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Exploring UAE's female leadership styles in the digital era: motivators and barriers

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Abstract: Women's participation in decision-making roles is increasing in the patriarchal society of the UAE. An empirical investigation has been undertaken to determine the differences in leadership styles adopted by women compared with those adopted by men in both the public and private sectors of the UAE, as well as the motivators and barriers faced by women in their leadership roles. A mixed-method approach – survey and interviews – was used to collect data from leaders working in various government organisations and private businesses. Responses from 409 surveys and 24 interviews were analysed using SPSS and thematic analysis, respectively, to test the study hypotheses. The survey found that women leaders mostly adopt a transformational leadership style along with a contingent reward strategy (transactional) to lead employees at their respective workplaces. They mostly avoid a passive approach to leadership compared with their male counterparts. Interviews with female leaders identified how self-development, social impact, and collaborations motivate them, and how a lack of authority, vigilance, and gender stereotypes inhibit them in their leadership roles. The study results have implications for industrial practitioners as well as policymakers in the UAE Government departments concerned with women's empowerment.

Keywords: female leaders; female empowerment; transactional; transformational; laissez-faire; barriers; United Arab Emirates; UAE.

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1 Introduction

Debates in the Western media about Arab women in Middle Eastern culture have been prevalent since the turn of the 21st century. These arguments stamped the communities here to be stereotyped with a cultural view of masculinity (Aldulaimi and Hameed Aldulaimi, 2019; Kabasakal and Bodur, 2002). While the role of women in Arab culture has received some academic attention, but in most of the Middle Eastern countries the research on gender stereotypes is still under-developed (Al-Salem and Speece, 2017; Cannon, 1985; Forster, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other Arab countries have used digital solutions to enable employees to work easily across geographical and organisational boundaries, and to protect employees and organisations through preventive measures that also increase flexibility and work-life balance (Ahmad et al., 2021). This environment has reduced face-to-face work; employees, including their leaders, may rarely meet one another in person, which makes employee dynamics and leadership challenges different from traditional ones (Purnomo et al., 2021; Wong and Berntzen, 2019). In particular, female leaders face more challenges and biases compared with their male counterparts (Eichenauer et al., 2021).

The UAE has experienced phenomenal success and growth in the short span of five decades since independence (Vel and Gomišček, 2021; Zarrouk et al., 2021). This can be mostly attributed to its leaders and their leadership styles in the course of economic progress and social development (Randeree and Chaudhry, 2012). Research on leadership in the UAE often overlooks the unique strategies and styles adopted by women when

leading their subordinates toward goal attainment, even though women's empowerment is of paramount importance in the UAE (Bhatt et al., 2020; Nickerson and Goby, 2017).

As articulated by Sultan bin Saeed Al Mansoori, the UAE Minister of Economy (Gulf Today, 2019) "empowering women is a key part of UAE's economic and social development plans." UAE Vision 2021 and UAE Centennial 2071 envisage advancing gender equality and women's empowerment across sectors (Gulf Today, 2019), so that both genders can direct the system strategically toward the articulated vision of the country's leaders.

Currently, the UAE is facing the serious challenge of mitigating the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic (The World Bank, 2020). The government has implemented several special policies, laws, and initiatives to promote gender balance in decision-making positions, based on the assumption that having more women in the workforce will give them the opportunity to shape the direction of the regions' economic development.

The UAE claims a 14.5% participation rate by women in the overall workforce (where 18.5% are citizens of the country), lagging behind the female workforce of Singapore and Norway, which claim 40% and approximately 50% female participation rates, respectively. Nevertheless, women in the UAE are playing increasingly important roles in the public sector as well as in the private sector of the economy. Women's participation in decision-making roles is increasing in the region, which makes it important to determine the factors that motivate them to seek leadership roles and the barriers they face while engaged in leadership. It is also important to determine whether their leadership styles, compared to those of their male counterparts, are an advantage or an impediment to their accessing leadership positions.

Until now, the real roles of Arab female leaders have not been well-researched, particularly during the transition to the online work environment in the pandemic era. The lack of exploration of women's roles in traditional communities and in modern communities, such as the UAE, is surprising given the growth of its economy in last decade and unsubstantiated western stereotypes. Women's roles need to be investigated, given the fact that specific styles of leadership, such as the transformational style, affect performance outcomes via complex mediating mechanisms (Ng, 2017), including environmental uncertainty in current pandemic. Scholars need to examine how transformational leaders can exert their influence on firm performance through these complex mechanisms (Chen et al., 2019).

The objectives of the present study were to determine the leadership styles adopted by female leaders based in the public and private sectors of the UAE, to learn what motivates them to seek leadership positions, and to identify the barriers they face at work. More specifically, the study wished to ascertain whether women in UAE adopt transactional, transformational, or laissez-faire leadership styles in their leadership roles. In addition, it explored whether their leadership styles were influenced by the generational cohort to which they belonged or by the type of sector in which they were leading. The study also compared male and female leadership styles to determine the differences, if any.

The study findings answered the following research questions:

- 1 What leadership styles are adopted by female leaders in the UAE?
- 2 Do demographic differences influence their leadership styles?

- 3 Are female leadership styles different from those of men in the patriarchal UAE society?
- 4 What are the motivators for, and barriers to, women who work in decision-making positions?

2 Literature review and conceptual framework

Leadership is a critical pillar of growth in organisations. Leaders play a pivotal role in driving sustainability, directing the employees, and achieving the organisational goals. According to the growing research on women and leadership (Offermann et al., 2020; Peus et al., 2015; Schock et al., 2019; Vinkenburg et al., 2011), leaders are vital to facilitating effective teamwork and building trust and relationships among team members (Wong and Berntzen, 2019), enhancing their commitment to organisation (Aggarwal et al., 2021). The three primary types of leadership styles are described below.

