

## Sahar – Story

Sahar is 37 years old and was born and brought up in Dubai and is a UAE national. Her mother is English and her father is originally from Bahrain. She is married to an Emirati. She speaks English and Arabic fluently and little bit of Farsi and “a tiny miny little bit of French”

### Family

Her father ran his own scrap aluminium business and her mother was a housewife but “I think she had a lot to do with the way, how could I say, I mean she tried to teach me the importance of independence” Her mother taught her that she should always be able to rely on herself “[you]should always be able to rely on yourself even if you get married...very happily married, have a husband, family and children, everything’s OK, you just never know what's going to happen”.

She has two older brothers and a half-sister, who lives in Bahrain. From her mother’s side of the family there are no remaining relatives as her mother was an only child and Shren’s maternal grandmother passed away at the age of 80. On her father’s side of the family, she has a few cousins in Dubai, but the majority of the family is in Bahrain.

Sahar has two daughters. She had her first daughter when she was 19.

### Education

Sahar attended high school in the in Mamzar area of Dubai at the \* Private School. It started as a small school in a villa in Dubai and was attended mainly by children of mixed marriages; in the main children of European mothers and local fathers. They were taught in English and Arabic. “it was for people in Dubai that were from...like kids that were from mix marriages, so like German mom local father...English mom local dad...you know like European and Arab. So what they used to teach you in English they would teach you in Arabic”. In high school she considers that she was a reasonable student, who was never top of the class but never failed a subject “I was always in between... I was never a book worm or, you know, really focused that much on studying or have to get straight A's. So long as I got like B or a C, I was more than happy with that. I used to like to enjoy myself also so it was never like study, study, study. It was like a bit of both for me”. It eventually became an American curriculum school but “out of all the schools in Dubai it was the only one that was like equal. Whatever they taught you in English they taught you in Arabic. And in my time it was the same even with Maths. I used to take Algebra in English and algebra in Arabic...chemistry in English chemistry in Arabic” She graduated from there and then got married at the age of 16. Sometime later she did a TESOL teacher training course at the British Council in Dubai.

### Growing up

In her early life outside school, she would mainly “just hang out with my friends really, nothing much; spent hours and hours and hours with my best friend on the phone”. She enjoyed sports, but not outside of school “when I was around like six seven years old, we used to go...I remember we used to go to the Hyatt Regency Galleria, ice skating so I used to take quite a few lessons ice skating; but that was it really”.

Sahar’s decision to get married at the age of 16 was neither family pressure nor any kind of rebellion. “I think I was very mature for my age first of all. My mum had me when she was 42 and I was very close to my mum. I think she wasn't very kiddish ... I mean they are sort of, you know, with their kids they are

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more like, how do I explain it, she sort of spoke to me like an adult. So I think maybe that's why I was a little too mature for my age I think." Her future husband was best friends with her brother and she was very close to his sister. "she was not in the same classes as me in [name of school]... she was I think 3 classes under me ... but we were very close. And he graduated and went off to the States to study ... decided to come back and get married for some reason. I don't know...and he just called me up one day and very bluntly asked me on the phone" She used to see this man at home but considered that "there was never anything there...he was a really sweet guy ...he used to make me laugh and everything but I never really looked at him that way. Maybe the way he called me up or the way he I knew he was a really good guy". They got engaged and spent a lot of time together over the next five months, although she "did think I was still a bit too young, but I just did it. I'm very impulsive, like when I got something in my mind I just do it". Her mother was not very happy about this but her father was "all for it".

At this point Sahar's husband finished his studies and returned to Dubai to work with his father in the family business. He still works in the family business but he set up his own interior design company. The couple lived with her husband's family for one year but "but it wasn't a very good idea. So moved out and I was just like house wife really, cooking cleaning. I never had any house maid or anything ... didn't like any of that. So just kept myself busy around the house gardening and you know". When her first daughter was three, Sahar began to get a little bored and wanted to do something for herself "that's when my brain started working a little bit more". It was at this point that she decided to do her teacher training course, which she really enjoyed.

### **Currently**

Sahar currently directs and manages a company in partnership with her husband, but says "I think he has enough headache of his own...he doesn't want to have anything to do with it whatsoever". She has one retail fashion shop and a hair dressing salon. Having previously operated three separate fashion outlets simultaneously, she is now enjoying operating just the one shop "I'm enjoying it more with one shop because I can sort of like when you order... 'cause I've got like only one shop, I don't need to take the full collection, I minimize the orders but I pick and choose as I want". She also very much enjoys travelling to fashion shows to do the buying for her shop "I love it I mean sometimes I fly back and forth within 24 hours. It's great, it's loads of fun"

### **Philosophy - views on life/work**

Despite certain views from outside the region of Arab women, Sahar considers that she has freedom "I got my license just after I got married. So I got it really young and yeah, I was free to [to go out go around]". On the subject of travelling alone nowadays, she believes that traveling alone "makes you a lot more independent". When she first started travelling alone to fashion shows, "she wouldn't sit in restaurants alone...I would order room service". But gradually she gained confidence and "now I just go everywhere...go to posh restaurants and you know anywhere I feel like. It doesn't matter".

