Scientific
Research
Publishing

Saudi Women and Leadership: Empowering Women as Leaders in Higher Education Institutions

Fatmah T. Alotaibi

Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia
Email: ftotaibi@uqu.edu.sa

Abstract

Saudi Arabia is perhaps one of the most controversial countries in terms of its very poor overall gender gap performance, although it has, according to Pew Research, the fastest growing female labour force participation rate of all the G20 countries. Although the education sector is by far the largest employer of Saudi women, the low level of representation of women in leadership positions in Higher Education demonstrates the fact that they have not been effectively empowered. Under the 2030 vision that the government recently announced, many reforms have been introduced, which are expected to have a direct impact on the empowerment of women. Therefore, this paper looks at the factors that might be considered as barriers to women rising to leadership positions in Saudi higher education institutions. Qualitative data was used for this study and semi-structured interviews were employed with Saudi males and females working in Saudi higher education institutions. The data was then thematically analysed. Findings showed that there are still many challenges, or rather barriers, to women leadership. It indicates that the main challenges are organisational barriers, cultural barriers and personal barriers. The participants gave suggestions on how comprehensive reforms could be made which would lead to more effective outcomes in lowering barriers to women's rise to leadership in the country.

Keywords

Women, Empowerment, Leadership, Culture, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Women have been marginalised in leadership fields directly or indirectly (Blackmore, 2010), with the education sector being no exception (Blandford et

al., 2011). In the last few decades, according to many researchers, Higher Education has seen a six-fold increase in the enrolment and participation levels of women across the globe (Morley, 2013). However, women have not been effectively empowered in terms of leadership positions in HE (Alghofaily, 2019).

Research on women's empowerment at the top of the organisational hierarchy shows how qualified females remain underrepresented in leadership positions (Abalkhail, 2016; Acker, 2010; Karam & Afiouni, 2014; Powell, 2010; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). No clear reason for this, beyond gender stereotypes, is holding women back (Eagly, 2016). As a result, gender discrimination in hiring and promotion (Alimo-Metcalfe, 2010), segregation of jobs based on gender, race and class (Acker, 2010) and the exclusion of women from male developmental networks is rampant (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015).

Saudi Arabia is perhaps one of the most controversial countries in the Western media because of the segregation of men from women (Alotaibi, 2019) and the very poor overall gender gap performance, in which Saudi Arabia is currently ranked 146th out of 153 countries. Despite this, according to Pew Research, the country has the fastest growing female labour force participation rate of all the G20 countries (Mulligan, 2019).

Factually, most of the research that has been published has been conducted at a time when Saudi Arabia had not undertaken any radical or sweeping reforms to rectify the situation (Alghofaily, 2019), such as the recently announced 2030 vision,. One of the main objectives of Saudi Arabia's 2030 vision is to gradually eliminate such barriers. Therefore, this paper looks at empowering Saudi women in leadership positions in higher education institutions.

The main aim of this paper is to explore the empowerment of Saudi women in Saudi higher education institutions. It tries to answer the following questions:

- What are the cultural, organisational and personal barriers preventing women from being appointed to leadership positions in Saudi higher education institutions?
- How is Saudi's 2030 vision affecting the cultural, organisational and personal barriers that are currently preventing women from being appointed into leadership positions in Saudi higher education institutions?
- Which have been, and continue to be, the challenges, and what does the future hold for women's empowerment in the state?

This paper begins with a review of the literature on Saudi Arabia and its culture, with particular emphasis on the recent changes in the state regarding women's empowerment. It then considers women leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia. Next, a brief overview of the barriers to women leadership is provided, the research methods are then introduced, and the findings are presented and analysed. The paper ends with a conclusion of the findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Saudi Arabia and Its Culture

The state of Saudi Arabia came into existence after political unification in 1932

and experienced rapid economic and social transformations for the rest of the twentieth century (Al-Bakr et al., 2017). It has an ancient culture with a history extending several thousand years. Therefore, the Islamic and Arabic traditions are revered and nurtured by Saudi citizens with great pride and satisfaction (Alomiri, 2015). The Islamic roots from which the Saudi culture stems has moulded the very core of its heritage. Islam hence plays a pivotal part in delineating the country's culture and serves as a cardinal impetus in regulating the social standards, protocols, principles and credos which have been inculcated from birth by relatives and educational institutions. Therefore, its historical adherence to strict beliefs has contributed to an image of a country reluctant to undergo social change and inflexible in its policies toward its own citizens. Within this deeply conservative society, modernity, juxtaposed with tradition (Gorney, 2016), and "gender politics and religion", are all intertwined (Al-Rasheed & Azzam, 2012: p. 7). However, a closer look at its most recent social history shows a different reality. The presence of pragmatism, which on many occasions has trumped the religious authorities, has allowed Saudi society to include all its citizens, regardless of gender, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic background, in contributing to the future social and economic development of the Kingdom (Alsharif, 2019).

The Saudi society is a tribal system where the family and tribe are the basis of the social structure and are the most significant entity in the entire Saudi society (Alotaibi, 2019; Al-Bakr et al., 2017). Kinship and affiliation play an important role in all social relations and tribes carry a weighty impact on individual lives (Alomiri, 2015). Firm tribal loyalties exist within certain zones and tribal traditions and influences can have a heavy bearing on an individual's liberty when the tribe's reputation is at stake.

The generation of Saudis born in the 1930s lived a traditional, tribal existence, as the state was just beginning to develop national institutions and identity. The children of this generation, born in the 1950s, bore the fruits of political integration, oil wealth, increasing access to education, and expanded contact with the West (Al-Bakr et al., 2017). The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of post-unification Saudis, the young adults of today's Saudi Arabia, are facing new challenges and struggles to make sense of their societal and personal identities in relation to changing gender roles (ibid, p. 2). Yet many issues might reshape the Saudi culture in the next few years. Sending tens of thousands of students to study abroad (more than 140,000 students at the end of 2012) is bound to bring back to Saudi values from the countries that such students have studied in. Furthermore, 64 percent of Saudi's citizens are below the age of 30, with 13 to 17-year-olds now comprising 12 percent of the population. This high percentage of youth is being shaped more by the media than by their parents; Arab youth is ranked number one in following and using Twitter and Facebook daily on the Internet (Alomiri, 2015). Moreover, these new windows to the world (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) give youngsters new perspectives of their lives socially, culturally and politically, and make them more inclined than their parents ever

were to accept or reject what they are being taught. Consequently, no one can accurately determine what the Saudi culture will be like ten years from now; dramatically change is, however, inevitable.