2.1 *Transformational leadership*

Transformational leadership, compared to other leadership styles, is considered a helpful leadership style for virtual teams (Mysirlaki and Paraskeva, 2020), inspiring employees to focus on the goals and rise above their own self-interests and providing them with a collective belief in their ability to succeed (Wipulanusat et al., 2017; Wong and Berntzen, 2019).

Burns (1978) first introduced the concept of transformational leadership as a process in which “[political] leaders and their followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation.” This leadership style has been widely adopted and is practiced by leaders in corporate culture. According to Bass and Avolio (1993), transformational leaders communicate a vision that provides support to their subordinates through their charisma (idealised influence) (Mekić et al., 2020), creates enthusiasm for employees (inspirational motivation) (Devi and Mahajans, 2019), pays attention to employees’ individual needs and responds to their problems (individual consideration) (Ramalingam et al., 2021), and encourages different thinking and innovation within the organisation (intellectual stimulation) (Tsevaïridou et al., 2019). This suggests four dimensions of the transformational leadership style: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration.

2.1.1 *Idealised influence*

Idealised influence is the emotional component of leadership (Antonakis and House, 2014). It describes leaders as charismatic and strong role-models with high ethical conduct who are rigorously followed, identified, trusted, respected, and emulated by their followers (Mekić et al., 2020; Raman et al., 2020b; Shafi et al., 2020). Idealised influence is measured as attributional and behavioural; the former refers to followers’ attribution of their leader based on their perception of the leader, while the latter refers to followers’ observation of their leaders’ behaviour (Raman et al., 2020a; Stedham and Skaar, 2019).

2.1.2 Inspirational motivation

Inspirational motivation is the practice of leaders who communicate high expectations to their followers, and who inspire them to be part of, and committed to, the shared organisational vision (Rahman 2017; Yaslioglu and Selenay Erden, 2018). A team spirit is instilled using symbols and emotional appeals by the leaders to channel their followers' efforts towards organisational goals (Devi and Mahajans, 2019). Transformational leaders inspire and motivate workers, which leads to a positive work climate and a growth-oriented workplace culture. They help to foster growth within the organisation by training employees and setting performance standards, which results in higher productivity (Udin, 2020). Employees' participation and involvement promotes innovation adoption and change implementation (White, 2018).

2.1.3 Intellectual stimulation

Intellectual stimulation refers to the leadership practice of stimulating followers to enhance their creativity and innovation (Ramalingam et al., 2021) by challenging their existing beliefs and values. Tsevairidou et al. (2019) defined intellectual stimulation "as the awareness and the management of difficult situations by the followers, with creative and free-wheeling thought, using their imagination and innovative methods". Leaders in Emirati organisations stimulate the ideas of followers and contribute to building a supportive organisational climate, which can play an important role in developing the employees' feeling of being integrated into their work. In addition, it unleashes employees' energies towards creative thinking, questioning assumptions, and solving problems in creative ways. In their study, Dong et al. (2017) reported that employees in UAE-based firms spend a significant amount of time developing and proposing creative solutions to improve system effectiveness and efficiency by modifying traditional work procedures. These initiatives are well-supported by the companies' management.

2.1.4 Individualised consideration

Individualised consideration refers to leaders who act as coaches and advisors to their followers to help them fully actualise their potential and grow despite their personal challenges (Dey, 2012). They provide a supportive climate to their followers by carefully listening to their needs. Their primary consideration is the development of employees by giving them individualised attention, which is achievable by coordinating leaders and followers. Leaders can positively affect their employees' orientation toward innovation (Ramalingam et al., 2021), particularly when they pay attention to the personal needs of their followers. This inspires employees to pursue the goals and vision of their leaders whole-heartedly (Heffernan, 2016).

Heffernan (2016) reported that the improved performance of employees working in the UAE government offices, resulting in significant positive outcomes, is largely due to the inspirational motivation of their leaders. This leadership approach focuses on how leaders create a worthy image along with positive change, which is missing in the traditional leadership theories and models.

Unlike other leadership styles, transformational leadership is all about creating motivation among subordinates and inspiring them to develop innovative solutions to achieve organisational goals, as practiced in UAE companies (Thibault et al., 2019; Rao and Kareem, 2015). The transformational leadership style inspires individuals and raises

their general awareness of the importance of organisational goals; this activates their higher-order needs and equips them to think beyond their self-interests toward organisational objectives (Wipulanusat et al., 2017). Transformational leaders encourage positive developments in their followers by being energetic, passionate, and enthusiastic (Antonakis and House, 2014; Wong and Berntzen, 2019). This management style motivates the employees to be creative and find innovative solutions to problems (White, 2018). As a result, employees are more productive and are more likely to be rewarded for exceptional work performance (Wipulanusat et al, 2017). We therefore hypothesise that:

Hypothesis 1(a) Female leaders adopt the transformational leadership style.

2.2 *Transactional leadership*

Transactional leadership is characterised by leaders who clarify work goals and consequences. This leadership style is defined by Folakemi et al. (2016a) as a “favour-for-favour” exchange. Leaders focus on performing specific tasks correctly and follow a ‘give and take’ policy. Rewards or penalties are used to motivate followers (Kuhnert, 1994). Transactional leadership is measured through the dimensions of contingent reward, active management-by-exception, and passive management-by-exception. The passive management-by-exception attribute has some features in common with the laissez-faire leadership style discussed below, characterised by the absence of leadership (Deinert et al., 2015).

2.2.1 *Contingent reward*

Contingent reward refers to a process in which the follower’s efforts are rewarded by the leader. In the UAE, organisational leaders occasionally use the contingent reward approach in exchange for their followers meeting their expectations. Rewards or incentives are used as positive reinforcers to achieve the desired results (Butler et al., 2020; Hartono and Murniati, 2021; Luthans and Stajkovic, 2000). These leaders stimulate followers achieve better outcomes and work toward organisational goals.

