

## SAUDI WOMEN LEADERS NEGOTIATING CHALLENGES IN SAUDI ARABIAN HIGHER-EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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### **Abstract**

The Saudi government passed a series of critical reforms, which allowed women to enter the economic and political arenas. Today, Saudi women have the right to work in industries that were traditionally dominated by male foreigners, as well as professions that were exclusively occupied by Saudi men, such as diplomacy, education, and other sectors of government services. The purpose of this study was to identify how Saudi women working in administrative positions in Saudi Arabian higher-education institutions negotiate their challenges as leaders, identify the challenges that Saudi women leaders in administrative positions face in higher education, identify what has helped Saudi women leaders overcome their challenges in higher education, identify what has hindered Saudi women from achieving their leadership goals in their institution, identify the advice Saudi women leaders give other women who aspire to attain a leadership position in higher education, also intended to empower women by presenting their voices. This qualitative study utilized narrative inquiry design to assist with understanding the phenomenon by using stories that relate to individuals' lived experiences. Ten Saudi women working in administrative positions were purposefully selected at three gender-segregated public universities in different regions in Saudi Arabia. These participants were interviewed through video conferencing. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guide. The responses to the interviews were later transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The findings of the study showed that the challenges identified by the participants replicated those identified in the literature on Saudi Arabia women and leadership. When discussing how they negotiated these challenges, however, the participants seemed to focus mostly on two of them. They relied primarily on themselves and not on the organizational structure of their institutions, and they focused on self-empowerment by improving their

leadership skills in their everyday roles and becoming actively engaged in strategic planning and professional development.

**Keywords:** Saudi woman, Saudi woman in higher education, the challenges of Saudi women.

#### ملخص البحث:

أقرت الحكومة السعودية سلسلة من الإصلاحات الهامة التي سمحت للمرأة بدخول المجالين الاقتصادي والسياسي. اليوم ، للمرأة السعودية الحق في العمل في الصناعات التي كان يهيمن عليها تقليديا الذكور الأجانب ، وكذلك المهن التي كان يشغلها الرجال السعوديون حصريا ، مثل الدبلوماسية والتعليم وقطاعات الخدمات الحكومية الأخرى. كان الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو تحديد كيفية قيام النساء السعوديات العاملات في المناصب الإدارية في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في المملكة العربية السعودية بالتفاوض على تحدياتهن كقائدات ، وتحديد التحديات التي تواجه القيادات النسائية السعودية في المناصب الإدارية في التعليم العالي ، وتحديد ما ساعد القيادات النسائية السعودية. التغلب على تحدياتهم في التعليم العالي ، وتحديد ما الذي أعاق النساء السعوديات من تحقيق أهدافهن القيادية في مؤسساتهن ، وتحديد النصائح التي تقدمها القيادات النسائية السعودية إلى النساء الأخريات اللواتي يطمحن إلى الحصول على منصب قيادي في التعليم العالي ، ويهدف أيضًا إلى تمكين المرأة من خلال تقديم أصوات. استخدمت هذه الدراسة النوعية تصميم البحث السردى للمساعدة في فهم الظاهرة من خلال استخدام القصص التي تتعلق بالتجارب التي يعيشها الأفراد. تم اختيار عشر سعوديات يعملن في مناصب إدارية عن قصد في ثلاث جامعات حكومية تفصل بين الجنسين في مناطق مختلفة في المملكة العربية السعودية. تمت مقابلة هؤلاء المشاركين من خلال مؤتمرات الفيديو. استغرقت كل مقابلة ما بين 45 و 60 دقيقة واتبعت دليل مقابلة شبه منظم. تم فيما بعد نسخ الردود على المقابلات وترميزها وتحليلها. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن التحديات التي حددها المشاركون تماثل تلك المحددة في الأدبيات حول المرأة السعودية والقيادة. ولكن عند مناقشة كيفية التفاوض على هذه التحديات ، بدا أن المشاركين يركزون في الغالب على اثنين منهم. لقد اعتمدوا في المقام الأول على أنفسهم وليس على الهيكل التنظيمي لمؤسساتهم ، وركزوا على التمكين الذاتي من خلال تحسين مهاراتهم القيادية في أدوارهم اليومية والانخراط بنشاط في التخطيط الاستراتيجي والتطوير المهني.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** سعودية ، سعودية في التعليم العالي ، تحديات المرأة السعودية

