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## Follower Gender and Authentic Leadership: Perspectives from the Middle East

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In the current era, there has been an increasing loss of trust towards leaders in business and political arenas. This loss of trust, in return, has shifted the definition of leader effectiveness. From the societal level to the corporate level around the world, people search for leaders whom they can trust. Such a change in follower expectations consequently has directed researchers to study new leadership approaches that build and nurture follower trust. In previous studies, authentic leadership was found to be associated with follower trust towards leaders (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Authenticity involves having one's actions in line with one's thoughts and feelings (Harter, 2002, p. 382). At the core of authenticity lies the harmony of one's self and behaviour

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(Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). This implies that reflections of one's own life experiences may help an individual to get closer to expressing the genuine self.

According to Gardner et al. (2011) authenticity involves a series of behavioural and cognitive processes that are related with self-development. During these processes, people discover and reach their genuine selves. Kernis (2003) indicated that authenticity is about operating as one's true or core self in daily life. Since authenticity is not an either/or condition, people can be described as being more or less authentic or inauthentic (Erickson, 1995). This gives leaders and followers to have an opportunity for self-development. Accordingly, the importance of self-development as a component of authenticity has been explicitly mentioned by other researchers in the field (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008).

In addition to self-development, several researchers proposed that authentic leaders focus on building followers' strengths and developing associates into leaders themselves (Gardner et al., 2005; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Luthans and Avolio (2003) stated that "the authentic leader does not try to coerce or even rationally persuade associates, but rather the leader's authentic values, beliefs, and behaviours serve to model the development of associates" (p. 243). Likewise, Gardner and associates (2005) stated that "positive modelling is the basic means whereby leaders develop authentic followers" (p. 347).

Most researchers define authentic leaders as being true to themselves and displaying high levels of moral integrity (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). As pointed out by Avolio and Gardner (2005), authentic leaders' moral integrity becomes established when their espoused values align with their behaviours in the course of time and across varying situational challenges.

In addition to the above conceptualizations, Begley (2001) posits that authentic leadership implies "a genuine kind of leadership – a hopeful, open-ended, visionary and creative response to circumstances" (p. 354). In this sense, having a vision which is shared and trusted by the intellects, hearts, and souls of people also becomes important for authentic leadership (Bhindi & Duignan, 1997).

By setting an open and honest communication context, authentic leaders become able to develop honest and genuine connections with their followers (George & Sims, 2007; Walumbwa et al., 2008) which

foster positive relationships (Gardner et al., 2005; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Whitehead, 2009). Through such open and truthful relationships, followers build trust in authentic leaders (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Ilies et al., 2005; Spitzmuller & Ilies, 2010).

In summary, authentic leadership is a process which relates to developing a genuine self and principles through a moral perspective. This genuineness applies to relationships via open and honest communication with followers. A leader's authenticity is set up by knowing both oneself and one's followers, as well as by focusing on the development of both oneself and one's followers. That's why authentic leaders have a propensity for setting up common ground with their followers, usually through the connections to their roots (Goffee & Jones, 2005). Accordingly, authentic leadership is defined as genuine leadership reflecting on vision and values, resulting in greater self-awareness together with fostering positive development (Begley, 2001; Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

Previous research on authentic leadership empirically validated its significant consequences mainly on positive follower responses such as perceived trustworthiness of the leader, identification with the leader, and positive social exchanges in addition to positive work outcomes (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2011). While these research findings reinforce the importance of authentic leadership for today's organizations in all parts of the world, they are much more vital in the Middle East region since in this part of the world trust in leaders within all layers of society is quite low (World Economic Forum, 2016). The Global Competitiveness Report 2016–2017 by the World Economic Forum (2016) explicitly stated that for economic competitiveness of the Middle East, there is a critical need for reforms that aim to strengthen the private sector: promoting competition, reducing red tape, and making labour markets more flexible (p. 23). The starting point for these reforms should be successful transformation of organizations which requires leaders who can successfully execute these transformation processes by generating positive outcomes and building trust (Zahra, 2011).

