AN INSIGHT TO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SAUDI FEMALES IN LEADERSHIP

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Abstract:

Women leadership plays a vital role in country's economic growth and community development but their participation in leadership roles in Saudi Arabia has been well below compared to the global average. In this context, current study aimed to explore the lived experiences of female Saudi leaders through their perspectives, and to understand the factors that may influence on their leadership journeys. Study comprised of interviews of 10 female leaders selected in a purposive sampling approach from the educational sector through structured questionnaires. The acquired data was analysed using NVivo software using thematic content analysis. The findings are discussed in the form of themes related to the impact of family relationships, socio-cultural and policy context of Saudi Arabia, and workplace environment on the leadership journeys of women.

Keywords:

 Women, Gender, Leadership, Empowerment

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Citation:

Introduction

Emerging research has indicated that there is a positive relationship between a country's economic growth and women in leadership positions (Duflo, 2012, Sidani et al., 2015). Also, women leaders are found to have a direct and positive impact on community development (Hassan and Silong, 2008), company performance (Flabbi et al., 2019), and Corporate Social responsibility (Harjoto et al., 2020). Yet, studies from across the world show that women hold only 24% of senior leadership positions (Serafin, 2013), and form only 4% of CEOs of the S&P 500 companies (Catalyst, 2020) .In government as well, only 21% of ministers are women, with a majority of them carrying portfolios like family, children, elderly and disabled (Women;, 2020).

In the KSA, over 600,000 women are employed, which is less than 25% of the total female population as compared to the 81% rate for the male population (Bank;, 2020). The data on women in leadership positions is striking, with only 8% of women in leadership roles as compared to 92% of male leaders in the country (OECD‹, 2019). Though Forbes Middle East has listed five female leaders from the region (Forbes, 2018), it is undeniable that female participation in leadership roles in the region is well below the global average, and more so, for the KSA. There are only 0.7% women board members on Saudi Arabia's TASI (Tadawul All Share Index) (OECD‹, 2019), only one female cabinet minister and few females in leadership positions in government organizations. In summary, there is scope and need for improving female participation in leadership roles in the KSA. The government is committed to this, as reflected in its Vision 2030, and numerous initiatives and policy changes are already on the way (Women, 2020). Nevertheless, it remains to be explored the underlying reasons for low female participation in leadership roles. Numerous scholars have focused on the subject, but predominantly from a Western context, which leaves scope for research in the exclusive context of the KSA. A deeper understanding of the journey that women have to undergo to attain leadership positions, and an exploration of the obstacles and support presented by family relationships, the work environment and the wider cultural context including the policy context is needed.

Within this context, current study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of women leaders during the leadership journeys. The main aim was to explore the impact that their family relationships, the broader socio-cultural and policy context of the country, and the workplace environment, may have had on this journey.

1.   The View from Published Literature

Leadership theories range from trait and style theories to those of transactional or transformational, and more recent, authentic/entrepreneurial, but almost all the theories conceptualize leadership as a characteristic or behaviours that a person seems to possess or display (Ford et al., 2017). The understanding of leadership as a journey of becoming a leader, is, however, less explored or understood, especially in the context of women leaders The current study builds further on the concept of leader as a dynamic concept - as women become leaders after following a journey of learning and adaptation through their life experiences (Fought and Misawa, 2019) .Female leadership, though not studied exclusively within this context, can still be captured as the lived experiences of women leaders through the prisms of their personal traits and learned behaviours within the institutional paradigms of socio-cultural environment (family and larger society) and policy environment (governmental policy and workplace norms).

1.1. Family Relationships

Family dynamics have been studied for their impacts on many aspects like workplace engagement/performance/leadership (Mango, 2018). However, these are more studied in terms of broad, generic impacts, and do not study from the perspective of female employees aspiring to become leaders. Most available research seems to be from the educational sector, where female leaders' aspirations are explored and analysed in terms of barriers and facilitators in their lived experiences. Ellinas et al. (2018), perceived family-work conflict had a negative correlation with leadership aspirations among women (but not for men) among faculty members in academic medicine. Similar results have been reported by Fritz and Knippenberg (2020), who suggests making workplaces more supportive in terms of flexible working hours, leaves, and on-side child support to encourage female employees to aspire for more leadership positions. Brue (2018) contends that women are likely to feel strain when they are not able to balance their work and non-work roles, time-spent in each role, or when they are not able to adjust their behaviours between the two roles. In the context of Saudi Arabia, family dynamics are rooted in traditional gender roles, which require women to prioritize their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters overwork (Alsubhi et al., 2018), and support and understanding of family members, may play a crucial role in developing (or de-motivating) leadership aspirations for females. Women are less likely to aspire to roles of leadership and responsibility due to lack of family support for household work and pregnancy and are also limited in terms of mobility - which may restrict their accepting promotions or roles that require travel (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). However, women who have experienced equality within their homes in terms of equal treatment to their male siblings, support of their parents, socialization with education, are likely to aspire to leadership and excel at it (Al-Suwaihel, 2010).

