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# **Women in Higher Education Institutions: The Obstacles in Reaching their Leadership's Opportunities**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Women continue to be underrepresented at universities globally, especially in leadership positions, and face a variety of challenges and obstacles even though there have been some changes to academic culture over the years (Hornsby, Morrow-Jones, & Ballam, 2012; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). In Saudi Arabia, until recently the academic sphere has been largely dominated by men. The culture and work ethic of academia has led to gendered stereotypes that have defined the government's stance on higher education (Alqahtani, 2018; Alfawzan, 2017). The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand what are the non-institutional challenges and barriers that hindering women's leadership opportunities in higher education institutions. Through semi-structured interviews with six female faculty members at a Saudi university. The research interview data provided by the women was powerful. Numerous of non-institutional challenges and obstacles were mentioned by the participants and took the form of personal, professional, and misconceptions about their abilities. In addition to these, all women shared stories and opinions about gender segregation, questioned the capabilities of women, and considered the idea of women's absence as impacts of these challenges. The findings suggest that the male guardianship law, misconceptions about women capability in workplace, and family and job obligations were the main non-institutional challenges and barriers that participants had encountered in Saudi higher education institutions.

Keywords: Saudi Women; non-institutional challenges; leadership; higher education institutions

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The "problem" of women's under-representation in educational leadership roles is not related to the lack of ambition or capabilities of women, but rather is a result of the limited opportunities created by the cultural, social and structural environments of the gender system and its consequences, from which women learned that the preferred choice in the management of higher education institutions always falls on their male colleagues (Grove & Montgomery, 1999; Kruger, 1996). Therefore, women often feel pressured and insufficiently qualified compared to their male colleagues (Kruger, 1996). Although women are capable, they experience slowed job mobility and higher job attrition than their male colleagues (Grove & Montgomery, 1999; Jakobsh, 2004).

A variety of research has been conducted on the topic of women in higher education, and the challenges women face in higher education; however, the existing research examined the non-institutional challenges that hindered women from opportunities to obtain decision making positions. This study aimed to unveil and shed light on the challenges and barriers that delay or impede women from occupying leadership opportunities available to them.

### ***Research question***

What non-institutional challenges have women faced that have hindered them from obtaining leadership positions?.

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## **2. METHODOLOGY**

To explore the non-institutional challenges that women face at a public university; the qualitative case study approach was used as a methodology. The case study approach was "chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing" (Merriam, 1988, p. 10). According to Baxter and Jack (2008), a case study approach "ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood" (p. 545). That means using this approach helped to explore the phenomenon within its context through the use of various data collection methods.

### ***Methods***

The data collection methods for this study included interviews, observations, and the review of documentation. I explored the non-institutional challenges of six full-time women faculty members at a Saudi public university by means of interviews conducted in the Arabic. The interviews were, as Yin (2009) stated, "guided conversations rather than structured queries" (p. 106).

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### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Saudi Women: Challenges and Barriers in Workplace*

AlAhmadi (2011) looked at the unique experiences and challenges that women dealt with in leadership roles and as leaders within Saudi universities (p. 151). Saudi Arabia has experienced significant transformations for women, over the last few decades. These transformations are due to the availability of more employment opportunities in the public sphere, as well as senior positions in different sectors (p. 150). The study sought to show the challenges female leaders faced in Saudi Arabia and hoped to find solutions to these challenges.

AlAhmadi (2011, p. 155) found that structural challenges are the most difficult to overcome in Saudi universities. These challenges are specifically concerned with decision-making, lack of power and lack of participation in development plans. AlAhmadi (2011) concluded that it is necessary to prepare women prior to their appointment to leadership positions, as the absence of female cohorts and the lack of empowerment is considered a major obstacle and challenge for women leaders in Saudi Arabia (p. 5). AlAhmadi (2011) also suggested that the development of a strategic plan to prepare and empower female leaders would be helpful, as it would offer women-driven social networks a way to obtain information that would enable future female leaders to face the challenges that come with any important leadership role (p. 162).

Alfawzan (2017) investigated the attitudes of Saudi society towards women in leadership positions relative to age, gender, education, incomes, religiosity, as well as region, within Middle Eastern higher educational systems (p. 7). The study showed that even with a positive perspective concerning women in leadership positions, Saudi citizens should not take the view that Saudi society has suddenly changed its conventional and patriarchal nature so quickly (p. 71). Alfawzan (2017, p. 7) believes that positive perspectives concerning women in leadership positions were constructed due to unintended behavior. Leadership by women is not an entirely new concept when it comes to the Islamic world (p. 75). The role and position of women within an Islamic culture varies, and is also affected by the level of education, religion, as well as economic situation. Within Islamic societies, issues related to gender are very common and range from the percentage of women employed, education, and the role these issues play within the wider family. The patriarchal hegemony of Islamic society has a meaningful role in the treatment of women and their position as insignificant participants in society (Alfawzan, 2017, p. 70).