A leader's action is perceived as genuine provided there is relational authenticity, i.e., two-sided authenticity wherein both a leader's action and the identification of it by followers mutually constitute authenticity (Eagly, 2005). Therefore, investigating leader authenticity requires

understanding the different viewpoints and expectations of followers. Similarly, Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten (2014) suggested that the follower–leader relationship is socially constructed as result of cognitive and attributional complexities, as well as the social identity of followers. With a parallel perspective, in the current study we analysed the follower aspect with respect to a leadership construction.

Although studies on authentic leadership need to be grounded in a well-developed follower ontology due to its relational aspect, previous research has largely overlooked follower characteristics, and especially ignored the possibility of variations in the perception of leadership resulting from individual cognitive processes. Some of the studies on implicit leadership theories pointed out that, over and above societal culture, a subordinate's self-concept represents a cognitive constraint in leader categorization processes (Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001). Gender identity, by being one of the most influential layers of self-identity, is likely to shape individual perceptions, evaluations, and behaviours (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987).

In the current study, we claim that followers' self-concepts have significant impact on the cognizance of authentic leadership by shaping followers' perspectives through their expectations which are rooted in their gender identities. Accordingly, the aim of the study is to explore how perceptions of female and male followers differ regarding their emphasis on different attributes of authentic leadership. By adopting a qualitative methodology, the data of the study was collected during the 2009–2016 time period by conducting in-depth interviews with 105 male and female employees in 10 Middle East countries, namely; Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria,<sup>1</sup> Turkey; and the United Arab Emirates.

The main contributions of the current study derive both from its data being collected from the Middle East region, and also its particular focus for integrating both female and male perspectives in perceptions of authentic leadership. The Middle East region is the least researched area in leadership studies, and has relatively higher gender inequality in terms of societal cultural norms compared to the other parts of the world (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002). Therefore, the Middle East region, distinctively, constitutes an interesting area to analyse gender-based differences in perceptions of leadership.

## The Cultural Context of the Middle East

Previous research showed that the countries included in the current study, i.e., Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates share some similar societal cultural values like high power distance and low individualism (Hofstede, 2001). High power distance practices are characterized by a hierarchical decision making mechanism, and inequality in the distribution of resources as well as decision power. Kabasakal and Bodur (2002) showed that societies in the GLOBE's Middle Eastern Cluster, are highly in-group oriented and hierarchical. The established in-group collectivist cultural aspects of the region merge with high worth attached to family members. As the head of the family, the father figure is usually the most respected and he stands at the top of the hierarchy (Kagitçibasi, 1994). Middle Eastern societies have relatively low levels of gender egalitarianism as a societal cultural norm (Barakat, 1993; Kabasakal, Dastmalchian, Karacay, & Bayraktar, 2012; Moghadam, 1993) leading them to be labelled as masculine societies which are not willing to reduce the differences in societal roles and status of women and men. These societal norms have roots in the common historical, religious, and socio-cultural characteristics of the countries in the region (Barakat, 1993; Bill & Leiden, 1979; Kabasakal et al., 2012). Islam, by being the prevailing religion in the Middle East, creates a shared culture that provides guidance, rules, and common values about personal lives, community relations, and ways of doing business (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002; Zahra, 2011).

In addition to the above mentioned societal cultural norms, the Middle Eastern countries are identified by their unique public and economic problems, including unemployment among the youth, underutilization of educated people, and gender imbalance in the workforce with very small numbers of working women, which derives from the traditions that give men higher status and power over women in public and professional lives. Further, several Arab countries face problems of corruption control, accountability, and transparency of government services (World Economic Forum, 2013). Managing and overcoming these problems in an effective and peaceful way may require these societies to build trust and confidence toward leaders. The importance of authentic leadership for the Middle East region derives especially from its effect on follower responses of feeling trust and identification with leaders. These are activated by accepting the leader's internalized

ethical and moral perspectives as genuine (Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck, & Avolio, 2010). For that reason, understanding perceptions of authentic leadership in this part of the world is important. In view of this context, this study explores the differences in female and male followers' perceptions of authentic leadership in the Middle Eastern context.

