Women's Leadership in Higher Education in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to explore Saudi female leaders' experiences in leadership roles in Saudi higher education. Moreover, this study offers an opportunity for Saudi female leaders to talk about barriers and challenges they face in the leadership positions in Saudi higher education. The sample consisted of 5 Saudi women leaders working in Saudi universities. The result of this research shows how female's desire for advancement is sparse resulting from internal factors created by the Saudi females themselves, that such decisions were conscious, and generated by external factors associated with their societies' and organizational practices. Furthermore, some recommendations and implications for future research were discussed.

Keywords: Women • Higher Education • Leadership • Gender Stereotyping

Introduction

In recent years, Saudi women have been making their way in ever-increasing numbers to the uppermost rungs of private corporations and public organizations, ascending to leadership roles once occupied almost exclusively by males (traditionally considered 'male jobs' in Saudi culture). However, the number of Saudi women in leadership or management positions remains small compared to their male counterparts [1]. This qualitative research aims to identify and explore the reasons behind the fact that, when women do aspire to a leadership role in Saudi HE, they are too frequently rejected for the most senior positions. In the following sections, I will discuss the research aim, problem, significance, methodology, and findings.

Aim and Objectives

This research aims to contribute to the increase the number of Saudi women who pursue leadership opportunities through increasing knowledge of what challenges women face in leadership positions in Saudi HE; because once they are understood the situation of women in leadership can be improved. Moreover, this research generates useful information for policymakers and stakeholders that can assist in re-defining policies to facilitate equal treatment of both genders at the organizational level.

Research Problem and Significance

Women in leadership and gender issues within developing countries have been the focus of many studies over the last few decades [2]. However, despite this wealth of research and publications, the Arab Gulf Countries (Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and the United Arab Emirates), especially the KSA, have received limited attention [3]. Moreover, what has been written is usually in non-academic

articles that promote stereotypical images of Saudi females as victims of oppression [2]. Thus, this study offers a theoretical contribution in terms of theorizing and increasing our knowledge of the sources of discouragement or barriers facing Saudi women who hold top leadership positions in Saudi HE.

Moreover, the researcher is a Saudi woman who was born and raised in Saudi Arabia; thus, she is considered as an insider-researcher. Insider's position and familiarity may carry the risks of blurring boundaries; imposing own values, beliefs, and perceptions by a researcher; and projection of biases [4]. However, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages as the knowledge, insights, and experience of the insider-researcher apply not only to theoretical understanding of the context, but also provide insights, rich descriptions and a detailed understanding of the situational nuances influencing the interviewees' experiences within this context [5]. Hence, the major contribution of this study will lie in its ability to explore the lived experiences of female Saudi academic leaders, offering insights into their progress and the tensions they experience as they seek in a traditionally conservative cultural environment.

Literature Review

The literature, regarding women and leadership, from a variety of Western and Eastern countries highlights that, regardless of a recent global increase in the number of females entering the labour market, a very small number of professional women hold leadership positions [6-8]. Although the growth pattern of women in the labour market and their representation in top management and leadership positions does differ across regions and countries [6] the overarching observation can be made that a substantive gender gap exists in female's representation concerning decision-making and leadership positions across many societies [8].

Historically, regardless of women achievements, certain factors have hindered them from being accepted as leaders. In majority of societies worldwide, women have traditionally shouldered the bulk of family responsibilities and remain primarily responsible for their husbands and children as well as the care of the elderly. Thus, work life balance is seen more as women issue due to the traditional mindset, where the woman is considered primarily responsible for the smooth running of the day-to-day affairs of the family irrespective of her job profile and official responsibilities [9]. This explains why managing family and work responsibilities can be very difficult for working women, more especially for women leader. Hence, a large number of highly qualified women are choosing to step down from positions of authority, as sometimes leave their careers [7].

Moreover, England's [10] research found out that in the twentieth-century

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females have progressed at a sluggish pace regarding workplace equality. However, many occupations/jobs remain as gender-gapped now as they were half a century ago. Furthermore, she notes that at any level of the employment pyramid, females continue to lag behind males in terms of pay and authority, regardless of the educational attainment and workplace seniority. Acker [11] discussed that such gender-segregated employment patterns are so tenacious because, as noted, they are built into the very organizational fabric of the workplace and work. Gender stereotypes means "generalizing behavioural characteristics of groups of individuals and then applying the generalization to people who are members of the group" [12].

