3 No Mary Poppins in sight

Linguistic effects of the nanny culture on Gulf identities

Hanada Taha-Thomure

Nannies have mostly occupied a beloved and nearly iconic space in popular culture ranging from Maria, played by Julie Andrews, who cared for the talented Von Trapp family to Mary Poppins, Nanny McPhee, and Aibileen Clarke in *The Help*. The famous and sweet Dada Halima, played by Thuraya Fakhry, in classic Egyptian movies further warms viewers' hearts. These fictional nannies provide a vision of a mother substitute who always knows how to deal with difficult and unruly children with discipline, fun, music, and, at times, a bit of magic. These nannies have engraved a lasting memory in society's collective imagination. The picture in real life, however, is far from Maria's enchanting music or Nanny McPhee, who can make it snow in August. Saud Alsanousi, who won the 2013 International Booker Prize for Arabic Fiction, detailed the bleak reality of household maids in his award-winning novel *The Bamboo Stalk*. The novel, which is woven around a maid in a Kuwaiti household who falls in love with the kind adult son of the family she works for, chronicles themes of love, racism, cultural and linguistic schisms and taboos, contradicting value systems, and abandonment (Qualey, 2015). It was probably one of the first Arabic novels to touch on the topic of live-in foreign domestic workers (FDWs) and how their presence in Arab households not only affects them but naturally affects the families they work for as well. The novel's acclaim is largely down to the courageous tackling of the live-in housemaid phenomenon that is so common in the Gulf.

This influx of live-in FDWs to the Arabian Gulf states has brought to the region a welcome mosaic of different cultures, cuisines, belief systems, ethnicities, and languages. It has, in addition, infused millions of homes around the Gulf region with housemaids and nannies whose language repertoire does not usually include Arabic, the mother tongue of all locals as well as millions of expatriate families from various Arab countries. With most housemaids and nannies being the main caregivers to children under ten in the Gulf region, this situation can be challenging with regard to Arabic language acquisition and proficiency. While many scholars have investigated the linguistic identities of FDWs and their host families in the context of Singapore (Cheo & Quah, 2005; Lorente, 2018), Hong Kong (Ladagaard, 2012; Tang, 2018), and Taiwan (Lan, 2003), very little can be found in the literature on the

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language of FDWs and its effects on Arabic-speaking children in the Gulf context. Moreover, previous work tends to focus primarily on the linguistic identities of FDWs rather than the children they care for (Pattadath, 2020; Ueno, 2010). This chapter aims to bridge this identified gap in the knowledge base by exploring the multidimensional relationships between FDWs and the families with whom they work, with a particular focus on how the language of Arabic-speaking children is affected.

Domestic workers in the Gulf: What do the numbers say?

As of 2016, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries had approximately 3.77 million FDWs, 1.65 million of whom were women who mostly worked as live-in housemaids (Tayah & Assaf, 2018) (Table 3.1). Global estimates on migrant workers rank the Arab states as the number one host of FDWs, collectively hosting 27.4% of the world's FDWs, followed by Southeast Asia at 19.4% and Europe at 19.2% (ILO, 2015). Most FDWs come from Southeast Asian countries including India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Nepal, and Bangladesh (Tayah & Assaf, 2018). It is very interesting to note in Table 3.1 the large number of male FDWs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This relates to the fact that women were not allowed to drive there until recently (see Hurley, this volume), therefore almost every household had to hire a male driver. It would be of importance to see if the numbers drop given the new legislation in the KSA allowing women to drive.

The demand for FDWs is said to have withstood the calamities of the 2008 financial crisis (Tayah & Assaf, 2018; Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2012). It is yet to be seen how much the COVID-19 pandemic has affected demand for domestic help in 2020 and 2021, with both parents in most families working online from home and the children doing schoolwork online as well.

