



Oman's labour force: an analysis of gender in management

Oman's labour force

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789

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the state of affairs in the Sultanate of Oman for the presence (or absence) of women in senior and managerial roles in private companies. The study also investigates where women are located within the organisations (e.g. as board members, chief officers, vice presidents, top management, division or unit heads).

Design/methodology/approach – This is a quantitative study that analysed gender in the largest 122 private and publicly listed organisations in Oman. The study is based on data available from the Zawya database that tracks information about companies in the Middle East and North Africa region.

Findings – Women are employed in Oman in small numbers when compared with the number of men. Women remain extremely underrepresented in senior roles in Omani organisations currently. Women are found slightly (but not significantly) more in departmental management roles (particularly in human resource management, marketing/communication, public relations, and project management) and in the transport and finance industries.

Research limitations/implications – The Zawya database did not contain complete data on each company analysed. Hence, this is a descriptive study and lacked advanced statistical techniques for comparison and relationship analysis.

Practical implications – This study increases the academic knowledge on international issues in gender and management. The study also provides insights for government leaders, educators, and scholars who work to help prepare women for leadership in this region.

Originality/value – This is one of the first scholarly studies conducted on the presence of women in senior positions and management within Oman. It adds value as it is the first study to compare gender in management across roles, industrial classification, size of company, and ownership.

Keywords Oman, MENA region, Women in management, Female leaders, Women in the GCC

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The Sultanate of Oman (henceforth referred to as Oman) has been described in the past as “one of the most traditional societies in the Arab world” (Curtiss, 1999, p. 66). Furthermore, the Arab world itself comprises some of the most traditional societies within the world (Gallup, 2011; Littrell and Bertsch, 2013). These societies traditionally follow a culture of patriarchy, which negatively effects the labour force participation of women in a modern world (Abdalla, 1996; Mernissi, 2003). Yet conditions are continually changing and academic research that focuses on understanding the status of women in Oman's more modernised society is needed more than ever (Al-Lamky, 2006). Chatty (2000) acknowledges the importance of such additional research, as

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“women in the Middle East have come to be seen as political and economic actors” (p. 241), who push the boundaries of what is acceptable in a patriarchal country.

Some progress has been made in terms of the advancement of Muslim women in their countries in the past few decades (Al-Lamky, 2006; Syed, 2010). According to the Oman Statistical Year Book (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011b), political leaders in Oman have recently shown a strong commitment to women’s rights and empowerment. Women occupy 9 per cent of the senior positions among Omani civil service employees, 15.5 per cent of the seats in the Upper House or Senate, and nine women hold ministerial positions (CountryWatch Inc., 2012; Hausmann *et al.*, 2011). In fact, Oman is among the Middle East countries that have shown at least some improvement in their score on the Global Gender Gap Index, which rates countries from 0.00 (inequality) to 1.00 (equality). However, despite the improvement, in 2011 Oman was still ranked 127 of 135 countries and was given a 0.587 score.

Thus, this study investigates the state of affairs in the Sultanate of Oman that supports or prevents women’s inclusion in the workplace. The focus on the private sector was chosen as there is a paucity of literature about women employed in this sector in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Although other researchers (e.g. Al-Sadi *et al.*, 2011; Davis, 2012; Dechant and Al-Lamky, 2005; Khan and Almoharby, 2007; McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003) have already studied self-employed and entrepreneurial women in the region. In addition, accurate data on women managers in the private sector are difficult to secure as research on women managers in Oman is limited. Besides which, a study to create a baseline of where Omani women are currently is particularly valuable, because it will enable other researchers to measure future improvements.

Hence, these authors designed a study to establish this baseline by investigating the presence (or absence) of women in senior and managerial roles in the private sector through a quantitative gender analysis of 122 private and publicly listed companies. For this study the roles located within the organisations (e.g. board members, chief officers, vice presidents, top management, division or unit heads) were analysed for gender comparison with various demographic variables[1].