One source of gender inequalities in the workforce is gender stereotyping in the form of occupational segregation [13]. Occupational segregation occurs due to there is a separation of women or men in certain employment or occupations sectors [13]. This gender separation is seen in occupations such as nursing, teaching, doctors and lawyers. Often, doctors and lawyers are portrayed as men, while nurses and teachers are portrayed as women. According to scholars in social role theory, such as Eagly (1987) and England [10,14] gender stereotyping in certain occupations/ jobs is deeply inherent in societal roles for females and males.

Number of studies showed that there is still a need to study the status of women in leadership positions [15,16] that because most individuals prefer to believe in a just world where gender differentiation is rare and success is based on merit; hence, in most instances, they will treat allegations of unequal treatment.

Unfavourably this leads to fewer reports for fear of negative repercussions, and consequently, inequity is often not noticed, challenged, or addressed [16]. In addition, Ibarra et al [17] believed that when institutes advise females to seek top management and leadership positions without addressing the subtle biases and challenges that exist in policies and practices, the companies undermine the psychological development that should take place to become a leader.

Context of the study

Saudi Arabia is at the heart of Arab countries, and the Islamic world, with a population of 31.54 million. It is the largest country on the Arabian Peninsula and is geographically located in the South West of Asia, with an area of 2,143,865 square kilometers. Riyadh is the capital city, and the main language spoken is Arabic [18].

The Ministry of Education is considered to be the central body of the Saudi Arabian higher education system. The Ministry directs universities following the country's vision while supervising the development of education and the outcomes of universities. The number of higher education institutes in Saudi Arabia totals 32 government universities and 14 private universities [18].

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), cultural, social, and religious factors play a significant role in determining the position of Saudi women, and all three combine to preserve women's status and confirm their position as subordinate members of society. However, the acceptance and the use of a sole religious interpretation of the Qur'an, to promote the authority of males is a problematic and pressing issue. Sometimes, religious and Islamic texts are interpreted literally to provide conservative religious scholars with a powerful narrative to silence women's voices, in the name of Islam. Nevertheless, recently, religious ideology has also become a tool for Saudi women, who are studying Islamic theology in-depth and are learning how to apply it to women's issues. Women are learning to use the so-called, 'legitimate language,' religious language, a language that cannot be challenged by their male peers, to attain their goals [1,18]

Research Methodology

Prior to the mid-20th century, quantitative approaches had dominated research in the social sciences. They were then challenged by qualitative research methods, which sought to delve deeper into subjective meaning-making of social phenomena, often to address matters of equity and social

justice [19,20]. Creswell [20] pointed out that "qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). In qualitative research, interpretations and meanings are mediated by human data sources as it is the subjects' realities that the researcher is trying to reconstruct [21]. In the words of Merriam [21] "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences." Van Manen [22] argued that people develop a perspective or a worldview that is determined by their environment, which includes the individuals themselves and their race, situation, gender, culture, among other factors. According to Becker [23] to understand an individual's experiences, we have to know how that individual perceives the situation, the obstacles the individual believes she or he faces, as well as the available alternatives. A qualitative researcher seeks to (a) make sense and understand phenomena from the participant's perspective, (b) serve as the primary instrument of data collection, (c) utilize an inductive process, and (d) produce a highly descriptive product [21].

In this study, as noted above, a qualitative research framework was selected because it allowed the researcher to explore the individual participants' experiences through a constructivist lens. Yin [24] claimed that the constructivist lens permits the collection of emerging themes based on personal experiences. This stands in stark contrast to quantitative methods, which seek observable and measurable objective evidence of social phenomena, using statistics and experiments.