## Chapter one: Introduction

In 1963, tribal conservatives and strictly religious Muslim groups surrounded girls' schools that were attempting to open in Saudi Arabia, threatening them and declaring that modern teaching clashed with the traditional moral and social values of Saudi Arabian girls (Al-Dawood, 1990). Saudi women are now moving steadily into new areas of private-sector employment that were previously unacceptable, such as advertising, broadcasting, and journalism. Saudi women also work from at-home offices in professions that were previously closed to them such as architecture. In many cases, these new professions cater solely to women. They also work, for example, in shops just for women in shopping malls exclusively for women that employ only women (Doumato, 1999).

The challenges for Saudi women leaders show that the patriarchal Saudi society is undermining women, expecting them to be submissive to men in all ways (Al-Doubi, 2014). This has prevented them from social advancement and assuming leadership roles in society. Although the Saudi government has introduced many reforms that allow greater freedom for Saudi women and eased some restrictions on women within the Islamic boundaries, these reforms are moving slowly (Doumato, 1999).

However, in the past 10 years, women have ascended to leadership positions that were forbidden to them in the past. In 2004, for the first time, a female university president was named. In 2009, the first woman as education deputy was appointed. In 2013, 30 Saudi women were assigned as parliamentary consultants to the Al-Shoura Council. In 2015, Saudi women were allowed to both vote and run for office in municipal council elections (Smith-Spark, Anderson, & Sirgany, 2017). Finally, in 2017, King Salman, the current ruler of Saudi Arabia, announced that women would be allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia (Hubbard, 2017). With the recent improvements in women's social status, more opportunities are becoming available for them to rise to leadership roles. This study focuses on this evolution in women's empowerment, specifically in higher education, and it offers stories of how Saudi women in leadership positions have negotiated challenges to them in Saudi Arabia's higher-education institutions. With the recent improvements in women's social status, more opportunities are becoming available for them to rise to leadership roles. This study focuses on this evolution in women's empowerment, specifically in higher education, and it offers stories of how Saudi women in leadership positions have negotiated challenges to them in Saudi Arabia's higher-education institutions

### Statement of the Problem

While females in Saudi Arabia hold administrative positions in various areas, very few are in higher education (Metcalf, 2011). When they do, their male managers often do not permit them to perform their duties. They are not allowed to add their voices or to have power over decision and policy making on matters that concern them (Al-Kurdy, 1986). Consequently, their

capacities are constrained to following the decisions made by men at higher administrative levels (Al-Kurdy, 1986). This leads to preventing women leaders in Saudi Arabia from contributing to decision making on issues that concern them and, therefore, excludes them from full participation in the development of their country (Al-Kurdy, 1986). Many studies have identified the nature of the challenges Saudi women face (AlDawsari, 2016; Al-Fawzan, 2017; Al Humaidhi, 2015; Al-Mouhandis, 1986; Al-Subaihi, 2016). However, these studies have not documented the challenges from the perspective of Saudi women leaders themselves. This study is designed to fill this gap in the literature. To provide the perspectives of women, the researcher interviewed Saudi women leaders working in Saudi Arabian higher-education institutions and based the findings on their responses.

### Research Questions

Based on the problem highlighted above, this study explored an overarching question: How do Saudi women working in administrative positions in Saudi Arabian higher-education institutions negotiate their challenges as leaders?

Several sub-questions were also created:

What challenges do Saudi women in administrative positions in higher education face?

What has helped Saudi women leaders in higher education overcome their challenges?

What has hindered Saudi women from achieving their leadership goals in their institutions?

What advice would Saudi women leaders give other women who aspire to a leadership position in higher education?

### Research Aims and Objectives

This study was prompted by the researcher's experience during her undergraduate studies as the administration of her department went through a very difficult time. The chair of the department, a male, adopted the policies and made decisions from the male campus without taking into consideration the women's voices on their campus, leaving the women in administration no control over the decisions that affected them.