Literature review

Oman is a small country with a total population of almost 3.3 million, which includes approximately two million Omanis, referred to as locals, nationals, or citizens, plus 1.3 million expatriates (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2010). There are approximately equal numbers of national women and men. In the 1970s Oman’s new monarch, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Sa’id al Sa’id, implemented a process of modernisation through personal and direct intervention (Shaw, 2001), that involved women who were employed in both the public and private sectors (Al-Qudsi, 1998; Chatty, 2000). As such, the working woman became a symbol of a modern state and was considered a necessary human resource to increase economic growth. But, as happened in other countries, once an immediate economic need had been met, women were discouraged from “particular occupations deemed inappropriate for the female sex” (Chatty, 2000, p. 244). In general, employment and management positions for women in Oman have been influenced by a host of complex variables, including cultural and religious values. The remainder of the review highlights literature in the following four categories: the current status of women, societal values and influences, government policies, and organisational practices in the Omani private sector.

Current status of women in the private sector

The private sector employs 177,716 citizens, of which 34,234 are women (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011b). However, in a one-year timeframe there was a 17 per cent increase of Omani women working in the private sector, from 29,273 (2009-2010) to 34,234 (2010-2011) (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011a). Interestingly, although there is a lower percentage of Omani women working in the private sector (19 per cent) than in the public (43 per cent), the employment situations for Omani men is reversed (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011b).

In the private sector, banking is the most popular industry for women in Oman (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011b). According to Al-Lamki (2005), "this is the highest female employing sector and represents almost fifty nine percent of the total female employees employed by the private sector in the country" (p. 183). Although salaries for the banking industry were not obtained, the average monthly salary for Omanis employed in the private sector is RO 228[2], and women are paid slightly below this average at RO 222 per month, with the highest number clustered within the lowest wage group (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011b). Furthermore, the peak in earning for Omani women in the private sector is between 400 and 500 (RO), with women being just over a quarter of that workforce in this salary range. From that point, as salaries increase, there is a noticeable decline in the numbers of Omani women employed. The total population of Omani women in the 25-29 age group is 102,679, and that is the age group in which we find the highest number of employed women (9,876), which is 10 per cent of the available population (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011b). From that age group onwards, the number of women reduces in the private sector workforce.

Like other countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council[3] (GCC), Oman has a large number of expatriates (Al-Sayegh, 2012; Kuehn and Al-Busaidi, 2000), and, although there are equal numbers of men and women among the Omani, females comprise only a third of the expatriate population. Most expatriates are single men who reside in Oman for work purposes; there are some single female expatriates with work visas, and spouses (usually female) of expatriates may also be included in the labour market. There has been a small increase (6 per cent) in female expatriates in private sector employment (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011a). Furthermore, in that same sector, expatriate females make up more than half of the expatriate employees in health and social work, and they are nearly half of the expatriate labour force in education. The vast majority of expatriate women (nearly 80 per cent) are employed as maids or nannies in private households (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011b). It is important to note though that Oman's workforce is dissimilar to other countries in the GCC, as the national population undertakes basic work (e.g. cleaners), and they are employed in customer-facing positions in the retail and travel industries (Curtiss, 1999).

Women in Oman are mainly employed in lower-status positions, as "professional and technical workers", where there is nearly parity in numbers with men. Conversely, Neal (2010) states that women "work across many sectors of the Gulf economies, often at senior levels" (p. 248). CountryWatch Inc. (2012) confirms that "educated women in Oman now occupy many middle and upper level positions in all sectors of society" (p. 136). But this accounts for only 10 per cent of the senior positions, classified as "legislators, senior officials and managers" by the World Economic Forum (Hausmann *et al.*, 2011). In the senior ranks of private sector organisations (i.e. administrators,

directors, and managers) there are only 1,459 female expatriates, which is 5 per cent of the total number of expatriates. Hawkamah, The Institute for Corporate Governance (2012) does document that there are eight women directors on the boards of corporations listed in the Muscat Securities Markets. However, little has been documented regarding the numbers of women in specific management positions within the private sector, particularly in different sectors and company sizes. The reasons for the current status of women in the labour force are explored in the following section on societal values and influences.

Societal values and influences

The reasons for low employment and low status of women in organisations in Oman may be framed as cultural, societal, and/or religious. Clearly, there remains a strong belief that jobs for women are inside the home, whereas those for men are outside that context (Metcalf, 2006). Robertson *et al.* (2001) state that generalisations about gender and notions about the traditional role of women in society have hindered the advancement of female managers around the world. However, these ideas are “perhaps even more pronounced in the Arab Gulf region because of the prevailing strict Islamic traditions” (Robertson *et al.*, 2001, p. 231). Metcalf (2006) observes that many women who are employed are not challenging their Islamic values, rather, they view working as “part of the long-term development of a just and fair Islamic nation” (p. 103). Yet, many others do not share these perspectives.