2.2. A New Saudi Arabia

Since the appointment of King Abdullah in 1995, the roles and status of females have been a prominent issue, and changes have been implemented. The King had a strategy and vision to promote women's rights and in 1999, for the first time in Saudi's history, the government permitted twenty women to attend the National Consultative Council (Alotaibi, 2019). Although it was a relatively modest gesture, it was nevertheless an initiative that paved the way for women to progress further into the public sphere.

The current regime under King Salman has witnessed marked progress in empowering women politically. More Saudi women are being selected for leadership roles, an example being the appointment of a Vice President for Women's Affairs at the General Sports Authority—a move which paved the way for women's participation in sports-for-health, sporting competitions, and professional opportunities (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017).

The appointment of Mohammed bin Salman as the crown prince of Saudi Arabia represented a major economical, social and cultural scene change for the country—the start of a new Saudi Arabia. Immediately after his appointment, the new crown prince set about a root-and-branch reform of his homeland, and dozens of decisions were taken to reform the state in all its civil and military institutions. On the economic front, he announced sweeping changes under the banner "Vision 2030" aimed at ending the kingdom's reliance on oil. As well as diversifying the economy, the plans included pushing for women to have a bigger economic role. This Vision has been adopted as a roadmap for economic and developmental action, its aim is to give the kingdom a leading position in all fields (Alotaibi, 2019). Vision 2030 sought to identify the general directions, policies, goals and objectives of the kingdom. Furthermore, the crown prince's Vision 2030 has prompted admiration among many of the younger generation. Many Saudis regard his ascent as evidence that for the first time their generation is taking a central place in running a country. Prince Mohammed's establishment of a think-tank, the Misk Foundation, which focused on education, youth, arts and social media issues, appears to showcase that preoccupation with compatriots of his generation.

To achieve the vision, ministries, universities, and government entities have had to restructure to align themselves with the requirements of this program. To move forward with the proposed timelines, all stakeholders need to restructure their management processes, and expand their competencies. Ultimately, this will enhance the level and quality of services provided to beneficiaries, and will help achieve a prosperous future and sustainable development. The Council of Ministers has tasked the Council of Economic and Development Affairs with es-

tablishing and monitoring the mechanisms and measures necessary for the implementation of Vision 2030.

In order to build the capacity and capabilities required to achieve the ambitious goals of Vision 2030, the National Transformation Program was launched as a Vision Realization Program (VRP), involving 24 government agencies. It aims to develop governmental work and establish the needed infrastructure to achieve Vision 2030's ambition and requirements. The Council of Economic and Development Affairs has set up an effective and integrated governance model with the aim of translating the vision into multiple VRPs working in parallel to achieve the strategic objectives and realize the vision.

2.3. Women Empowerment in Vision 2030

Although, from a Saudi cultural perspective, Saudi women are encouraged to remain at home to serve their children and husbands, this does not mean Islam or Saudi culture forbids women from working—as long as it is controlled by traditional Sharia law (Alotaibi, 2019). According to Al-Sheha (2000), Islamic law does not prohibit women from the right to work. Rather it permits women to conduct their own businesses and financial issues. However, these businesses must not conflict with her main responsibilities and duties at home.

Much of the focus of Vision 2030 is on women's empowerment. In an effort to create more job skills and to guarantee employment to its citizens, the Saudi government announced the need to overcome the traditional rentier economy based on oil, and shift to a more diversified paradigm (Alsharif, 2019). One of the major steps toward achieving this goal is to empower Saudi women, who constitute more than 50 percent of the population, to participate and contribute their needed skills and talents to the Saudi labour market.

One of the main themes that The National Transformation Programme is built on is the labour market accessibility and attractiveness, which mainly focuses on overcoming the obstacles that development of the labour market faces for all segments of society. This includes strengthening the culture of women's participation in the labour market and providing the possible means that make the working environment suitable for women[1]. In considering this theme, the government stated two main challenges that prevented women from contributing to their country; the first was the limited awareness of the positive role of women in the labour market and their contribution to economic development and improvement of the GDP; the second was the weak representation of women in leadership positions in all fields.

This, however, was acknowledgment from the government that women were not empowered in the labour market and that there was a weak representation of women in leadership positions in all fields. When challenged on this point, the government has explained that it is the result of the Saudi culture. which is to some extent conservative and therefore encourages women to remain at home to serve their children and husbands.

[1]Vision 2030 documents (https://vision2030.gov.sa/en).

Over that last few decades, Saudi women have played a greater, albeit restricted, public role, and this held true when Vision 2030 was first announced in 2016. Nevertheless, social and economic policies have rapidly shifted. In September 2017, three senior positions in finance, including the CEO of the stock exchange, were filled by women. Citigroup has also appointed a woman to head the bank's operations in the kingdom. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's military has sought applications from women for the first time, marking a major step towards improving women's rights and opportunities in the state. Saudi women have been granted the right to drive and to attend football matches, and very recently, in 2018, a woman was appointed as Deputy Labour Minister (Al-Eisa, 2018). More recently, in 2019, H.R.H. Princess Reema Bint Bandar Al Saud was appointed as an ambassador to the United States, making her the first Saudi woman to ever hold this diplomatic position. Increasing the number of Saudi women in the workforce is part of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's proposed reforms for Vision 2030—the objective being to raise women's participation in the workforce from 22% to 30%. According to the Global Gender Gap Index 2016 (n.d.), Saudi Arabia achieved the region's largest improvement in gender gap closure over the past decade, and is the fifth-most improved country globally in educational attainment (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). According to Al-Bakr et al. (2017), women participation in the labour market has almost tripled over the last past decade.

