WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA

LAMA ALGHOFAILY

Social Science, School of Education, University of Lincoln
E-mail: lama85@hotmail.co.uk

Abstract - Personal barriers such as lack of motivation, confidence work life balance etc. are often cited as barriers to women leadership. One of the key millennium development goals is reducing gender inequality in the society highlighting that the issue persists decades after acknowledgment of this being critical for overall human development. The state is more concerning in countries like Saudi Arabia where such issues have been left untreated due to socio-cultural pressures. As a result, these countries have legged significantly in human resource development. Overcoming this challenge requires countries to review the barriers that might be causing the problem. Saudi government has introduced several reforms within last one decade towards women empowerment such as the 2030 vision. These reforms may have improved the participation of women in workforce but have had limited impact on rise of women to leadership positions in Saudi Arabia. Past research have placed great emphasis on personal barriers such aspoor work life balance, familial responsibilities, lack of confidence etc. posing significant barriers to rise of women in leadership positions. This research looks at how these personal barriers have been influenced by the reforms undertaken by the Saudi government and what additional measures can be undertaken to overcome these personal barriers. Data for this research was collected using semi structured interviews with Saudi women working in Saudi higher education institutions. Data was thematically analysed. Results indicate that Saudi women have faced a number of personal barriers in rising to leadership positions with lack of motivation and opportunities as well as poor work life balance opportunities being the most critical of these barriers.

Keywords (JEL codes) - Higher Education, Teachers, Education and Gender, Education and Inequality, personal barriers, Gender Discrimination, Women.

INTRODUCTION

The patriarchal concept of leadership leads to indirect or direct marginalisation of women (Blackmore, 2010), even in sectors where women have considerable representation such as education sector (Blandford et al. 2011). Within last four decades the level of participation/ enrolment of women in higher education (HE) increased six fold (Morley, 2013;Leathwood and Read, 2009). However, this rise has not resulted in comparable rise in their representation at leadership levels especially in countries like Saudi Arabia where women continue to be severely underrepresented in top leadership positions (Beer, 2013 cited in Morley, 2013).

Years of neglect in this regard has led to an environment where Saudi women have enacted several personal barriers towards leadership. Saudi Arabia has undertaken a series of reforms in past decade, such as the 2030 vision, to address the issue of women underrepresentation in workforce.The main aim of this paper is to explore the Saudi women's perception of the current and future state of the personal barriers affecting women leadership in Saudi higher education institutions. The key research questions for this paper are:

- What are the key personal barriers that women face in achieving leadership positions in Saudi higher education institutions;
- How is the 2030 vision likely to affect the personal barriers that women face in achieving leadership positions in Saudi higher education institutions;
- What are the various challenges that policy makers may face in reducing/eliminating the personal barriers that women face in achieving leadership positions in Saudi higher education institutions.

II. WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION OF SAUDI ARABIA

Abalkhail (2017) looked at women leadership in Saudi higher education institutions and found that despite comparative better qualifications and experience than their male counterparts, women were less preferred choice for leadership roles. Almansour and Kempner (2016) found that women have to overcome several personal challenges and have to exhibit extraordinary commitment to overcome personal challenges in their path to leadership; for example, travelling to conferences despite the cultural and familial restrictions. Al-Asfour et al. (2017) highlighted several barriers for women attempting to rise to leadership positions such as lack of freedom to travel, gender stereotyping, restricted growth opportunities, poor consideration for work life balance etc. Such issues create both endogenous and exogenous challenges for women seeking leadership positions (Alsubaihi 2016).

As the part of the Kingdom's developmental plans, the education and employment for the women in Saudi Arabia is being vigorously promoted (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). Saudi government has undertaken some initiatives to give women more representation at higher levels but these initiatives are

mainly focused on the field of politics (Varshney, 2019; Leber&Lysa, 2018; Jarbou, 2018). However, researchers believe that women are still far away from achieving equality. Studies have identified that the number of the women in management and leadership position in Saudi Arabia was 3.2% in the year 2017 and 7% of the women are in legislative and managing positions (Account Ability, 2017). This evidence informs that gender diversity in Saudi Arabian board rooms is still very low.

Several researchers have analysed state of women leadership in the higher education of Saudi Arabia, but this literature significantly lacks the perspective of the women leaders in higher education (von Alberti-Alhtaybat, &Aazam, 2018). Although, it is known that barriers to higher education and leadership position still exist, very few studies have focused on analysing that what could be the significant barriers and what could be the motivations that encourage women to seek leadership positions in higher education of Saudi Arabia (Longman, 2018).