1.2. Socio Cultural and Policy Environment

The overall culture of the country impacts gender roles and expectations, and how women are perceived or how they perceive themselves (Johnson, 2017). Positive Self-efficacy, a characteristic essential for leadership, is largely melded through cultural role models and is limited by religious or cultural beliefs (Al-Suwaihel, 2010). Within the larger society or culture, women's roles are pre-defined, and often contrast with their aspirations (Abolade, 2014). This has been especially apparent in the Arab world, where traditional gender roles and women's perceptions about themselves and career development are melded based on tribal and religious cultural underpinnings (Johnson, 2017) .Additionally, a case of self-fulfilling prophecy is also operational, as women may be expected to underperform, be less than their male counterparts, and end up with less sense of self-efficacy and low confidence that acts as a barrier to leadership aspirations (Mango, 2018) .However, within the broader cultural backdrop, if there is a conscious and deliberate effort from the government to bring about a transformation in the society, the position of women can likely change. This has been observed in the context of the KSA Vision 2030, which aspires to place more women in employment and create conditions that support and facilitate female leadership at all levels and sectors (Naseem and Dhruva, 2017).
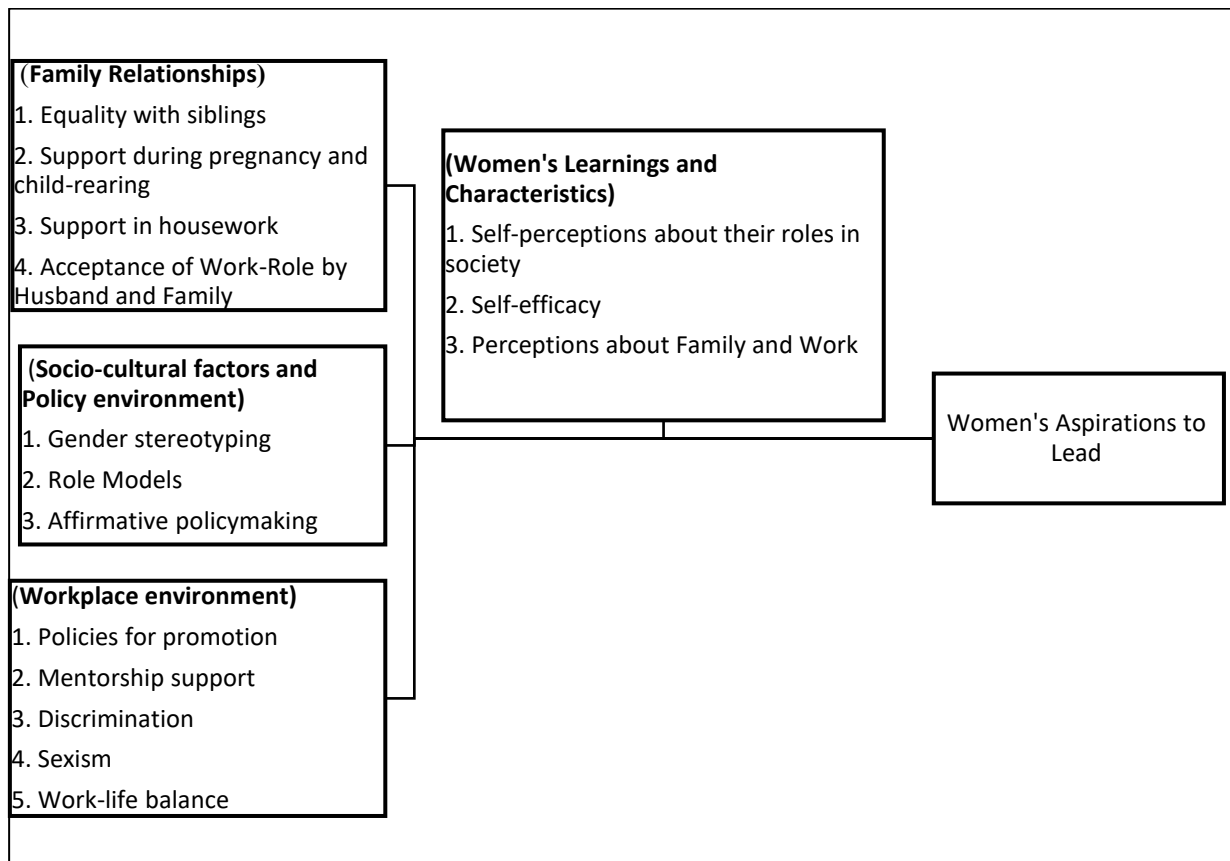
1.3 Work Environment

According to Ellinas et al. (2018) women who perceived their work environment as supportive were likely to seek and aspire to leadership roles. Similarly, Calderwood et al. (2016) found that women possessed both credentials and desire for leadership, though their overall representation in the workforce limited the absolute numbers of female leadership aspirants. According to Zhuge et al. (2011), women have the skills, intellectual capital, leadership aspirations, and leadership efficacy once in position, but the gender gap in leadership is the

result of organizations' perpetuating traditional gender roles, sexism, and lack of mentors for female aspirants.