## **Authentic Leadership Perspectives in the Middle East**

Societal culture, by its definition, i.e. “shared motives, values, beliefs, identities; and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of communities, and are transmitted across age generations” (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004, p. 15) provides guidelines for categorizing and understanding individual viewpoints by referring to norms of larger groups. Within this framework, we expect that the depth of the meaning attributed to authentic leadership is linked to the common understanding and interpretation of “what constitutes authenticity” in the Middle East area.

A few studies have assessed authentic leadership and its influence in the Middle East (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2013; Ertenu, Karacay, Asarkaya, & Kabasakal, 2011; Özkan & Ceylan, 2012; Senam, Rashid, Sarkawi, & Zaini, 2014; Tabak, Polat, Cosar, & Turkoz, 2013). Among them, the study of Ertenu and colleagues showed that attributes of authentic leadership are expected to be manifested not only by etic factors, but also by some emic elements which are directly linked with the collectivist cultural norms of the region.

## **Followers' Gender Identity in Cognizance of Authentic Leadership**

Self-concept is important because it is central to an individual's perceptions, evaluations, and behaviours (Geertz, 1975; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Self is accepted as a reflexive concept since it can be categorized, classified, or named in specific ways in relation to social

groups or categorizations (Stets & Burke, 2000). Through such a process of *self-categorization* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and/or *identification* (Burke, 1980), individual identities are formed (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Individuals have multiple identities through which they operationalize different impressions of themselves within different social situations (Tajfel, 1981). Accordingly, individuals are likely to put emphasis on one identity over the other in different social circumstances. Stryker and Serpe (1982) asserted that the more committed an individual is to an identity, the more activated (salient) an identity becomes in a given situation. Yet, one's gender provides an implicit background identity (Ridgeway, 1997, p. 231) such that interactions between the gender identity and other identities are often based on internalized beliefs about one's gender and appropriate behaviour for that gender (Stets & Burke, 1996). Consequently, these interactions sustain the gender system as a whole by maintaining the stability of human behaviour that is gendered (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). Previous research has indicated statistically that throughout human life, gender becomes one of the most important sources of one's identity as it bears on individual's perceptions, evaluations, and behaviours (Brewer & Lui, 1989).

Socio-cultural norms function as root forces that shape individual's identity, including gender identity, by defining socially expected gender roles (Shweder & Bourne, 1984). According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), societal level cultural division of individualism-collectivism can also be found in one's self-identification. Based on the findings of the study by Markus and Kitayama, Cross and Madson (1997) conducted research to investigate the reflections of self-construal within gender groups by arguing that females and males differ in the ways they view themselves, and their self-construal provides the fundamental basis for regulating and influencing their behaviours. More specifically, Cross and Madson (1997) suggested that men tend to be more independent, while women tend to be more interdependent; and such differences are reflected as gender differences in their affect, motivation, and cognition.

The main reason for men and women to have divergent self-construal, that is men being more independent while women are more interdependent, drives back to their different socialization experiences (Eagly, 1987; Maccoby, 1990). Individuals initially learn about acceptable behaviours

linked to gender roles from their primary groups who are closest to them during initial socializations (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). On this subject, Chodorow's (1978) model of gender differences in the development of identity pioneered extant research by claiming that while girls continue to define themselves within the context of their initial socialization with their mothers, boys feel the need to separate themselves in order to develop as males. Men's identity formation, then, results in independence and detachment, while women's identity formation results in interdependence and attachment. Accordingly, women and men develop different ways of knowing compared with each other (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Likewise, developmental theories draw attention to the differences in primary and secondary socialization experiences of boys and girls that lead to separate identity formations.