Saudi women are allowed to seek jobs or employment in the education system. Saudi Arabian education system is dominated by women educators, but how they perceive their position and their responsibilities as educators and organisational leaders, is to clearly known (Elliott &DeFrank-Cole, 2018).

Findings of the study conducted by von Alberti-Alhtaybat, &Aazam (2018) has identified that there are three different concepts that affect the Saudi Arabian women leadership in education. These concepts can have the negative as well as the positive influence over the leadership and its effectiveness among these women.

These concepts include, experience and expectations from the leadership position, challenges of managing the work-life balance and differential treatment at the workplace (von Alberti-Alhtaybat, &Aazam, 2018). Female leaders have the dual pressure of managing the work life balance and their positions are also significantly influenced by the differential treatments (Abouammoh, 2018).

Despite the rise in women employees in Saudi HE sector, Saudi women have not been able to achieve the leadership or senior management position in considerable number (Elliott&DeFrank-Cole, 2018; Al Alhareth et al. 2015). According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Education (2019), only one woman has achieved the highest leadership position as the director of the University in Saudi Arabian higher education. 12 women are in the position of Vice President and 61 are working as Dean and 228 women have been able to achieve the position of Deputy Dean of faculty in Saudi Arabian university(Neubauer& Kaur, 2019).

III. PERSONAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN LEADERSHIP

Women in Saudi Arabia experience similar barriers and obstacles that many other women around the world face to achieve the senior leadership positions (Sobehart, 2015). The personal barriers to the career advancement of women are significantly higher than organizational and cultural barriers (Shabbir, Shakeel, &Zubair, 2017). The social circumstances and women's personal experiences in the restricted society often affect their leadership behavior and skills. Women become incapable to exercise their leadership role effectively because of poor self-confidence, fear of taking responsibilities and difficulty to maintain the balance between the family obligations and professional responsibilities (Albakry, 2016;Tlaiss, 2014). Women in Saudi Arabia also have the sense of being isolated, when they reach the administrative positions because the structural and organizational challenges often isolate the women departments. Women in Saudi Arabia also have the increased mental and psychological pressure, because they are often subjected to social, professional and cultural pressure (Marinakou, 2014). Low self-efficacy is a major barrier that restricts women to achieve better positions in their career (Tlaiss, 2014) as their status mainly remains limited to the domestic responsibilities (Marinakou, 2014). Lack of self-confidence is a significant factor that results in fear from taking the professional responsibilities among women. Social pressure and traditional and culture problems prevent the development of the proper leadership attitude and values among women (Al-Ahmadi, 2011). Another problem associated with personal characteristics of the women is the problem of role conflict, as the women face problem in balancing professional and personal life. This is mainly due to the lack of the structural support within the organizations that creates difficulty for women in fulfilling the family obligations and professional demands (Kattanet al. 2016). Another theme identified in terms of personal barriers is the feeling of suffering and frustration, which occurs due to the increasing pressure of dual roles and sense of marginalization that affects their personality. Women often feel themselves to be inferior, because they have been brought up in the environment, where men are considered as superior and women are supposed to be passive and submissive (Alotaibi et al. 2017). Therefore, there is a mix of many personality traits that impact women leadership and ability to acquire the senior management and leadership positions. It has been found that lack of information and inclusion of women results in lack of managerial skills and information that are required to exercise leadership.
The women who aspire to be leaders in Saudi Arabia have to overcome the childhood socialization that had significantly discouraged and suppressed the

development of some important leadership qualities. Kattan et al. (2016) also state that "a popular perception of the maleness of leadership both of which tangibly reduce the chance she will be judged qualified", which means the association of masculinity with leadership affect chances of women being accepted as leaders.

IV. RESEARCH GAPS AND CONTRIBUTION

While some research has been conducted on understanding the personal barriers that affect women's progression to leadership in Saudi Arabia, further research is required to explore the impact of new policies and initiatives. Saudi Arabia is in a state of transition from conservative to liberal culture and this is leading to significant changes in these barriers as well. The announcement of the reforms such as the 2030 vision is expected to create a more liberal environment for women and consequently lead to some impact on self perceived barriers towards women leadership. However, extremely scarce literature exists which has looked at the impact of these recent changes on women's progression to leadership in Saudi Arabian HE institutions. This makes this research comparatively more relevant and accurate in present context.

It is extremely important for the impact of these initiatives to be considered on state of women leadership in the Kingdom merely because the significant changes they have brought to women leadership in Saudi Arabia (Alsubaie and Jones, 2017). Research also needs to address the issue of suitability of these initiatives. In this regard it needs to be identified as what kind of policies will be more effective in Saudi context and whether the changes brought so far can be expected to bring any meaningful long term change. How women construct their identities after these initiatives have been announced must also be explored through subjective experiences of women towards the changes in their society, family, workplaces etc. (Alsubaie and Jones, 2017). This research aims to fill these gaps.