2.2.2 *Management-by-exception*

Management-by-exception encompasses corrective criticism, negative feedback, and negative reinforcement by the leader. This approach can be either active or passive. *Active management-by-exception* involves the continuous monitoring of workflow to avoid making mistakes and ensure that tasks are completed correctly. Leaders keep track of performance and take corrective action when required (Folakemi et al., 2016b). *Passive management-by-exception* occurs when a leader intervenes only after standards have not been met or a problem has arisen. Brendon (2019) highlighted that the passive management-by-exception approach renders leaders inactive in monitoring the performance of their followers both active and passive management-by-exception styles involve more negative than positive reinforcement.

Previous research suggests that leaders in the UAE adopt regular performance evaluation mechanisms for monitoring organisational performance, which makes them proactive in mitigating performance gaps instead of being reactive (Alshehhi et al., 2019; Siddique, 2004). Emirati leaders pay special attention to the needs of followers and

reward their accomplishments by adopting positive reinforcement strategies, hence providing evidence of both transactional and transformational leadership styles.

A transactional leadership style relies on motivating employees with rewards and punishments; this is best suited for organisations that engage in routine work (White, 2018). It is not suitable for innovative systems that are change-oriented for survival in an environment of cut-throat competition. The increasing role of technology and innovation offers a sustainable competitive advantage in the current fourth industrial era, suggesting that a higher level of technological sophistication calls for the adoption of transformational leadership more than the transactional leadership style (AlNuaimi and Khan, 2019; Alseiyari et al., 2019). We therefore hypothesise that:

Hypothesis 1(b) Female leaders adopt the transactional leadership style.

2.3 *Laissez-faire leadership*

This style represents the absence of leadership. Northouse (2016) pointed that the laissez-faire leaders leave things as they are and do not interfere with them; that is, they relieve themselves of the leadership responsibility. This style of leadership is ineffective and has poor outcomes. Leaders neither take any responsibility nor take timely decisions, nor do they give any feedback to their followers about their performance.

Most leaders in UAE-based firms do not adopt the passive/avoidant management approach, as it might lead to frustration among employees and create a waste of resources (Alshehhi et al., 2019; Jabnoun and Rasasi, 2005). Rather, they have been reported to be more directive in their approach (Al Remeithi, 2017). It is assumed that passive/avoidant leadership will have a negative impact on the Emirates vision and aspirations toward innovation and creativity in the workplace. We therefore hypothesise that:

Hypothesis 1(c) Female leaders adopt the passive/avoidant leadership style.

2.4 *Female leaders in the UAE*

The current study assesses the leadership styles adopted by female leaders in the UAE- to understand whether their leadership approach supports or undermines envisioned change and innovation in the region. Having women lead organisations show several benefits such as enhancing financial outcomes, engaging employees, supporting gender diversity, and delivering better performance (Hoobler et al., 2018; Perryman et al., 2016; Spencer et al., 2019). Lower female representation in leadership position has been a major concern across the world (Chauhan and Mishra, 2021). The governments and organisations alike have considered many strategies to reduce the gap between the representation of men and women in senior leadership roles such as “equal opportunity strategies, opportunity enhancing strategies, reporting requirements, setting gender targets, and introducing quotas” [Sojo et al., (2016), p.520].

As well, several studies provide a link between women and transformational leadership in the literature, citing the fact that women are more interactive and collaborative in the workplace (Ivan, 2012; Nielsen et al., 2019; Sharif, 2019; Shaya and Khait, 2017). Interactive and collaborative women are considered to be transformational leaders who are willing to forego pandemic pressure by focusing their efforts on the long-term health and well-being of their employees. Nevertheless, leadership positions are still occupied mainly by men, despite indications that today's women are as capable,

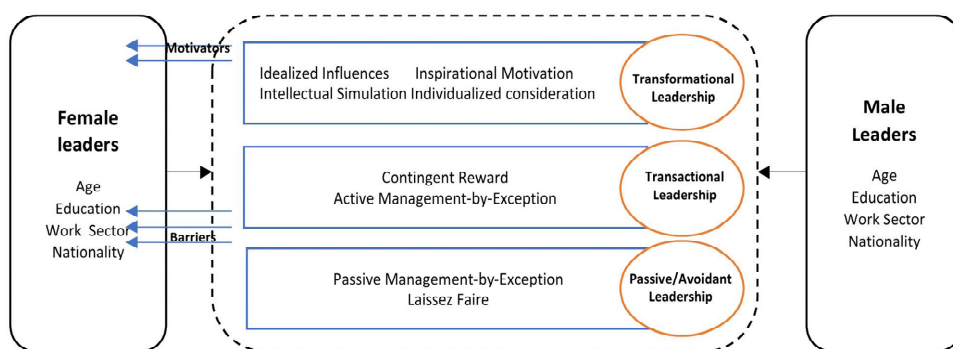
or more capable, in leadership and management roles as men (Bono et al., 2017; Offermann et al., 2020; Vinkenburg et al., 2011). Research on transformational leadership, particularly among female leaders has been discussed intensively in many countries and in several context such as the USA, India, and China (Peus et al., 2015; Zheng et al., 2018), but not as much in the UAE. Therefore, the researchers studied other hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2 Female leadership style is influenced by their:

- a age
- b educational level
- c work sector
- d nationality.

Hypothesis 3 Female leaders adopt leadership styles that are different from those of male leaders.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework (see online version for colours)



The study further determines the factors that motivate the female leaders in their leadership roles, as well as the barriers that inhibit them from successfully leading their subordinates in the desired direction. Moving in this direction, the study's conceptual framework Figure 1 incorporates three leadership style categories. The first category is the transformational leadership style, which incorporates the four dimensions of idealised influence (attributional and behavioural), inspirational motivation, intellectual simulation, and individualised consideration. The second category is the transactional leadership style, with its dimensions of contingent reward and *active* management-by-exception. Combining the *passive* management-by-exception aspect of transactional leadership style with the laissez-faire style creates a third category, the passive/avoidant leadership style.

3 Methodology

A mixed-method approach was adopted to achieve the study objectives. In the first phase of the study, a survey was conducted to collect information on the leadership styles adopted by male and female leaders, and the differences between male and female styles, if any. In second phase, interviews were conducted with women working in top-level

positions to identify the factors that motivate them or that create barriers for them in their decision-making roles.

