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TheNational



Forward thinkers

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An Abu Dhabi organisation has provided career and social support to businesswomen for more than a decade. *Helena Frith Powell* speaks to women about the challenges and benefits of being a professional in the Middle East.

When Dr Deborah Aldred arrived at Jeddah airport on a business trip two years ago, the driver waiting to pick her up was carrying a sign which read "DR AL DRED". She got into the back seat of the car, clothed in an abaya.

"He kept looking around at me," she says. "Eventually he picked up his noticeboard, pointed at the name written on it and demanded 'You this person?'" She told him she was.

"No, no, no, that cannot be,' he said. 'Doctor should be man'."

Despite this kind of encounter, she has found doing business in the region a rewarding, if challenging, experience. Aldred is the Abu Dhabi-based managing director of ELS Language Centers for the Middle East. The American franchise was established 50 years ago and now has 14 centres across the Middle East, teaching English and business communication to some two million students a year in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait. Aldred worked in the UK, Hong Kong and Japan before joining an oil and gas company in Abu Dhabi as a staff trainer in 2002 and then taking over ELS three years ago.

"It was a very interesting experience, being one of the only western woman in the company," she says. "It was also quite a challenge for me to do my job effectively because the boundaries of the systems were different to my experience and expectations."

Like many other women doing business in the UAE, she sees the challenges as an essential part of a learning curve that everyone has to go through here. Luckily, there is a group that is able to help. In 1995, four expatriate women who used to lunch together between working commitments decided to set up a forum for businesswomen in Abu Dhabi. They named it the International Business Women's Group.

The aim of the group was to promote the empowerment of businesswomen professionally and socially. It has grown from those four original members to a group of more than 200. Every first Monday of the month they hold a luncheon. They are busy events where women of all nationalities and backgrounds network. Cards and ideas are exchanged over canapés; there are lawyers, bankers, nurses, restaurant owners, spa owners and more.

"The object is to offer businesswomen an informal setting for networking and to bring like-minded women together to identify and discuss common interests," explains Nafisa Taha, the chairwoman and also the managing director of Cafe de la Paix. "There are some women who have been here for 20 years or more. They have a lot they can share with others. Many of us are at different stages of our careers here in Abu Dhabi. There may be women further down the line who can help those who are just starting out."

Aldred compares the challenges of getting used to doing business here with those of settling in on a personal level. "They both take time and patience," she says. "But it's worth it."

Cynthia Trench had to learn patience while waiting to become the first female expatriate to be licensed as a legal consultant in the UAE. She was also the youngest at the time.

"It took two years for my licence to come through," she says. "I think they were understaffed and back then, in 1994. They weren't used to applications. I don't think it had anything to do with being a woman."

Trench grew up in Hong Kong and moved to Dubai with her then husband, who worked for HSBC, in 1989. She joined the legal firm of Fox & Gibbons, where she worked as a corporate lawyer. One of their clients was the owner of Spinneys, Ali Albwardy. "Working with him put me in good stead," says Trench. "He put me in touch with a lot of his contacts and so I had a good client base when I set up on my own. The day my licence came through, my staff and I were jumping around the office for joy."

She thinks that working as a female lawyer in the UAE is easier than in Hong Kong. "I am listened to much more than I was back home. Granted, I was much more junior then, but in Hong Kong there is a huge amount of competition from your own race and gender. Here they think I'm a little bit different and little bit blunt and they quite like that."

In the early days of her business, Trench had a policy of not rejecting any client, however small. Now she acts for some of the biggest names in the area, such as British Telecom, Dutco Tennant and Al Futtaim Motors. Just as Trench didn't discriminate against clients, she says she has not been discriminated against here.



Cynthia Trench was the first female expatriate to be licensed as a legal consultant in the UAE.

"I have been pleasantly surprised," she says. "I know the Middle East has not been hit as hard as the rest of the world, but in times of crisis I think prejudices creep in even more and you might expect women to be ousted. But that just is not happening. In terms of my own experience, I would say that my lack of Arabic, especially written Arabic, has been more of a barrier than my gender. In terms of discrimination here, though, it is race, not gender, that is the big issue. I find it very sad that if I hire a British or Arab secretary as opposed to, say, a Filipino one, the discrepancy in salary is huge."