Women entering into higher education in Saudi Arabia today who specialise in science, technology and engineering subjects will in a few years enter into a labour market potentially full of technical jobs. These include the construction of giga projects such as NEOM and Qiddiya[2], and numerous new wind and solar renewable energy installations that have been announced and tendered over recent months (Mulligan, 2019). Furthermore, Princess Noura Bint Abdul Rahman University is the largest women-only university in the world, embracing colleges of humanities (Education, Arts, Social Services, Languages and Translation) through to colleges of sciences (Computer and Information, Business Administration, Arts and Design) to colleges of medicine (Nursing, Pharmacy, Health and Rehabilitation, Dentistry and Medicine) (Al-Shahrani, 2016). Preparing young Saudi females for such jobs will go a long way toward achieving the women labour participation goal of 2030, and thus will aid in Saudi Arabia's commitment to women empowerment.

Despite the positive improvements made by the government and policy makers over the last few years, women are still poorly empowered in Saudi Arabia (Alghofaily, 2019). The state still scores very poorly in terms of women participation in the labour force (Gorney, 2016), mainly due to the structural challenges (Thompson, 2015). The three main identified structural challenges are: 1) lack of women participation in the formulation of strategies, 2) centralization of

---

[2]Qiddiya (Riyadh) is being built around five cornerstones: Parks & Attractions, Sports & Wellness, Motion & Mobility, Arts & Culture and Nature & Environment (https://qiddiya.com/en/about-qiddiya/about/).

the decision-making process and 3) lack of authority.

The World Bank has provided data about the rate of women participation in the labour force in Saudi Arabia from 1990 to 2019. The average value for Saudi Arabia during that period was 17.79 percent, with a minimum of 14.21 percent in 1992 and a maximum of 23.45 percent in 2019 (The World Bank). The world average, however, in 2019, based on 181 countries is 51.81 percent[3]. Saudi Arabia has one of the best female education statistics in the world; in 2018, according to the Saudi General Authority for Statistics, more than 53 percent of all university graduates in Saudi Arabia were female. These numbers, however, do not reflect its low position in terms of women employment and women empowerment, where more than two thirds of female graduates have not been employed. Lack of confidence in their leadership skills, managerial efficiency, and capabilities could be factors contributing to structural barriers (Alghofaily, 2019).

In fact, women over the world are not represented in leadership positions. For example, in 2004 only 7% of the universities were managed by women globally (Zinyemba, 2013). Across the 27 countries in the EU, only 15.5 percent of all higher education institutions are headed by a woman (European Commission, 2012). In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, just 3.2% of women hold senior leadership positions (Pande & Ford, 2011; Patel & Buiting, 2013), and a figure of 1% has been reported from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries[4] (Sperling et al., 2014, cited in Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). In Saudi Arabia, which only recently opened its doors for women to participate in the labour force, the percentage is much lower than the world average. Of the 38 Saudi Arabian higher-education institutions, just one university is led by a woman (2.5%), which is the Princess Nourah Bint Abdul Rahman University. This supports the claim of the Gender Gap Report that ranks Saudi Arabia's performance as 146th out of 153 countries.

According to researchers (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Alsuwaida, 2016; Al-Kayed, 2015), women leaders lack resources and feel powerless because of gender bias. Several studies provide implications for leadership development to address issues with female empowerment. Al-Shaalan and Kaki (2013), cited in Al Ghamdi (2016), found that there are barriers to the empowerment process for females in Saudi universities that affect the quality of the entire university's performance. These include extreme centralization, the predominance of working individually, routines at work, management traditions, lack of consultation in decision-making, and the low efficiency of employees (Al Ghamdi, 2016).

2.4. Barriers to Women's Leadership in Saudi Higher Education

Traditionally, the concept of leadership has been associated with masculine characteristics and traits such as power, domination and assertiveness (Alomiri, 2015). Although there is no evidence that such characteristics are associated with true leadership, it appears that socially and culturally they have been. Although

---

[3]https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Saudi-Arabia/Female_labor_force_participation/.
[4]Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

there are many examples of women leaders in Islamic literature, Saudi women in general have faced a cultural and traditional gender bias over the last century, not just in the field of leadership but in all areas of life. In Saudi Arabia, women are absent from public life.

Females now represent the majority of the students in schools and universities in Saudi Arabia. The female enrolment in basic education for the year 2017 was 52.4% as compared to a 47.6% male population. For higher education, females constituted about 54%, whereas 46% were male. Furthermore, the percentage of female lecturers in Saudi higher education institutions was 45.4% in 2017. Despite these higher figures for females in educational institutions, only a few were appointed in leadership positions. Glowork[5] (2017) found evidence in their research "Women In Management and Leadership In The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" of under representation of women in management and leadership positions, as one in two survey participants employed less than 1% of women in leadership roles (p. 2).

The highest position reported for women leadership in Saudi institutions is the chancellor of Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University (a female only university). The second highest position is vice (deputy) dean at a co-educational university. There are 12 women vice deans (presidents) in other universities, or vice (deputy) deans for women's sections (campuses) (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). However, the responsibilities of women in these positions are restricted, although there are several deans' faculties where women have more responsibilities. This limited number of women leaders in educational institutions in Saudi Arabia stands in contrast to the thousands of leadership positions prepared for men; there are 37 universities headed by men compared to just one university (aforementioned) headed by a female. Although the number of women in higher education leadership is still finite, this single appointment nevertheless marks an important turning point for women's leadership in Saudi Arabia.

Although empirical evidence suggests that Saudi female managers are as effective as their male counterparts (Al-Shamrani, 2015), they still face many challenges in the workplace (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). These challenges can be categorised, according to Hodges (2017), into cultural, social, religious, and organisational challenges. A deeply rooted obstacle is cultural practices, such as defined gender roles, gender-based occupations, and restrictions of interactions between men and women (Glowork, 2017). Generally, across various industries women suffer from:

> "lack of mobility; the salience of gender stereotypes; gender discrimination in the workplace; limited opportunities for growth, development, and career advancement; excessive workload caused by a lack of family-work balance; and gender-based challenges related to dealing with pregnancy" (Al-Asfour et al., 2017: p. 184).