It should be recognized that large numbers of FDWs have not always been present in the region. Prior to the 1970s oil and economic boom in the Gulf states, the notion of FDWs was largely unknown. Wealthy families in the

Table 3.1 Number of domestic workers in the GCC, 2016 (thousands)

Country	*Female*	*Male*
Bahrain	67	44
Kuwait	346	332
Oman	148	48
Qatar	108	66
Saudi Arabia	759	1,544
UAE	219	87
Total	1,647	2,121

Source: Tayah & Assaf (2018)

Table 3.2 Female labour force and female population aged 15–64 in the Gulf region, 2019

	Female labour force (% of total labour force)	*Female population aged 15–64 (thousands)*
Bahrain	20.1	417.63
Kuwait	25.1	1,178.83
Oman	12.7	1,085.38
Qatar	13.7	497.86
Saudi Arabia	15.8	9,747.76
UAE	17.6	2,256.75

Source: World Bank Organization (2020)

region who could afford domestic help used to have either local servants or servants who had been raised by them over the years and who dealt with household chores only (El-Haddad, 2003). For the most part, children were taken care of by their parents and members of their extended family who usually lived together within the same household. Accordingly, children were truly raised, as the saying goes, 'by a village', with numerous family members talking to them, telling them stories full of cultural nuances and tales about personalities of importance and acceptable behaviour (El-Haddad, 2003). With the oil boom and the riches it brought to the region and to individual lifestyles, both Emirati and expatriate households started employing FDWs as a way to unburden women of some of their household chores. With higher education levels for local women and increasing employment rates for local and expatriate women around the Gulf (Table 3.2), the region witnessed a sharp move from single- to dual-income families (Tayah & Assaf, 2018). In addition, the population of the GCC has increased by 51% over the past ten years, driven mostly by a rise in migrant expatriates holding middle to high income jobs (Tayah & Assaf, 2018).

All this created a need to hire domestic workers who could take care of homes and young children when both parents were out at work. Moreover, the move by so many locals and expatriates to an upper income bracket ushered in certain signs of prestige and social status, even for households where mothers did not work (Jabbar, 2014; Tayah & Assaf, 2018). These signs of social prestige included having one housemaid or more, a driver, owning increasingly larger homes, more cars, and indulging in buying luxury brands.

Governmental laws and regulations in place

Governments play an important role in regulating the relationship between employers and FDWs to ensure that the rights of both the employer and the domestic worker are respected (ILO, 2017). To hire an FDW, governments in the Gulf have stipulated several laws and regulations over the years to help

Table 3.3 Summary of requirements/income/benefits for FDWs in the Gulf

Country	*Summary of FDW working conditions*
Bahrain	Average salaries for a nanny – 640 BHD (1702 USD current rate), housekeeper – 540 BHD (1436 USD current rate).
Kuwait	147 USD is the minimum monthly wage. In June 2015, Kuwaiti legislators adopted a new law (the first of its kind in the GCC) giving domestic workers enforceable labour rights (a weekly day off, 30 days of annual paid leave, a 12-hour working day with rest, and an end of service benefit, among other rights).
Oman	The minimum wages for housemaids are set by the government and vary depending on the nationality of the housemaid hired. The average base is around 206 USD a month, but monthly salaries of live-in housemaids can vary from 247 to 686 USD a month.
Qatar	The monthly average wage for FDWs increased from 453 USD in 2006 to 800 USD by 2016. Besides housing, full-time housemaids have to be provided with money for food, clothing, and optional extras. Health cards are renewed every two years, tickets home are provided every two years, and repatriation costs are covered.
Saudi Arabia	Sri Lankan domestic workers earn a minimum of 80–100 USD a month. Kenyans in Saudi Arabia earn at least 375 USD per month plus benefits. The Philippines has set a 400 USD minimum wage for its citizens across all countries.
UAE	Private sponsorship requires that the sponsor must show a salary certificate of 6,800 USD, but those with a lower monthly salary can recruit a Tadbeer-sponsored worker. Costs are the same for workers from all nationalities at 30 USD for four hours daily or 1000 USD for a month plus benefits.

Sources: Average Salary in Bahrain (2020); Hubbard and Donovan (2020); Migrants-Rights Organization (2020); Salama (2020); Tayah and Assaf (2018); UN Migration (2018); Welcome Qatar (2016).

regulate the process. There are different government requirements that people need to meet to get nannies/housemaids (Table 3.3). The requirements to hire a nanny/housemaid in most countries in the Gulf region include a minimum household income, sponsorship regulations where the FDW's visa and residency need to be sponsored by the family hiring him or her, a minimum salary for FDWs, and benefits that include basic medical insurance, accommodation, food, clothing, and a plane ticket to return home once every two years (ILO, 2017; Tayah & Assaf, 2018). The UAE's policy on domestic workers, for example, stipulates 12 hours of rest per day, 30 days' medical leave per year, 30 days' annual vacation, and possession of their own identification papers including identity card and passport (UAE Portal, 2020).