Ultimately, this study aims to empower Saudi women leaders by communicating their voices and allowing their stories to be heard. Telling their own stories allowed women leaders to make observations regarding their leadership styles in their professional contexts. Hearing their voices raised awareness in other women about their rights and encouraged them to give voice to their issues. Moreover, learning about how Saudi women leaders in the educational field negotiate challenges to their leadership can shed some light on what women in other fields may be experiencing.

This study is intended to have government officials, specifically male leaders, hear the stories of these Saudi women and learn about how they deal with their challenges, as it will benefit the field of higher education and other disciplines as well. Furthermore, understanding how the few women leaders negotiate their challenges can lead to an understanding of the low

representation of women in leadership positions and help organizational leaders to increase the number of women in senior administrative positions. Decision makers will be made aware of the delay in the empowerment of Saudi women and identify the needs of Saudi women who wish to qualify for leadership positions. This study hopes to make a significant contribution to the body of research literature by highlighting the ways in which Saudi women leaders in higher education institutions negotiate their challenges and empower other women to follow their lead.

### Operational Definitions

**Challenges:** Restrictions that limit women leaders' effectiveness and prevent them from performing their leadership roles (Al-Ahmadi, 2011). Challenges also refer to the obstacles that may prevent female administrators from advancing into the upper levels of leadership (Bubshait, 2008).

**Higher education:** The post-secondary schooling level in Saudi Arabia, which consists of a variety of gender-segregated colleges and universities that offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.

**Negotiating challenges:** Responses and ways of thinking described by Saudi women to overcome challenges in leadership positions or to find new ways to enter leadership positions at the department or university level.

**Saudi women leaders:** Women holding middle or senior administrative positions in a gender-segregated public university in Saudi Arabia. These administrative positions include directors, deans, vice deans, and deputy head of the female departments. They work with a male department head who oversees the department at the male campus and occupy a subordinate position.

### CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following literature review assisted with understanding how Saudi women leaders negotiated their challenges in Saudi Arabian higher education. It started by providing a historical context of the Saudi Arabian political system, the educational system, and the development in Saudi women's status across the kings of Al-Saud. It explained how Islam and the Saudi culture influenced Saudi women's roles and presented where Saudi women leaders are in terms of institutional leadership and workforce underrepresentation. The literature review discussed the status of Saudi women leaders and the challenges they faced in Saudi Arabian higher education. It also highlighted the voices and agencies of Saudi women who advocated for women rights through various fields in Saudi Arabia and the different kinds of feminist movements. Finally, the theoretical framework of women empowerment that this research used as a lens to interpret and present the results of the study was discussed.

## The Political System in Saudi Arabia

The link between religion and government was evident in the way the country was governed. In 1932, under King Abdulaziz Al-Saud, the Arabian Peninsula was unified and named the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Cordesman, 2003). This independent Muslim Arab country was located in southwest Asia and comprised nearly 2,240,000 square kilometers with a total population of 19.9 million and an annual growth rate of 3.5% (Mengash, 2001). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, headed by the Al-Saud royal family, with political decisions made by the king and a council of Ministers who led the country according to the principles of Islam (Baki, 2004). King Abdulaziz Al-Saud, after uniting the country, declared the Islamic Shari'ah law to be the constitution for all the country's laws of governance (Rashwan, 2015). There were other Arab countries that also implemented parts of this law, but the case of Saudi Arabia was particularly important. Among Muslim countries, Saudi Arabia is considered the keeper of the Islamic religion and had a distinguished place in Muslims' hearts because it contained the two holy mosques in the cities Makkah and Al-Madina. The country was proud of this responsibility and happy to preserve the Muslim religion (Baki, 2004).