3.1 Recruitment and data collection

Using snowball sampling technique, women and men working at managerial positions in the public and private sector were solicited via email and social networking sites and asked to participate in the survey. People who indicated their willingness to participate in the study were forwarded the survey link and the guidelines for completing the survey form.

Next, 30 female leaders were recruited from the alumni database of academic institution in Abu Dhabi. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 female participants working in decision-making positions in 18 different UAE public and private institutions, using Zoom application. Female leaders from various industries were represented, such as petroleum, education, telecommunication, IT, construction, banking, pharmaceuticals, and hospitality. The interviewees were from various age groups, educational levels, and work sectors.

3.2 Survey and interview instruments

Survey respondents' transformational, transactional, and passive/avoidant leadership styles were measured using the multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ-5X) developed by Avolio and Bass (2004). The items were measured on five-point likert scale (1: not all through 5: frequently). Questions about their demographic profile and leadership styles were included in the questionnaire.

Interview respondents were asked about the factors that continued to influence them to climb the ladder toward top, mostly-male dominated, positions, as well as those factors that hindered them while progressing toward their goals.

4 Data analysis

Quantitative (survey) data were analysed using IBM SPSS® 17 software. The survey data were checked to remove responses with a high percentage of missing values and straight-line issues. A series of t-tests were conducted to test Hypothesis 1 (a, b, c) of the study, determining whether female leaders adopt transformational, transactional, or passive-avoidant leadership style while leading in their workplaces.

Qualitative (interview) data from all participants were transcribed and combined into a master transcript. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the data manually. Initially, the data that emerged from the transcripts were grouped into two categories: motivation behind working as a leader, and barriers faced by participants in their leadership roles. Following the initialisation process, a meta-analysis was conducted, during which line-by-line coding was done to systematically organise useful data, followed by generating and assigning thematic codes. Subsequently, all data were grouped under similar codes, and later sorted into initial themes. The interview analysis yielded two categories, including six themes. Pseudonyms were assigned to all interviewees to protect their privacy.

Table 1 Demographic details of survey participants.

		<i>Survey respondents</i>	<i>Interview respondents</i>
Participant demographics	Female		
(N = 290)	Male		
(N = 119)	Female		
(N = 24)			
Age			
20–40 years	251 (61.3%)	73 (17.9%)	12 (50.0%)
41+ years	39 (9.6%)	46 (11.2%)	12 (50.0%)
Education			
Diploma/High School	46 (11.2%)	32 (7.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Graduate degree	166 (40.6%)	54 (13.2%)	13 (54.0%)
Post-graduate degree	62 (15.2%)	32 (7.8%)	11 (46.0%)
Sector			
Public	167 (40.8%)	90 (22.0%)	8 (33.3%)
Private	98 (24.0%)	26 (6.4%)	15 (62.5%)
Semi-private	25 (6.1%)	3 (0.7%)	1 (4.0%)
Nationality			
UAE citizens	261 (63.8%)	89 (21.8%)	15 (62.5%)
Residents	29 (7.1%)	30 (7.3%)	09 (37.5%)

5 Testing and results

5.1 Survey phase

409 managerial employees participated in the survey using a self-administered questionnaire. 71% of the respondents were female ($n = 290$), and 29% were male ($n = 119$). Four out of five participants were millennials (ranging in age from 20 to 40 years), while the rest ranged from 41 to 60 years (41–50 years: 17%; 51 to 60 years: 3.7%). Participants from a variety of educational backgrounds were represented, including those with diplomas (19%), graduate degrees (54%), and post-graduate degrees (23%). 85% of respondents were UAE citizens employed in the public sector (63%), the private sector (30%), or the semi- public sector (7%) Table 1.

5.1.1 Leadership styles – women

The study hypotheses findings revealed that a significant number of female respondents adopted transformational leadership style by engaging in individualised consideration (t -statistic = 7,644; $p = 0.000$, idealised influence–behaviours (t -statistic = 6,560; $p = 0.000$), and inspirational motivation (t -statistic = 3,884; $p = 0.000$) Table 2. They showed less of a tendency to engage employees using the idealised influence–attributes ($p = 0.681$) or the intellectual simulation ($p = 0.481$) dimensions of transformational leadership.

Female leaders showed a significant adoption of contingent rewards ($p = 0.000$), reflective of a transactional leadership style, but they did not practice either active or passive management-by-exception. The mean scores of management-by-exception (passive) (mean value = 1.39) and laissez-faire (mean value = 1.62) were the lowest compared to the mid-score of 2.5, indicating a low tendency of female leaders to avoid decision making or ignore their responsibilities. Hypothesis 1 (a and b) were partially accepted, supporting the finding that the female leaders in the UAE adopt transformational leadership (individualised attention, idealised influence, and inspirational motivation) and transactional leadership (contingent reward) styles; however, Hypothesis 1(c) was rejected, confirming that female leaders do not indulge in a passive/avoidant leadership approach.

Table 2 Leadership styles adopted by women leader

<i>Female leadership styles</i>		<i>Mean value</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>	<i>t-statistic</i>	<i>p</i>
TF5	Individualised consideration	2.98	1,060	7,644	0.000***
TF2	Idealised influence (behaviours)	2.92	1,101	6,560	0.000***
TR1	Contingent reward	2.77	1,075	4,206	0.000***
TF3	Inspirational motivation	2.75	1,104	3,884	0.000***
TF4	Intellectual simulation	2.54	1,081	0.706	N.S.
TR2	Management-by-exception (active)	2.49	1,144	-0.103	N.S.
TF1	Idealised influence (attributes)	2.47	1,141	-0.412	N.S.
PA2	Laissez-faire	1.62	1,363	-11,033	N.S.
PA1	Management-by-exception (passive)	1.39	1,335	-14,165	N.S.