What is expected of an FDW?

It is believed that the average number of hours worked by live-in domestic workers in Gulf countries is extremely high and could be as much as 101 hours

per week. This is compared to Costa Rica, for example, where the workload is 72 hours a week (Tayah & Assaf, 2018). Tasks may include cleaning the house while also looking after the children, playing with them, putting them to bed, taking them for walks, accompanying them to play dates and birthday parties, and doing school drop-offs and pick-ups. Sixteen to eighteen hours of work per day is the average for domestic workers in the Arab world (Esim & Smith, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

In interviews that Tayah and Assaf (2018) conducted with several live-in housemaids, comments such as 'Nationals and Arab expatriates are micro-managers', 'They monitor us closely', 'We prefer to work with Western expats', and 'They (Western expatriates) trust us with the work and let us manage our time' were prevalent. For their part, Arab families, when interviewed by the same researchers (Tayah & Assaf, 2018), expressed many concerns regarding their domestic helpers, particularly concerns that might not directly relate to an FDW's job description. Complaints included 'She is stubborn', 'She does not listen', 'She is not friendly with children', and 'She is distracted, always looking at her phone and checking family photos' (Tayah & Assaf, 2018).

It may be that too much is expected of the FDWs in Arab homes in terms of working hours, not leaving the house, and the range of tasks required including cooking, cleaning, laundering, and taking care of the children, the elderly, and any pets. In contrast, very little is offered in terms of investing in these FDWs to learn Arabic well and to grow and focus on certain tasks, rather than being the designated cook, nanny, caregiver, and cleaner.

A housemaid or a nanny?

The Cambridge Dictionary (2020), accessed online, defines a nanny as 'a person whose job is to take care of a particular family's children' (para. 1). A housemaid is defined by the same dictionary as 'a woman who is employed to clean hotel rooms and make them neat, or a woman who is a servant in a person's home' (para. 1). Although there seems to be a clear difference between the role of a nanny and that of a housemaid, this may not be the case in many households around the world and in the Gulf region. The two roles tend to converge into something that is less defined and more encompassing than the definitions above suggest (Romero, 2013). What is regularly seen in households in the region is housemaids who mostly do not have the credentials or certification needed to be nannies, such as having an associate degree or certificate in early childhood development, cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training, or a functional level of Arabic or knowledge of the culture. Domestic workers usually double up as a housemaid and a nanny. FDWs in most households have little authority over the children they care for and are rarely allowed to act in their role as a caregiver and discipline them. A FDW is almost never tasked with helping the children they care for with their homework, as the task of helping children with their schoolwork is reserved for parents or possibly a private tutor in the Arab culture. Even if parents were

open to having the nanny/housemaid help children with their homework, this may be difficult because of the often low educational attainment level of domestic workers.

Initially, households in the region, when hiring domestic helpers, know that they are hiring a housemaid whose Arabic language skills and education are quite limited. The pressure, in many cases, of having both parents working and possibly travelling for business purposes several times a year has necessitated the elevation of a housemaid's role to that of nanny as well. However, this increase in responsibilities does not usually come with training, support, or the trust to be given enough authority to take on the role of caregiver, which may result in the children having behavioural problems that manifest themselves at school and home (Tang, 2018). It is estimated that some infants and toddlers in the Gulf region spend between 30 to 70 hours a week in the care of a housemaid due to their parents' busy schedules (Al Sumaiti, 2012). It is argued that this is much higher than any number of hours an infant or toddler would spend in a professional nursery or preschool (Al Sumaiti, 2012).

Arab parents in the region seem to oscillate between the pragmatism of needing a nanny to enable mothers to work and, at the same time, limiting the role and authority of the nanny in order not to encroach on their role as parents. At times, a parental void develops when parents are not home to exercise their roles, yet nannies are not empowered to discipline children in the absence of their parents. This often leaves nannies seeking to appease the children with unhealthy, sugar-filled food or by tolerating unacceptable behaviours (Yeoh et al., 1999). Additionally, younger children can get emotionally attached to their nanny, which may result in parents feeling a certain resentment towards the nanny. A love-hate relationship can develop between mothers and nannies in many households where children tend to seek the nanny for comfort and attention rather than their mother (Jabbar, 2014). This complex relationship triangle between nannies, parents, and children leaves parents, especially mothers, feeling guilty about having to leave their children in the care of a nanny and also frustrated that their children are not developing in the way that they had hoped linguistically and behaviourally (Yeoh et al., 1999).