## The Educational System in Saudi Arabia

The strong connection between Islam and the political system powerfully shaped every aspect of Saudi life and therefore, the Saudi educational institutions. Before the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, there were no formal schools. The first formal school in Saudi Arabia was established for boys in 1933 (Al-Doubi, 2014). King Abdulaziz, under the advisement of religious scholars, supported the establishment of formal schools for boys and one way they encouraged students to attend was by paying them a salary (Al-Sheikh, 1992). Even after the Ministry of Education was established, formal schools were still restricted to males. At that time, females of wealthy families were taught at home by private mentors or sent to other Arab countries for general and higher education (Mengash, 2001). Girls of less affluent families went to the informal Kuttabs schools (Al-Humaidhi, 2015). there were approximately 38 private schools for females in the country, and some of them were informal, with each school operating under a different system, and no official agency responsible for them (Mengash, 2001). However, formal schools for girls were not established until 1959. Currently, there are three kinds of schools that existed in Saudi Arabia: public schools, private schools, and international schools. Public schools were run and financed by the Saudi government. In 1958, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, agreed to an educational system that included the following levels of education: pre-school (kindergarten), a 6-year elementary, a 3-year intermediate, a 3-year secondary (high school), and a separate cycle of post-secondary education (higher education). The post-secondary level consisted of a variety of colleges and universities on gender-segregated campuses for males and females. Today, Saudi Arabia's higher education system included more than 25 public

universities, 10 private universities, and 168 colleges and other educational institutions (Al-Humaidhi, 2015). Public universities were open to all Saudi citizens and required no tuition. In addition, students enrolled at a public college or university received monthly allocations from the Saudi government ranging from \$220 to \$280. Since 1975, the Ministry of Education managed higher education, but in 2015, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) was established. The responsibilities of this institution were to administer colleges and universities (Al-Humaidhi, 2015).

Since the establishment of formal schooling in Saudi Arabia, there were two strictly separate schooling systems for males and females, as reinforced by religious scholars. Males and females were instructed by same sex teachers and in separate school buildings from 1st grade throughout higher education. The curriculum from 1st to 12th grades was standardized throughout the country, and 60% of the courses were devoted to religious studies and classical Arabic, while 25% were devoted to mathematic and general sciences (Al-Hefdhhy, 1994). Higher education majors, classes, and curriculum were completely different in terms of gender. Males and females attended classes at two separate campuses and were taught by same sex professors and instructors. Though there were a respectable number of female faculty holding doctorate degrees and teaching at the public university, Baki (2004) explained when female university instructors were not available to teach certain courses, female students were educated by male instructors through videoconferencing. There was no physical contact between female students and their male instructor, and they could only communicate with the male instructor through a phone that was available in the classroom. This method upheld the ancient social practices of Saudi culture by making sure that male and females did not share the same space (Baki, 2004).

### Development of Women's Status across the Kings of Al-Saud's

The most important political and social events that were considered milestones for women's success and progress in the country. First in 1959 King Saud established formal schools for girls (Jeizan, 1998). In 1960 King Saud established the General Presidency for Girls' Education (GPGE) to supervise and administer girls' education (Rashwan, 2015). Later in 1961 King Saud supported the opening of the first public university King Saud University (KSU), in Riyadh city. also in 1963 King Faisal fought the Islamic extremists who protested while opening public schools for girls in different locations of the Kingdom, and King Faisal Al-Saud was crowned the King of Saudi Arabia in 1964. King Faisal supported the opening of the first private university known as, King Abdulaziz University (KAU), located in the city of Jeddah, while in 2005 King Abdullah took charge of the Kingdom. 2008 King Abdullah founded the first all-women public institution, Princess Noura University (PNU) and appointed the first woman university president Princess Al-Joharah Al-Saud. A year later King Abdullah appointed the first Saudi women member of the Council of Ministers, Norah Al-Faiz, to be Deputy Minister in charge of girls' education. after that in 2011 King Abdullah made the monumental decree that

women would be allowed to vote and run for office in the next election, scheduled for 2015. Also, King Abdullah appointed 30 women as members to the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia's Al-Shoura Council (Al-Feraehy, 2016), King Salman was crowned the king and he currently rules Saudi Arabia, Women were allowed to both vote and run for office in municipal council elections (Alexander, 2017). 2017 King Salman lifted the ban on Saudi women's driving and ordered to release Saudi women from the guardianship system (Hubbard, 2017). In 2018 Women started driving in June of 2018.