Notes: *** Significant at $< 1\%$; TF = transformational leadership; TR = transactional leadership; PA = passive/avoidant leadership; N.S. = not significant.

5.1.2 Demographic differences and female leadership styles

Subsequently, Hypothesis 2 (a, b, c, d) were tested to determine whether age, educational level, work sector, or nationality differences among the female leaders influenced their leadership styles. The findings revealed that female leaders who were Gen Xers (the cohort born between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s, after the baby boomers and before the millennials) practiced individualised consideration (F statistic = 13,194; $p = 0.000$), inspirational motivation (F statistic = 11,453; $p = 0.001$), idealised influence-behaviours (F statistic = 4,516; $p = 0.034$), and contingent rewards (F statistic = 9,013; $p = 0.003$) more than millennial female leaders (the cohort born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s). However, in the rest of the leadership dimensions, Gen Xers and millennials were similar; thus, Hypothesis 2(a) was partially accepted Table 3.

The mean differences were computed to determine whether female leaders with different educational backgrounds adopt different leadership styles. The mean ranks indicated that female leaders from different educational levels differ in their transformational leadership styles. Leaders with high school certificates or diplomas engaged more in idealised influence-behaviour (F statistic = 2,644; $p = 0.023$),

inspirational motivation (F statistic = 2,956; p = 0.013) and individualised consideration (F statistic = 2,355; p = 0.041). Female leaders who hold Master's degrees in their respective fields engaged more in idealised influence–attributes (F statistic = 2,475; p = 0.032) and intellectual stimulation (F statistic = 4,178; p = 0.001), instead of inspirational motivation. However, no difference was observed among female leaders in their approach toward transactional and avoidant/passive leadership style based on their educational differences; therefore, Hypothesis 2(b) was partially accepted.

Mean differences were computed to determine differences in the leadership styles of female leaders working in different economic sectors. The findings revealed that female leaders from public and semi-public sectors practiced inspirational motivation techniques (F statistic = 4,978; p = 0.007), individualised consideration (F -statistic = 2,858; p = 0.05) and contingent rewards (F statistic = 3,002; p = 0.05) more than private sector leaders. No other significant difference was observed between the female leaders from public and private sectors in terms of their leadership approaches; thus, Hypothesis 2(c) was partially accepted.

Hypothesis 2(d) was tested to determine whether female leaders who are Emirati citizens differ from resident female leaders in their leadership approaches. The Emirati and the resident leaders showed no significant differences in leadership styles except in the management-by-exception (passive) approach. The independent sample t -test revealed that Emirati female leaders showed a tendency of staying passive until things go wrong compared with resident leaders (F statistic = 4,966; p = 0.027). However, the mean value of management-by-exception (passive) remained lower than the mid-point of 2.5 (Emiratis: mean value = 1.46; Residents: mean value = 0.79), showing less inclination of the leaders toward the passive leadership style; therefore, Hypothesis 2(d) was partially accepted.

5.1.3 Leadership styles – Women versus men

Hypothesis 3 was tested to determine if the leadership styles of the female respondents differ from those of the male respondents. The t -test results indicated that female leaders differed significantly from male leaders in the intellectual stimulation dimension of the transformational leadership style (F statistic = 12,168; p = 0.001) Table 4. The mean rank identified that male leaders indulged more than their female counterparts in intellectually stimulating their followers. However, leaders of both genders engaged in the transformational leadership dimensions of idealised influence (attributes and behaviours), inspirational motivation, and individualised consideration.

Another significant difference was observed among the leadership styles of both genders. The findings confirmed that male leaders adopt the management-by-exception (passive) leadership approach (F statistic = 6,131; p = 0.014). The mean rank identified that male leaders more often avoid leadership responsibilities and decision making than do female leaders. Nevertheless, no difference was noted among the two groups of leaders in terms of transactional leadership style; therefore, Hypothesis 3 was partially accepted.

The overall results of the hypotheses testing are shown in Table 5.

Table 4 Leadership styles – female leaders versus male leaders

	Transformational leadership (TF)					Transactional leadership (TR)		Passive/avoidant leadership (PA)	
	Idealised influence (attributes)	Idealised influence (behaviors)	Inspirational motivation	Intellectual stimulation	Individualised consideration	Contingent reward	Management-by-exception (active)	Management-by-exception (passive)	Laissez-faire
Female (mean and SD)	2.47 (1,141)	2.92 (1,101)	2.75 (1,104)	2.54 (1,081)	2.98 (1,060)	2.77 (1,075)	2.49 (1,144)	1.39 (1,335)	1.62 (1,363)
Male (mean and SD)	2.63 (1,288)	2.87 (1,207)	2.87 (1,134)	2.76 (0,899)	3.15 (1,030)	1.46 (1,483)	1.18 (1,371)	2.82 (0,983)	2.52 (1,199)
F value	2.363	0.373	0.135	12,168	0.344	2,830	0.060	6,131	0.748
p	0.125	0.542	0.713	0.001**	0.558	0.093	0.807	0.014*	0.388

Note: * Significant at 0.05; ** significant at .01.

Table 5 Overall study hypotheses results

<i>Hypotheses</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Status</i>
Women's leadership style = transformational leadership style	Hypothesis 1(a)		
	Idealised influence (attributes)	N.S.	Partially accepted
	Idealised influence (behaviours)	0.000***	
	Inspirational motivation	0.000***	
Women's leadership style = transactional leadership style	Intellectual stimulation	N.S.	
	Individualised consideration	0.000***	
	Hypothesis 1(b)		
	Contingent reward	0.000***	Partially accepted
Women's leadership style = passive/avoidant leadership style	Management-by-exception (active)	N.S.	Rejected
	Hypothesis 1(c)		
	Management-by-exception (passive)	N.S.	
	Laissez-faire	N.S.	
Age differences → women's leadership style	Hypothesis 2(a)		
	Contingent reward	0.003**	Partially accepted
	Management-by-exception (active)	N.S.	
	Idealised influence (attributes)	N.S.	
	Idealised influence (behaviours)	0.034*	
	Inspirational motivation	0.001**	
	Intellectual stimulation	N.S.	
	Individualised consideration	0.000***	
	Management-by-exception (passive)	N.S.	
	Laissez-faire	N.S.	

