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Exploring the Intersection of Gender and Marital Status in the Middle East

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There is a growing body of literature which examines the experiences of women in expatriate contexts (Salamin & Hanappi, 2014), yet, while women form a significant part of the global workforce, they are under-represented in many expatriate work environments (Varma & Russell, 2016). One explanation for this under-representation is the barriers enforced by host country institutions (Altman & Shortland, 2008), which is a notable feature of some expatriate reliant regions. In these highly regulated national environments, such as Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, sociocultural frameworks are considered to constrain expatriate women's employment (Bonache, Langinier, & Zárraga-Oberty, 2016). Yet, despite these challenges, expatriate women still achieve successful careers in the GCC (Harrison & Michailova, 2012).

While studies have explored how factors such as perceived organisational support (Varma & Russell, 2016), overseas employment conditions (Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015), entrepreneurial undertakings (Bodolica & Spraggon, 2015) and international adjustment (Salamin & Davoine, 2015) affect the experiences of women expatriates, the intersection of being a woman and single marital status has not been fully explored. Single women specifically, as a subgroup of expatriate workers, remain under-researched (Wechtler, 2018). Female non-nationals account for 13% of workforce in the GCC, however, as Al-Waqfi and Al-Faki (2015) indicate, many women only access work as a dependent on their spouse's visa. There is a limited understanding of how a female expatriate's marital status affects their experience of working in the GCC.

This paper addresses the gap in knowledge using a qualitative research approach underpinned by an interpretivist philosophical stance to explore the narratives of expatriate women living and working in the GCC. Human agency theory (Bandura, 2006) is used as a theoretical framework to understand how the intersection of gender and marital status affect the overseas experience. Mooney's (2016) nimble intersectionality approach was adopted to allow both marginalization and privilege to be revealed. The paper focuses on addressing the following research question: *How does marital status affect women expatriates' human agency in the GCC?*

This study builds on existing research by extending our understanding of the intersection of gender and marital status and the nuanced challenges and opportunities that this intersection presents. The expectation of organisations to increase diversity and inclusion demonstrates the necessity to further our understanding of the different ways by which the international careers of women can be facilitated. Contextualised in an expatriate-reliant national environment, this article also contributes to the extant literature by exploring the experiences of female expatriates living and working in the GCC (Al-Waqfi & Al-Faki, 2015; Hutchings, Lirio, & Metcalfe, 2012). Furthermore, this paper goes some way towards addressing a call for research to understand the experiences of single women relocating abroad (Salamin & Hanappi, 2014).

The contextual setting of this study plays a critical role in making sense of the experiences of single female expatriate, thus it is important to position the contextual setting at the forefront of the discussion (Cooke, 2018). GCC countries, namely: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are noted as being highly regulated patriarchal societies (Hennekam, Tahssain-Gay, & Syed, 2017). The socio-cultural underpinnings of these regulations, such as

women's role in society as 'wife and mother', shape laws and policies such that they reinforce the gendered order (Rodriguez & Ridgway, 2018). For example, a woman whose visa is sponsored by her husband or guardian must obtain his permission, provided through a 'no objection certificate', to undertake employment (The World Bank, 2007); by comparison, with very few occupational exceptions, a woman is unable to sponsor her husband. Despite the legal provision not preventing women's freedom of movement in most GCC countries, the requirement of 'no objection certificates' indicates that this is not the case in practice. Women who are sponsored directly by an employer, however, are not subject to the same guardianship and, arguably, could be perceived as having an advantage over their married counterparts. Conversely, as women's role in society is predominately positioned as mother and wife, women who remain single traditionally meet challenges in not adhering to social expectations (Rashad, Osman, & Roudi-Fahimi, 2005) and do not hold the same social status as married women (Seikaly, Roodsaz, & van Egten, 2014). Although the requirement for visa sponsorship is limited to foreign workers, Kemp and Rickett (2017) argue that women expatriates are privileged over their local counterparts as they are perceived as outsiders to cultural norms.

Intersectionality brings together different facets of oppression, originally gender and ethnicity; in this article, the intersection of gender and marital status is explored. Ben-Ari and Yong Yin Fong (2000) coined the term twice marginalized through an exploration of the social position of expatriates from Japan working in Singapore. The expatriates in question were marginalized initially through their gender but also their marital status in reflection of the social perceptions of women's role participation in the workplace. Nimble internationality (Mooney, 2016) is used to surface the dichotomy of marginalization and privilege as experienced by single expatriate women. Single female expatriates are positioned at the centre of the research to reveal differences in their experiences based on their liminal categorisation.

This study is based on an interpretivist philosophical stance, adopting a qualitative research approach to surface the rich and meaningful experiences of women expatriates. Contextually, the GCC offers a unique setting for this study due to the region's reliance on foreign workers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 women expatriates who were single at the time of relocating to the GCC. Participants were identified and approached through the author's professional network, participants were also asked to refer other potential participants for the research, thus alluding to a hybrid of purposive and snowball sampling. The interview guide was informed by the Bandura's (2006) human agency theory; interviews were conducted in English either face-to-face or using a voice-over-internet-protocol (Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim; participants were offered the opportunity to review and make annotations to the interview transcripts. King's (2004) template analysis method was followed to code the data through an iterative processes of data collection, coding and analysis.

The findings allude to the female expatriates' single marital status simultaneously being an advantage and a disadvantage to their human agency. On the one hand participants expressed a sense of freedom of not being hampered by consideration for dependent family members, reflected in the study's context as also not being dependent on others. In contrast however, freedom was curtailed by a heightened concern for personal safety manifested through an awareness of

geographical isolation from family. Feelings of isolation became more prominent in times of crisis, for example, hospitalisation as participants expressed the dilemma of the desire to be self-sustaining and the desire to notify family members to seek reassurance but at the risk of causing them alarm. Participants also expressed frustration at the need to find individuals with whom they could share the burden of accommodation and living costs, negating initial desires for independence.

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