Alfawzan (2017, p. 27) explains that Islamic feminism is a theory of the interpretation of Islam in a female-friendly way. In this research, the relationship between religiosity and women in leadership roles was closely examined. The study showed that many barriers to women have been linked to the restriction of women's empowerment in various parts of the cultural and organizational sphere (Alfawzan, 2017, p. 69).

Hodges (2017) discussed the challenges that professional women encounter within Saudi Arabia. Hodges explained that there are many aspects of Saudi society that impact women's leadership experiences in Saudi Arabia including the social, religious, organizational and cultural (Hodges, 2017, p. 10). The study suggested that in Saudi society, a woman's leadership opportunities were significantly hampered by misconceptions about women and their perceived lower capabilities due to their lack of leadership skills (Hodges, 2017, p. 2). The study also showed that religion played a role in the widespread and rooted misconceptions about the competence of women in managerial positions (p. 12). In a religious context, women are considered subordinate to men and the man is forced to protect and carry out her affairs, which leads to an inferior view of women. Consequently, this has affected women's opportunities in leadership and decision-making positions (Hodges, 2017, p. 10). This conservative religious view has turned into an ideology that has affected educational policies and job distribution. The various cultural and social constraints that influence this outlook has also reinforced perceptions of women and their experiences in leadership positions (Hodges, 2017, p. 11). Most of the women who participated in the study admitted that they did not yet consider themselves leaders. Gender segregation also affected the leadership opportunities of these women because women who work in an environment separated by gender have less access to communication and information which would be available to men; therefore, giving men more opportunities.

AlKayed (2015, p. 35) argued that women across the globe are not represented enough within decision making roles. For example, globally, 7% of universities had female president as of 2004. This study highlighted the many challenges that women face in reaching leadership positions in public universities in Saudi Arabia. AlKayed (2015, p.40) concluded that most of the 19 women who participated believed that Saudi society considered men to be better managers than women because they lived in a patriarchal society. The participants in the study also mentioned that in educational institutions, female managers in women's departments did not have sufficient authority to make decisions due to the centralization of power and control by male departments. AlKayed (2015) stated that women's empowerment programs must be offered to Saudi women by their educational institutions so that they may receive the training and monitoring necessary for employment in leadership and senior positions (AlKayed, 2015, p. 42). These programs would also help and encourage Saudi women to manage the obstacles and barriers safely and with confidence. The study explored the challenges that these women face in public universities concerning their leadership positions; it also suggests solutions (p. 35).

AlKayed (2015) found that Saudi Arabian female leaders dealt with numerous challenges, including long working hours, conflict with subordinates and lack of authorization in decision-making. Specifically, female managers in public universities faced the continuous change of university forms and teaching staff, interference of higher management in the work of lower-level managers, conflicting decisions, conflicting demands and a lack of coordination between decision-makers in upper management levels, a lack of available facilities for teaching staff, lack of motivation in subordinates, bureaucracy and the need to combine teaching with managerial work (p. 43). According to AlKayed, work-family balance was not a major challenge for Saudi female managers due to the dependency on servants in the home.

Abalkhail (2017) examined the perception of Saudi women leaders regarding the factors that affect their employment advancement to leadership positions within the Saudi higher education institutions (p. 165). Abalkhail (2017) argued that when examining employment development, it is crucial to fully

internalize and identify socially cultured contexts in order to better develop comprehensive human resource policies. In this study, the issue of the poor representation of women within critical leadership positions has been examined with the help of numerous concepts and terms, some discussed below (p. 167). Abalkhail (2017) argued that one of the main barriers that women face is the “glass ceiling” concept. This glass ceiling, in addition to being invisible, plays an important role in limiting the career opportunities of women, and negatively affects ambition because it hampers the ability to climb the career ladder (p. 176).

Due to the glass ceiling, women face significant barriers to leadership during their career. The modest representation of women in various sectors, such as education, has negative effects on their developing career compared to men at the same career stage (Parker, 2015, p. 4-9). Organizational and macro-level factors are the key elements that hinder career development for women. For example, women living in Saudi Arabia have been exposed to technological, organizational, cultural empowerment, and self-imposed challenges that make it difficult for women to engage in decision making (Abalkhail, 2017, p. 178; Alkayed, 2015, p. 43; Alahmadi, 2011). Without self-confidence, assertiveness, and determination, women are too intimidated to engage effectively in decision-making (Alkayed, 2015; Alahmadi, 2011). However, the problem is: How do women acquire these attributes when they do not have the opportunities to develop their leadership capacities?.

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## 4. FINDIND AND DISCUSSION

Throughout the interviews, participants reflected on the non-institutional challenges and barriers they had experienced as female faculty members. The misconceptions about the capability of women in workplace, and family and job obligations, were the main non-institutional challenges and barriers that participants had encountered in Saudi higher education institutions.