These primary and secondary socialization experiences also shape one's moral identity which represents an individual's self-conception organized around a set of moral traits (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral identity reflects the organization of self-related information brought together according to the principles of moral consistency; therefore, moral identity functions as a distinct mental image of how a moral person is prone to think, feel, and behave (Kihlstrom & Klein, 1994). As a result, it becomes part of the self-definition. Gilligan (1982) highlighted the association between the definition of self and one's morality development; and pointed to the differences in the ways males and females define themselves which are reflected in their approaches while resolving dilemmas involving others. Gilligan (1987) based her assertions on the identification theory, that is, identity formation of women being rooted in relatedness, whereas identities of men are rooted in autonomy; and argued that these different self-identification patterns are reflected in the moral orientations of men versus women. Women's moral action derives from care, responsibility, intimacy, and relationships (i.e., *ethics of care*), while men's moral action depends on the capacity to be an autonomous, objective and impartial agent in making verifiable and reliable decisions based on universal rules and principles (i.e., *ethics of justice*).

Given that leadership is socially constructed among leaders and followers by cognitive and attributional complexities (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), cognizance of a leader's authenticity necessitates relational authenticity, i.e., a



mutual existence of leader's authenticity, and its identification by followers (Eagly, 2005). For that reason, investigating authentic leadership requires understanding different viewpoints and expectations of followers. In the current study, we analysed a conception of leadership from the follower perspective by focusing particularly on followers' gender.

In reference to identity theories, we proposed that male and female followers would have differences in their perceptions about authentic leadership in accordance with their gender identities which are believed to shape their expectations about relationships (Brewer & Lui, 1989; Ridgeway, 1997; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). Particularly, we expected that female followers would focus more on leader's interdependence, while male followers would concentrate more on leader's independence. We also claim that such differences in gender-based expectations are likely to be much more evident in the Middle East context due to the prevalent societal cultural norm of high gender inequality, which nurtures gender roles being polarized among men and women.

## Methodology

As an exploratory study, qualitative research methodology was applied by conducting in-depth interviews with 105 participants from 10 Middle Eastern countries. Qualitative data collection was made via face-to-face interviews (85), and if necessary Skype and email communication (20). The researchers conducted interviews with the participants, mainly in the English language, without making deliberate effort to have matching genders. The sample consisted of employees with professional careers as well as self-employed entrepreneurs working in various sectors; 43 of which were from Turkey, 16 from Iran, 12 from Lebanon, 9 from Saudi Arabia, 8 from Egypt, 7 from Jordan, 4 from Syria,<sup>2</sup> 3 from United Arab Emirates, 2 from Iraq; and 1 from Morocco. While 42.9% of total participants were female, with an average age of 35 years and 13 years of work experience, 57.1% of them were male, with an average age of 38 years and 15 years of work experience. The composition of the research sample is consistent with the general demographic structure of the Middle East region where there is a male dominance within business life.

Each in-depth interview was started with an open-ended question, through which the participants were asked to make comments on the traits of leaders whom they would define to be “genuine or true.” Followed by this opening question, the participants were directed to elaborate on the criteria for being a “genuine/true leader.” Whenever the term “authentic” was explicitly mentioned by the participants, the researcher asked for a specific definition of authentic leadership as well as their personal expectations from an authentic leader. While asking about their perceptions of authentic leaders, the participants acknowledged that the gender of the leader was an irrelevant issue; that is to say, an authentic leader’s gender can be either male or female. In the last part of the interview, the participants were questioned for their related feelings and reactions towards authentic leaders.

Each of these interviews was recorded and then redacted in order to be content-analysed. From the redaction of 105 interviews, totalling 954 narratives, each of them representing at least one idea articulated within one or more phrases, were documented. Then, the researchers progressively categorized the documented narratives.

As a first step, the researchers went over the 954 narratives, and identified 67 separate descriptions of concepts about authentic leadership that were either existing in the authentic leadership literature or new depictions of authentic leadership given for the first time in these narratives. In this procedure, each separate idea was assigned to only one description. In a later stage, the researchers agreed by consensus on categorization of these 67 items into nine attributes of authentic leadership which are mutually exclusive and jointly bring a holistic construction of authentic leadership. All verbatim quotes were classified under these nine categories, and also matched to the gender of the respondents in order to exhibit the gender distribution of these items. As a final step, verbatim quotes under nine categories were linked with the main conceptualizations of authentic leadership. The final four categories that emerged from the data matched with key aspects of authentic leadership that was mentioned in the existing literature.