Note: * Significant at .05; ** significant at .01; *** significant at 0.001; N.S. = not significant.

Table 5 Overall study hypotheses results (continued)

<i>Hypotheses</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Status</i>
Education level differences → Women's leadership style	Hypothesis 2(b)		
	Contingent reward	N.S.	Partially accepted
	Management-by-exception (active)	N.S.	
	Idealised influence (attributes)	0.032*	
	Idealised influence (behaviours)	0.023*	
	Inspirational motivation	0.013*	
	Intellectual stimulation	0.001**	
	Individualised consideration	0.014*	
	Management-by-exception (passive)	N.S.	
	Laissez-faire	N.S.	
Sector-based differences → Women's leadership style	Hypothesis 2(c)		
	Contingent reward	0.05*	Partially accepted
	Management-by-exception (active)	N.S.	
	Idealised influence (attributes)	N.S.	
	Idealised influence (behaviours)	N.S.	
	Inspirational motivation	0.007**	
	Intellectual stimulation	N.S.	
	Individualised consideration	0.050*	
	Management-by-exception (passive)	N.S.	
	Laissez-faire	N.S.	

Note: * Significant at .05; ** significant at .01; *** significant at 0.001; N.S. = not significant.

Table 5 Overall study hypotheses results (continued)

<i>Hypotheses</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Status</i>
Citizenship differences → Women's leadership style	Hypothesis 2(d)		
	Contingent reward	N.S.	Partially accepted
	Management-by-exception (active)	N.S.	
	Idealised influence (attributes)	N.S.	
	Idealised influence (behaviours)	N.S.	
	Inspirational motivation	N.S.	
	Intellectual stimulation	N.S.	
	Individualised consideration	N.S.	
Women's leadership styles ≠ Men's leadership styles	Management-by-exception (passive)	0.027*	Partially accepted
	Laissez-faire	N.S.	
	Hypothesis 3		
	Contingent reward	N.S.	
	Management-by-exception (active)	N.S.	
	Idealised influence (attributes)	N.S.	
	Idealised influence (behaviours)	N.S.	
	Inspirational motivation	N.S.	
	Intellectual stimulation	0.001**	
	Individualised consideration	N.S.	
	Management-by-exception (passive)	0.014*	
	Laissez-faire	N.S.	

Note: * Significant at .05; ** significant at .01; *** significant at 0.001; N.S. = not significant.

5.2 Interview phase

Generated themes and initial codes obtained from the interview transcripts are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Themes and initial codes generated from interview data

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Initial codes</i>
The motivation behind working as a leader	Social impact	Social impact
		Social status
		Reputation
	Self-development	Self-development
		Personal growth
		Rising the ladder
	Collaboration	Collaboration
		Teamwork
		Collectivism
Barriers faced by leaders	Lack of authority	Lack of authority
		Absence of power
	Vigilance	Vigilance
		Personal issues
	Gender stereotypes	Gender stereotypes
		Undermining women

5.2.1 Motivation to work as a leader

The identified themes related to the motivation behind working as a leader were social impact, self-development, and collaboration. Most participants pointed out that attaining key leadership positions raised their social status and reputation.

- M1 — social impact: Participants discussed how being in a leadership position enhanced their social impact in their country. Some explained that social impact was the main driver in seeking their leadership positions; for example, in the context of healthcare in the UAE during COVID-19, one participant said

“Among other factors, my leadership role allows me to earn more respect in my community and makes me lead through my passion toward public health improvement: to fight and prevent serious illnesses” (P2). Most of the participants indicated that their leadership positions satisfy their social needs. For example, P8 indicated “that being a leader, especially in a large company, gives me an important social position, makes me earn enormous respect in my society where people consider my opinion on certain things, and seek my advice on others.” In addition, P3 said, “When you have a good position at a reputable company, most people in the community treat you as a source of advice.” P7, in speaking of her leadership position, said it will “enhance my image within the society in general and my community in specific”.
- M2 – self-development: All participants felt that being a leader is crucial for personal growth and development. The majority of participants indicated that seeking different opportunities to help themselves learn, expand their knowledge, and

progress in their career was the reason why they are motivated to be in leadership positions (P1, P2, P5, P9, P15). Two interviewees said:

“Everyone wants to grow and attain self-actualisation” (P20); and “being a leader exposes you to novel situations that develop and sharpen your problem-solving, intellectual, and professional skills” (P21). P3 said that developing these personal skills would be enhanced “by indulging in challenges that shaped my leadership traits and provided me with access to world-class opportunities,” particularly “in my organisational setting” (P6). Another said that these skills “help me boost my self-esteem and enhance my self-confidence. Being a leader helps me in the decision-making process” (P8). Finally, personal growth and development, or self-fulfillment, is another motivation for “climbing the ladder”, providing “the ability to guide people and lead them to success” (P11, P12, P17, P19).

- M3 – collaboration: Participants discussed various factors such as teamwork and collaboration that motivated them to be effective leaders in their organisations (P7, P10, P18, P20). Through being supported by:

“Their culture that promotes cross-functional collaboration and team work” (P2), most participants indicated that they are able to satisfy their needs by surrounding themselves “with many amazing teams and members and watching them grow and develop around their leadership support” (P1). Ultimately, because “no one can work alone to achieve success,” “teamwork is essential” (P5). Some spoke of using collaboration as it is their responsibility as a leader “to get such stakeholders together, identify and visualise synergies, and invoke collective approach toward the common goal” (P16). Furthermore, collaboration creates opportunities for every person involved to learn from others’ experiences, which helps build better organisations (P15, P21). “Every collaboration brings a lot of knowledge and learning into other aspects of businesses” (P15). “It helps you in growing your business. Your interaction with people from the same field in a different organisation helps you to learn, as well as creates a friendly environment” (P21).