Work culture largely derives from broader country culture, which means that women face similar expectations or presumptions at their workplaces. This is likely to be truer in the context of public or governmental organizations, like KSA's governmental institutions that are hierarchical and managed traditionally and per the regional sensibilities (Naseem and Dhruva, 2017). Research from Saudi Arabia has found that women leaders face barriers like gender-based stereotypes, social networking limitations, and biased organizational policies (Alsubhi et al., 2018). Al-Asfour et al. (2017) have reported that gender discrimination at the workplace and limited development opportunities are some of the barriers faced by women who aspire to become leaders in KSA organizations. Often, there are a systematic bias inbuilt organizations' policies related to promotions.

1.4   Gaps and proposed Conceptual Framework.

Some of the gaps that emerged from research indicate a lack of studies that have focused on female leadership in KSA from the comprehensive perspective of impacts of factors on the leadership journey of women. These factors can be related to their family relationships and family dynamics, the broader socio-cultural environment and policy development, and the workplace environment. Extending this conceptualization, Figure 1 is defined in the following manner:

(Family Relationships)
1. Equality with siblings
2. Support during pregnancy and child-rearing
3. Support in housework
4. Acceptance of Work-Role by Husband and Family

(Socio-cultural factors and Policy environment)
1. Gender stereotyping
2. Role Models
3. Affirmative policymaking

(Workplace environment)
1. Policies for promotion
2. Mentorship support
3. Discrimination
4. Sexism
5. Work-life balance

(Women's Learnings and Characteristics)
1. Self-perceptions about their roles in society
2. Self-efficacy
3. Perceptions about Family and Work

Women's Aspirations to Lead

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Female Leadership Aspirations in the KSA.

2.   Methodology

A total of 10 participants were sent the questionnaire in a hard-copy format, and their responses collected after a gap of week. Participants highlighted problems they were having

with some of the terms used in the questions. The language needed simplification to increase clarity. As a result, the content was adjusted to make it simpler and clearer. It was also agreed that the survey be distributed online in order to access more participants within a short time. A summary of selected participants in current study is given in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Description of participants enrolled in current study

Name	Marital status	Employment	Education level	Occupation
1	Divorced	Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia	Master's	Manager
2	Married	King Abdulaziz University	Doctorate	Vice-Dean
3	Married	King Abdulaziz University	Doctorate	Vice-Dean
4	Married	King Abdulaziz University	Doctorate	Vice-Dean
5	Married	King Abdulaziz University	Doctorate	Vice-Dean
6	Married	Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia Cultural	Master's	Manager
7	Married	Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic	Doctorate	Vice-Dean
8	Married	Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic	Master's	Vice-Dean
9	Married	Princess Nourah Bint Abdul Rahman	Doctorate	Vice-Dean
10	Married	Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University	Master's	Vice-Dean

Using a Constructionist paradigm this research used qualitative data collection methods, Data was collected using an interview method with semi-structured questionnaire that was developed from insights gained in the available literature. The qualitative interview method allows for obtaining contextually rich information from the perspectives of the participants and enables the construction of their reality (Gaus, 2017). Since there was a paucity of research focused on the lived experiences of Saudi women leaders, and of women leaders in general, the interview questions were developed with the underlying aim of capturing memories, thoughts, and experiences of participants about growing up as a girl child in parental homes (as previous research had indicated a link between upbringing and leadership qualities later in life (Fought and Misawa, 2019), and how the marital home environment and duties impact on their leadership aspirations and efficacy (based on prior research on gender roles and leadership (Fritz and Knippenberg, 2020). Additionally, the questions were also related to exploring their perceptions about Vision 2030, and how its promulgation may be impacting their experiences as women leaders, both directly through the policy environment and indirectly through bringing about a transformation in their socio-cultural and family context. Further, there is substantial research that has found impacts of workplace environment and culture on women employees' career development (Dresden et al., 2018, Cross and Linehan, 2006, Kuchynka et al., 2018), and these were also included in the questionnaire. Since the interview questionnaire was developed eclectically, and not based on any standard scale, its validity was established by conducting a pilot study, which included two respondents. The findings from the pilot were used to gain insights about the effectiveness, relevance, and credibility of each of the questions, and then to modify or reword them. Thematic Content

Analysis was conducted on the interview responses by using the SPSS software. The interviews were conducted in Arabic but were translated and transcribed in English that were used for generating the themes that emerged from the findings.

A purposive sampling method was used for two reasons. One, since women leaders in Saudi Arabia form a small percentage of the overall workforce, it was difficult to find an adequate number of female leaders in a random sampling approach, as that would have required access to all organizations in the country that have female leaders, or access to a large pool of such women through social media or other platforms. Secondly, since the research involved interviews, the researcher needed to include women that were accessible, available, and ready to participate in the research. Moreover, these factors (accessibility, availability, and readiness of the participants are especially important when the research aims to explore the lived experiences and journeys of the participants (Dodgson, 2017), and where the opinions of the participants are placed at the center and reality is developed based on their collective perceptions (Gaus, 2017). A purposive sample, therefore, allowed the researcher to select the Saudi women leaders who were available, in high positions in their workplaces and were eager to participate in the research. A total of 10 such leaders were selected for the final interviews.

