique cultural context of the UAE. Organizations can benefit from understanding the specific needs of working mothers and implementing supportive practices that enhance work-life balance. For society, this research can promote greater gender equality by highlighting the importance of supporting mothers in their dual roles.

CONCLUSION

Currently there is an ongoing examination of the complex relationship between the motherhood dilemma and religion, culture, and family relationships in the research work. Some preliminary understanding of how these interlocking elements influence the choices, identities, and experiences of mothers juggling the demands of both work and family life has been achieved. According to the current literature research, mothers' opportunities and problems in different circumstances are greatly influenced by cultural norms, religious beliefs, and familial expectations. However, there is much to learn about the entire scope of these interactions and their repercussions.

The potential for this research to shed light on the complex ways that religion, culture, and family shape the experience of motherhood lies in its ongoing development. Expanding the comprehension of these intersections can lead to better-informed practices, legislation, and support networks that respect the variety of maternal identities and enable mothers to deal with the challenges of their responsibilities with resilience and autonomy. The practical implications of this research for policymakers, organizations, and society include supporting working mothers and promoting gender equality in diverse cultural contexts like the UAE. This research can inform policies that create more supportive work environments and flexible working

conditions, encourage organizational practices that acknowledge the dual roles of mothers, and foster societal attitudes that value both professional and maternal contributions.

NEXT STEPS

The following stages of this developing research entail assertively searching out other sources to supplement the understanding and improving the gaps in the current literature. Careful review of more literature to pinpoint particular topics that require further investigation or clarification. By examining a broader range of papers, the intent is to deepen the understanding around the subject and research themes.

Next, it is vital to develop a theoretical framework that incorporates these refined gaps and insights. This framework will guide the data collection efforts and assist in analysing the results. Lastly, to lay out a precise strategy for gathering data, ensuring that the methods selected align with both ethical and theoretical frameworks. The research seeks to make a significant contribution to our field of study through these steps.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One potential limitation of our approach is the reliance on qualitative methods, which may not capture the full breadth of experiences across different demographic groups. To address this, the plan is to ensure a diverse sample and consider triangulating our findings with quantitative data in future studies. Additionally, the cultural specificity of the UAE context means that findings may not be directly applicable to other regions. Future research should explore similar dynamics in different cultural settings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the global motherhood dilemma.

By addressing these limitations and continuing to refine the theoretical framework, the research aims to provide robust, actionable insights that support working mothers and promote gender equality in various cultural contexts.

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