5.2.2 *Barriers faced by female leaders*

Gender stereotypes, lack of authority, and vigilance were identified as the three main barriers that hinder their progress toward their professional goals.

- B1 – Gender stereotypes: The participants discussed how they face gender stereotypes while at work.

“It is difficult to lead people who consider you naturally inferior to them. They cause you problems; they don’t follow orders” (P2, P3, P6). “Male subordinates cause wild problems; they are always questioning how I rose through the ranks. I have to report to the top when I face resistance to execute my orders in most cases” (P7). Another participant elaborated on how she fights this stereotype. “There is no denying that this is a male-dominated world, and female leaders are hard to come by. I’ve had to overcome many obstacles on my way to becoming a leader, and I continue to do so today. Many people want to work with mentors who are of the same gender, so they are more likely to recognise the issues that they encounter. Women face a slew of modern obstacles as a result of globalisation” (P10). P24 described this issue clearly, saying “Of course, there are gender stereotype issues. At first, I felt the role was not fit for me as a female. People are more concerned about your weaknesses than your strengths as a female leader, especially in our backward culture that does not fully recognise the role of women in leadership”.

- B2 – Lack of authority: Six female leaders pointed to a lack of authority as a hindrance to their effective leadership. Examples of the responses were:

“Sometimes I find it difficult to direct a team without the power to punish poor performance or reward astounding effort” (P3 and P4). “Once your team discovers that you do not have the right to make key decisions without consulting your superiors, they do not respect your orders” (P15). P14 indicated that the lack of authority in her work came from male employees in her office: “So they refuse to help others, not hearing our suggestions, etc.; in fact, they do not show respect and moral support.” P16 explained the consequences of the lack of authority in her organisation, saying, “in my organisation, there is a multilayered, hierarchal structure, which results in a lack of decision-making power at my hand. It becomes worse once the request regarding a decision is raised. It goes up through multiple levels which results in losing the objectivity and sometimes the criticality. It results in a reduced impact of decisions and delays in general”.
- B3 – Vigilance: Seven female leaders pointed to vigilance as part of their leadership role. Some of them highlighted that complying with the

“General rules of the company and understanding my responsibilities, helps me reduce the vigilance in my work environment” (P2). Sometimes “team members don’t share information with other colleagues” (P4). “My organisation supports me as a leader by providing relevant training” (P5), but “my job requires vigilance and insists on my being the person in charge” (P3). As well, “I have some interpersonal issues with different managers, which creates issues in our vigilance” (P6). These “interpersonal cues are monitored and well taken care of, as in any organisation such impacts are never neglected” (P7). “The company has an inclusive culture, thus requiring a lot of vigilance when managing the human resources” (P24).

6 Discussion

The present study is the first to examine the leadership styles adopted by female leaders in the public and private sectors of the UAE. Using the mixed-method approach of a survey and interviews, it also sought to identify the motivating and inhibiting factors in their leadership roles. The findings provided a better understanding of the strategies and practices adopted by them to lead in the workplace and the challenges faced by women in leadership positions. The results also compared the diverse female leadership styles with those of their male counterparts.

The study findings highlighted that UAE female leaders practice transformational leadership, with a prime focus on individualised consideration, idealised influence (behaviour), and inspirational motivation. These findings are aligned with the outcomes of studies conducted by Heffernan (2016) and Thibault et al. (2019) on UAE leaders, although those findings were not gender specific. Our study confirmed that, like their male counterparts, female leaders also act as advisors and provide a supportive climate to their followers so that they can deal with their personal challenges effectively and receive special attention to their needs.

Female leaders address employees’ primary consideration of getting individualised attention, and orient them toward innovation and the pursuit of goals. This influence creates a climate of trust, open-communication, and participation, reinforcing the findings of Chen et al. (2014) and Sharif (2019). It also instils a sense of confidence and pride

among followers in the organisation who are the pioneers and agents of change and innovation through learning and knowledge-sharing, reiterating the findings of Noruzi et al. (2013).

The findings also confirmed that female leaders are transformational in their style; they communicate high expectations to their followers by inspiring and motivating them, using emotional appeals and symbols, as suggested by Avolio et al. (2004). They empower them and instill a team spirit to channel their efforts toward organisational goals, thus creating a growth-oriented workplace culture. As White (2018) suggested, inspirational motivation techniques foster innovation and change adoption within the organisation, as an outcome of employee training and performance standard setting (with employee participation). Thus, our female leaders are paving way toward the adoption of innovation at their workplaces.

The study findings further revealed that female leaders have adopted the idealised influence approach, using their own behaviours as a model for their subordinates. Followers perceive them as charismatic, strong role-models of high ethical conduct, and thus follow their leader's example rigorously. The findings also corroborated the work of Antonakis et al. (2004), confirming that female leaders incorporate an emotional component in their leadership to win trust and respect at the workplace.

Despite being transformational leaders, women do not significantly stimulate the intellectual abilities of their employees by challenging their existing beliefs or values or by giving them opportunities to deal with demanding situations on their own. Female leaders do not try to unleash the employees' energies towards creative thinking, questioning assumptions, or solving problems innovatively. These findings contradictory with those of Aragón-Correa et al. (2007), and of Dong et al. (2017). Dong et al. (2017) found that the employees in UAE-based firms spend considerable time in improving system effectiveness and efficiency using their creativity, and that these initiatives are well-supported by management. They also reported that male leaders showed a higher tendency than female leaders to allow their employees to find solutions independently.

The passive/avoidant leadership style mean score was lower than the mid-point value of 2.5, confirming that female leaders do not sidestep their responsibilities as leaders. In addition, they do not adopt the management-by-exception approach of the transactional kind, mostly because it uses negative rather than positive reinforcement techniques. Our subjects prefer to use positive reinforcement by adopting contingent rewards for the desirable behaviours of their followers, rather than correcting their behaviours using negative reinforcement. This finding was in contrast with the findings of Jabnoun and AlRasasi (2005), in which hospital employees rated their leaders (who were not identified by gender) low in their use of contingent awards to improve service quality.