---

[5]Glowork was formed in 2011 by three young Saudi entrepreneurs. Their aim was to increase diversity in the Saudi workforce by helping women find employment opportunities.

Furthermore, in such an environment, according to Alomiri (2015), the absence of defined competence-based criteria and procedures for the selection of candidates to leadership positions opens the door to chaos in the workplace environment. Selections are often made according to who knows who, and employment decisions frequently stem from attempts to obtain the services of acquiescent juniors rather than considering the organization's interests. Supporting this view, Glowork (2017) claim that the family network seems to be crucial in recruitment and selection processes, often over-riding qualifications. They identify four barriers to female leaders (p. 6):

1) the double-burden syndrome.

2) lack of pro-family public policies and support.

3) social expectations to not work continuously.

4) lack of culturally acceptable, gender-appropriate infrastructure.

In fact, women in Saudi Arabia experience a lack of professional training for leadership positions and limited opportunities to gain diverse experience and skill sets (Al-Ahmadi, 2011). In addition to the aforementioned factors, women face individual factors such as personal skills, capabilities, confidence, support, ability to achieve balance and a sense of empowerment (ibid).

3. Research Methods

The qualitative research methods are often adopted to answer the "whys" and "hows" of behaviour, opinion, and experience-information that is difficult to obtain through a quantitative approach of data collection (Guest et al., 2013). They are used to gain rich descriptive data to facilitate the exploration of the phenomena. Qualitative data, typically in the shape of words rather than statistics, have continuously been the key element of certain fields such as anthropology, education, nursing, psychology, sociology and marketing (Alotaibi, 2019). Therefore, this study has employed an in-depth interviews method to qualitative research in order to gain a deep understanding of the specific challenges faced by women leaders in public universities in Saudi Arabia. Using qualitative research for exploring the concepts in this study provided participants with the opportunity to describe their experience toward women's leadership and the barriers to attaining full empowerment in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia.

4. Data Collection and Sample

The population of this study includes males and females who are working as leaders in Saudi Arabian higher education institutions. A sample of women and men leaders were drawn from three public universities, namely: Kind Saud University (KSU), Umm al-Qura University (UQU) and King Abdulaziz University (KAU). The main reason behind choosing men and women to participate in this study was because empowering women in Saudi higher education institutions and appointing them in leadership positions was in males' hands. Saudi's organisations, particularly Saudi HE institutions, are dominated by men. Conse-

quently, the questions should mainly be addressed to them about what their philosophy is behind not fully empowering women in leadership positions. Is it social, cultural, economic, religious or personal factors, or did they feel that women were not qualified to lead? How could women be moved forward towards empowerment? Data was collected using semi structured interviews. In the current study, purposive sampling was used, which involves selecting a sample of the people who are most readily available for participation (Saunders et al., 2012). Through phone calls and emails, the potential interviewees were informed about the overall objective of the study and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. In total, 26 in-depth interviews were chosen (9 from UQU, 9 from KSU and 8 from KAU).

5. Data Analysis

This study used thematic analysis to identify subjects within the data. Many researchers have used the thematic analysis technique in qualitative research focused on women's leadership in Saudi Arabia (Alghofaily, 2019; Alotaibi, 2019; Hodges, 2017; Al-Asfour et al., 2017; AlDoubi, 2014; Gazzaz, 2017). Thematic analysis can be used within various theoretical frameworks, and it has the advantage of applying the theoretical framework of the study (Alotaibi, 2019). It was considered useful for this research because the researcher was unaware of all the potential themes that would be discovered.

6. Findings

6.1. Organisational Barriers

Although there are many challenges facing women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, there is a semi consensus among participants that the main challenges are personal challenges, institutional challenges and socio-cultural challenges.

The majority of participants (more than 60%) reported that organisational barriers are a key challenge for women's leadership opportunities. They stressed discrimination against women in terms of selection for leadership positions, promotion as well as training and development. There is a semi consensus among participants that there are organisational issues that create obstacles for women to lead. No advanced training for leadership positions exist for both sexes; there are especially few for women, as they have only recently tried to enter the arena. There are some basic training courses but not enough. Lecturer L1UQU[6], L3UQU and L4UQU suggested that the university should revisit their regulations and procedures to serve the new trend of the state:

> "You will find nothing in the job descriptions which determine the appropriate training for each position … men have experience as they have been appointed in various positions in their career … Women do not … they are in the first step of the ladder".

[6]L1UQU means Lecturer One at University UQU.

Another male participant added:

"There is a lack of clarity and complexity of work procedures due to male management, as well as institutional regulations and procedures that have not included employing or empowering females".

Many lecturers from the three universities who participated in this study (more than 40%) claimed that the policy within universities focuses on research only and does not include as much leadership training as it should. Although there is some training, it is not planned and does not continue for the whole academic year. L1KAU[7] and L5UQU explained:

"In the university, the majority of the talk is about how much research that lecturer publishes, not how qualified he or she is as a leader … although research is the soul of educational life … training, especially leadership training, is important".

It should be noted, however, that not all universities participating in the study are at the same level in terms of providing such training. KAU and KSU provide planned leadership training for both sexes, particularly the women section, which holds many short leadership courses during the academic year.

The second organisational barrier was lack of decision-making opportunities. As a result of marginalising women in leadership positions, they have been marginalised in taking any decision within their organisations. In one university, a lecturer (L7UQU) confirms that:

"female lecturers just deliver their subjects but the male lecturers are responsible for preparing exam papers and they mark them too, and make the strategic decisions".

Participants suggested that women should be given decision making responsibilities from the early stages in order to prepare them as they gain experience. Women are marginalised in many aspects of the university's life. There is a semi consensus among participants (males and females) that:

"Women are (obligatorily) absent from all university activities … All decisions are taken from male counterparts … regardless of how big or small are they … the main role for women is just to implement what males decide".

This is true, as all deans and pro-vice chancellors are males. They are responsible for developing the university's strategic plan, action plan and their annual plan. This is clear, since the university's council members are all male.