Nannies' impact on children's linguistic identities and language practice

Research largely suggests that young children's home background and environment influence their academic achievement in school (Tang, 2018). The quality of parent-child interactions and the availability of learning resources at home are important factors that can support children's language and pre-academic skills in early childhood (Al Sumaiti, 2012; Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011) and educational achievement during their school years (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). The richness and proficiency of caregivers' language can be related to children's language development (Dickinson & Tabors, 1991; Hart

& Risley, 1995; Song et al., 2014; Weizman & Snow, 2001). Parents around the world are usually considered to be their children's first teachers, reading to them in some cultures, leaning more on oral traditions in other cultures where they tell stories, and reciting religious songs or verses from a holy book in other contexts (Fenimore, 2015; Taha-Thomure et al., 2020). Moreover, parents' contingent responsiveness and sensitivity to infants, toddlers and young children relate to children's receptive and expressive language, story comprehension, and phonological development (Beals & DeTemple, 1993; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hirsh-Pasek & Burchinal, 2006; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001, 2014). The number of children's books in a child's home environment also relates to the development of receptive and expressive vocabulary (Payne et al., 1994; Raikes et al., 2006).

The level of education among domestic workers ranges from unschooled to college graduates (ILO, 2013). In a study conducted by Esim and Smith (2004) on Kuwaiti FDWs, a high number of both male and female domestic workers had high-school certification. The study revealed that 46% of Filipino women and only 13% of Sri Lankan women had school certificates (Esim & Smith, 2004). The same study also found that only a limited number of surveyed domestic workers were able to read and write in Arabic and 53% reported that they spoke Arabic satisfactorily (Esim & Smith, 2004).

In a study by Tang (2018), it was concluded that, in Hong Kong, Filipino FDWs who were mature and proficient in English raised the educational outcomes of the children in the households they worked for. This is due to their maturity, level of education, and ability to speak and communicate regularly with the children they cared for in English, the language that the parents in the study wanted their children to learn. In contrast, Cheuk and Wong (2005) found that young children under the care of other FDWs were more prone to serious language impairment and deficiencies.

In a study conducted with two groups of children, a controlled group (without a nanny) and a test group, 50% of the children in the test group did not use Arabic to communicate with the nanny and 20% of the children communicated with the nanny in her language. Interestingly, 20% of the children developed their nannies' accent (Hijab, 1994). Clearly, research on this matter is still in its exploratory phase, with more longitudinal studies needed to understand the lasting linguistic effects of non-Arabic speaking FDWs on children's language development. This begs the question of identity, given the intertwined and complex relationship between language and identity. In countries where the native language (L1) takes a back seat due to domestic, economic, and social circumstances, the lack of L1 in the immediate environment may affect children's identities and the imprints of who they really are or will become (Suleiman, 2003). Complex linguistic realities including linguistic hybridity, as seen in several countries of the Arab Gulf (Hillman et al., 2018; Hopkyns et al., 2018, 2021), influence youth whose Arabic language skills are sometimes inadequate for accessing their written history, literary works, and long tradition of philosophical treatise that thrived from the 7th to the

13th centuries. Scarce exposure to their native language, namely Arabic, due to the long hours spent with non-Arabic speaking nannies may also affect how children acquire concepts relating to cultural viewpoints. Such factors may also affect the development of children's cognition and thought, and the acquisition of that inner speech that Vygotsky presented in his renowned book *Thought and Language*. Vygotsky (1997) believes that the basic speech structures developed by children form the basic structures of their thinking and, without verbal thinking, it would be almost impossible to understand concepts. In this sense, verbal communication and internal thoughts can influence the identities of children, which extend into ways of thinking as adults. More longitudinal research is needed with subsequent reflection, not only on the family or small community level but also on a national level. As acclaimed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (2005) says, addressing the Arabic language: 'Am I you my language, or are you me? Oh, my language, help me fuse every letter of the alphabet into my body so I can become a master, not an echo'.