One societal aspect that has contributed to the number of women in the workforce is the increase in education opportunities in the past few decades. Most studies show that women who complete a college education are more likely to be employed (CountryWatch Inc., 2012). Omani women hold the belief more firmly than men that academic qualifications are a route to gaining better positions in work (Al-Harthi, 2011). However, another challenge is that a poor employment market is anticipated to continue in Oman, because “the annual number of college and university graduates already exceeds the annual number of jobs available in Oman” (Al-Barwani *et al.*, 2009, p. 416). Fewer jobs available inside the country causes graduates to seek work elsewhere, but the opportunity for emigration is less likely for women than for men because of cultural restrictions on women travelling or living away from the family. That is, travel for work purposes is limited, as there may be little support for women working due to seeming role conflicts between employment and family obligations (Hutchings *et al.*, 2010; Metcalf, 2006). Elnaggar (2008) notes the gap between highly educated women and their presence in employment, and concludes that such women continue to seek employment. In turn, Al-Lamki (2002) points out the need for higher education to be aligned with market needs to strengthen the Omani economy. It is an economic loss to Oman when labour market potential is reduced because of the unemployment or underemployment of qualified women.

Females in gender-marginalised occupations may also have limited employment possibilities because of workplace practices. Gender segregation at work is considered appropriate, but this practice prevents women from working in mixed environments. Various occupations remain gender-marginalised because of a practice of segregation, as seen in engineering firms (Al-Harthi, 2011). Other potential growth areas for Oman's economy include those that would advance the country in the global knowledge society. Again, organisational constraints may minimise participation of Omani women, who “are at a higher risk of being marginalized from today's knowledge-based economy, due to factual findings related to a traditionally male-dominated ICT sector”

(Elnaggar, 2008, p. 280). Certain jobs are then less available to local women because of traditional attitudes that continue organisational practice. Local men and expatriate men and women will then typically fill those positions that local women are restricted from entering (Elnaggar, 2008).

Another unique barrier for Omani women is that, according to a recent report, the ability of women to participate in the employment market depends on where they live. Those in the capital, Muscat, experience “the most freedom, working in the retail sector and hotels, and as policewomen, doctors, nurses and civil servants” (Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2010, p. 11). Away from the capital city, “women may be restricted to jobs in which they only come into contact with women and girls, such as teaching in a girls’ school or nursing female patients. Once married, they may be prevented from working at all” (Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2010, p. 11).

Assumptions about the definitions and understanding of authority may also create barriers and opportunities for people in Oman. First, Common (2011) states that, in Oman, the word “leadership” is immediately linked to the Sultan and is not associated with business leaders. Second, Porcaro (2011) finds that Omani men value authority more than women do, because males have more direct involvement with authority figures. Karabenick and Moosa (2005) also found that Omani women college students were less accepting of authority than men, concluding that this was because female study participants were high achievers, independent thinkers, and more accomplished in general because they had already overcome societal barriers to success. Third, a tendency for bureaucracy is common in Arab management, while a survey of women students showed that the values in Oman are based on charisma, interaction, and a strong rational legal authority (Common, 2011, 2012; Neal *et al.*, 2005). It is important to note, however, that these data are limited by participants’ lack of exposure to the working environment – particularly on the part of the women.

Government policies

A royal decree in 1996 was of particular significance for employment studies in Oman (Ministry of National Economy, 1996). The Vision for Oman’s Economy: Oman 2020 (Vision 2020) moves the country away from reliance on the public sector to building the economy via private sector enterprise (Ghailani and Khan, 2004). In Vision 2020, there is no specific reference to the future of women in the labour force, but Budhwar *et al.* (2002) suggests that the programme does encourage females to enter into employment. However, these authors also state that the anticipated skills development has lagged behind the national goals.

Omanisation is a law of positive discrimination, within which employers are expected to achieve recruitment targets in favour of nationals’ employment (Al-Lamki, 2005; Goveas and Aslam, 2011; Khan, 2010; Khan and Almoharby, 2007). Interestingly, foreign investment in the GCC countries is welcomed and continues even as Oman strives for Omanisation within its labour force (Mellahi *et al.*, 2003). As figures showed in the section on the current status of women, there has been an increase in Omani women employed in the private sector and a lesser increase in expatriate women. This indicates that, although the Omanisation policy may not be targeted particularly at women, it has increased their private sector employment.