V. METHODOLOGY

This research is primarily based on perceptual information conveyed by respondents who have personally experienced these barriers as part of their day to day lives. Consequently, this research adopts interpretivist epistemology and subjectivist ontology. Qualitative methodology was adopted due to the exploratory nature of the research questions. Data was collected using semi structured interviews.

In total 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members of 6 different female universities from Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam. The sample included only female respondents with at least 10 years experience to ensure that the respondents had full knowledge of the barriers before and after the announcement of 2030 vision. No male respondents were selected because due to gender segregation males are less likely to provide accurate data required for this research.

Thematic analysis technique was adopted for analysing the data.The focus was more on the latent content and not as much on the manifest content.

VI. FINDINGS

One of the most commonly cited personal barrier was the lack of confidence to lead. Respondents suggested that due to living in a patriarchal society where women perceive their role as subservient to men, Saudi women have over the time lost the confidence to lead. Some respondents even used words like fear, reluctance, and hesitationwhile referring to women's confidence to lead. According to respondents women have had limited opportunities to lead at the top levels and there are no references of women leaders (i.e. role models) for them to learn from leading to a great deal of uncertainty and consequently lack of confidence. Respondents suggested that they feel safer in jobs that they know well; for example, as academics. Respondents suggested that women have had little experience of playing meaningful leadership roles and consequently lack confidence in their capability to lead.

In addition to lack of confidence respondents also reported lack of motivation to lead. According to the respondents Saudi women are often conditioned into being less competitive and more accommodating right through their upbringing. Women are not taught to be leaders and consequently do not see themselves splaying leadership roles. One respondent who disagreed argued that lack of motivation to lead is not gender specific and that even some men lack motivation to lead. Generally, individuals in senior position argued against lack of motivation while those in middle management positions argued lack of motivation being a personal barrier.

Lack of interest in leadingwas also stated as one of the personal barriers by the respondents. Responses indicated that due to other factors such as perceive poor work life balance of leaders, greater accountability for decisions, need to interact with unrelated men etc. many women tend to exhibit lack of interest in leading. By far one of the most common reasons cited was perceived poor work life balance. Interestingly all of the respondents agreed that leaders have considerably poorer work life balance as compared to people not in leadership positions. Some respondents, however, suggested that those seeking leadership opportunities are well aware of the poor work life balance which is balanced by higher respect and compensation. Lack of familial support was cited

as a key reason for poor work life balance but many respondents also indicated a changing trend where more families are becoming comfortable with the idea of working women.

Respondents suggested that women face considerable societal pressurewith women at middle management levels especially getting affected by this. The societal trend of associating professional excellence with perceived lack of attention towards the family causes discomfort amongst women aspiring to be leaders. However, respondents agreed tat this is somewhat changing with families giving women more space and time for professional duties. The reforms such as increased attention and investment towards women education especially funding for foreign education has played a vital role in this regard.

Respondents also cited lack of managerial training and experience as one of the key personal barriers. This results in lack of confidence to lead as women feel underprepared for leadership positions. Some respondents suggested that women lack capability to lead but they blamed years of deliberate deprivation of leadership opportunities for women as well as poor training and support as the key causes for this lack of capability. Other respondents, however, argued that lack of capability to lead is not gender specific andnot all women lack capability to lead..

Policies and reforms: Respondents agreed that reforms such as the 2030 vision have played a useful role in lowering the perceived personal barriers. Respondents suggested that these reforms have helped in creating an environment which is more favourable for women leadership. They, however, also expressed disappointment that despite these reforms there have been little to show in terms of women leadership. For example, despite some appointments of women in policy making roles women do not yet have powerful voice representing them at policy levels. They, therefore, argued for real rather than symbolic representation at top levels.

According to the respondents, while the current reforms may be a good starting point considering the conservative cultural environment in which these are introduced but a lot of work needs to be done in order to witness any meaningful outcomes. Some respondents expressed caution while trying to comment on the 2030 vision being a game changer. According to them the focus of the 2030 vision is on overall development of the economy and society but not specifically on women empowerment. According to them, unless the government comes up with a clearly stated and specifically focused policy for women empowerment the situation is not likely to change noticeably at least with respect to women in leadership roles. According to them the male dominated structure of global society is unlikely to change soon and such changes must originate at social level rather than through political reforms.