The third organisational barrier was organisational culture, which promotes a rigid career structure that is inclined to support males rather than females, and male domination, in which males feel superior to females. Many participants (male and female) have also mentioned that:

---

[7]L1KAU means Lecturer One at University KAU.

"the male is considered to be superior within the university. He is preferable for leadership positions regardless of his qualifications … he is the first choice in all cases … the problem is women also accept it".

Another female lecturer added:

"The male is superior for leadership positions in the eyes of both the males and females … the male invented it and the women believed in it".

Factually, Saudi society is a masculine society and leadership is seen as being for men not women (Alomiri, 2015). Furthermore, the dominating leadership style is masculine, since this style of leadership has repeatedly been established as a successful and acceptable style during the last century. According to Alotaibi et al. (2016), men perceive that men possess more requisite leadership characteristics than women. Interestingly, women also believe that men have more appropriate skills and abilities than they do. It could be concluded, then, that the Saudi culture has stereotypical masculine qualities.

The fourth organisational barrier was managerial selection and promotion procedures. Many lecturers (more than 55%) stated negative attitudes toward women in the work environment, which showed discriminatory organisational practices through discriminatory managerial recruitment and selection processes. Lecturers from two different universities (L7UQU and L6KSU[8]) commented:

"Females are always outside the selection for managerial positions … all vice-chancellors are men … all deans are men … we know that qualifications, experience and leadership competences are not the first criteria for the selection for leadership positions … sex is the first criterion".

Another participant (L7KSU) highlighted that:

"recruitment and promotions to senior positions depend on who knows who in general … and females are never considered among them …".

One participant also commented that:

"male hierarchies are more likely to promote men for managerial positions than women".

The majority of participating females (more than 53%) believed that:

"men receive more support and trust from the organisation than women … as they meet every day … working together shoulder to shoulder … we never see them or have a meeting with them … if we need to, we have to use a video conference system".

Another organisational barrier cited by most of the female participants was lack of connections with top level decision makers. Women suffer lower connections, which is one of the most critical components of top-level promotions.

---

[8]L6KSU means Lecturer Six at University KSU.

L3UQU, L4UQU, L5KAU and L3KSU stated that:

> "to reach the top, people need connections, and women often do not have these connections as they do not engage with vice chancellors and deans".

Contrary to this suggestion, L1UQU said:

> "The issue is not whether females have or do not have connections … the issue is with the university's policy itself … it does not allow women to lead … it is not in the chancellor's hands to recruit females in any position … he cannot do so … all appointments are based on the approval from the ministry of higher education".

Therefore, empowering women into leadership positions should be treated as a national project rather than leaving it in an individual's hands to do what they like. It should come as a top-down decision to allow females to be appointed into leadership positions. The only factors for recruitment and selection to leadership positions should be efficiency and capability, not sex or connections.

6.2. Cultural Barriers

National culture is considered to be one of the most cited reasons for "glass ceiling" in Saudi Arabia. Some of the participating men (20%) in this study expressed their concern about women's leadership, not just their characteristics or traits or their leadership style but the idea of working under a female's command. They don't trust them as leaders and they believe that:

> "the nature of women is different to men in many aspects … the concept of leadership has been associated with special traits and characteristics such as power and directiveness, and with task-based behaviours, for example … if women want to lead, they need to have some very masculine traits …".

Another participant added:

> "women are weak, sensitive, and not able to handle sophisticated tasks …".

Other male participants added:

> "The belief that the female leader is emotional with emotional decisions is dominant in the public … amongst males and females" (L6KSU).
> "I believe the cultural and social factors are still highly influential in restricting women from being part of the society in many careers, such as those who work with men shoulder to shoulder, like pilots and the military. Our society still prefers women to be segregated from men".

This was not surprising, as Saudi culture is masculine in character and women's social role is wholly different than men's. In Saudi Arabia, wives are required to dedicate themselves fully to their families whereas husbands are expected to devote their energies to furnishing the resources for their families' survival.

Another participant was less aggressive against women, commenting that:

"Women are able to work in lower positions up to middle management positions … they will do greatly in such positions … for example they can work as secretaries (they are well organised), human resources (they are more relationship-oriented), performance management (very accurate and detailed-oriented)".

On the other hand, the majority of the male participants supported women being appointed into leadership positions and they believed that they would contribute tremendously in the state's development plans. Some participants (L8UQU, L2UQU, L2KAU) reported:

"It does not matter to me if my boss is male or female, as I think women are more supportive and caring and tend to be good team leaders …".

These male participants also believed that:

"a 'feminine style' tends to be interpersonal and democratic, with people-based behaviours … they can lead better than men".

Another male participant added:

"Women can be multi-tasked, emotional, compassionate, relationship-oriented, consensus-based, collaborative, and communicative … if they are given the opportunity to lead they will lead better than men as they are characterised as being relationship-oriented, which in my opinion is the main difference between management and leadership".

Until recently the Saudi culture was against the appointment of women in leadership positions, on the basis that "women are encouraged to remain at home, their kingdom is their house, and their hijab (veil) has concealed them" (Alotaibi et al., 2016: p. 9). Therefore, the quantum leap from "staying at home" to emerging attitudes like "if they were given the opportunity to lead they would lead better than men", tells us that women empowerment in the state is heading in the right direction. This conclusion supports the study of challenges facing women leaders in Saudi Arabia by Al-Ahmadi, who found that "cultural challenges are less important compared to the other challenges faced by women leaders". This is an indication of a changing perception of the role of women in society by males in the state.

6.3. Personal Barriers

Another organisational barrier against women empowerment in leadership positions lies in the leadership skills that they have. According to many participants (female and male):

"Women often make low level decisions and do not have sufficient power to take authoritative decisions … they think about management more than leadership … they waste their time in small (and sometimes unimportant) issues".

Women suffer from a lack of basic skills to exercise a leadership role (such as planning, organizing, following up and evaluating) and a lack of skill in managing time and prioritizing. Consequently, their decisions can be easily disputed and overturned, which in turn affects their confidence as leaders, and importantly, causes them to build a bad reputation about their leadership efficiency.

