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## **Businesswomen in the Middle East: Is it for you?**

**By Donna Marsh, Cultural Trainer**

As more multinational organisations expand their global presence and establish their businesses in the Middle East, more expatriate businesswomen are in a position to consider the opportunities and challenges of working in this complicated but rewarding region.

Of course, businesswomen working in the Middle East – whether occasionally flying to glamorous Dubai or accepting an long term expatriate assignment in Saudi Arabia - will be focussed on doing a good job. How they can increase their chances of success will depend on many factors beyond their core competencies – culture awareness matters.

In general, attitudes toward Western business women in the Middle East are positive. In a professional capacity, Western business women are often placed in a position of privilege, especially when working in the Gulf Countries. A woman's job title provides her with her status, which can be quite powerful, depending on her line of business, her local business partners and *wasta* (connections and influence) in the region. Many Western business women will find it no more difficult to do their job in the Middle East than they would in London, New York or Sydney. Women from other parts of the world may struggle a bit, more due to their nationality than their gender – unpalatable but reality in the region.

However, some challenges for business women remain, especially when working with very traditional or very religious colleagues, such as some Muslim men's reluctance to shake hands with an unrelated woman. Even then, women should be aware that these challenges are rarely meant to be malicious, but are the traditionalist's belief in how to treat a woman 'properly'. Most business women quickly adapt, especially in a work environment.

Many women considering an assignment in the Middle East have questions about many situations that may be different for or may not directly apply to her male counterparts. Sometimes, they are the main focus of a woman's reluctance to work in the Middle East.

Let's explore the main considerations most women may have, which may vary from country to country.

### Personal Safety

- Mostly, this is common sense
- Avoid areas that are male only
- Dress modestly even when 'off duty'
- Avoid excessive alcohol
- Minimise the impact of jetlag where possible
- Try not to travel with more than you can comfortably carry (trolley bags help)
- Rely on vetted service people at airports and hotels as well as your driver

- Know your environment, e.g. airport transport, hotel floor plans, office addresses, contact details and commuting patterns
- Have important information written down in Arabic, including telephone numbers, especially when relying on taxis
- Be aware that women in the Middle East are rarely out in public alone. Whilst a foreign woman out alone in public is not in any specific danger, she may attract quite a bit of curiosity and attention in some environments.
- Walk with confidence
- Talk with confidence
- Be aware that a woman's friendly conversation can be easily misinterpreted.
- Be firm but polite if unwelcome attention is received. Often ignoring the person is effective. Go to a safe public area (hotel lobby, restaurant, shop) if you feel uncomfortable as soon as possible. Do not engage in further dialogue with the person.
- If you are lost, try to ask a woman for help first
- Learn at least a few 'survival' words in the local language
- Make sure your mobile phone holds telephone numbers for your hotel, local contacts, and how to ring back to your own office and home
- Trust your instincts; they are more important than being polite

#### Women and Dress

- Err on the side of modesty regardless of age, both at work and at leisure – even in places like Dubai or Cairo where many female tourists are wearing immodest clothing. It is always a good idea to cover shoulders, upper arms and legs throughout most of the Middle East. Be careful of u-shaped and plunging necklines and tight fitting clothes.
- Long, loose clothing is the way to go for all hot weather conditions – you remain professional and cool
- Although women can choose whatever footwear they wish, high heels and strappy sandals do not make sense in countries with broken pavements, a need to walk on uneven surfaces or sand, or dealing with poorly lit, litter strewn areas
- Women must adhere to specific dress codes dictated by religious law in Saudi Arabia, including the *abaya* (black robe) and headscarf in most environments.

#### Social Etiquette

- Don't rush into business conversation. Polite small talk is very important.
- Don't be surprised if you are asked personal questions about your family, including assumptions about husbands and children. No matter your status or personal philosophy on the matter, it is important not to be bothered or insulted – just answer the question simply and politely.
- Be aware that, in many countries, women are 'invisible' and will struggle in what passes for queues. Other times, women will be invited to the front of the queue.
- In a mixed gender group, some Middle East men may initially only address a male colleague. Be prepared to overcome this through your job title.
- Women should not sit in the front seat of a Middle Eastern taxi.
- A woman should never meet with one man behind closed doors. The same is true for her Western male's counterpart with an Arab woman.
- Lift etiquette is a constant challenge. Does the woman get on first, sharpen her elbows so she has a chance to get on at all, wait for a man to invite her on, or wait

for another lift that she does not have to share with a religious Arab man? In reality, all of these options are correct, depending on location and circumstances.

- Be careful with alcohol as it can infer reputation issues as well as compromise personal safety

#### Health Issues

- Confirm that you are travelling on an insurance policy that covers you for your entire trip, including any possible 'extra days' touring at one end of the trip
- Make sure you carry all prescription medications in your carry-on luggage or handbag at all times. Include prescriptions in their original containers. It is often advisable to carry a doctor's note in some countries.
- Check for the legality of your medical kit. For example, it is illegal to bring codeine based products, including over the counter medications, into the United Arab Emirates.
- Take special care with contact lenses, and carry your specs with you in case you cannot tolerate your lenses in your new environment. Sunglasses are also advised.
- Be prepared. It is no fun having to approach a male hotelier where to buy tampons on a Friday morning.

#### Coping with Stress

Although not gender specific, many women are particularly cognisant of the negative impact of stress. Be prepared to deal with a higher level of stress anytime you travel to and work in an unfamiliar environment, including the Middle East. Considerations:

- Accept that business happens at a different pace
- Different perceptions of keeping time, schedules, and appointments
- Different standards of drivers, traffic congestion, road conditions, night travel
- Varying quality of infrastructure, including infrastructure failures and weather delays, which in the Middle East is most often rain and dust related
- Research dates and the basics of festivals, religious and other public holidays
- Prepared to cope with interruptions, especially varying etiquette in the use of mobile phones, PDAs, laptops, etc.
- Learn something about local politics, both to avoid truly unsafe situations (such as recent events in Libya) and especially to avoid unnecessary tension (many Western media broadcasts can be over sensationalised)

#### Finally

Do not let fear, uncertainty or doubt cloud your decision to make the most of your opportunity to work in the Middle East. An understanding of cultural differences can be the difference between success and failure. With the right set of expectations, accepting an opportunity in the Middle East may be a highlight of your career.

## **About the Author**

Donna Marsh first travelled to the Middle East in 1978. She has worked as a businesswoman in corporate sales, marketing and new business development in the fields of banking and information technology, travelling throughout the Levant, Egypt and the Gulf Countries, including to Saudi Arabia as a businesswoman in her own right.

Ms Marsh provides cross cultural business consultancy services to professionals in a variety of multinational corporate and governmental organisations, and is a regular cross cultural trainer and consultant for Babel Language & Cultural Consultants. She is the author of *The Middle East Unveiled*, aimed at all Western travellers to the Middle East as well as addressing issues of particular interest to Western business women. She is also a contributing author to *Lonely Planet's 2010 edition of Oman, UAE and Arabian Peninsula* guide with the article *A Businesswoman in Saudi*. Her newest book, *'Doing Business in the New Iraq'* is scheduled for publication in late 2011.