In order to check the reliability of the results of the content analysis, the inter-judge reliability method was used. For that purpose, two judges independently re-coded all 954 reported narratives according to the com-

monly agreed nine authentic leadership attributes. Consistency between the assessments of the judges was checked, and compared with that of the researchers. Cases of disagreement were discussed among judges and, if possible, consensus was reached. For the few cases of disagreement where consensus could not be obtained, the related items were dropped from the final analyses. The inter-judge reliability score was calculated by Krippendorff's alpha, which is used as the standard reliability measure in content analysis (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Found at 85%, the inter-judge reliability is shown to be at acceptable levels (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 242).

## Findings

In reference to the development theories and gender identity theory, the main assertion of the study was that perceptions and expectations about authentic leadership would vary based on follower gender. While male followers would expect authentic leaders primarily to be autonomous and independent by presenting a solid standing that verifies their uniqueness, female followers would prefer authentic leaders to show nurturance and care by being interdependent. This proposition would be particularly valid for authentic leadership rather than for generic leadership due to the fact that authenticity is about knowing and developing oneself, and behaving in accordance with thoughts and beliefs that define the true self (Harter, 2002), and therefore linked to self-identity. For this reason, authentic leadership was expected to be strongly linked with gender identity, which derives from self-identity.

In order to explore whether perceptions and expectations about authentic leadership vary based on follower gender, the narratives derived from the interviews were content-analysed, and by means of a progressive grouping, nine attributes that jointly relate to the different aspects of authentic leadership were identified. These nine attributes were further merged under four dimensions, which are linked with the main conceptualizations of authentic leadership mentioned in the existing literature. The nine categories as well as the related four main dimensions of authentic leadership derived from these analyses are found to be as follows:

**Development of self and others:**

- Being autonomous, unique, and decisive
- Mentoring, coaching and counselling followers
- Being aware of weaknesses and strengths

**Moral perspective in terms of ethics of justice and care:**

- Fairness and integrity
- Caring and empathy for needs of others
- Prioritization of collective interest and team welfare

**Openness in outgoing and incoming communication:**

- Open, honest and trustworthy communication
- Listening and understanding others' points of view

**Visionary and equipped:**

- Being competent, visionary, and equipped in business life by seeing the bigger picture

Table 2.1 summarizes the findings of the content analysis regarding authentic leadership attributes classified under nine categories by providing a comparative distribution based on the gender of respondents. The frequency level of each attribute was calculated as a percentage of total narratives of female (370 narratives), and total narratives of male respondents (584 narratives). The overall findings of the study shown in Table 2.1 indicated that although female and male respondents share some common convictions about the attributes necessary to acknowledge a leader as authentic, there were some key differences both in the strength as well as in the scope of some attributes expected from authentic leaders by female versus male respondents.

Exhibited in Table 2.1, both female and male respondents expected authentic leaders to show attributes related with development, moral integrity, open communication, and vision. These findings support the assertions of the previous research that conceptualises authentic leadership as a process which relates to developing a genuine self and principles through a moral perspective and reflecting this genuineness in their open

**Table 2.1** Authentic leadership attributes mentioned by female and male followers

Expected attributes from authentic leaders	Female respondents	Male respondents
Development (self & others)	Frequency level	Frequency level
Being autonomous, unique, and decisive ("to be oneself")	< 1%	31.3%
Mentoring, coaching, and counselling followers	19.7%	< 1%
Being aware of weaknesses and strengths	1.8%	7.2%
Moral perspective (ethics of justice & ethics of care)	Frequency level	Frequency level
Fairness and integrity	13.5%	22.9%
Caring and empathy for needs of others	15.2%	< 1%
Prioritization of collective interest and team welfare	17.5%	< 1%
Openness in communication (outgoing & incoming)	Frequency level	Frequency level
Open, honest and trustworthy communication	12.1%	20.5%
Listening and understanding others' points of views	9.9%	8.4%
Visionary and equipped	Frequency level	Frequency level
Being competent, visionary, and equipped in business life by seeing the bigger picture	10.3%	9.6%