2.2   Data Collection – Qualitative media portal

In order to include the context related to the influence of the society on the Saudi female

leaders' journey, the current study used an additional method for collecting data, in the form of articles in the electronic media. As such, for this phase of the study, data was obtained from various sources that were drawn from news portals. The media articles were included in the research as according to Pinkleton and Austin (2002) one of the functions of media is to be a recorder of events, sentiments, and changes in the society as they unfold. Media news is portrayed as "real data," as it is based on facts and backed by evidence (Hayles, 2004). As such, media was considered to be an adequate source of authentic and credible information and current perceptions around growing concepts and ideas in a society (Panayiotou, 2021), including about Saudi Arabian women in leadership roles. The study used various news articles drawn from *Al Arabiya, Arab News, and News Saudi Arabia news portals,* as these have wide readership and are noted for their authentic coverage. The data from the news portal was also helpful in ensuring that the political developments and changes in issues surrounding career and professional progression of Saudi women in leadership roles were tracked and analyzed (Thomas et al., 2015). The sources were carefully selected from the leading Arabic channel portals to explore the current issues and the topic under investigation. The selection process for these sources followed a strategy that involved both inclusion and exclusion criteria. The papers that were chosen had a large daily distribution and wide-ranging routes, which made them ideal to quickly disseminate data on women's development to millions of people, and hence, they carried immense potential as sources of creating awareness about change.

The articles that were included from the selected newspapers were published between June 2020 and September 2020. This time period was selected based on the following reasons:

§   In the beginning of the year 2020, a discussion about women's abilities and how to be

more certain and successful in the Saudi Arabian economy was gathered.

§   During this period, the nature and scale of women's investments have undergone great

changes.

§   During this period, people have seen the expansion of Saudi ladies' interest in a wider public and wider communication.

The search terms that were used to locate the articles included: "Saudi women," Saudi female drivers," "Saudi and UN Women." "Empowerment and Inclusion of Saudi women," "Saudi Vision 2030", "Historic ruling for Saudi women," and "Gender gap in Saudi." Articles that were included needed to be in the form of opinions or surveys and directly related to the role of the women in strengthening the economy. Articles that were merely literary or based on other issues related to women (not concerning leadership roles), were excluded. Additionally, various news highlights, articles, reviews, editor's letters, reviews, and commercials carried in the *Al Arabiya, Arab News, and News Saudi Arabia news* portals were also studied and applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria to choose the item of interest for analysis. A total of 25 articles were thus selected for analysis. Qualitative research about Saudi women would give an in-depth analysis to answer this study's research question. The qualitative thematic content analysis of the media articles focused on how the articles reported on Saudi women and provided an understanding of the wider opinion and perceptions regarding women leaders' roles and journey in public sector and within the context of the Vision 2030.

2.3   Ethical Approval of Study

The research adopted all ethical considerations like informed consent, data integrity, safety and security of the participants, privacy, and confidentiality of responses. Ethical consent approval was attained from university of Brighton prior to conducting the research.

3.   Results and Discussion

As a key objective to *understand the impact of family relationships in the journey of women leaders in Saudi Arabia,* the research found that early childhood families played a crucial role in developing leadership qualities in women by creating an environment of gender equality, giving freedom, encouraging decision making, and providing a supportive influence. Later in life, post-marriage, gender equality at home, gender role flexibility, and availability of child-care support had an impact on female leaders' journey. This is in accordance with what has already been found in studies by other scholars, where availability of family support and practical hands-on support for managing home responsibilities, has been found to be linked with positive impacts on female employees career progression (Afiouni, 2014, Cross and Linehan, 2006, Powell and Mainiero, 1992). A structured layout of role of family in women's leadership journey is provided in **Figure 2**.
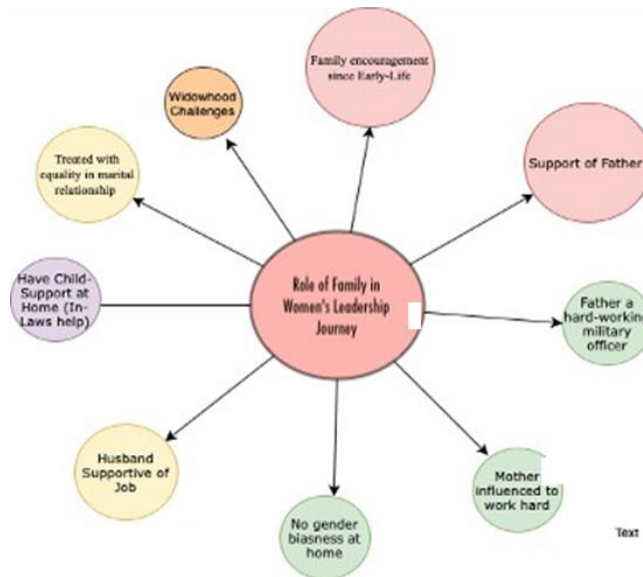
Figure 2: Role of family in women's leadership journey

