



Exploring the challenges and perceptions of Al Rustaq College of Applied Sciences students towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector



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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to identify the perceptions of Al Rustaq College of Applied Sciences (RCAS) students towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector and the challenges women may face. The main data collection method involved the distribution of a self-completion questionnaire ($n = 290$) to both male and female students. The study concluded that students' perceptions towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector were quite positive. The study revealed that female students' perceptions regarding the ability of Omani women to work in the tourism sector without prejudice to the traditions and customs of the Omani conservative society were more positive than their male counterparts. The study also detected that "the negative perceptions of the tourism sector jobs" as well as the need to work "night shifts" were the most important challenges preventing female students from choosing work in the tourism sector after their graduation from the college.

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1. Background of the research

Tourism is one of the largest and fastest growing service industries in the world. In both emerging countries (like Oman) and developed countries, the tourism industry is sponsored by governments as it is a means of earning foreign exchange earnings, increasing the standard of living and the creation of direct and indirect employment (UNWTO and UN Women, 2011). According to The World Travel and Tourism Council (2016a, b), the travel and tourism industries generated 9.8% of world GDP (US\$7.2 trillion) and creating 284 million jobs (1 in 11 jobs) to the global economy in 2015.

Certainly tourism is becoming an increasingly important industry for Oman. Oman has a significant number of natural, cultural, and heritage assets, including a high number of UNESCO-classified World Heritage Sites. These include Albaleed, site of the ancient city of Zafar; Bat, with its tombs dating back 3000 years; the Bahla Fort; and, Ras Alhadd, home to the rare green turtle (Abdul-Ghani, 2006). In order to reduce dependency on the oil and gas industries (which constitutes about 44% and 3.6% of the total budget revenue respectively), the tourism sector has been given a priority by the Omani government in its development policy ("New plan to cut Oman's dependence on oil revenues", 2016).

According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the contribution of the Oman's tourism sector to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 2.2% in 2015 and it is expected to reach 6% by 2040.

More specifically, in 2015, the number of inbound tourists visiting Oman from around the world was 2.1 million with total tourism expenditure totalling US\$ 652 million (National Centre for Statistics & Information (NCSI), 2016). Regarding employment, the total contribution of travel and tourism to employment, including jobs indirectly supported by the industry, was 5.7% of total employment (111,500 jobs) in 2015. This is expected to reach 4.4% in 2016 to 116,500 jobs and rise by 3.5% per year to 164,000 jobs in 2026 (7.9% of total) (The World Travel and Tourism Council, 2016a, b). According to the NCSI, in 2014 the number of employees in hotels stood at 10,763, with Omani people constituting around 31.4% of total employees in hotels. Likewise, there are 7690 workers in the country's airline companies, of which 59% are Omanis. In addition 1596 employees are working in travel agencies, 47% of whom are Omanis. Restaurants offer jobs to 1585 of whom 38% are Omanis (Haque, 2010). However, despite the rapid growth of the tourism industry in Oman, Omani women represent only 26% of the total workforce in Oman's tourism industry, whilst they represent almost half (49.4%) of Omani citizens (2.3 million) ("International Women's Day", 2015). In this context, according to the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Tourism, creation of job opportunities for Omani women in the tourism sector is the ministry's vision and mission ("Tourism sector in Oman needs more women leaders", 2016). The tourism sector is thus thought to offer important employment opportunities for Omani women and so contribute to their independence and empowerment. However, there are real challenges facing their empowerment in the tourism sector, which must be discussed transparently with all stakeholders. Hence, the current study represents a stage in a process as the country moves to a better understanding of the

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challenges and perceptions of women's empowerment, specifically of Omani women, and more generally, of Muslim women.

UNWTO and UN Women argued that women's empowerment in tourism can have a significant influence on poverty reduction in developing countries. In this context, *Bolles (1997)*, *Ghodsee (2003)*, and *Afifi and Al-Sherif (2014)* concluded that empowering women in the tourism sector will help to reverse rural poverty and further economic growth, therefore, improving women's economic status. Furthermore, *Chant (1997)* argued that working in the tourism sector can increase the visibility and public recognition of women within their societies. Nevertheless, in many Muslim countries, including Oman, cultural and religious expectations have led to low rates of workforce participation in the tourism sector among Muslim women (*Al Mazro'ei, 2010*). In this context, *Al-Zedjali (2009)* in her study on challenges to women's empowerment in Oman, found that culture is the main obstacle for Omani women to work in all sectors since some segments of the population still hold negative perceptions towards working women.