and honest communication with followers (George & Sims, 2007; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Existing literature indicates that a leader's authenticity is shaped by knowing both oneself and one's followers, as well as self-development and contributing to the development of others (Gardner et al., 2005; Goffee & Jones, 2005; Ilies et al., 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Moreover, setting a vision by reflecting on values which are shared and trusted by the intellects, hearts and souls of people becomes important for authentic leadership (Bhindi & Duignan, 1997). Consequently, authentic leaders' truthful relationships foster follower trust in them (Goldman & Kernis, 2002; Ilies et al., 2005; Spitzmuller, & Ilies, 2010; Whitehead, 2009).

The comparative findings below show the expectations of female versus male respondents from authentic leaders: while male and female respondents exhibited some common convictions about authentic leaders, they also had major differences in their expectations of authentic leaders.

## Development (Self and Others)

In relation to the “development” dimension of authentic leadership, while female respondents primarily expect authentic leaders to mentor, coach and counsel followers so as to bring the best out of each employee (19.7%), male respondents rarely mentioned this aspect (< 1%). As an example of this attribute, a female participant stated:

Authentic leaders should genuinely be interested in others – their career goals, professional development, personal issues etc.; and should not just do “tick box exercise” or go through the motions of pretending to care.  
(Anonymous participant)

In contrast, male respondents gave a significantly higher importance to being unique, autonomous and decisive, in developing the true self (31.3%), and awareness of strengths and weaknesses (7.2%), whereas these aspects of authentic leadership were quite insignificant for women (< 1% and 1.8%, respectively) in explaining their perceptions of authentic leadership. With the highest frequency, men stated that in order to accept a leader as being authentic, they expect that leader to have a solid depiction of “being oneself”; that is in general explained as, “having a solid, autonomous and inspirational standing; which becomes factual by the actions, decisions, and speeches of the authentic leader; all reflecting his/her personal principles rooted in objective criteria.” Some examples for male participants’ narratives regarding development of the true self are as follows:

Talks the talk and walks the walk, acts what he/she preaches.

An authentic leader can be different than others, be unique without being afraid of criticism.

I expect an authentic leader to recognize his/her own mistakes.

The findings reported in Table 2.1 show that female respondents give higher importance to development of followers and associates by coaching and counselling, in line with their interdependent self-construal. On the other hand, male respondents focused more on developing a genuine self by being autonomous and being aware of their strengths and weaknesses.

## Moral Perspective (Ethics of Care and Ethics of Justice)

In terms of the moral aspect of authentic leadership, women mentioned prioritization of the collective interest and paying attention to cooperation within the work environment (17.5%) and caring and having empathy for the needs of others (15.2%) as important aspects of authentic leadership. On the other hand, men did not mention these attributes at a significant level ( $< 1\%$  for both items), while they focused on fairness and integrity more frequently (22.9%) compared to women (13.5%). The fact that women concentrated on care, sensitivity to needs of others, and prioritization of collective welfare is in line with the female identity that has been shown by previous researchers to be connected to *ethics of care* (Gilligan, 1987). Some examples for female participants' narratives regarding ethics of care are as follows:

I expect authentic leaders to take ownership for their teams, boost them and take the best out of them, authentic leaders should definitely be a peoples' person.

S/he needs to be understanding, empathetic, always supportive, and have attention to detail and to what matters to me; s/he needs to be willing to fight for me and for her/his team, and go the extra mile for us.

In contrast to women, men highly emphasized fairness and integrity which is in line with making verifiable and reliable decisions based on universal rules and principles, indicating that male identity is more closely associated with *ethics of justice* (Kohlberg, 1969). For instance; a male participant stated: "I expect an authentic leader to be driven by principles – he/she must stick to what are his/her core values."