## Influences of Islam on Women in Saudi Arabia

The Islamic Shari'ah law influenced all matters of women's lives, including their education, employment, and leadership. There was much research which touched on the concept that Islam does not place restrictions on women's career and educational choices, as long as it does not interfere with their domestic roles. These authors supported their arguments with evidence from the Qur'an and the Hadith of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) (Al-Feraehy, 2016; Al-Munajjed, 1997; Hamdan, 2005; Rashwan, 2015; Mengash, 2001). Mengash (2001) argues that before Islam, and even until 1843 in the west, women had no rights to own property, inherit, divorce, or even choose their marriage partner. With the advent of Islam, women were given the above rights and their status changed to that of a dignified human being deserving respect and honor. Mengash (2001), Saudi women's education is affected by the population's understanding of Islam and the status of women in Islam. The author further explains that there are no barriers to women attending schools or acquiring knowledge in Islam as long as there is no mixing between the two genders. Therefore, women could work and study in any setting where there was no exposure to men. Al-Munajjed (1997) argues that the Hadith of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and the Qur'an are more democratic and recognizes women's equality with men but within the Islamic boundaries. The author further explains that the Qur'an gave women equal, but not identical, rights with men on personal, civil, social, and political levels. She supports her argument by providing evidence from the Qur'an that states that women and men are equal in God's eyes in terms of religious duties, as they both receive equal punishments and rewards for their acts., Rashwan (2015) agrees to a certain point with Al-Munajjed's idea that Islam assigned women equal, but not identical, rights with men. Rashwan further explains that these rights are not identical because the Qur'an portrays men as providers and protectors of their wives and children and physically are stronger than women, having God-given strength. She further proposes that if a woman needed to take some other roles, such roles should not compromise their domestic role. However, Rashwan (2015) argues that this does not prevent women from their rights, as it was evident in the Hadith that women should choose their future husbands, own businesses, and inherit from their husbands and parents.

## Influences of Cultural and Social traditions on Saudi Women Leaders

As most of the Saudis are from tribes, Saudi society is considered a tribal society in which the tribe or the family controlled and guided people (Al-Dakheel, 2012). According to the system of the tribes, when a citizen does anything against its customs, he or she would face the tribe's punishment, which in many cases differed from the punishment laid down in the law (Al-Dakheel, 2012). In a tribal system, the family played an important role in bringing up children in which they received and practiced ancient traditions from their parents and learned the behaviors of the community. Women in the tribal community were highly valued because they were the repository for the honor of the family and the tribe, therefore, women suffered from strong pressure, control, power over them to reserve their honor (Al-Dakheel, 2012). The history of Saudi society played an important role in making women's issues very sensitive and from this point it became extremely difficult to make changes (Al-Dakheel, 2012). There was a consensus among researchers that cultural and social traditions were the primary sources of restrictions and hindrances to Saudi women leadership and empowerment. Some forms of cultural restrictions on Saudi women included patriarchal social structures in institutions; stereotypes around the role of Saudi women and their capabilities to lead; the male guardianship system; and the issue of mobility (Al-Doubi, 2014; Al-Feraehy, 2016; Baki, 2004; Rashwan, 2015). Rashwan (2015) indicates that in Saudi Arabia, cultural and social norms recognized men as the predetermined leaders. The author explains that Saudi women were extensions of men, and their position at every level of leadership was subordinate to that of men. As a result, Rashwan argues Saudi men held leadership positions that more competent women would otherwise have held and executed better. Even if a woman was more qualified than a man, she might not get the same opportunities and accreditations to lead because of the rigid gender roles imposed by culture and society. This meant that women were not able to explore and execute their full potential. Moreover, Rashwan explains that the stereotypes surrounding leadership in Saudi Arabia perceived women as compassionate, soft natured and best suited for subordinate roles, which affected how women perceived themselves and their abilities. These cultural issues greatly limited the role of women within society, especially regarding self-empowerment (Rashwan, 2015). Rashwan (2015) further explains that the male guardians imposed strict codes of conduct upon their female counterparts, and women are obligated to obey them. Rashwan adds that women are expected to be submissive to men in Saudi culture, and they do not have the freedom to be independent or engage in any activity without consulting their male partners. Adding to the cultural restrictions placed on Saudi women, Baki (2004) talks about the issue of mobility as a restriction that could completely deny women's access to education and work. Before King Salman decreed the decision to lift the ban on women's driving that was made on September 26th, 2017, Baki explains that women in Saudi Arabia were not allowed to drive, and they might risk getting arrested for riding in a vehicle not driven by a chauffeur or a close male relative. The author further emphasizes that women were restricted in the use of public transportation when in the