In 2010, the Omani government and the International Labour Organization (ILO) created a strategy document to advance women in employment (ILO, 2010). Prior to this, Lalji (2006) had stated that the principles and rights at work as declared by the ILO stipulated “the elimination of discrimination in the workplace” (p. 12). The Decent

Work Program, as it is termed, is “to enhance decent and productive job opportunities for women in conditions [of] freedom, justice and dignity” (Goveas and Aslam, 2011, p. 234). The strategy devised by the government and the ILO is for research to be undertaken to identify best practices to support women’s involvement in the labour force and for equal opportunities to inform national policy (ILO, 2010).

Organisational practices

Labour laws and organisational culture impact organisational practices in a continuation of traditional attitudes to women in the labour force. There are numerous examples of labour laws that impact organisational practices being based on religious beliefs that restrict local women’s working in various professions. One such is Omani law that states that “women shall not be required to perform works which are harmful to the health or hard works or such other works as may be specified by a decision of the Minister” (Article 82, Ministry of Manpower, 2012). Nursing is an example of an occupation that is considered to be a respectable profession for women in other countries, but not in a Majority Muslim Country such as Oman. Nursing is perceived as a low-level rather unclean job and, because the law and societal values take this stance, nursing jobs are then typically staffed by expatriate women (Abugideiri, 2012; Maben *et al.*, 2010).

Second, there are legal restrictions on women working night shifts; the reasons are attributed to personal protection, but the law also confines women to employment between 6:01 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. (Article 81, Ministry of Manpower, 2012). Of course, this law limits women’s choices, as many private sector occupations staff a variety of shifts. Third, under Article 83, “a woman who has completed a year in the service of the employer shall be entitled to maternity leave the total of which shall not exceed six weeks” (Ministry of Manpower, 2012). A consequence of that law, Al-Harhi (2011) reports, is that “most employers, both public and private, prefer to employ males to avoid what they see as frequent maternity leaves” (p. 546). Personal and societal choice for a nurturing role, combined with a lack of organisational support, disadvantages women in the promotion stages. It is difficult to reconcile the contrasting values and policies that appear to protect and discriminate.

Four examples from the literature provide insight into organisational practices that cause women’s underrepresentation in management ranks. First, Al-Lamky (2006) states that these practices negatively affect women’s rise to seniority, because their jobs remain “concentrated primarily in clerical and administrative jobs” (p. 51). These jobs tend to be clustered at the lower end of organisational hierarchies, and potential advancement to senior positions is minimal. Second, in their research with 100 female managers in the Middle East, Hutchings *et al.* (2010) found that organisational policies tended towards resistance to women taking international assignments. Since international assignments have become important for promotions in most global companies, these policies can be viewed as discriminatory. This study also reported that less gender diversity in companies is caused by a lack of attention to gender equality, which then leads to few female role models and little training for women. Next, mentoring and sponsorship by influential men in companies is required for more women to be developed and promoted within workplaces, and this remains a challenge within the Omani culture. Finally, Shaw (2001) writes that a range of factors has controlled access to occupations in the MENA region, including “gender, tribes and family networks, ‘wasta’ and patronage” (p. 103). Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) state that a barrier to many women is a lack of wasta, described loosely as an influential network

or connections for recruitment, training, and promotion to senior positions. They argue that women are prevented in two ways from building these connections:

- (1) a lack of professional connection with men because of segregation; and
- (2) few women at the top to support others further down the hierarchy.

As reviewed, the societal conditions are changing and academic research is called upon to understand the status of women in Oman's more modernised society. A review of the literature has demonstrated the need for a specific study that assists future researchers for investigating the presence (or absence) of women in senior and managerial roles in the private sector. We aim to add academic knowledge in an investigation of women managers in the private sector because accurate data has been difficult to secure. Furthermore, research on women managers in Oman is limited, and a study that creates a baseline to measure future improvements will be particularly valuable.

Research methods

We designed a study to establish this baseline by investigating the presence (or absence) of women in senior and managerial roles in the private sector. This section will highlight the research methods by discussing the data sample, data collection, and data analysis.

Data sample

This research study is based on data available from the Zawya database that tracks information about companies in the MENA region. Zawya is a major online business intelligence platform that provides detailed profiles on companies, as well as industry and asset class research, online networking, and news (Zawya, 2013). In January 2013, Zawya listed 938 privately owned organisations in Oman. We limited our study to those with 300 or more employees, and 16 per cent of these companies ($n = 122$) met these criteria[4]. Hence, this quantitative gender analysis includes 12 per cent of all companies in the database.