Arabic language challenges in the Gulf

A case study by Fenimore (2015), which explored home reading practices in the Kuwaiti culture, involved interviewing five nannies who cared for children with additional needs. The focus of the interviews was on reading practices in the households in which they worked. The study reported a lack of engagement by Kuwaiti adults in preparing their children for school, a lack of books around the home, and a perception on the part of nannies that reading is an educational task linked to homework and not part of childcare (Fenimore, 2015). The study also revealed that nannies believed the purpose of reading was solely linked to schoolwork and that, in their own homes, children's books were not something they grew up with.

The Dubai Women's Establishment surveyed 1,186 Emirati working women in various governmental jobs in Dubai and found that 62% of children under four years of age are taken care of by housemaids, 32% of children under four are cared for by extended families, and 5% by private nurseries (Dhal, 2011). Bennet (2009) reports that only 5.4% of nursery staff in Dubai speak Arabic, a rate that is alarming for children whose first language is Arabic language. Moreover, results from the 'Progress in International Reading Literacy Study' (PIRLS), which is a standardized test of international impact and reputation for assessing fourth graders' reading comprehension in their native language, show that in all Arab countries, including the Gulf states, students performed below the international average of 500 on Arabic reading comprehension (Mullis et al., 2012, 2016; Taha-Thomure, 2017, 2019).

Dhal (2011) argued that children growing up with nannies experienced language delays due to a lack of conversation and language use. In the absence of parents in many Gulf homes, children spend much more time with FDWs than they do in childcare centres (Al Sumaiti, 2012; Dhal,

2011). This means that, in many cases, children are left with a pseudo-parent who not only lacks the necessary skills and education to raise a child, but also the level of Arabic language proficiency needed for a child who is at a critical age for mother tongue language acquisition (Taha-Thomure, 2019). The Philippines, for example, mandates only a four-day preparatory course for all Filipino maids heading overseas (Lorente, 2018). The four-day course includes one day of cultural familiarization and, if the maids are heading to Arab countries, they have to do a three-day crash course in Arabic to know the basics of the language and learn hurriedly memorized phrases such as 'cut the meat', 'iron the shirt', or 'change sheets' (Lorente, 2018). This type of language training means that FDWs often come to host countries with almost no Arabic and commit basic language errors that render communication ineffective. Even those who have spent several years in Arab countries are not at a level of Arabic language usage that would be considered acceptable to transfer to children. Errors in feminine-masculine tense agreement are widespread, as well as limited vocabulary, incorrect use of major timeframes such as past, present, and future, singular and plural tenses, and confusing pronouns, to name just a few. These errors are transferred to children who spend many hours with nannies in the absence of their parents, and this could lead to problems and delays in children's language development (Lorente, 2018).

Kagan (2017) argues that employers' frustration towards domestic workers is largely due to their lack of language proficiency, which creates a communication barrier. In a Twitter poll I conducted for the purpose of this chapter, a question was posed to Arabs in the Gulf on the effect of having non-Arabic speaking nannies/housemaids in their homes. The poll offered three options: a) negatively affects their children's Arabic language acquisition, b) no effect, c) positively affects their children's Arabic language acquisition. There were 148 responses to the poll and 60% of respondents felt that having a non-Arabic speaking housemaid at home affected their children's Arabic language acquisition negatively, 5% said it had a positive effect on their children's Arabic language, and 35% said it had no effect. Four respondents left comments saying that it is mostly the parents who influence their children's Arabic language. One added that it really depends on how long the children are left alone with the housemaid. Another said that if the child is immersed in an Arabic environment, then it will be hard for the non-Arabic speaking housemaid to have a negative effect. In some sense, the results of this poll mirror the results noted in earlier studies. Some studies found the effect of housemaids on children's academic attainment and language proficiency to be insignificant (Al-Jarf, 2005; Cheo & Quah, 2005), some found that English speaking nannies had a positive effect on children's achievement (Tang & Yung, 2014), while others found negative effects (Jabbar, 2014; Cheuk & Wong, 2005). Reasons for the contradicting results might be due to several factors, including the level of Arabic language proficiency of domestic workers, their level of education, the

belief systems they bring into the hosts' homes, and whether collectivism or individualism is nurtured and prized (Greenfield et al., 2008).