Another barrier for women to lead in Saudi's organisations is ***balancing work and family responsibilities***. This is one of the most challenging obstacles for women seeking leadership positions. Therefore, women either do not seek top positions or are not considered for top positions, according to some participants.

More than 30% of participants (especially men) suggested that:

"In Saudi Arabia, women are traditionally considered for familial roles rather than professional roles and hence even for those who work in professional roles they are supposed to prioritise familial responsibilities".

Some participants said women need to:

"be able to face challenges, accept failure, show better resistance to psychological stress which may arise from the society, and balance their workloads with house loads".

Many researchers have found that women are a "poorer fit" for leadership positions due to their family responsibility (Edwards, 2016; Buckalew et al., 2012). Furthermore, the main issue with women is the difficulty of balancing professional and family obligations, which leads to them feeling that they are unable to take on a leadership role (Hodges, 2017).

A weak self-perception and underestimation of their performance is another barrier to women becoming leaders. According to Al-Ahmadi (2011), women unknowingly act in accordance with male ideals, and are thus marginalised. As they believe (culturally) in the superiority of males, they emulate them in their leadership styles. They don't think that they are able to lead differently and achieve success. According to some male participants:

"women express a feeling of inferiority towards men as leaders … if they want to lead they should lead differently … They should have their own type of leadership" (L7KAU).

Other female participants added:

"Women are unable to lead in a male environment … it is so difficult to lead men … but it is easier in a female environment …" (L8UQU).
"Women make a great effort to please others and try to avoid criticism and attack from others … they are often unable to connect with their institutional power" (L5KSA).

Consequently, the historical understanding of leadership as "command and control" is considered to be the main factor impacting on women becoming leaders in a Saudi environment.

On the other hand, most of the participants (male and female) asserted that the new generation is totally different. They are willing to take responsibility and they are very keen to take advantage of the 2030 vision that encourages empowerment in women in the Saudi labour market. A participant commented:

"The Saudi Vision 2030 captures the strong ambition of its female citizens and has the potential to successfully provide equal opportunities for them" (L7KAU).

A participant, L4KSU, looked at the situation from a different viewpoint:

"The diversity in management and leadership of organizations creates positive and sustainable value … as diversity brings new perspectives, it brings new skills, new styles and new ambitions that would bring strength to organisations".

6.4. Impact of the 2030 Vision on the Empowerment of Women

The majority of female participants were optimistic about the 2030 vision and what it could bring to them. More than 52% of the women participating in the study said that this was the only way to move forward to achieve their dream, and without a top-down decision nothing would have happened. One of the female participants commented that:

"some societies take ages to accept changes as their culture is characterised as an uncertainty avoidance culture … they don't want to change and they don't even allow the society to change … regardless of whether this change is positive or negative … Saudi culture is one of these cultures which does not believe in women and their empowerment in the labour market … let alone appointing them in leadership positions … the only way to deal with such a society is to treat them with a 'fait accompli policy'".

Another male participant added:

"Segregation became part of the history … With the new vision, many organisations had already been quietly eased in practice, with many organisations and other meeting places no longer enforcing segregation".

Many lecturers (male and female) confirmed that:

"rapid reform in the state is opening the door for women role models and leaders of the future …".
"The 2030 vision is definitely considered an opportunity, as its changes allow women in Saudi Arabia to work in various fields, which they were not able to even train in a couple of years ago. All of that is only the beginning towards a brighter future".

Despite the optimistic outlook for the majority of the participants, there are still some who are conservative about the 2030 vision. They believe that this is not enough to empower women in the labour market or to assign them as min-

sters, executives and directors.

"In the last four years, the Saudi government appointed just one woman as an ambassador … this is the only one … no more … all ministers are men … we are still at an early age when it comes to empowering women".

Some of the participants consider that the changes that have happened in Saudi Arabia lately are not fundamental ones. The government has just encouraged the public sector to empower women, nothing more. There was no clear plan accompanying the 2030 vision of how to change the masculine culture of Saudi society. Therefore, according to some participants, what happened was just an outburst with the women and will not continue. A female participant suggested that:

"the male dominated structure of the Saudi society is unlikely to change rapidly and such changes must originate at all levels: politically, socially and economically".

It is a known fact that most people don't like change. According to the cultural dimensions theory, our attitude towards change will vary by culture. Therefore, the change will be more complicated in a society characterised, according to Hofstede's (1980) study, as an "uncertainty avoidance culture". The main issue in changing such a culture is the time factor, as part of this thought (women working or appointing women as leaders) comes from their religion, where Saudis believe that Saudi women should be "encouraged to remain at home to serve their children and husbands". Consequently, if the government is serious about empowering women, they have to have a comprehensive plan on how to deal with such a culture, as even if all doors are open for women to be empowered there will still be resistance from the society toward empowerment of women.

6.5. Comprehensive Reform

Participants highlighted several reforms to overcome the problem. They considered the Saudi Vision 2030 as a solid foundation for further improvements in this regard. They asserted that the major barrier to empowering women in Saudi Arabia is an organisational barrier of women having no control. One participant suggested:

"Although I've done many training courses on leadership in various training centres such as the London Business School and IFCAM … and have the full support of my family … still my university has not opened the door yet to top managerial levels for my colleagues and I …".

One of participant added:

"Society still needs more awareness of the role of women and their effective impact in society, because policy-makers are less confident in the performance of working women, which dominates public thinking".

Many participants seek to reform the universities' policies and regulations. They confirmed that the HE ministry (as an umbrella of all universities and the one that controls and supervises all universities in Saudi Arabia) has to reform the universities' counsels. They need to develop universities' structures and policies to recruit, embed and develop women into management and leadership roles.

One of the participants stated that:

"It is a complicated situation … where the universities' counsels consists of all the vice chancellors and deans in the university … all its members are males … a university counsel is supposed to draw the university vision and strategy … not a single woman exists among them … how can they empower women then?".