### 4.1. *Misconceptions*

In a male-dominated work environment, such as the work environment of higher education institutions, traditional gender roles and expectations usually ran rampant. In such settings, misconceptions about women in workplace prevailed. The participants in this study spoke about their experiences with misconceptions that they faced at the university.

During her interviews, one of the participants addressed how men took for granted — on many occasions — the idea that they knew how to do things better and had more knowledge than women, and men also expected women to accept that reality. She explained:

They think — and of course they are wrong — they think we are their wives. They've tried a number of times to impose their will but they cannot, thinking that we are their wives, and that we are supposed to be submissive. But we are not, we're equal, and they still cannot accept that fact.

Another problem that participants faced was the misconception that woman lacked independence and self-confidence. For example, one of the participants felt surprised when a junior administrator offered his help when she had just started a senior position. She stated:

I remember I had just taken a senior position, and a junior administrator — a man of course — and someone I was supervising, came up to me and said, ‘Don’t worry, we’ll be available for help and stand by you’ (she laughed). He confidently expected that I would be lost and weak and that I would rely on him completely. I was surprised and speechless. I just said thank you!

Women's experience with misconceptions, which were mostly about gender roles and expectations, was another big challenge that the women dealt with in their daily lives.

### 4.2. *Family and work obligations.*

All the participants described the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities, except for Sarah, who instead spoke of her ability to manage her many responsibilities. However, it was a costly decision as she could not accept a senior position due to her responsibilities at home. The participants vented about the greater number of responsibilities at their work compared to their male colleagues, especially female faculty members who worked on the women's campus.

Women all over the world suffer from gender bias and discrimination, and thus far, solutions to this problem have not been addressed (AlShammari, 2014). On the contrary, the additional difficulties and challenges increase and persist as barriers to women and their career advancement. Examples of these challenges include: a lack of training and development programs, a lack of service facilities at work, and a difficult balance between work and personal life. As a result, women turn their backs on leadership opportunities due to the fear of increased burdens, which is what Sarah, Aisha, and Hana mentioned. The lack of services and facilities available to ensure adequate care for children, and the lack of training programs and preparation for managerial work, prevented them from accepting leadership positions. They simply could not add to their burden.

Lamphere (1974, p. 81) explained the division in societies within the domestic sphere of women and the public sphere of men. According to this author, women are responsible for maintaining life at home, which include cleaning, caring for children, cooking, and the emotional work of family and extended family. It was believed that men are more suited to the outside realm, politics, economics and the military. According to Lamphere, men “have no single commitment as enduring, time consuming, and emotionally compelling as close as the relation of a woman to her infant child; and so men are free to form those broader associations that we call society” (1974, p. 81). In my research, participant Amal experienced a situation that closely resembled the issues discussed by Lamphere. Amal was asked by a male colleague why she had failed to obtain a promotion so far into her career. She responded by

comparing the obligations that society imposes on women versus men, and how men in society often do not expect other men to participate in the burdens associated with the household. This gives men a great deal of time to pay attention to matters of promotion and career development, unlike the woman who work both outside and inside the home.

The idea that women are best suited to domestic life is a social construction that has spread globally. The promotion of domestic, maternal and household roles as the real work of women limits the ability of women to attain and succeed in institutional positions, such as the universities in Saudi Arabia (Lamphere, 1974). This social construction of the public and domestic realms relates to gender performance theory and its concept of building gender dominant norms in societies through social interaction. Previous literature highlighted most of these same challenges and difficulties faced by working women, especially mothers, which include the balance between family and work, and the lack of preparation and management training programs for leadership roles (AlAhmadi, 2011; Alkayed, 2015; Tunheim & Goldschmidt, 2015). My research also suggests similar challenges and difficulties, such as negative attitudes and discrimination due to their gender in the workplace, and the unrealistic expectations of certain gender-roles that were imposed on them, which appeared in previous literature (e.g. Hodges, 2017). These difficulties often become overwhelming and sometimes unmanageable due to insufficient administrative support, in addition to professional conflicts in the work environment (Abaalkhail, 2017; Alkayed, 2015). All participants did not have sufficient or helpful administrative support. In the end, most of the women I interviewed believed that because of family and job obligations they would have to think twice before they accepted a senior position.

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## 5. CONCLUSION

Numerous non-institutional challenges and obstacles were mentioned by participants which were both personal and professional, and included misconceptions about their abilities. In addition, all women shared stories and opinions about gender segregation, questioned the capabilities of women, and considered the idea of women's absence as a type of gender performance. Most women I have interviewed suggested that men were rewarded more with less effort when compared to female counterparts at the university. At the same time, wider society also restricts women and their achievements. Notably, participants claimed that despite their effort in balancing the family and work, they received very limited recognition and appreciation. As a result, they experience daily challenges in work-family responsibilities and other daily obstacles that prevented their ability to contribute to society. Policy and decision-makers in the Ministry of Education, and Saudi universities must take responsibility to rebuild and reshape a better future discourse that will be both supportive and helpful for women.

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