There are various design approaches in qualitative research [24] however, all qualitative methodologies share two important elements. The first element is that the phenomenon occurs in a real-world or natural setting. Secondly, the research includes capturing enough data to study the complexity of the phenomenon [25]. This study suggested that the stereotyping of females, and bias against women is one reason for the lack of women's representation in leadership roles in universities. The intention is to thus explore how women, who have obtained top positions in higher education (HE), view their experiences of bias and stereotyping. The research question is: What are the sources of discouragement or barriers facing Saudi women who hold top leadership positions in HE?

Research Sample

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method commonly used in qualitative research [26]. Also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, it is a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers rely on their own judgment when choosing members of the population to participate in their study [26]. Purposeful sampling procedures were used to identify the research participants, as proposed by Cohen et al. [26], who argued that sampling decisions are based on the author's "judgment of typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought." Bryman [27] described purposive sampling as "essentially strategic […] entail[ing] an attempt to establish a good correspondence between research questions and sampling". Thus, individuals are selected for their relevance to the study, as guided by the study's research question, which, according to Bryman [27] "should give an indication of what units are to be sampled". In addition, purposive sampling is used to access 'knowledgeable people', for example, those who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues, maybe by virtue of their professional role, power, access to networks, expertise or experience [26].

In qualitative research, sampling, and sample sizes are considered problematic for researchers, due to the experts in research design do not agree on what is an appropriate sample [24,28]. These ambiguities and inconsistencies leave inexperienced researchers without a coherent and clear understanding of appropriate sample sizes [24,28]. According to Power and Gendren [29] sample sizes in qualitative studies tend to be smaller, compared to quantitative studies because a qualitative study is not about generalizing the data collected, it is about creating meaning from the data. In quantitative studies, sampling size logic is used to determine

the desired sample size [29]. Dworkin [30] pointed out, in her review of the requisite sample size for qualitative studies using in-depth interviews, that the literature generally recommends that anywhere from five to 50 participants is an adequate number of interviewees. Thus, the sample that I selected was elite people, including senior managers, with leadership positions in universities. This research is based on in-depth personal interviews of 5 elite females who occupy/occupied senior management positions at a number of Saudi universities.

As the researcher is familiar with Saudi universities (working at Al-Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University a Saudi public university - as a faculty member), the first steps to identifying participants were relatively straightforward. I was in turn assisted by fellow colleagues and professionals at IMSIU to identify potential study participants. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: female academics that were currently employed or had been employed in upper or middle management positions, for example, directors, deputy directors, deans, assistant deans, as well as heads of units, at Saudi universities.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Bogdan and Biklen [31] described qualitative analysis as "working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others". Patton [32] stated that no formula has been established that a researcher can follow to transform raw data into findings. He added that, "Directions can be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer". Robson [33] concurred, pointing out that, "There is no clear and accepted single set of conventions for analysis corresponding to those observed with quantitative data". Clearly, this depends on the investigator's approach to the data, along with a consideration of alternative interpretations and a presentation of the evidence [24]. Bogdan and Biklen [31] claimed that analysis is exciting because, "You discover themes and concepts embedded throughout your interviews". I focused here on analyzing the themes, rather than on generalizing the subject under investigation, in order to gain an improved understanding of "the complexity of the case" [19]. Therefore, in this study, thematic analysis is based on the principle of 'fitness for purpose' [26]. The thematic analysis defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data. It minimally describes and organizes [the] data set in (rich) detail" [34]. Furthermore, they emphasize that thematic analysis should be regarded as a method in its own right.

As all the interviews were conducted in Arabic, two further steps were directly required in the first stage of the data analysis: firstly, transcription of the audio scripts into written forms; and then translation of the written form into English. After that, I used NVivo to code each transcription in its entirety. Strauss and Corbin [35] stated that, "Coding highlights problems, issues, concerns and matters of importance to those being studied". An analysis of the interview data gave me insights into how individuals make sense of, and act upon, their own experiences. The transcripts were read line-by-line, noting down the themes, and itemizing them into categories as they appeared in the data. This technique facilitated the identification of "something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represent[ed] some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" [34]. This format assisted in the initial categorization process of the main concepts in the findings. Bell asserted that, "A hundred separate pieces of interesting information will mean nothing to a reader unless they have been placed into categories [...] grouping, patterns and items of particular significance". As a result of this analytical reflection three themes were defined: balance between family and work, social and cultural practices, and institutional policies and culture.