Our study results provide evidence that female leaders in the UAE prefer to use positive reinforcement, which helps them mitigate performance gaps proactively. Our finding that female leaders tend not to adopt the passive/avoidant leadership approach is in line with the Emirates' vision and aspiration of implementing innovation and creativity in workplaces, which is not possible with the passive or avoidant leadership styles. An interesting finding of the study is that occasionally male leaders are passive and avoid taking decisions or responsibilities.

Our study findings have brought into focus the differences between female leaders and their male counterparts in terms of stimulating the intellectual abilities of their followers. Male leaders are more comfortable in empowering their followers to solve problems than female leaders, who prefer to take the lead in resolving issues. However,

both male and female leaders use idealised influence, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, and contingent reward practices to support and direct their followers toward organisational goals, as suggested in earlier studies (Dong et al., 2017; Heffernan, 2016 and Thibault et al., 2019).

Female leaders from Generation X apply the emotional component of the transformation leadership style by creating idealised influence over their followers, and use inspirational and motivational appeals to direct them toward their goals. They also guide and mentor their followers through self-actualisation and goal attainment and practice the transactional leadership approach of contingent reward to acknowledge desired behaviours and productivity. However, millennials remained behind, showing that female leaders above 40 years of age are more confident in leading their followers being transformational leaders. This reiterates our interview-based findings, in which female leaders shared about being treated as maternal, primarily because of their unprecedented support of, and emotional connection with, their subordinates.

Female leaders with post-graduate degrees enjoy idealised influence (attributes) over their employees, which helps to stimulate their followers intellectually by challenging their existing work practices. Female leaders with only a high school education or a diploma-level technical qualification inspire their employees by acting as role models with high ethical standards. They also prefer to give individual attention and consideration to every employee, making them feel part of the team working toward greater goals.

Women leaders from the public and semi-public sectors practice a motivational approach more often by rewarding their employees for attaining their goals and demonstrating exceptional performances. In addition, they never fail to give personalised attention to each employee. This can be linked to the long tenures of leaders as well as subordinates in the public sector.

Private sector leaders lagged in rewarding or inspiring the employees, which can be attributed to the profit orientation of the sector (rather than giving priority to its people). The study further revealed that no significant differences exist between female leaders who are UAE citizens compared with resident female leaders in their adoption of leadership styles, except in the management-by-exception (passive) approach; citizen female leaders tend to remain passive until things go wrong, while residents have to prove their abilities in order to retain their positions. These findings are a valuable addition to the existing knowledge of leadership approaches adopted by female leaders in the UAE.

The study findings gleaned from interviews highlighted that female leader in the UAE faced gender stereotype issues and a lack of authority and vigilance while performing their roles, despite the support provided by the government for enabling and empowering female leaders. Leading in a male-dominated society is not easy; male subordinates sometimes consider female leaders less influential or courageous and more dependent compared to themselves. Sikdar and Mitra (2012) advised that in male-dominated organisations of the UAE, female leaders need to adopt the 'agentic' characteristics of male leaders such as courage, independency, and assertiveness, in order to break the glass ceiling. Female leaders also reported that due to leadership hierarchies at their workplaces, they do not have enough rewarding or coercive authority, which leads to insubordination and a loosening of authority over their subordinates. Jakobsh (2012) found that women in hierarchical organisations are subordinated and disempowered. To deal with the dilemma of a lack of authority, Jakobsh (2012) suggested having

communicative structures in which women assume the dominant roles of nurturing, problem solving, and dialogue. The government initiatives must take into consideration the necessary steps to ensure that women are empowered in their firms and provided with legitimate authority enabling them to reward good performance and punish bad behaviour, as deemed necessary. Also, they should be trained enough to exercise the authority assigned to them through their legitimate position.

Despite of odds, female leaders have motivators that amplify their drive toward top positions. The most prominent motivators are their sense of personal development and the impact that they could make on society. Seeing themselves progressing in their careers and making an impact on society gives them better sense of self-worth and fulfillment. Furthermore, the support of their team members and collaboration with professional networks helps them to grow and develop as leaders. Hence, female leaders in the UAE are transformational in their styles and fight the gender stereotypes to break the glass ceiling.

7 Conclusions and future direction

Female leaders in the UAE mostly adopt a transformational leadership style along with a contingent reward strategy (transactional). They mostly avoid a passive approach to leadership compared with their male counterparts, who sometimes ignore their responsibilities as leaders. Although female leaders lag behind male leaders in stimulating the intellectual abilities of their employees or giving them the freedom to solve problems on their own, they excel in giving individualised attention to their followers. Moreover, female leaders from Generation X and the public sector have proved to be more confident in leading compared with millennials and private sector leaders. However, they still face gender stereotypes, low levels of empowerment, and other personal issues that prevent them from performing optimally. Nevertheless, their constant drive to make a positive impact on society, develop themselves, and grow as a part of larger teams and professional networks motivates them to keep progressing toward the top of the ladder by breaking glass ceilings.

In this study, we focused on female leaders' perceptions of their leadership styles; however, future studies need to focus on followers' perceptions of how female leaders direct them, to better understand the reasons behind the biases and stereotypes reported by female leaders in this study. Likewise, the study had limitations in understanding the social support the female leaders enjoyed (if any) that helped them in concentrating on their professional roles better, which must be taken into consideration in future investigations, to determine if women's roles are perceived any differently since the government's struggle of empowering women professionally in a patriarchal society of UAE. Also, it is important to determine the kind of leadership development programs and practices in place to develop and improve the leadership skills among the women leaders primarily who are new entrants to the challenging positions in Arab world (Al-Mafrachi et al., 2019). Future studies should also determine whether the length of a work relationship plays a significant role in improving the quality of leadership practices.

Understanding the roles of women as leaders within the new digital world during the pandemic may alter our approach and allow us to facilitate female empowerment and leadership in the digital workplace.

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