Women also mentioned importance of principles and justice as a component of authentic leaders at a relatively lower frequency. These findings suggest that while both men and women expect to see fairness and principles in the actions and decisions of authentic leaders, women in addition focus on the care and nurturance aspect of morality to a great extent indicating the importance of relationships and interdependence in their moral understanding.

## Openness in Communication (Outgoing and Incoming)

Both men and women indicated that openness in communication was an important aspect of authentic leadership. They mentioned a two-way openness in communication, indicating that they expect authentic leaders to be honest by providing correct information as well as being keen to listen and understand diverse points of view. Both women and men seemed to agree on the importance of listening and understanding others' points of view (9.9% and 8.4%, respectively). Respondents made the following comments:

Have an open-door policy in terms of being open to communication from employees. Be open to ideas, concerns and criticisms. (Male respondent)

Should be willing to listen to team members and take their discussions into consideration. (Female respondent)

On the other hand, men to a greater extent than women seemed to emphasize the openness and trustworthiness of authentic leaders in communicating with others (20.5% vs. 12.1%). For instance, a man said: "Authentic leaders should avoid high secrecy and failing to deliver on promises."

## Visionary and Equipped

Both female and male respondents indicated the importance of authentic leaders to set a vision which is built on solid knowledge, accumulated experience, and business acumen. They mentioned the significance of competence and ambition in individual business profession by seeing the bigger picture rather than focusing on small issues (10.3% for women, and 9.6% for men). Some examples of female and male participants' narratives are as follows:

Authentic leaders need to understand their business well so they're credible and deliver what they say they'll do. Set a vision and a plan for the business so we know the goal. (Male respondent)



For me, authenticity is a vibe/ feeling you get from a person that is very difficult to verbalize or quantify, but some associated attributes include: being competent and knowledgeable – has to feel credible and be not an imposter who is pretending to know what he/she is talking about or only in a leadership position due to the position in the hierarchy. (Female respondent)

In addition to the attributes of authentic leadership derived from expectations of female versus male respondents, respondents also indicated their attitudes and feelings towards authentic leaders. While telling their stories, all respondents, both men and women, indicated that they respect and trust authentic leaders. Authentic leadership initiates followers' admiration and respect, through which followers become much more motivated to trust leaders who satisfy followers' core expectations of having genuine qualities. Some examples of female and male participants' quotes from the interviews are as follows:

I would respect the authentic leader and potentially aspire to become like him/her one day. (Female respondent)

I would feel trust, respect and honour. (Male respondent)

To sum up, regarding followers' cognizance of authentic leadership, the findings of the current study showed that followers' own gender plays a role in shaping some perceptions and evaluations of authenticity. The results clarified that female respondents, by their more communal point of view as well as their tendency for having interdependent self-construal, more frequently expected authentic leaders to have a relational perspective by deliberately focusing on the development of followers through coaching and mentoring them, prioritizing collective interests and caring, and having empathy for followers' needs. On the other hand, according to male participants, the self-development of an authentic leader would be more evident in "being one's-self," which indeed points to leader's independence and a higher emphasis on fairness and integrity in conduct. Integration of the expectations of female and male respondents points to an important fact that although male and female expectations may differ in some points, it is necessary that authentic leaders fill expectations of both male and female followers.

## Concluding Remarks

The current study showed that authentic leadership is an important concept for the Middle East region, since the sample population perceived that authenticity brings a morality perspective to leaders' conduct. Accordingly, they mentioned that in this part of the world authenticity is highly respected, and people of this region trust leaders whom they find to be authentic. Previous research on authentic leadership validated the significant consequences of authentic leadership in the western part of the world by showing that authenticity increases perceived trustworthiness of the leader and identification with the leader (Avolio et al., 2004; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al. 2008). The findings of the current study showed similar results for the outcomes of authentic leadership for today's organizations in the Middle East. Since trust is relatively lower in this region (World Economic Forum, 2016), authenticity on the part of leaders is a highly valued quality for building trust and solving problems in a peaceful and effective way.