The next research objective, *To explore the impact of social, cultural, and policy-environmental factors in the journey of women leaders in Saudi Arabia., was attained Successfully as* the research found that there was a change between the pre-and-post Vision 2030 promulgation, both in terms of direct enhancement in opportunities for women leaders through policymaking and institutional support, as well as through a slow and steady change in the Saudi society, that was becoming accepting and supportive of female ambitions. Findings related to socio-cultural impact on women leadership are given in **Figure 3**.
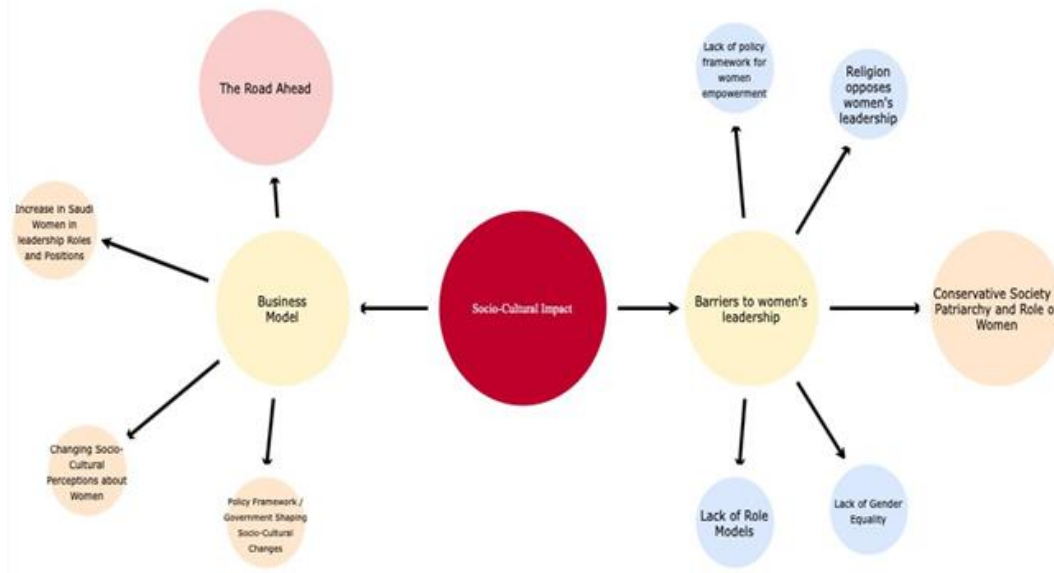
Figure 3: Socio-Cultural impacts on women's leadership

The final research objective *To explore the impact of the work environment in the journey of women leaders in Saudi Arabia* Workplace environment appeared to be experiencing a very slow transition, as women reported a continued presence of informal discriminatory practices like not allowing women leaders to take independent decisions without consulting with male counterparts; not giving credit for work done; having to work more and harder than male colleagues for the same posts, and being forced to choose between work and home duties. These findings are similar to what has been found in previous studies, though mostly in a

Western context. Worldwide studies have reported the continued existence of a hostile and discriminatory work environment for women (Dresden et al., 2018, Kuchynka et al., 2018), that has impacted negatively on their leadership aspirations (Pacilli et al., 2019, Wolfers, 2017).