Data collection

The data were prepared manually for analysis by research assistants trained by one of the authors. The variable categories were created for each organisation, including position, number of employees, industry classification, and ownership. The raw numbers relating to these categories were coded appropriately. The most time-consuming data preparation element related to categorising and coding the gender of the senior personnel within the companies. The Zawya database includes names of these senior personnel divided into board members, senior managers, key officers, and heads and department managers. Titles such as Chief, Director, and Vice President are given, and the name data also includes role designation (i.e. departmental responsibility). The data on gender of each individual manager and the totals were manually entered for each company.

Research assistants determined the gender of individuals in the sample from the listed designations given in the Zawya database. "Mr", "Ms", or "Mrs", and other titles designated the gender of personnel. In the GCC, the title of Sheikh (male) or Sheikha (female) indicates gender, although in the Oman data only "Sheikh" appeared. Other titles given in the database are gender neutral. One title is Dr, which was checked for female names. We assumed H.E. was a gender-neutral title; however, only males (His Excellency) were found. Similarly, H.H. (we assumed Her/His Highness) was actually defined only as His Highness (Prince/Sheikh). Where occasionally the title

was missing, or there appeared to be an error, research assistants assigned the gender based on their knowledge of regional names. If the gender could not be assigned based on this local knowledge, the company web site or professional network (LinkedIn) was consulted. If gender could not be determined using these tactics, lists of common names for nationalities were also consulted.

Data analysis

For this study, the original list of possible data categories available for analysis included country, location of investments, sector, ownership types, company size, market capital, total revenue, total revenue growth, total assets, total assets growth, net profit, net profit growth, and company profile, officers, and news. However, fewer than 10 per cent of the companies analysed had entries on market capital, total revenue, total revenue growth, total assets, and total asset growth, net profit, and net profit growth. Hence, these variables were dropped from the study, which, unfortunately, limited our use of more advanced statistical techniques to analyse the remaining data.

In summary, a quantitative gender analysis was conducted on 122 private and publicly listed companies. The gender of employees in the organisational roles (e.g. board members, chief officers, vice presidents, top management, division or unit heads) was compared in this study. The analysis compared gender for various organisational variables; industrial classification; number of employees; company ownership.

Findings and discussion

Data emerged to reveal where women are located within organisations by senior position (e.g. board member, chief officer, vice president, or top management, division or unit head). The descriptive results are shown in the following tables, and below we highlight and explain some important findings on gender comparison for position, industrial classification (sector), number of employees (size of company), and ownership.

Position

This study found that females hold 5.7 per cent of the top department management positions within the 122 companies, the highest percentages being with department heads (12.5 per cent); top project management positions (11.9 per cent); top marketing, sales, communication positions (11.9 per cent); and top human resource positions (10.3 per cent) (see Table I and rank order by position).

Rank order by position:

- (1) department heads (12.5 per cent);
- (2) top marketing, sales, communication, corporate affairs, brand, and circulation (11.9 per cent);
- (3) top HR positions (10.3 per cent);
- (4) directors (8.3 per cent);
- (5) board members (5.5 per cent);
- (6) general managers (3.1 per cent);
- (7) top management (3.0 per cent);
- (8) top positions in finance, banking, investor relations, and wealth (2.3 per cent);

Category	Males no. (%)	Females no. (%)
<i>Senior company</i>		
Board members	497 (94.5)	29 (5.5)
Top management	935 (97.0)	29 (3.0)
Key officers ^a	8 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Regional/branch/division/unit heads and managers	99 (99.0)	1 (1.0)
Chief officers – CEO, CFO, COO	135 (99.3)	1 (0.7)
General managers	157 (96.9)	5 (3.1)
Vice presidents	15 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Directors	342 (91.7)	31 (8.3)
Total	2,188 (95.8)	96 (4.2)
<i>Top department</i>		
Department heads	63 (87.5)	9 (12.5)
Top positions in finance, banking, investor relations, and wealth	84 (97.7)	2 (2.3)
Top HR positions	61 (89.7)	7 (10.3)
Top IT/data/information positions	37 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Top marketing, sales, communication, corporate affairs, brand, and circulation	52 (88.1)	7 (11.9)
Top operations, turbocharge, strategy, and commercial positions	115 (99.1)	1 (0.9)
Top project management positions ^a	7 (87.5)	1 (12.5)
Top administration	17 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Top legal positions ^a	3 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Top business development/head branch positions	20 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Top asset, service, institutional effect positions ^a	12 (92.3)	1 (7.7)
Top PR and government/external relations positions ^a	10 (90.9)	1 (9.1)
Total	481 (94.3)	29 (5.7)
Combined total	2,669 (95.5)	125 (4.5)