Career advancement, to some extent, has not been fully articulated to the society. Although, the 2030 vision is progressively aiming towards the creation of a highly competitive and productive workforce, the public and private sector still lacks comprehensive professional development opportunities offered with regards to leadership and technical skill sets to empower women. Consequently, to achieve such an ambitious target, the government needs to have a five-year plan to effectively integrate female employees into the labour force. Many participants (males and females) asserted the need for reform of universities' structures and policies:

"All parties (policy makers and private and public sectors) should engage and collaborate to develop a policy to serve and execute what has been planned in the 2030 vision. They should be encouraged to assess existing structures, policies and programs, so as to align with women's expectations and actual needs".

7. Implications for Theory and Practice

This study has generated implications for future research on women's leadership in Saudi higher education institutions. For public policy and organisations, the findings suggest the need for institutional frameworks to help eradicate inequalities and give women autonomy in the workplace. Implementing effective strategies and policies are essential to promote the awareness among males on the importance of empowering academic female leaders, particularly in the leadership field. Also, assigning leadership tasks to academic female leaders in order to demonstrate their abilities, at least in the women's section, is a crucial step to alter the dominant views about women leaders. Furthermore, government could set up initiatives to foster gender equality in public organisations, particularly HE, where universities can play an important role in facilitating social changes within society.

8. Conclusion

Saudi Arabia is going in the right direction in terms of transformation and aims

to be a leading model of excellence in workforce development on a regional and global level. As the government announced in their ambitious Vision 2030, "*Saudi women are yet another great asset. With over* 50 *percent of our university graduates being female, we will continue to develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities and enable them to strengthen their future*". They are, four years after this announcement, on the right path to achieving their goals and objectives, although they are progressing slower than expected.

The current research provides a unique opportunity for an in-depth investigation of issues faced by working women; institutionally, culturally and economically. The primary objective of the study has been to identify the barriers to empowering Saudi women in leadership positions in higher education institutions and discuss possible solutions in the hope that the results of the study would help alleviate those challenges. This study is among the few that examine Saudi women in the workforce. The interplay among females' expected roles in Saudi society based on the sociocultural perspective of the society is evident in the participants' answers. The findings reveal a number of barriers which impact women's ability to exercise leadership in Saudi Arabia. While some of these barriers are internal, the others are external. Internal barriers stem from the nature of women, including characteristics and traits, aspirations to lead, leadership styles and the prioritisation of their family or work. Conversely, external barriers are derived from outside forces over which women have no control. These are comprised of bias and discrimination of all types (i.e. recruitment and selection), their family obligations (husbands or fathers), social expectation and organisational and/or national culture.

Although in their 2030 vision the government has addressed some issues and barriers that have prevented women from being empowered at managerial and leadership levels, a direct and wider set of actions are required to provide desirable results. In order to achieve its target for female employment, the government could be encouraged to design and implement an inclusion strategic plan and framework for the work environment. Furthermore, policy makers could create and enforce appropriate policies and regulations that enable workplace flexibility and the participation of women within the workforce. Giving women a prominent role in designing such policies is a critical factor that would ensure its success. Supporting, developing and promoting awareness of female talent and abilities is another factor that the government needs to work on. Establishing a leadership academy or centre is an important part of ensuring that women qualify for leadership and managerial level roles, thereby reducing the gap between male and female leadership capabilities. The collaboration and integration between private and public sectors are critical at this stage.

9. Study Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study have provided an in-depth understanding of Saudi women's experience in management, which might stimulate interest in con-

ducting further research on women's careers in similar contexts. However, acknowledgement of a study's limitations is an important aspect of any research. One important limitation in this study is that the data collected are based on qualitative research with a relatively small sample (due to Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak situation) of men and women managers drawn from within a Saudi HE context so the findings may not be generalized to other cultural contexts. Therefore, future research needs to be carried out using quantitative or mixed-methods research based on large samples of women in different contexts, which would allow for more information and add rigour to the results.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Abalkhail, J. (2016). Women in Management in Saudi Arabia. In R. J. Burke, & A. M. Richardsen (Eds.), *Women in Management Worldwide: Signs of Progress* (3rd ed., pp. 323-338). Farnham: Gower.

Abalkhail, J., & Allan, B. (2015). Women's Career Advancement: Mentoring and Networking in Saudi Arabia and the UK. *Human Resource Development International, 18,* 153-168. https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2015.1026548

Acker, S. (2010). Gendered Games in Academic Leadership. *International Studies in Sociology of Education, 20,* 129-152. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2010.503062

Al Ghamdi, A. M. (2016). *The Empowerment of Academic Women Leaders at Saudi Universities and Its Relationship to Their Administrative Creativity.* Doctoral Dissertation, Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University.

Al-Ahmadi, H. (2011). Challenges Facing Women Leaders in Saudi Arabia. *Human Resource Development International, 14,* 149-166.
https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2011.558311

Al-Asfour, A., Tlaiss, H. A., Khan, S. A., & James, R. (2017). Saudi Women's Work Challenges and Barriers to Career Advancement. *Career Development International, 22,* 184-199. https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-11-2016-0200

Al-Bakr, F., Bruce, E. R., Davidson, P. M., Schlaffer, E., & Kropiunigg, U. (2017). Empowered but Not Equal: Challenging the Traditional Gender Roles as Seen by University Students in Saudi Arabia. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education, 4,* Article 3. http://preserve.lehigh.edu/fire/vol4/iss1/3
https://doi.org/10.18275/fire201704011083

AlDoubi, S. H. (2014). *Road to Leadership: Experiences of Saudi Women in Higher Education.* Doctoral Dissertation, Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University.
https://mountainscholar.org/bitstream/handle/10217/82578/AlDoubi_colostate_0053A_12296.pdf?sequence=1

Al-Eisa, E. (2018). *Women's Empowerment Is Happening and Heartfelt.*
https://www.arabnews.com/node/1618216/business-economy

Alghofaily, L. (2019). Women Leadership in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Social Sciences, 8,* 14-32. https://doi.org/10.20472/SS2019.8.2.002

Alimo-Metcalfe, B. (2010). Developments in Gender and Leadership: Introducing a New "Inclusive" Model. *Gender in Management, 25,* 630-639.

https://doi.org/10.1108/17542411011092291

Al-Kayed, L. (2015). Leadership Challenges for Women Managers in Public Universities in Saudi Arabia. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science , 15,* 35-43.