Balance between Family and Work

Family-related matters affect women's decision to become leaders. If family

matters become barriers to women in leadership positions, the interventions on women's relationships at home must be addressed. In Saudi Arabia women are socialized to be the ones solely responsible for domestic affairs, as nurturers and caretakers of the family and children "I have the greatest responsibility for looking after the children and home. I take care of everything related to my kids and home" (Participant 3). Saudi females have to meet traditional obligations towards their families. Irrespective of the career a woman chooses, the duties and expectations of a wife and a mother are stressed as her primary goals. As a result, women have to adjust their own lives to cope with often conflicting family roles and work commitments. The participants identified the difficulties they frequently faced while trying to juggle their personal lives and their jobs/leadership positions. In patriarchal societies such as Saudi Arabia, gender roles are fairly rigidly defined, and specific gendered expectations are deeply embedded in Saudi culture [13]. For example, participant 4 described how she is responsible for everything at home and how the only decisions her husband get involved in are on financial matters. She noted "I am responsible for everything related to [our] children. I take care of their upbringing, education, and their health. Additionally, I am responsible for cooking, laundry, cleaning, and dishwashing. And regarding financial responsibilities, they are shared between me and my husband".

Poor work-life balance is one of the reasons why women either do not seek top positions or obtain and then leave leadership position. From the following quotes, Saudi females are traditionally considered for familial roles rather than professional roles, thus they are supposed to prioritize familial responsibilities, even when they play professional roles. According to Participant 2 "I suddenly found myself detached from the lives of my kids. I was not a present mother. The moment I returned home, I was busy cleaning and cooking, and I did not sit with my children as I had before e [I got a leadership role]. My worlds started to collide, and this made me feel very sad. So, I decided to return to a job as a lecturer to devote more time to my family with less administrative responsibilities".

Similarly, Participant 1 conceded that "It was one of the most difficult years in my career. I was so happy to be a leader for two years, but I was exhausted. Before this position, I was able to keep my work and home life separate, so when I got home, I was completely present for my children, and my husband. But after this leadership position, I became very busy because I became responsible for a large number of employees and students. This sometimes caused me problems with my husband because he did not accept the idea of me being busy, and sometimes I was even answering emails and calls outside of office hours [...] so because of that I have not accepted any other leadership position since".

Social and Cultural Practices

Societal expectations, regarding appropriate careers/jobs for women, helped shape the participants' choices and restricted their possibilities. Although these women were partaking or had partaken in leadership roles, the culture was consistently described as male-centered, and one where women's leadership was not accepted or valued by others. Most the participants mentioned that the combination of tradition and culture hindered their ability to perform in their jobs and seriously influenced their professional choices. For example, participant 1 made the following observation about her experiences, worth quoting at length: "As Saudis, we have traditions and values that distinguish us from others but at the same time our culture as a male- dominant one gives freedom to men and opens doors to them, while women have some restrictions and limited access within those traditions [...] People here still uphold views that it is shameful for a woman to be in a higher position than a man, and that a man has the guardianship over a woman, and he is the manager and the leader [...] This is what we have been taught from an early age [...] Therefore, the community perception of women is a big challenge for me. Some look at me as a woman who has given up her femininity and all the associated values because I chose to be a leader".

Measuring its impact on their professional role, they viewed culture negatively and indicated with dismay that their freedom to lead had been constrained by it. Participant 4 explained how custom and tradition had influenced her throughout her whole life as well as how they played a significant role in her career progression: "The Saudi woman must be a wife, mother, and housewife before anything else. Society's view made us focus on our role at home more than our future and our success in working or studying. I know that this thing has changed now, but I am talking about my generation. From very young, we learn how to cook and clean […] we were always reminded that the best place for a woman is her husband's house". Thus, social structures attempted to steer women towards roles that were perceived culturally as appropriate for their gender.