Key Factors responsible for job success

Some of the notable factors that were cited by the respondents included Commitment (24), Training (17), Honesty (12) and Teamwork (10). Continuous improvement and company management were also quoted by 9 respondents each, as leading to progress in their careers. As seen from the following **Figure 4** below. The findings indicate that majority of the respondents believe that commitment to their jobs (16.7 %) and getting adequate training (11.4%) are the factors that can lead them to turning points in their careers.
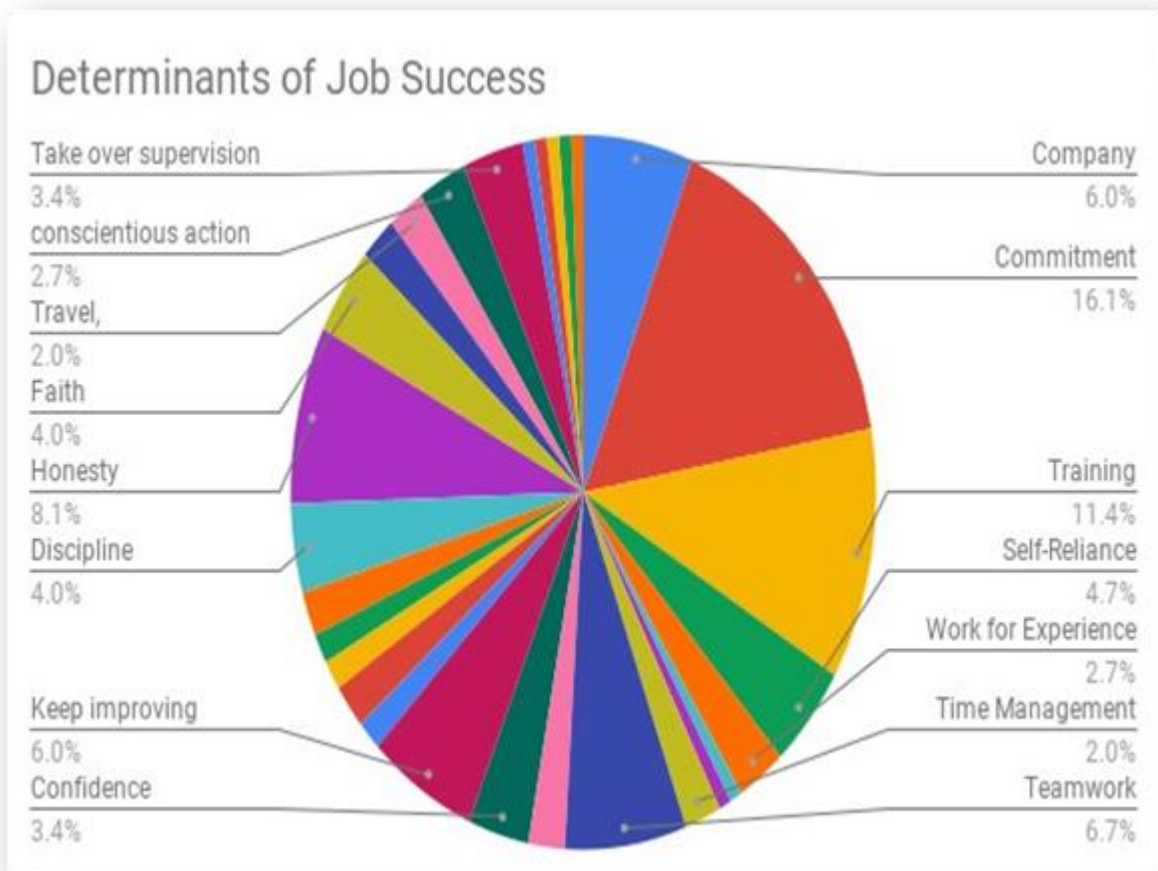

Figure 4: Key determinants of Job success

More specifically, the respondents believed that for women to achieve leadership positions, they need to have diligence (17) which is again closely associated with commitment and perseverance (16); and that they also need to have qualification (16). Experience (12), ambition (10) and productivity (9), were additional factors quoted by the respondents for women leadership. Diligence, reported by 11.3% of the participants as depicted in the following **Figure 5** was the most cited attribute that could lead to women achieving leadership positions in Saudi Arabia, followed by perseverance (reported by 10.7% of the participants).
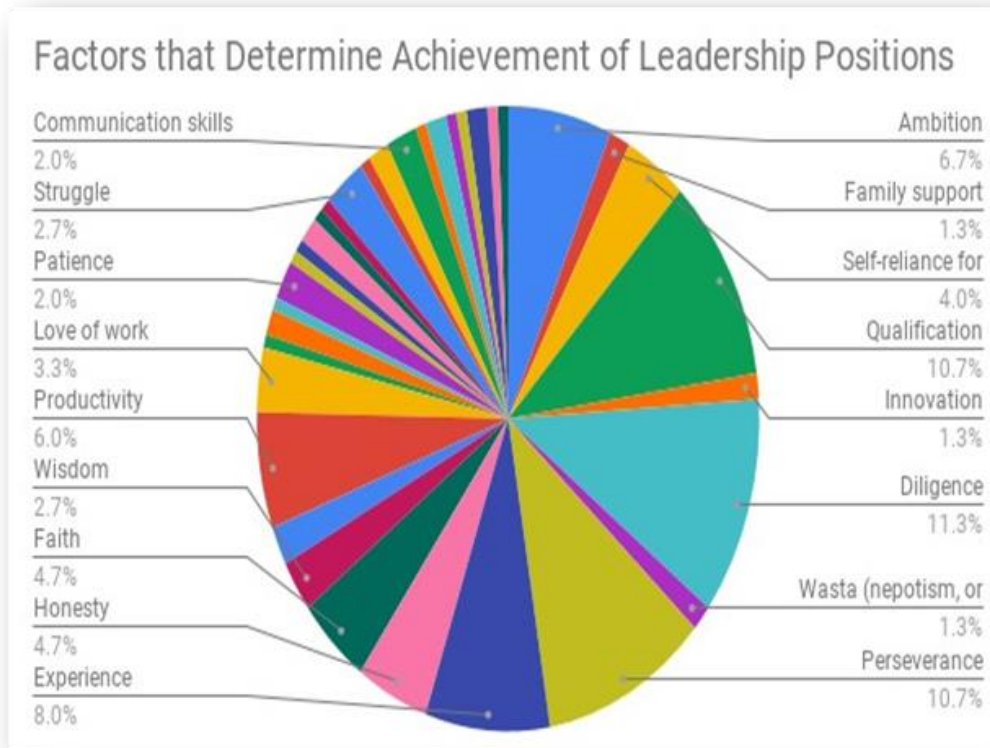