In summary, there is a general societal concern for children's Arabic language proficiency that has been blamed on many factors, including the rush to enrol children from a very young age in English-medium private schools, the extreme reliance on non-Arabic speaking live-in housemaids to care for younger children, minimal time spent immersed in Arabic, and the 'Anglicization' of everything considered to be pop culture surrounding children in the Gulf (Al Kuttab, 2017). Newspapers have repeatedly raised the topic of lack of parental involvement in their children's lives. There is not a month that goes by without a newspaper article addressing this issue (Almazroui, 2014). Headlines include: 'Parents must be more involved in children's lives' (Almazroui, 2014); 'The power of parental involvement' (Brown, 2019); 'Arab fathers' role key to shaping children's future' (Mojib, 2019); 'Are foreign nannies a bad influence on UAE children?' (Al Kuttab, 2017); and many more that reveal the level of concern not only for children's Arabic language proficiency, but for their social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing. There is a general call for more parental involvement in children's lives. This is not an unsubstantiated call, as research has repeatedly highlighted that parental involvement in children's lives, especially in the first eight years, is associated with greater reading skills and improved scholastic achievement (Almazroui, 2014).

Implications and Conclusion

This chapter explored the nanny culture phenomenon in the Gulf and zoomed in on the effect that this phenomenon has on children's language acquisition. The chapter, moreover, explored the effects of the nanny culture on language identities, concept formation, and the challenges currently being faced in the teaching and learning of Arabic. Due to the often limited educational level and skills that FDWs bring into the households they work for, it is imperative that parents become seriously engaged in their children's lives, and education as parental involvement is the best indicator of children's success and achievement (Al Sumaiti, 2012). This chapter has argued that, in the Gulf, housemaids have a strong yet invisible and unacknowledged influence on children's linguistic, cultural, social, behavioural, and communication skills. Recognizing such a situation is a must, considering the large number of families who depend on the help of FDWs (Scheftel, 2016). Five suggestions can be made to raise awareness and instigate change.

First, parental awareness and education campaigns are needed to help inform society about the importance of parental involvement. Parents talking to their children in their native language is a key factor in helping them acquire the language and cultural nuances expected of a native speaker of any language. Such awareness campaigns could be instigated by schools or

universities with the purpose of discussing current sociolinguistic realities and context-specific strategies rather than providing generalized recommendations for good parenting practice.

Second, new government regulations might be needed to help improve the relationship between FDWs and employers by defining the roles of housemaids, nannies and parents more clearly. This could include minimal requirements regarding necessary skills such as Arabic and English language literacy, financial education, and communication training so that FDWs are in a better place to negotiate their rights and feel confident in their ability to do the jobs required of them. For employers, it is crucial that they have realistic expectations of what the FDWs can do coming in. Moreover, it is essential that employers understand that FDWs have left their own children and families to care for families and children they don't know, in countries that are far away from their homes and anything familiar.

Third, there is also a need for Arab movies and TV reality shows that feature nannies and housemaids as central characters, or programs that include scenes with realistic nanny-parent dynamics and common dilemmas (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014; Newbould, 2017). Such programs could prove to be a welcome forum where neglected conversations linked to parenting might be highlighted and where parents can choose to attend informal and indirect coaching sessions on the art and science of being parents. This is a sensitive issue that needs to be treated with great tact.

Fourth, an important area that the Gulf and Arab region at large needs to look into more seriously is investment in quality public and private early childhood education. Children would be cared for by trained and credentialed Arabic speaking staff for a specific number of hours while parents are at work (Adamson & Brennan, 2017), and this would limit the time spent with non-Arabic speaking nannies, expose children to their mother tongue, and allow them to interact with other children within a safe and pedagogically appropriate environment.

Finally, it is important that a win-win formula is reached, where working mothers in the Gulf and elsewhere in the world are enabled and empowered to pursue their careers and dreams while their children at home receive the best childcare they can get. This is only possible if an investment mentality is adopted. Society at large needs to invest in FDWs, educating and empowering them to care for children in a way that will not clash with parents' expectations. At the same time, parents need to be educated and made aware that no nanny, no matter how qualified she is, can replace them and play the role reserved solely for them. This includes frequently communicating with their children in their mother tongue, exposing them to Arab culture and pop culture, and ensuring that everyone in the household plays by the same rules. Only then might we reach the place that Nanny McPhee, played by Emma Thompson in the 2005 film, so wisely described: 'When you need me, but do not want me, then I must stay. When you want me, but no longer need me, then I have to go'.

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