Most participants agreed that tradition and custom generally serve to limit their aspirations rather than facilitate them. They felt that male domination overshadowed and devalued women's contributions. According to Participant 3: "So, when I was in leadership position, I was asking to have authority, but the dean of the college refused! So, I was forced to follow their orders and wait for them to allow me to make decisions. This makes me feel very sad, but I have to follow them".

Institutional Policies and Culture

It is essential to understand how the universities' policies and culture affect women's decision to partake in leadership roles. Institutional policies refer to a course of action developed by an institution to guide actions, and organizational culture refers to the beliefs and values that have existed in an organization over a period of time, and to the beliefs of the staff that influence their attitudes and behavior. Questions about what the universities are like for women leaders were asked, and the data presented that there is lack of empowerment of women leaders in Saudi HE and exclusion of women from some policies and regulations and from participating in decision-making. Most of the participants stated that women leaders were considered as followers and were expected to follow the common social roles and gender stereotypes carried through Saudi society when interacting with men in the workplace "Male colleagues see me as follower, so they do not expect any step or decision without their permission. I feel my position is available for women just because it belongs to the female's section in the business school. So, there is no true leadership for women here. This is because of our culture which gives the freedom to men and opens doors to them, while women have some restrictions and limited access within those traditions. For example, here in the business school men are leaders who have the freedom to distribute the budget according to their needs and their campus. Male leaders may say that you are a leader but actually you are following their leadership" (Participant 4).

Similarly, when analyzing Participant 3's experience, based on the structure of leadership in Saudi, she was expected to follow what men said or decided. A man had to approve of her decisions even regarding the female campus. Therefore, her experiences as a female leader forced her to receive commands from men, wait for their approval, and possibly do administrative work for a second time based on men's decisions. She concluded: "There is no true leadership for women because women follow what men say, that really makes me feel sad and unsatisfied to be in this position". That is, women must follow men's decisions and do not have the ability to truly lead. She did not stop there, adding: "Ummm. I was ready when I held a leadership position, and I knew that I would face difficulties. However, the only thing that made me very stressed is that the Vice Dean in the girls' section does not have powers compared her male counterpart! I have to ask permission from the Dean or the Vice Dean of the boy's section in order to complete the work. This is something that makes me very nervous and uncomfortable. There are some simple things that I can solve without their permission, but I cannot; I have to wait for their approval! […] Our culture influences the way we work. For example, power is still in the hands of men, and women are not allowed to possess it. Yet the work environment is beautiful for women, and we have everything we want except power".

Discussion and Conclusion

The research examined how the leader Saudi women challenged different internal and external challenges to move forward in their careers. In general, the findings of this research support previous studies and contribute to the theoretical debates around leadership and gender, by exploring other theoretical angles for discussing women's experiences as leaders in Saudi HE. The findings highlight how females' desire for advancement is generally low and frequently contradictory. Some participants chose to give up leadership roles, in favor of their family responsibilities, in response to society's prescription that 'family obligations come first'. Many women have the appropriate qualifications and skills, as well as ambition, however, are concerned that a leadership position will distract them from their personal and social commitments. One major distinguishing aspect of life for females, in Saudi Arabia, is traditional and religious values that support a conservative approach to female advancement, often resulting in cultural dilemmas where a difficult choice must be made between pursuing a career or following a traditional domestic path that ensures familial and social harmony.

Furthermore, this research generates useful information for policymakers and stakeholders that can assist in re-defining policies to facilitate equal treatment of both genders at the organizational level. Issues regarding cultural norms are emerging as obstacles to female advancement, thus, they need to be looked at closely. As Hoeritz [36] proposes, institutions should explore "the relationship between culture and women's advancement and identify cultural conditions that promote or inhibit women as leaders". In addition, Saudi universities should formulate appropriate plans to effectively encourage females in academia to seek advancement as well as strive to investigate the institutional challenges hampering the career advancement of female faculty members. Moreover, Saudi higher education needs to minimize and address the challenges and barriers that women encounter, especially by assisting them in navigating their family obligation and should strive to adopt policies that reduce the pressures female faculty members experience when seeking a balance between work and family commitments. Finally, additional future studies are needed in non-western places using samples that are usually overlooked in the literature, also more women leadership identity research should be conducted on this topic in the future.

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