Most respondents, however, agreed that if implemented in true spirit the 2030 vision can be a good starting point in this regard because it is likely to bring necessary organisational and cultural changes which will eventually lead to change in personal barriers. According to the respondents the major impact of the 2030 vision has been to provide more public space to women and remove the hypothetical barriers that affected social and professional lives of Saudi women. In views of the respondents, the changes brought in by the 2030 vision are likely to bring a change in self attitudes which will lead to other constructive changes for the role of women. Respondents also believed that the changes will be gradual and will become effective only if the reforms are sustained over a long period of time. In this respect the challenge for the government will be not only to implement the currently stated reforms but to sustain and even accelerate the rate of reforms vis a vis women empowerment. Some respondents argued that government should seek opinion of experienced women representatives to identify the challenges women face and ways n which these cod be overcome. For example, one of the respondents argued that government should incentives women for pursuing scientific education and give them more opportunities in this regard.

Respondents recommended more decentralised organisational structures which will expose women to some leadership opportunities as they rise along management levels. Giving women more and meaningful leadership opportunities at all levels is likely to boost their leadership skills, confidence and motivation as they grow in their career.

Respondents highlighted the need to have genuine role models for women and for this they suggested promoting current women candidates for top positions. Respondents suggested that government should look at promoting inspiring candidates for top positions so that their stories can inspire other women to follow their path to success. Allocating symbolic position to already powerful women may have limited benefits in this regard. Respondents also suggested that government should also highlight achievement of women such as through media) as this will create favourable environment for professional success of women. For example, when the top ministers recognise the achievements of women even through simple tweets, it acts as motivator for other women.

VII. CONCLUSION

Personal barriers affecting women leaders in Saudi Arabia have originated from years of social, cultural and organisational environment which gradually

eroded women's confidence, motivation and interest to lead. In addition, issues such as perceived poor work life balance have also led to a deliberate discrimination of women for leadership positions. Lack of genuine leadership opportunities in their roles has also hampered any efforts in this direction. A gradual and systematic approach to leadership development is required which means more decentralised organisation structure must be adopted in HE institutions.

This research highlighted several ways in which government and initiate and sustain its efforts towards lowering the barriers that affect women for leadership positions. Acknowledging their achievement publically motivating them to undertake more relevant and competitive education, training and supporting them to enhance their leadership skills are just some of the suggestions mentioned by the respondents in this research.

In summary, respondents indicated that government must consider the following when making policies regarding women:

- Introduce unambiguous, direct and explicitly focused policy towards women empowerment.
- Decentralise power in HE institutions to allow women to gradually develop leadership skills.
- Look at taking genuine steps rather than symbolic steps.
- Increase recognition of achievements of women at national level especially through popular media such as Twitter.
- Set a clearly stated policy along with clearly set milestones for women empowerment.

REFERENCES

[1] Abalkhail, J. M., and Allan, B. (2015). Women's career advancement: mentoring and networking in Saudi Arabia and the UK. Human Resource Development International, 18(2): 153-168.

[2] Abalkhail, J.M. (2017). Women and leadership: Challenges and opportunities in Saudi higher education. Career Development International, 22(2): 165-183.

[3] Abouammoh, A.M. (2018). The Regeneration Aspects for Higher Education Research in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In Researching Higher Education in Asia (pp 327-352). Springer, Singapore.

[4] Account Ability. (2017). Women In Management and Leadership In The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Retrieved from: https://www.accountability.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/AA-GW-Final-report-English.pdf

[5] Al Alhareth, Y., Al Dighrir, I. and Y. Al Alhareth (2015). Review of Women's Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. American Journal of Educational Research 3: 10–15.

[6] Al-Ahmadi, H. (2011). Challenges facing women leaders in Saudi Arabia. Human Resource Development International 14: 149–66.

[7] Al-Asfour, A., Tlaiss, H.A., Khan, S.A. and R. James (2017). Saudi women's work challenges and barriers to career advancement. Career Development International 22: 184–99.

[8] Albakry, A. H. (2016). Voices of women leaders in corporate institutions in Saudi Arabia, Doctoral dissertation, University of San Francisco.

[9] AlDoubi, S. H. (2014). Road to leadership: experiences of Saudi women in higher education, Doctoral dissertation, Colorado State University. Retrieved from: https://dspace.library.colostate.edu/bitstream/handle/10217/82578/AlDoubi_colostate_0053A_12296.pdf?sequence=1

[10] Almansour, S. and K. Kempner (2016). The Role of Arab women faculty in the public sphere. Studies in Higher Education, 41: 874–86.