797

Table I.
Position – business
managers in Oman
companies by gender

Note: ^aNot included in rank order as it is too small a sample

- (9) regional/branch/division/unit heads and managers (1.0 per cent);
- (10) top operations, turbocharge, strategy, and commercial positions (0.9 per cent);
- (11) chief officers – CEO, CFO, COO (0.7 per cent);
- (12) vice presidents (0.0 per cent);
- (13) top IT/data/information positions (0.0 per cent);
- (14) top administration (0.0 per cent); and
- (15) top business development/head branch positions (0.0 per cent).

Not surprisingly, these data show that there are fewer women than men employed in management positions in Oman and that women are substantially underrepresented in senior roles. There were no women represented in any company in top IT/data/information, administration, legal, or business development/head branch position posts. A lower percentage (4.2 per cent) of female representation was found in the ranks of senior company executives, with the highest being directors (8.3 per cent) and the two with no representation being vice presidents and key officers. It appears that 5.5 per cent of corporate board members in this 2013 study were female, which is up from the 2.1 per cent reported in the Dubai Women Establishment (2011) *Outlook* report using 2007 data from TNI Investment Research. However, the same report touted that 9 per cent of “legislators, senior officials, and managers” in 2008 were female, while the

Global Gender Gap report (Hausmann *et al.*, 2011) stated that the female-to-male ratio for this same group was 0.10. The current study, however, found that a combined total of 4.5 per cent existed in female representation in senior and top department roles in Omani companies with 300 or more employees. Although these comparisons have been provided, caution should be used as the study populations and samples for each are substantially different.

Industrial classification – sector

Surprisingly, the highest percentages of female managers in the Omani companies were found in the finance (7.3 per cent) and transport (7.8 per cent) industries. At first glance, these two industries seem to be male-dominated professions; however, as previously mentioned, women are found in higher numbers within the banking industries, which could account for the finance percentage (see Table II and rank order by sector).

Rank order by sector:

- (1) transport (transport) (7.8 per cent);
- (2) finance (financial services, Islamic finance) (7.3 per cent);
- (3) pseudo services (education, government, healthcare, services, legal) (5.7 per cent);
- (4) technology (IT, media, telecom) (4.2 per cent);
- (5) hospitality (leisure and tourism, food and beverage) (4.1 per cent);
- (6) industry (agriculture, construction, manufacturing, mining and metal, oil and gas, power and utilities) (2.9 per cent); and
- (7) sales (consumer goods, real estate, retail) (2.4 per cent).

A focus in company practice on the employment of women, following government policy, has enabled women to increase their senior status within the finance industry. In addition, a few female-friendly companies within the country could have made a

Category	No. of companies (%)	Company employee count	Male leaders no. (%)	Female leaders no. (%)
Industry (agriculture, construction, manufacturing, mining and metal, oil and gas, power and utilities)	61 (50)	169,931	1,177 (97.1)	35 (2.9)
Sales (consumer goods, real estate, retail)	7 (5.7)	14,195	166 (97.6)	4 (2.4)
Pseudo services (education, government, healthcare, services, legal)	2 (1.6)	800	33 (94.3)	2 (5.7)
Finance (financial services, Islamic finance)	11 (9.0)	13,904	379 (92.7)	30 (7.3)
Hospitality (leisure and tourism, food and beverage)	24 (19.7)	45,179	442 (95.9)	19 (4.1)
Technology (IT, media, telecom)	3 (2.5)	4,129	115 (95.8)	5 (4.2)
Transport (transport)	14 (11.5)	43,176	357 (92.2)	30 (7.8)
Missing: 0 Total	122	291,314	2,669 (95.5)	125 (4.5)

Table II.
Sector – business managers in Oman companies by gender

difference in the higher numbers, as only 11 companies were analysed in finance and 14 in transport. Interestingly, the industrial classifications with the lowest percentages of females in management included sales (2.4 per cent) and industry (2.9 per cent). Female employees in general are found in higher numbers in hospitality and pseudo services (e.g. education, government, healthcare, services), yet the percentage of females in top positions is still low (4.1 and 5.7 per cent, respectively). Many senior roles for women are found in occupations in which women can more freely work with men, such as marketing and human resources.