As Oman struggles to empower Omani women in the tourism sector, it becomes essential to identify the challenges to their empowerment in the tourism sector and the perceptions that can make a difference to their status and opportunities within the industry (*Baum, 2013; Afifi and Al-Sherif, 2014*). However, very little is known about challenges preventing Omani women from working in the tourism sector as well as the perceptions of Omani people towards female empowerment in the tourism sector. Furthermore, these critical issues in developing countries and Islamic culture have received scant attention from researchers (*Al Mazro'ei, 2010; Afifi and Al-Sherif, 2014; Dumbrăveanu, Light, Young, and Chapman, 2016*). Therefore, any attempt to examine these issues may contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of issues on employment of Muslim women in the tourism industry in general and perceptions of Muslim people towards female empowerment in the tourism sector and the challenges facing them in that industry. To be more specific, this study sought to examine the most important challenges preventing female students from choosing work in the tourism sector as well as identifying the perceptions of students studying at the Rustaq College of Applied Sciences (RCAS) towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector. In this context, *Alananzeh (2014)* argued that in order to explore the main reasons behind the challenges and difficulties that face Muslim women in the tourism sector, it is vital to examine undergraduate students who are the labor force of today and the future in any country.

2. Methodology

The current study used an exploratory quantitative method. This method is used because it enables researchers to gain close and new knowledge with economically resendable cost (*Ahmadi, 2016*). The collected data are quantitatively analyzed using the statistical software package, SPSS (version 24). Descriptive analysis was performed for all survey items to report means and standard deviations for the challenges and perceptions of (RCAS) students towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector, and to rank them in terms of their importance. Furthermore, an independent samples *t*-test and a one-way ANOVA were used to explore the influence of socio-demographic variables (gender, major and year of study) on students' perceptions towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector.

A self-completion, closed-ended survey questionnaire was developed and distributed to collect data regarding the challenges and perceptions of RCAS students towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector. In this context, *Jennings (2001)* argued that self-completion questionnaire method is widely used to obtain tourism data. The questionnaire was developed through a review of related literature focusing on perceptions towards women's empowerment in the tourism sector (e.g., *Schwarz and Bohner, 2001; Haven, 2002; Karas and Ferencová, 2010; Al Mazro'ei, 2010; Alhammad, 2012; Baum,*

2013; Afifi and Al-Sherif, 2014; Alananzeh, 2014; Al-Zou'bi and Al-Kharouf, 2015; Dumbrăveanu et al., 2016).

The questionnaire included three main sections. In the first section, students were asked to identify their socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender, major, and year of study. The second part of the questionnaire was designed to identify students' perceptions towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector. The students were asked to express their level of agreement with each of the 20 statements which addressed perceptions towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector on a five-point Likert-style scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). On this scale, a high score represents a positive perception, whilst a low score indicates a negative perception towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector. However, for those items negatively set in this study, low scores represent positive perception when interpreted reversely. The last part of the questionnaire includes question about the challenges preventing female students from choosing work in the tourism sector after their graduation from the college.

The pilot test was randomly conducted with 35 male and female students who are studying at (RCAS) to obtain feedback on the clarity and appropriateness of questions seeking perceptions towards Omani women's empowerment in the tourism sector. Based on the pilot test analyses, some adjustments were made to enhance students' understanding of the questionnaire's questions.

The current study has adopted certain procedures to ensure the suitability of the distribution and the collection procedure for the questionnaires. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of RCAS, Oman. Students were randomly selected from the RCAS. The researcher explained them the nature and purpose of study and how to fill the questionnaire. Students were aware that their participation in the questionnaire was voluntary and returning of the questionnaire was considered as consent. Questionnaires were distributed and collected during the month of March 2016.

That students from RCAS were selected was primarily determined by the ease and convenience of access to this population. The College at Rustaq is administered under the Omani Ministry of Higher Education and offers four-year degrees in Business Administration (dependent on entry qualifications) that includes majors in both tourism and hospitality management. These majors are studied in the third and fourth year of the degree after preliminary studies of management disciplines in the first two years of study. The college is one of the major sources of graduates for the industry in Oman.

3. Results

3.1. Sociodemographic profile of respondents

Out of the 340 questionnaires distributed, 320 questionnaires were returned but only 290 questionnaires proved valid for analysis. Based on the results, there were 32 males (11%) and 258 females (89%). This is a representative sample, because 88% of RCAS students are females. As to their programme of study (major), 149 students (66.9%) were students of International Business Administration (IBA), 54 (18.6%) were Education students and 42 (14.5%) were Information Technology (IT) students. In terms of the students' year of study, third year students comprised 31.4% of the total sample, 22.1% were fourth year, 21% were fifth years, 15.5% were second year and 10% were first year. *Table 1* shows the demographic profile of respondents.

3.2. Reliability and adequacy of the construct

To ensure that the data are statistically appropriate for further analysis, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient test was employed. Reliability refers to the ability of the research instrument to yield the same or stable results each time it is run (*Gatewood & Field, 1994*). Cronbach's alpha coefficient is widely used as a measure of the internal consistency

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