Figure 5: Factors that Determine Achievement of Leadership Positions

Majority of the respondents stated having the quality of 'wisdom' (27) as most important for a person to become a good leader. This was followed by Honesty (23), Team Builder (22), being Fair (16), Moral Strength (14), Patience (13), Objectivity (12) and compassion (11). It is evident from the responses that majority of the participants recognized factors that can be attributed to a transformational leader, as essential for good leadership. Wisdom, reported by majority of respondents (11%) was therefore the most acceptable quality of being a good leader in women. This was followed by qualities like being honest (reported by 9.4% of the respondents) and being a team builder (9% of the respondents). The following **Figure 6** also highlights additional qualities that were reported included being fair (6.5%) and having moral strength of character (5.7%). It needs to be noted that characteristics like being assertive, having confidence and being firm were not mentioned by many respondents, as essential qualities for female leaders.
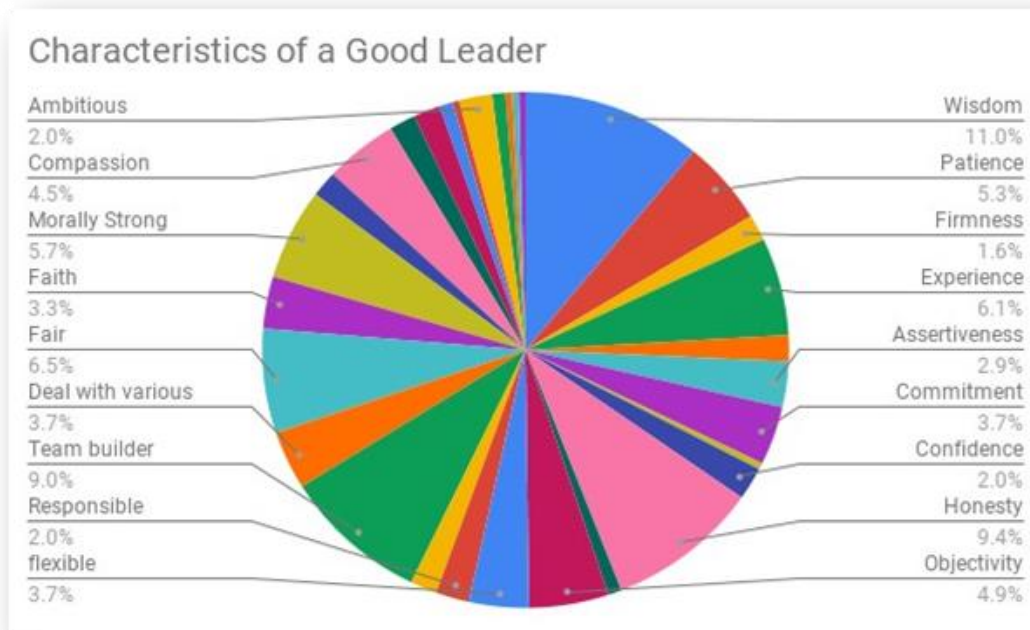
Figure 6: Characteristics of a good leader

The survey also asked the respondents about their perceptions regarding the factors that help or hinder women to achieve leadership roles. It was evident that family support and workplace policies and overall socio-cultural acceptance of women being ushered in Saudi Arabia post Vision 2030, were the factors that were acting as facilitators for women leadership. However, practices like Wasta and favouritism still continued to negatively impact on women leaders' aspirations. The most powerful factor cited by 35.2% of the respondents as seen in the following Figure 4.4, was family support - which, when present could act as a facilitator, and when absent, can hinder women's leadership aspirations. Additional factors cited included favouritism (24.2%), which was cited as a negative impact since women were likely to get discriminated against for their gender; and Wasta (12.1%), where women were likely not have connections that could help them along their career growth. A positive factor that was reported by 19% of the respondents was the change in policies and culture of the country (**Figure 7**).
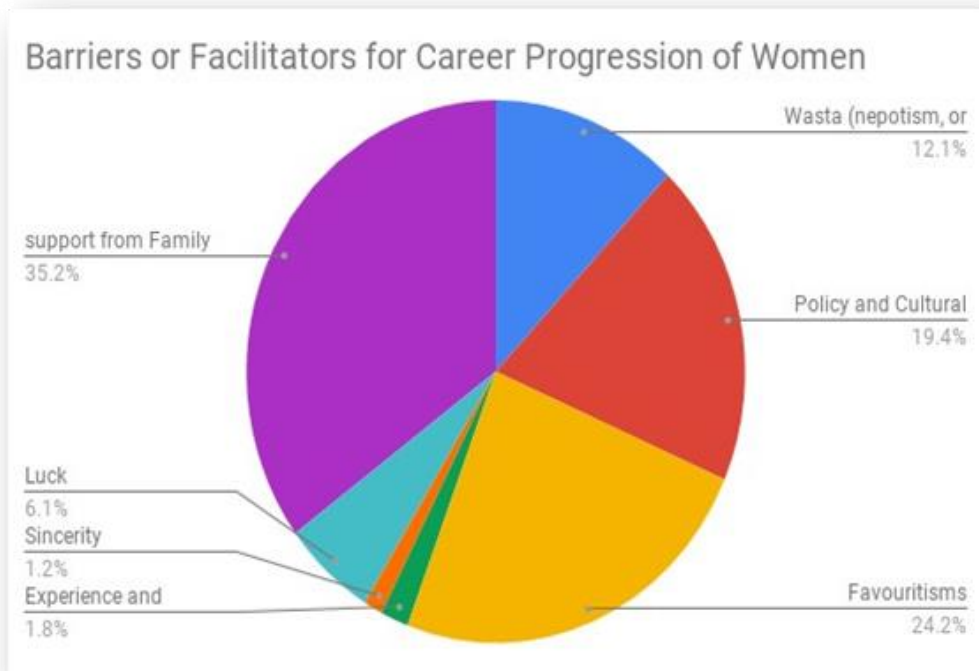
Figure 7: Barriers of facilitators for career progression in women