It is Sahar's view that when managing a business, there should always be a distance between oneself and staff, and indicates that she has had lots of 'ups and downs' with staff "one of the sales girls I had, I became very friendly with. [I'd] sit and have coffee with her, have a meal with her. I used to mix with her quite a bit. Big mistake!"

She held a special sale of bags in a local hotel, using mainly SMS messages to publicize it. The sale was not particularly successful. The next time Sahar used different method to publicize and found that she was much more successful, leading her to say that in business one has to learn from experience and be

prepared to try new ideas and to be optimistic despite occasional setbacks. “[have a]bit of optimism...have to keep trying...add something new...change it a little bit. Can just give up the first time...OK it doesn't work, so what? do it again...make it different”

On the topic of leadership, Sahar does not think there is any specific definition to it and does not particularly consider herself to be a leader. However, she does believe that “if you can be an inspiration to anyone or ... you know ... anybody could be a leader in their way really, I mean they don't really have a business ... or... I mean even being a house wife in itself is ... is hard work on its own”.

Throughout her career, Sahar has also brought up a family and does not think it was particularly difficult to combine career and family “it was fine...it was easy with a four, five year old it's...I mean when you've just got one it's alright...I mean she's in school until lunch time. A lot of the time I would go home at lunch time, have lunch with her, my husband would come home and I would leave. So if I wasn't with her my husband was with her ... when I started working in HSBC, I got help then, for the house, not for my daughter”. Even when later she had her second baby, “I used to come to [name of shopping mall] every morning with her... she again was always with me. Never had a nanny looking after her’

### Career

After completing a teacher training course, Sahar did some part time teaching in the British Council, who also used to send teachers out to the Iranian School and “ so I've done a bit of ... it was just part time work”. However, she wanted something more permanent but she didn't really see herself doing that [teaching], so applied to HSBC. Before applying, she had the idea that she like to open a boutique but when she discussed this with her husband, he said “you know nothing at all about managing a business”. He had the mentality that she was not capable of this; that she did not know what she was talking about. “you've not been to ...you've not got a business degree or anything ...what do you know?” She tried explaining to him that her best friend, who has got the Lingerie shop, was a stewardess on Emirates Airlines for nine years. “I said look what has that got to do with that...”

She meant by this that her friend wanted to set up a business of her own, even though she had always wanted to be a stewardess. But she had done that did that and, “where do you go from there...you just continue like that and work there until you retire? or do you try and do something for yourself?” She points out that some people are more comfortable with just working for someone, but others are not; they want to be more independent; they want to set up their own business “they want to give it a shot, you know”. So, Sahar thought that the best place to learn was in a bank. She trained for a month, “I've done personal banking commercial banking”. She felt it was good and that she had learned. Although she felt that she was starting to get somewhere with the bank and did not really want to leave, she still wanted to start her own business. It took a bit of convincing her husband but after some negotiating, during which she felt that he was simply trying to get her to give up working, they agreed that he would set up the business and that she would run it. Sahar is very clear here, however, that she would not simply be working for her husband, “it wasn't just like, ok I will come work for you. hey...no it was a little smarter than that”.

The business was selling designer clothes in retail outlets in a prestigious shopping mall and although she felt that the setting up went smoothly, it was very hard work, “I used to put many, many hours sitting in [name of shopping mall] I mean it was like 12 hours a day 7 days a week...I used to be here all the time”. This was because she enjoyed interacting with the customers. However, after 4 or 5 years, when she decided that the business was established and she had a regular clientele, she would spend more time in the office “I used to hide in my office because then, everybody would come after me for discounts. So it was like, right, once they see Sahar that's it, discount!” She actually opened 2 retail shops within days of each other. Originally planning to open just one, Sahar and her husband attended