The interviews conducted with followers from the Middle East region show that they have many common convictions about authentic leaders. They addressed a holistic construction of authentic leadership by focusing on diverse and mutually exclusive aspects of authentic leadership. In this regard, interviewees indicated their expectations of development, moral perspective, open communication, and providing vision derived from experience. On the other hand, in line with the main assertion of our study, there are also some significant differences between perceptions and expectations of men and women about authentic leaders. We based our proposition on the idea that the follower–leader relationship is socially constructed through cognitive and attributional complexities as well as social identity processes of followers (Eagly, 1987, 2005; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Signifying the validity of this assertion, the findings of the current study make an initial and focused contribution to authentic leadership literature, explicitly by showing that identity formation on the basis of gender identity can have influential effects on the expectations and perceptions of male and female followers concerning authentic leaders. In other words, in the cognizance of authentic leadership, followers' own gender identities shape their related perceptions regarding authenticity.

The findings of the study show that expectations of women and men regarding authentic leaders may differ in terms of importance and strength of different attributes. While women indicated mentoring, coaching and counselling of followers as the most important aspects of authentic leadership, none of the male respondents talked about these attributes as expectations from authentic leaders. However, men predominantly mentioned the importance of being oneself, i.e., having a unique, autonomous and independent standing driven by personal and objective principles. On the other hand, independence and uniqueness were not mentioned by female respondents as a required aspect of authenticity in any of their stories. The general theme in the stories of women consisted of interdependent and communal aspects of authentic leadership, whereas the stories of men had a general emphasis on being independent. This major difference in the expectations of respondents based on their gender identities suggests that women respondents gave more importance to the *nurturing* aspect of authentic leadership, while male respondents suggested the importance of *being one's true self* as a part of authentic identity.

Middle Eastern societies are characterized by high power distance and low gender egalitarianism practices (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002; Kabasakal et al., 2012). In line with the hierarchical nature of society, organizations are highly centralized and have very powerful organizational and political leaders. The high power distance practices lead to authoritarian decision making practices, which detach the leaders and managers from the input of employees (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002). In describing their expectations, respondents in the current study indicated a desire to have authentic leaders who listen and take into consideration different viewpoints. This finding suggests a willingness to voice their viewpoints and be heard by the leaders. Thus, open communication, listening, and understanding employee viewpoints should be considered as a tool to balance the high power distance practices prevalent in this region.

Due to the highly masculine culture of the Middle Eastern region, there are some differences between gender roles and status of men and women, and a great gender imbalance in the workforce with very small numbers of working women in both public and private sectors. Indeed, increasing employment levels of women in the workforce would be significantly beneficial for the economic prosperity of the region

(World Economic Forum, 2015). Total number of women in the workforce is relatively limited in this region, thus meeting expectations of women workers might be particularly important for organizational leaders to support their presence in the work environment by coaching and mentoring them.

Although the findings of the study represent a general view regarding the expectations of the followers within the Middle East region, a limitation of the study is that there might be differences among the Middle East countries that could not be reflected in the current study. By extending the scope of the sample representation, a more rigorous depiction may be possible.

The current study showed that gender identity, by being one of the most dominant aspects of self-identity, shaped individual perceptions and expectations regarding authentic leadership via bringing a cognitive restraint and disparity in leader categorization processes (Lord et al., 2001). More qualitative and empirical research investigating authentic leadership from a follower perspective is needed to better understand the intricate and complex dimensions of follower–leader relationships in different parts of the world, especially in regions like the Middle East where research on leadership is scarce (Zahra, 2011). Future research on authentic leadership needs to consider and integrate other characteristics of followers. In addition to gender, the attributes of age, education, and social background of followers might impact the cognitive and attributional complexities as well as social identity processes of followers. Additionally, the gender of the leader can be also integrated as a variable in future research.

## Notes

1. From Syria, the last data collection was in 2010.
2. The interviews continued to be conducted up until 2016 with the respondents from the nine Middle East countries, except Syria, from where the last data collection was in 2010.

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