Alomiri, H. F. (2015). *The Impact of Leadership Style and Organisational Culture on the Implementation of E-Services: An Empirical Study in Saudi Arabia.* Doctoral Dissertation, Plymouth: Plymouth University.

Alotaibi, F. T. (2019). *An Exploration of Issues Relating to the Implementation of Active Learning in Saudi Arabian Universities.* Doctoral Dissertation, Plymouth: Plymouth University.

Alotaibi, F., Cutting, R., & Morgan, J. (2016). A Critical Analysis of the Literature on Women's Leadership in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Business Administration and Management Research, 3.* https://doi.org/10.24178/ijbamr.2017.3.1.29

Al-Rasheed, M., & Azzam, M. (2012). *The Prospects and Limits of Women's Mobilization in Saudi Arabia.* London: Chatham House.

Al-Shaalan, M., & Kaki, S. (2013). The Mechanisms of Activating the Empowerment to Achieve Quality Performance at Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University. *Saudi Journal of Higher Education, No. 10,* 37-72.

Al-Shahrani, F. (2016). Strategies to Empower Saudi Women's Educational Attainment and Work. *International Journal of Social Work and Human Services Practice Horizon Research, 4,* 1-6. https://doi.org/10.13189/ijrh.2016.040101

Al-Shamrani, M. S. (2015). *An Empirical Study of Male and Female Leadership Styles in a Segregated Work Environment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.* Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Hull, UK: University of Hull.

Alsharif, F. L. (2019). *Empowering Women: Educational Programs and Reforms in a Diversified Saudi Economy.* Riyadh: King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies.

Al-Sheha, A. (2000). *Women in Islam and Refutation of Some Common Misconceptions.* NOOK Book (eBook) | Barnes & Noble®.

Alsubaie, A., & Jones, J. (2017). An Overview of the Current State of Women's Leadership in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia and a Proposal for Future Research Directions. *Administrative Sciences, 7,* 36. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci7040036

Alsuwaida, N. (2016). Women's Education in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of International Education Research, 12,* 111-118. https://doi.org/10.19030/jier.v12i4.9796

Blackmore, J. (2010). Special Issue: Disrupting Notions of Leadership from Feminist Post-Colonial Positions. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 13,* 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603120903242949

Blandford, E., Brill, C., Neave, S., & Roberts, A. (2011). *Equality in Higher Education: Statistical Report 2011.* London: Equality Challenge Unit.

Buckalew, E., Konstantinopoulos, A., Jonathan, J., & El-Sherbini, S. (2012). The Future of Female CEO'S and Their Glass Ceiling. *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly, 3,* 145-153.

Eagly, A. (2016). *Why Do So Few Women Hold Positions of Power?* https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/news/2016/why-so-few-women-hold-positions-of-power.html

Edwards, J. (2016). *The Barriers and Inequalities to Women Progressing to Management in the Retail Sector.* Masters Dissertation, Dublin: National College of Ireland. http://trap.ncirl.ie/2305/

Gazzaz, L. (2017). *Renaissance of Saudi Women Leaders' Achievement.* Doctoral Dissertation, London: Brunel Business School, Brunel University.

Global Gender Gap Index 2016 (n.d.).
https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2016#:~:text=Through%20the%20Global%20Gender%20Gap,2016%20Report%20covers%20144%20countries

Glowork (2017). *Women in Management and Leadership in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. Account Ability.
https://issuu.com/glowork1/docs/english-2

Gorney, C. (2016). The Changing Face of Saudi Women. *National Geographic,* 110-133.

Guest, G., Namey, E., & Mitchell, M. (2013). *Qualitative Research: Defining and Designing* (pp. 1-40).

Hodges, J. (2017). Cracking the Walls of Leadership: Women in Saudi Arabia. *Gender in Management, 32,* 34-46. https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-11-2015-0106

Hofstede, G. (1980). Culture and Organisations. *International Studies of Management and Organisation, 10,* 15-41. https://doi.org/10.1080/00208825.1980.11656300

Karam, C., & Afiouni, F. (2014). Localizing Women's Experiences in Academia: Multi-level Factors at Play in the Arab Middle East and North Africa. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 25,* 500-538.
https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2013.792857

Morley, L. (2013). The Rules of the Game: Women and the Leaderist Turn in Higher Education. *Gender and Education, 25,* 116-131.
https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2012.740888

Mulligan, C. (2019). *How to Empower Saudi Women in the Labor Force?*
https://www.kapsarc.org/research/publications/how-to-empower-saudi-women-in-the-labor-force/

Pande, R., & Ford, D. (2011). *Gender Quotas and Women Leadership: World Development Report.* http://www.worldbank.org/

Patel, G., & Buiting, S. (2013). *Gender Differences in Leadership Styles and the Impact within Corporate Boards.* The Commonwealth Secretariat, Social Transformation Programmes Division. http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/cpadocs/Genderdiffe.pdf

Powell, G. N. (2010). *Women & Men in Management* (4th ed.). London: Sage.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2012). *Research Methods for Business Students* (4th ed.). London: Prentice Hall.

Sperling, J., Marcati, C., & Rennie, M. (2014). *GCC Women in Leadership: From the First to the Norm.* McKinsey & Company.
https://es.uefa.com/MultimediaFiles/Download/uefaorg/CaptainsofChange/02/20/42/36/2204236_DOWNLOAD.pdf

Thompson, M. C. (2015). Saudi Women Leaders: Challenges and Opportunities. *Journal of Arabian Studies, 5,* 15-36. https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2015.1050880

Tlaiss, H., & Kauser, S. (2011). Women in Management in Lebanon. In M. J. Davidson, & R. Burke (Eds.), *Women in Management Worldwide: Progress and Prospect* (pp. 299-315). London: Gower.

Zinyemba, A. (2013). Leadership Challenges for Women Managers in the Hospitality and Financial Services in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences, 2,* 50-57.