the prêt -a-porter show and she thought that \*was a stronger brand and suggested that they should go for that instead. However, her husband replied “well why not open two?”, and that is what they did. A year and a half later, they opened a third business even though Sahar told her husband that it was not a good idea “I told him not to open that shop, but he didn’t listen”. It became difficult to operate the three shops as they were starting to compete with each other. Even though it was difficult operating these three shops, it did not stop Sahar from undertaking yet another business venture: a hairdressing business. It is quite interesting how this came about. She had always had her hair cut at the same place and used the same stylist. When this person left and went to work for another company, Sahar started going to this company for hair cutting so that she could continue to use this stylist. While chatting with her, Sahar discovered that she was not happy in this new position. It was at this point that Sahar had the idea of setting up a hairdressing business, “I was like why not, you know, get a hold of her and go into partnership with her...let her run it and I can have my own hair salon. So I gave her a proposal; made her partner and we set up the Hair and Beauty shop”. Though not is so many words, Sahar uses this as an example of the power of ‘Networking’ to the entrepreneur: “it works like that. I mean you get the best opportunities by speaking to people more than actually, you know, coming up with the business. OK coming up with business ideas just, you know, that you have in your mind also works, but socializing and talking to people also opportunities can pop up from nowhere”. Sahar reinforces this point by referring to the setting up of one of her husband’s businesses. The project manager for the shop fitting company that worked on the retail fashion shops indicated in conversation that he was not really happy working for that company. Sahar spoke to her husband about this and suggested that he should open an interior design company with this man. Her husband responded that he did not know anything about interior design, to which she countered “so what speak to him he will manage it; work with him, you will get to know it...you will learn it”. So her husband sat down with this person – as she had done with the hair stylist – and suggested that they open a business together as partners and he agreed. They now have a very big interior design company with over 350 staff and a massive factory in Ras Al-Khaimah, doing shop fitting work for several leading multi-national companies.

Around 2007, Sahar had to close the outlet as the company went bankrupt “the designer left, the collections became smaller, smaller, smaller and it wasn’t feasible for them...they just closed down”. She was somewhat upset by this development “I was more upset when \*closed down, because that was the, you know, it was like one of the first...it was my first baby”. Almost immediately, at the suggestion Chris, of the designer partner in her husband’s design company, she decided to re-open in the accessory field even though she had no previous knowledge of this sector; she did not know any of the brands. Chris suggested [bag company] So set up a meeting with the company in the UK and went over to see them and told them she wanted to open a [bag company] shop in Dubai. They found this somewhat unusual as they had no shops outside the UK at that time “I think the guy thought I was a bit out of my mind...they have never had anybody coming because they don’t have shops out of the UK”. Within 6 months [bag company] was open! However, at the time the global financial crisis hit Dubai, Sahar was operating four businesses in Dubai and [bag company] wanted her to open another three shops in Dubai and one in Abu Dhabi. She did not think that this was a good idea, “I was like no way. You don’t have that many shops around UK...you want to have that many shops around Dubai? forget it”, and so broke the contract with them, even though the original shop was doing OK “that’s why we broke the contract. I mean it was doing well...it wasn’t doing great but it was doing ok”.

### **Influences, mentors, coaches**

Sahar believes that yoga instructors have had an influence on her “definitely they alter your personality...they do”. She practices yoga three times a week and has private lessons with an instructor who offers life coaching classes. Prior to starting her business, she considers it was her mother who had

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a major impact on the way she thinks. Though her mother passed away when Sahar was 20 years old, she considers the her mother gave here her values “my mom that always put in my mind that I should always try and do something for myself. She always used to tell me, always have like savings...always save a little, give a little, spend a little, you know the saying, it was always that with my mom and she really sort of drilled that into my brain, and I've always been like that”. Even though her father was very rich when she was young and could give her more, “they never did, they always, you know, gave me the minimum”. She believes that this influences her thinking now: “now thank God I can afford a lot. But I still I don't...whatever I buy I enjoy it...and I always feel that it's not nice to have everything”.

### **The future**

Sahar believes that there are always opportunities arising and that one should go for any opportunity that does arise. She does not see herself stopping at where she is now and is currently looking to open another hair dressing salon but combining it with something else “I've got an idea in my mind that I want to...that I want to do”. She would not go anymore into retail fashion as she is happy with the one shop that she still has “I've got the one shop now and I'm very happy with it. I've got all the brands that are still...all the brands that I had in all the shops” She is always prepared to try out new ideas. This is well illustrated by an anecdotal account of when her daughter told her that she wanted a new handbag and Sahar said to her, as a joke really, that she should sell all the bags that she already had in order to buy a new one. Her daughter knew of a place where they did indeed purchase used handbags and took her bags there. However, this place only offered to purchase two or three of the bags and actually questioned the authenticity of one bag that was a ‘limited edition’. All this so irritated Sahar that she told her daughter not to go ahead and decided that she (Sahar) would hold a sale of these bags. This was so successful that “so many women come up to me, asking me to sell their hand bags and take commission on that. So definitely do it again”.