Number of employees – company size

There appears to be no pattern in terms of the percentage of female managers and the size of company in terms of employees (see Table III and rank order by number of employee list). One may expect there would be more women in smaller companies (i.e. 300-499) and fewer in larger ones (i.e. 5,000 +); however, this was not the pattern in our study. The lowest numbers were companies with 500-999 employees (2.6 per cent) and 2,500-4,900 (2.4 per cent) and the highest in companies with 1,000-2,499 employees (7.1 per cent). It is also important to note that a percentage of the females in the “senior ranks” of private sector organisations in Oman are expatriates (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011b). This means that the percentages outlined in our study include both nationals and expatriates, which should be considered when using these data as they relate to company size or any study variable.

Rank order by number of company employees:

- (1) 1,000-2,499 employee companies (7.1 per cent);
- (2) 5,000 + employee companies (5.4 per cent);
- (3) 300-499 employee companies (4.7 per cent);
- (4) 500-999 employee companies (2.6 per cent); and
- (5) 2,500-4,999 employee companies (2.4 per cent).

Ownership

We also analysed data in terms of ownership (private or publicly listed) by position. Slightly more women were found in the ranks of private (4.6 per cent) vs publicly listed (3.6 per cent) in terms of the percentage of female senior managers, while it was reversed in the top department category (7.3 per cent publicly listed; 4.8 per cent private) (see Table IV). Slightly more women at senior level were found in the ranks of private versus publicly listed companies, but there was a higher percentage in the top department category of publicly listed companies than private. We also note that the percentage of human resource managers was higher in the publicly listed companies

Category	No. of companies analyzed	Employee total	Male leaders no. (%)	Female leaders no. (%)
300-499 employee companies	36 (29.8)	13,034	662 (95.3)	33 (4.7)
500-999 employee companies	27 (22.3)	17,160	590 (97.4)	16 (2.6)
1,000-2,499 employee companies	22 (18.2)	31,129	538 (92.9)	41 (7.1)
2,500-4,999 employee companies	18 (14.9)	63,491	453 (97.6)	11 (2.4)
5,000 + employee companies	18 (14.9)	166,500	422 (94.6)	24 (5.4)
Missing: 1 Total	121	291,314	2,665 (95.5)	125 (4.5)

Table III.
Number of company employees – business managers in Oman companies by gender

Table IV.
Ownership – business
managers in Oman
companies by gender

Category	Private		Publicly listed	
	Male no. (%)	Female no. (%)	Male no. (%)	Female no. (%)
<i>Senior company managers</i>				
Board members	249 (92.6)	20 (7.4)	248 (96.5)	9 (3.5)
Top management	593 (97.5)	15 (2.5)	342 (96.1)	14 (3.9)
Key officers	4 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Regional/branch/division/unit heads and managers	86 (98.9)	1 (1.1)	13 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Chief officers – CEO, CFO, COO	78 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	57 (98.3)	1 (1.7)
General managers	108 (98.2)	2 (1.8)	49 (94.2)	3 (5.8)
Vice presidents	3 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	12 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Directors	168 (87.5)	24 (12.5)	174 (96.1)	7 (3.9)
Total	1,289 (95.4)	62 (4.6)	899 (96.4)	34 (3.6)
<i>Top department manager</i>				
Department heads	31 (93.9)	2 (6.1)	32 (82.1)	7 (17.9)
Top positions in finance, banking, investor relations, and wealth	57 (98.3)	1 (1.7)	27 (96.4)	1 (3.6)
Top HR positions	46 (90.2)	5 (9.8)	15 (88.2)	2 (11.8)
Top IT/data/information positions	27 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	10 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Top marketing, sales, communication, corporate affairs, brand, and circulation	33 (84.6)	6 (15.4)	19 (95.0)	1 (5.0)
Top operations, turbocharge, strategy, and commercial positions	74 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	41 (97.6)	1 (2.4)
Top project management positions	6 (85.7)	1 (14.3)	1 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Top administration	16 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Top legal positions	1 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Top business development/head branch positions	16 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Top asset, service, institutional effect positions ^a	5 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	7 (87.5)	1 (12.5)
Top PR and government/external relations positions	5 (83.3)	1 (16.7)	5 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
Total	317 (95.2)	16 (4.8)	164 (92.7)	13 (7.3)

Note: ^a87 private companies (71.3 per cent) and 35 publicly traded companies (28.7 per cent)

than private but, as that amounted to a difference of only two women, it was not statistically significant.