presence of men; they had to enter the buses by a separate entrance in the back and occupy designated seating. Baki describes that if a female student wanted to attend a university, she needed to have a chauffeur or an available relative to drive her to and from the campus, and some students could not afford to hire a driver. Therefore, this lack of mobility greatly hindered their access to education and work opportunities. There were many quantitative studies that showed that cultural obstacles were the most common challenges women leaders face in any Saudi Arabian institution. Bubshait's study (2008) investigates the type of obstacles that Saudi women encountered in various fields. The study used mixed methods, including field surveys and qualitative interviews with 45 Saudi women representing most parts of the Kingdom's administrative regions who work in different fields. The author's findings were that cultural obstacles were the most common challenges that women faced, followed by organizational obstacles such as segregation, and finally personal obstacles. The major cultural obstacles that these women faced included lack of confidence of senior management in female leaders, common belief in the weakness of female administrative skills, difficulty in dealing with male superiors, and unwillingness of women to accept leadership roles. Bubshait believes that this was influenced by the historical place of women in Saudi Arabia and the conservative nature of the society, which in general discouraged the open interaction between women and men outside of family and spousal interactions.

### **Saudi Women Leaders in Various Institutions in Saudi Arabia**

Saudi women have worked hard to attain higher education in order to get better employment opportunities. The first employment opportunities for women were in the public sector beginning in the 1960s, in the areas of teaching, and educational administration (AlShaman, 1993). The GPGE was the first and the largest employer of Saudi women. Since education was an acceptable vocation for women in the Kingdom, a large number of female students pursued degrees in education and worked in this sector (Mengash, 2001). However, some Saudi women participated in the workforce as doctors, nurses, and social workers, but the numbers were very small since there were few jobs available for wellqualified women in Saudi Arabia (Mengash, 2001). Recently, the Saudi government passed a series of critical reforms, which allowed women to enter the economic and political arenas. Today, Saudi women have the right to work in industries that were traditionally dominated by male foreigners, such as retail, as well as professions that were exclusively occupied by Saudi men, such as diplomacy and other sectors of government services (Alexander, 2017). Lately, there have been women who took leadership positions in various areas, including political positions and managerial positions (Rashwan, 2015). For example, in 2009, Norah Al-Faiz was assigned to the position of Deputy Minister of Education for Girls' Affairs (Rashwan, 2015). In 2013, 30 Saudi women were assigned to Al-Shoura Council, the King's highest advisory body. Even though Saudi women were not allowed to drive cars, Hanadi AlHindi was the first Saudi female pilot to earn her

piloting license in 2013, and she was awarded a 10-year contract to fly Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal's private jet. She also instructed a new generation of male pilots in a flying academy in Jeddah (Shoshana, 2017). In 2015, women were allowed to both vote and run for office in municipal council elections (Alexander, 2017). Business was another field where Saudi women leaders were able to be employed. In 2016, Samba Financial Group became the first Saudi bank to have a woman CEO. Additionally, in 2016, Dammam Airport, in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia, became the first airport to have a female executive director. In the same year, the Saudi stock exchange received its first ever female chair (Shihabi, 2017). Saudi women also attained leadership positions in health institutions, such as Dr. Selwa AlHazzaa who was the first Saudi woman to hold the position of Chief Ophthalmologist in King Faisal Hospital (Shihabi, 2017). Though the mentioned achievements of Saudi women show they have reached top leadership positions that they were previously unable to reach, women were still greatly underrepresented at senior positions in most institutions (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013).