[11] Alotaibi, F., Cutting, R., and Morgan, J. (2017). A Critical Analysis of the Literature in Women's Leadership in Saudi Arabia. International Journal of Business Administration and Management Research, 3(1): 29-36.

[12] Alsubaie, A., and Jones, K. (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(4). 36.

[13] Alsubaihi, S. I. (2016). Challenges for Women Academic Leaders to Obtain Senior Leadership Positions in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia, Ann Arbor: ProQuest.

[14] Blandford, E., Brill, C., Neave, S. and Roberts, A. (2011). Equality in Higher Education: Statistical Report 2011. London: Equality Challenge Unit.

[15] Boohene, D., Charles, R.-O., &Agyemang, M. (2012). A Critical Study on Work – Life Balance. A Case of Teaching Faculty at Loyola Institute of Technology and Science, India and All Nations University College Ghana. International Journal of Social Sciences, I(1), 22–34.

[16] Elliott, J. D., and DeFrank-Cole, L. (2018). Recruiting women to work in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Challenges in leadership and cultural intelligence. SAGE Publications: SAGE Business Cases Originals.

[17] Gazzaz, L., (2017). Renaissance of Saudi Women leaders' achievement, Doctoral dissertation, Brunel University London.

[18] Hodges, J. (2017). Cracking the walls of leadership: women in Saudi Arabia. Gender in management: an international journal, 32(1):34-46.

[19] Jarbou, R. (2018). Know your enemy: the Saudi women's driving campaign from flyers and faxes to Youtube and hashtags. Feminist Media Studies, 18(2): 321-325.

[20] Kattan, M.M., Heredero, C.D.P., Botella, J.L.M. and Margalina, V.M. (2016). Factors of successful women leadership in Saudi Arabia. Asian Social Science, 12(5): 94.

[21] Leathwood, C., and B. Read (2009). Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education: A Feminized Future? New York: SRHE/Open University Press.

[22] Leber, A. M., and Lysa, C. (2018). Onwards and Upwards with Women in the Gulf. Middle East Report.

[23] Longman, K. A., Ante, A. And R. Remke (ed) (2018). Perspectives on Women's Higher Education Leadership from Around the World. Special Issue Published in Administrative Sciences, Retrieved from https://www.mdpi.com/books/pdfdownload/book/795

[24] Marinakou, E. (2014). The glass ceiling and women in management in the Middle East: Myth or reality. In: Finance, Economics, MIS and Global Business Research Conference, 11-12 December 2014, Miami, Florida.

[25] Ministry of Higher Education. (2010). Women in Higher Education: Saudi Initiatives and Achievements. Retrieved from: http://womeninscience.rasit.org/files/women_in_higher_edu_Saudi_Arabia.pdf

[26] Ministry of Higher Education. (2013). Higher Education Statistics Centre, Saudi Arabia, Retrieved from: http://www.mohe.gov.sa/ar/Ministry/Deputy-Ministry-for-Planning-and-Information-affairs/HESC/Ehsaat/Pages/default.aspx

[27] Ministry of Higher Education. (2019). Higher Education. Retrieved from: https://www.moe.gov.sa/en/Pages/default.aspx

[28] Morley, L. (2013). The rules of the game: Women and the leaderist turn in higher education. Gender and education, 25(1): 116-131.

[29] Morley, L., and Crossouard, B. (2015). Women in higher education leadership in South Asia: Rejection, refusal,

reluctance, revisioning. Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research, University of Sussex, Retrieved from: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/british-council-women-higher-education-leadership-south-asia.pdf

[30] Neubauer, D. E., and Kaur, S. (Eds.). (2019). Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education in Asia Pacific. Springer International Publishing.

[31] Shabbir, H., Shakeel, M. A., and Zubair, R. A. (2017). Gender stereotype, glass ceiling and women's career advancement: An empirical study in service sector of Pakistan, Retrieved from: http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/bitstream/2438/14736/1/FulltextThesis.pdf

[32] Sobehart, H. C. (2015). Women leading education across the continents: Overcoming the barriers. Rowman and Littlefield.

[33] Tlaiss, H. A. (2014). Between the traditional and the contemporary: careers of women managers from a developing Middle Eastern country perspective. The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 25(20): 2858-2880.

[34] Varshney, D. (2019). The Strides of the Saudi Female Workforce: Overcoming Constraints and Contradictions in Transition. Journal of International Women's Studies, 20(2): 359-372.

[35] von Alberti-Alhtaybat, L., and Aazam, S. (2018). Female leadership in the Middle Eastern higher education. Journal of Economic and Administrative Sciences, 34(2): 90-107.

★★★