Trench says the only irritating thing about being a female lawyer and running an office with several female staff is that people immediately assume they specialise in divorce. "Also, while it is a good thing to have all these women in the office, there are sometimes issues that arise between girls. I think in any situation you need balance and a team of people works better together when there are different genders, cultures and races."

Shamma Al Nowais and Sharon Moore are a perfect example of different cultures working well together. Nowais is an Emirati. Moore was born in Bangkok and grew up in Australia. Just over a year ago they set up the Sharanis Wellness Spa in Khalifa City A, Al Raha.

They met through Nowais's father, who used to be the deputy minister of finance and is now chairman of the Rotana Group of Hotels and managing director of Abu Dhabi Fund.

Moore had been working in the wellness and spa industry for 19 years and had long dreamt about setting up her own business. "Spas are about healing people," she says, sipping a ginger tea, surrounded by artefacts and soothing smells in her Thai spa. "But a lot of the people I worked for were just interested in the bottom line. I knew I wanted to do something more. I wanted to make sure my clients left feeling well and happy, not just with perfect nails."

She managed to get a meeting with Nowais's father through a friend who owns Spaloon, the men's salon, and is now also a partner in Sharanis. "I had six minutes with him," Moore recalls. "Six minutes to make or break. My whole dream rested on this man's response. He asked me who I was and what I wanted to do, then he called Shamma's sister and I went straight over there. Shamma and I met and within a month it was all done."

Nowais explains what it was about Moore that made her decide to set up the business with her.

"What really motivated me was that she was full of energy and really believed she was going to make it," she says. "I would never have done it if it hadn't been for her. I was so impressed with her determination to reach her goal. I knew we would make it."

Another reason Nowais chose to go into the spa business is her belief that there are a lot of women out there who need the service they provide. Her husband died of cancer two years ago, and everything she has gone through has made her more aware of health and how important it is to look after yourself.

"What I liked about this idea is that everything is natural and that we have everything under one roof. I wanted to provide women with a place they can get away from the daily stress of life, somewhere to relax for the whole day and make time for themselves."

It's all very well helping other women to relax, but just how tough was it to set up the spa? "It took a lot of patience," says Moore. "The procedures for setting things up are very difficult, one of the reasons being that spa is not one of the business categories that the municipality has listed. They have 'beauty salon' or 'hamman' but not 'spa'. We are pioneers, paving the way, which is harder for us, although I would rather be a leader than a follower."

Moore feels that being a woman can be a disadvantage in doing business here. "We don't get taken as seriously as men do and there are some people who refuse to deal with us," she says. "But we have had a lot of support from Nowais's father and the minister of higher education and scientific research, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak."

Nowais agrees there is a good support structure here. "The government backs us in every way, most importantly providing us with free education and scholarships abroad to ensure we get the best education. As a Zayed University graduate, I was privileged to get the support of the minister of higher education during and after my graduation. Most importantly, my father supports us in every possible way, whether morally or financially."

Finding a suitable location proved a challenge. The women looked at close to 120 villas. "Then we heard this one was available," says Nowais. "It was a mess. The last occupants even took the grass. But it was just right." By pure coincidence, the villa they have ended up in used to belong to Nowais's late husband.

"I believe in signs," she says. "This was meant to be."

adina Negulescu, originally from Romania, came to Abu Dhabi on holiday eight years ago but ended up staying. "I fell in love with the place," she says. "I was living in Holland at the time but, there, if you blink the summer is gone. I had a young daughter and I loved the attitude towards children people have here."

Negulescu, who now works for Gasco, has worked in both the public and the private sectors. She started at the National Bank of Abu Dhabi and stayed for more than seven years. She left because she felt she couldn't get any further in the company.

"Basically I had progressed as far as I could without a shift in culture within the organisation. I'm not sure if it was to do with being a woman, but as I have experienced, when a promotion comes up and the choice was between a man and a woman, the man got the job because his needs as a sole family provider are greater. Employees here are perfectly willing to give a woman responsibility but less willing to give them financial recognition."