### Saudi Women Leadership in Higher Education

According to Al-Humaidhi (2015), the administrative structure in higher education was governed by the Supreme Council of Higher Education (SCHE), an organization chaired by the Prime Minister (the King), the Ministry of Higher Education members, and university presidents. In all female universities, the females took the position of presidents and the entire administrative staffs were women, as men do not work at female universities. In gender-segregated public universities, where a university has two separate campuses for males and females, a male president usually managed both campuses, and females were not allowed to access this position. However, the highest female leadership position at the public university level included a vice president for female student affairs, and two deans, one at the women's Medical campus, and one at the women's Arts and Sciences campus. There were also female deans and vice-deans, one for each department. Many women worked as deputy department heads under the male department head, who took charge of the department at the men's campus. Despite the difference in position title, the responsibilities and job descriptions of department heads and deputy department heads were similar. For both positions, the scope of work was essentially to manage the functioning of the department, its Council Presidency, the formation of committees, and to assess the performance of faculty members (Al-Humaidhi, 2015).

### Challenges Facing Saudi Women Leaders in Higher Education

Even though Saudi women successfully accessed some leadership positions in higher education, they still face major challenges while serving in these roles. Al-Yamani's study

(1985) described the type of communication between men and women in women's campuses at traditionally gender-segregated universities. In the women's campuses, there were female deans who supervised the women's campus. Results showed that women did not have the full authority to administer their own departments, and there were many issues related to men's administration of women's colleges. However, the job of the female dean was to implement the plans and decisions made by the men's administration. Al-Hmale (2000) recommends the establishment of an independent women's university. It suggested that this university would serve as a regional scientific, technological teaching and research center for women in the 21st century. Al-Hmale encourages the placement of women in leadership positions to be able to respond effectively to the students' needs and to be role models for them which would be supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education. He argues that there was no need for the administration of the General Presidency of Girls Education (GPGE) and that its role had become obsolete. He also argues that now we are experiencing a revolution of information and scientific improvement, and he asks what is preventing us from establishing such universities like other Muslim and Arab countries, or at least from replacing all men in the GPGE with women. However, some of the GPGE members disagree with Al-Hmale's suggestions. Al-Kudaire (1999) explains some of the general difficulties in Saudi higher education, and these problems apply more to women's higher education. She emphasizes that there was no clear policy for advising; no coordination and cooperation among universities and colleges. Mengash (2001) conducts a qualitative study to explore Saudi women's needs in two types of universities in Saudi Arabia, the purpose of this study was to provide a foundation for deciding whether to establish a women's independent university or a women's open university in Saudi Arabia.. Mengash's findings reflect that in the independent women's university, improved communication and support was found between administrative leadership, faculty, and staff without any male-female communication barrier, which was linked to higher job satisfaction. The establishment of an all-women university also benefited students by having more personal interaction and freedom of expression in all-women classes. The author further explains that female administrators and faculty benefited by taking responsibility in top-level positions and by learning the necessary skills to compete and succeed in today's global economy. Al-Subaihi (2016) aims at identifying the most common challenges for Saudi women leaders to obtain senior leadership positions in higher education in terms of cultural, personal, and organizational challenges. The author uses an online survey to capture responses from 78 faculty members who worked in three universities in Riyadh, in the central region of Saudi Arabia. This study ranks the cultural and organizational challenges as the most significant challenges facing academic women leaders, followed by lack of empowerment and personal challenges.