Implications and conclusion

The study suggests a number of important implications for business practice. First, colleges and universities in Oman should design and develop partnerships, programmes, and curricula geared towards exposing women students to workplaces, including private-sector employers. Student exposure through field trips, internships, mentoring, and role models in the private sector will increase their knowledge of the working environment and potential challenges and opportunities within various types of companies. Second, it is clear that employment policies need to be revisited in order to increase the recruitment, retention, and promotion of women in the private sector. To retain women in the workforce for longer periods, and for them to be available for promotional opportunities, a range of flexible working arrangements is needed, including part-time employment, flexible working times, and teleworking. Finally, Syed (2010) calls for awareness training in organisations to support women's future in employment. Training is essential for expatriate and local workers to understand each other and work together. International managers need to be sensitised to the workings of different cultures, and the development of their "relational or 'soft skills'" may help to overcome reservations about dress, attitude, work ethics, and family values that are particularly helpful in recruiting, retaining, and promoting women (Harris and Kumra, 2000, p. 604). Training and development of women for senior status within the private sector is also warranted to increase their presence.

A number of recommendations for future research emerge from this study as well. Further descriptive research needs to be conducted on the variables in this study (i.e. company ownership, industry, and company size) as well as a host of other variables (e.g. total revenue, total revenue growth, company family-friendly policies and practices, numbers in terms of nationals and expatriates). To move forward with research, it is essential that complex quantitative data be collected so advanced statistics can be run to discover more insight through investigating correlations, relationships, and links among variables. Qualitative studies are also needed to understand the experiences of top women and their pathways to becoming managers in their cultural contexts. Exploring the details of successful company programs, interventions, initiatives, and strategies is also of utmost value to companies for proactive management of diversity. Academic study should also investigate the perceptions and realities around recruitment, retention and promotion of women in Oman. Finally, exploring the aspirations and motivations of women to be managers is a foundational project that would be helpful in understanding the starting point for Omani women in employment.

Clearly, there are substantially fewer women in management roles than men, whether data are analysed by position, industrial classification, company size, or ownership. Yet, these data provide a better understanding of the current state of affairs, which is a starting point for future benchmarking and research. The authors designed this descriptive study to create a baseline for researchers and practitioners by investigating the presence (or absence) of women in senior and managerial roles in the Omani private sector.

Research on women managers in Oman is limited, and this study fills a gap by providing a snapshot of the state of affairs of women in corporate management. By doing so, we add to the extant academic literature on the managerial status of women

in Oman (Al-Hamadi *et al.*, 2007; Al-Lamky, 2006), as this is one of the first known scholarly studies conducted on the topic as it relates to specific positions, sectors, and industries. However, the major limitation of this study was that, because of the limited data variables available in the database utilised, the statistical analysis provided was descriptive in nature and lacked advanced statistical techniques for comparison and relationship analysis. Yet, quantitative data would have been nearly impossible for researchers to gather in other ways because of limited access to women in employment due to their small numbers, respect for their privacy, and, although English is the language of business, the authors do not speak the native language (Arabic).

Nonetheless, this study has endorsed previous findings on women's employment in Oman, and it adds quantitative data to the body of knowledge about women's progress in the private sector. This research increases the academic knowledge on international issues in gender and management in its focus on a country within the GCC and the wider MENA region. It also provides helpful insights for educators, scholars, practitioners, and government leaders who work to help prepare women for management positions in this important region. The authors believe it is important for women in Oman to develop more management skills so they can become more effective role models for the next generation of women workers.

Notes

1. The authors have completed a similar study on the United Arab Emirates (Kemp *et al.*, 2013) and have completed a comparative study of the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries as well.
2. 1 Omani Rial (RO) = US\$2.6; 228 Omani Rial (RO) = US\$594; 120 Omani Rial (RO) = US\$312, available at: www.oanda.com/currency/converter/ (accessed 19 February 2013).
3. Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.
4. We are in the process of conducting research on each Gulf country and have set the same criteria for each study.

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