Several of the women I spoke to complained of a discrepancy in salary levels between men and women. This is one of the issues the International Business Women's Group is trying to improve. "Women now enjoy a real status. There is what I would call almost equality here," says Taha, the chairwoman. "But we need to work towards equal pay in the future."

Pam Simmons, also on the group's board and president of CoreNICHE Public Relations, agrees. "In addition, there should be scope for nurses, for example, to work part-time. At the moment it is not allowed and there are lots of highly skilled people out there who have come here to enjoy life as well as to work."

One nurse living in Abu Dhabi can't get any work at all, full- or part-time. The reason? Not her gender, but her age. Mary-Ellen McLaren is a sprightly Canadian, aged 59. "I used to be the manager of a plastic surgery, endoscopy and conscious sedation unit back home in North Toronto. I have 35 years experience but when I sent my CV to Sheikh Khalifa Hospital I was told they wouldn't even look at anyone over the age of 55. Apparently it's a rule set by the health department."

Negulescu, who joined Gasco as the head of business solutions development, is sure her career here will be over before then. "As an expatriate in a government organisation there is a ceiling," she says. "But it is not really a case of being an expatriate woman, although there is only one senior woman at Gasco out of 3,500 employees. But anyway, in 10 years' time I hope to be able to retire and maybe do some writing or run motivational courses for people."

Negulescu finds the working environment in Abu Dhabi positive. "I have seen a real tolerance of cultures and religion here," she says. "No one tries to convince you that their way is *the* way. Sure, you are ultimately exploited by your employer but it works both ways; you exploit them to get what you want. So long as there is a balance that you're happy with, the relationship works. In my own small way I will be happy to say I helped to build the country to what it is, but I'm not here to change it."

Some things have changed, though, and for the better. Amanda Banham, a PR director who is English but was brought up in Hong Kong, has been working here for 10 years and recalls that it used to be perfectly normal for a man to refuse to shake her hand.

"It happens less and less now," she says, "but it really used to throw me. Now I understand it. I really like it here because it really is a place where you will get on if you work hard and do your job well. And in terms of the culture, the fact that they respect women means that you get listened to."

Most of the women featured find being a woman in business here much easier than back home in many ways. "In the US I used to be characterised as a pushy girl working in Manhattan," says Karen Attyah, the corporate communications director at Al Qudra Holding, an Abu-Dhabi based strategic investor. "And I had to be. It's always do or die there, you need to prove yourself immediately. Here they evaluate you far more on your experience and what you have to contribute."

Attyah has been in Abu Dhabi for 14 months and in her role at Al Qudra for four months. She is of Lebanese heritage but was brought up in the US. Prior to moving here she spent 12 years in branding in New York.

"The reason we moved is that we knew there were opportunities to grow from a professional point of view. Here you feel you can do something, actually build something," she says. "You get to do things here you don't get to do in any other part of the world. Things are happening so fast, you bring all your experience but you learn pretty quickly that the old rules don't apply."

For more information about the International Business Women's Group, go to www.ibwgabudhabi.org.

Top tips on how to be a successful woman in business in the Middle East

Dr Deborah Aldred: Don't take things personally.

"As women we live our jobs," she says. "We get emotionally involved but the more experience we get the more we learn not to. I have developed strategies to deal with certain aspects of business including not expecting myself to solve an issue immediately."

Adina Negulescu: No regrets.

"Women are specialists at beating themselves up. Stop looking back and thinking you should have done something differently. You took a decision based on the information you had at the time."

Amanda Banham: Follow the dress code.

"Dress well, or rather appropriately, especially for meetings with government representatives. You need to be suited and booted at all times. Some more old-fashioned ones will find trousers offensive so go for a long skirt."

Karen Attyah: Let yourself make mistakes.

"Women don't like to make mistakes. We need to allow ourselves to make mistakes without beating ourselves up about it. Men seem much better at this."

Cynthia Trench: Don't get irritated.

"Of course things here will irritate you and drive you mad, but remember that would be the same anywhere else in the world. It would just be different things that would irritate you."

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