Both the interviews and the surveys revealed that post-marriage, the support of the husband, both emotional as well as practical support in terms of household duties and child- care support, was crucial for the Saudi leader's success. These findings are therefore reflective of what is already been researched in the Western context about female leadership success or female employees performance that early childhood experiences as well as later life experiences with the family impact on their success (Kattan et al., 2016). According to the semi-structured interview respondents, one of the direct consequences of gender segregation, in particular, the culturally assigned primary role of women of raising children and being good wives (familial role), is the difficulty of having to balance work and family roles in their quest to climb the leadership ladder. They described it as one of the most challenging things they have had to face, which sometimes filled them with remorse and shame is when they had an inkling that they were placing their work ahead of their obligations to their families. There is no direct reference to this dilemma facing family women leaders in the media portal and questionnaire survey. However, it is instructive that the former cites government officials during a G20 women engagement group meeting in Riyadh advocated "*for the promotion of equal rights for women and men, including paternity leave and improved childcare services, to increase the sense of responsibility among Saudi families*" (Arabian News on 9 July 2020).

This indirectly acknowledges that the disparity in rights between the sexes in this area still exists. The story of a woman arrested for leading an independent life without her father's permission confirms the deeply rooted nature of conservative cultural values in Saudi Arabia.

Scholarly research, on the other hand, has it that some female leaders have had to abandon their careers because of the inner guilt of having neglected their families, especially with *Ulamas* being quick to label them contrarian (Alghofaily, 2019). This facet of gender segregation persists even after the announcement of a raft of reforms following the promulgation of Vision 2030 and remains one of the significant impediments to Saudi female leaders' career progression. So strong was the *Wahhabism*/State conflation over the years

before the social renaissance that the assignment of the familial role to women has remained strongly etched on their minds even during the renaissance era wrought by the promulgation of Vision 2030 and its attendant reforms, as evidenced by the responses of interview respondents and media portal stories.

The majority of the interview respondents contended that the Saudi Arabian conservative culture's social aspects were among the most significant impediments to women assuming leadership positions. The characteristic response was that the decision-makers, the customs, and traditions are masculine, forcing women to work harder than men to prove their equality – a view which was confirmed by both the questionnaire survey respondents with a 67.75% affirmation and is also corroborated by the extant literature (Kattan et al., 2016 ; Alotaibi et al., 2017; Alshalawi, 2020). It is instructive that according to the Arabian News in the media portal, as late as 9 July 2020, government officials were still advocating for the removal of discriminatory, gender-based labour laws and the promotion of equal rights for women and men at a G20 women engagement forum and that the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development only made an Order for equal pay between men and women in September 2020 notwithstanding the fact that Vision 2030 was promulgated in 2016. Attendant reforms were announced immediately after that. All this confirms the absence of equality of opportunity between men and women, leading the latter to work harder to prove equality. This also opens scope for positive action, by way of quotas or reservations for women in leadership roles, and area that may be useful for the government to explore.

4.   Conclusions

The research concluded that Saudi women leaders' lived experiences on their leadership journey are both positively and positively impacted by their early childhood experiences that help in shaping their ambitions and aspirations and enable the development of positive self-efficacy. Additionally, women in marriages with gender equality and where they have practical support for child-care and other household responsibilities are likely to be able to invest time in their leadership development career. Vision 2030, women leaders have experienced transformative changes in the socio-cultural and policy-making environment of the country that is supportive of their leadership journeys, though there continue to be several barriers at the workplace that inhibit and prevent the growth and development of women leaders to their full potential. The findings underscore the need for making further changes in the work environment through both policy changes and gender-related sensitivity programs that can help workplaces more acceptable and encouraging of women leaders. However, this research was limited to a sample of ten female leaders from the educational sector, and as such, future research is recommended that can explore the perceptions of women leaders on a larger scale from across diverse sectors in Saudi Arabia. Also, research is recommended to focus on the mainstream media and discourse around female leadership in order to develop further insights.

Conflict of Interest: None

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