## Women's Agencies and Feminist Movements in Saudi Arabia

The advancement of women in Saudi Arabia did not happen overnight, as women have been fighting for their rights over the last decade. Wagner (2011) identifies three types of feminist movements, which includes Islamic feminism, Saudi-Islamic feminism, and Western feminism. The feminist movement was introduced in the late 1960s and 1970s to Muslim women who were educated in western schools. Muslim women's exposure to feminist influences broadened their thinking and sharpened their critical thinking skills. Wagner explains that the first advocates of feminism in the Muslim world were upper-class women who adopted a Western-style feminism. These Muslim women, especially those who studied in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, admired the freedom that the Western women had. Consequently, these Western educated Muslim women initiated the Islamic feminist movement. Wagner identifies the Islamic feminist movement as a movement that sought to marginalize cultural and tribal influence and grant women rights guaranteed in the Qur'an. This movement included both some Western feminist ideals with a unisex society in which there was a single set of rules for both sexes, with women assuming the same roles as men. According to Omair (2009), what Western feminists perceived as a woman's oppression was not necessarily perceived as such in the Muslim world or by Muslim women themselves. Omair further explains that Western feminism views Muslim women as victims to be rescued by Western values and feminist motives. For instance, Western feminists perceived the hijab (covering the woman's hair) and the traditional covering of the woman's body as a powerful indicator of oppression and women's submission to men. The author also theorizes that Western society also believed that the hijab limited the ability of women to work effectively.

### Saudi Women Communicating Their Voices through Many Fields

While advocating for their rights has not been easy, the voices of Saudi women are now present in many fields in the country. Saudi women, for example, are now active in journalism. Latifa Al-Khatib was the first Saudi women columnist and editor of the women's section in Al-Belad newspaper in 1952 (Mellor, 2010). More Saudi women followed and continued to fight to be heard and to communicate their issues until the famous Oukaz newspaper dedicated 25% of its space to women's and family issues in 1960. During the beginning of the Saudi women's journalism journey, there were only few women who participated in the popular press and they were used as bait to attract female readers. Some male journalists even took advantage of Saudi women's absence in the field by using female names to add commercial and professional value when marketing their columns and attracting readers' attention. Saudi women have also raised their voices through filmmaking. A new generation of female filmmakers has emerged and one of the famous Saudi female filmmakers is Haifaa Al-Mansour who directed a movie called "Wajdah." The movie advocated for Saudi female rights through Wajdah, a 10-year-old girl who wanted to ride a bicycle in public and took a risk in a society that allows only boys to ride bikes in public (Garcia, 2013). However, these religious rulings did not stop women from fighting for

their basic right to drive (Al-Feraehy, 2016). The first Saudi women rights protest was demonstrated in 1991, when 47 Saudi women who already obtained international driving licenses from other countries, drove around Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's capital. A second protest was in 2011, by Manal Al-Sharif who drove in protest of the ban and posted a video on YouTube showing her experience driving on the streets of Riyadh (Al-Feraehy, 2016). The third protest was in 2014, by Loujain Al-Hathloul, a Saudi women's rights activist and a social media figure with many followers on Twitter, who also posted a live video on YouTube of herself driving her car alone from United Arab Emirates to Saudi Arabia (Al-Feraehy, 2016). These Saudi women demonstrated using Islam as their main argument, defying the religious scholars and Islamic extremists to find a Quranic reference that speaks explicitly against women's right to drive (Mellor, 2010). Art is another field that many Saudi women artists used as a creative way to communicate their voices, ideas, and thoughts on Saudi women's rights. One of the Saudi photographers, Areej Adel, worked on a series of photographs under the title "A Queen, But ...". The series of photographs focused on the lives of Saudi women showing how Saudi women are perceived by others as queens who are driven around by chauffeurs, do not work, and are treated like queens while in reality they were denied their basic rights. Adel describes her series of photographs as "a story of a Queen who views the crown as a symbol of her power, and the suggestion that everything is under control of the crown. But this Queen in fact is powerless and is treated like a juvenile" (Al-Feraehy, 2016, p.26). Today, the younger generation of Saudi society is more accepting of the idea that a woman is capable of practicing Islam while exercising her basic rights. Saudi society is ready for change and the future for Saudi women looks promising.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Research Approach

This qualitative study aimed to communicate the Saudi women leaders' voices through research and reveal their thoughts and feelings on how they negotiated their challenges. A quantitative method was not appropriate for the study because the researcher did not want to measure, count sums and totals of the data that was collected. Merriam (2009) finds that quantitative studies focused on quantity, statistics, and experimental data that is organized and reduced by entering numerical data into a database to measure, test, and calculate the results. Alternatively, the qualitative research was best suited for this study as Maxwell (2012) indicates that researchers use the qualitative design to give a verbal explanation for the phenomenon under study. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), taking a qualitative approach allows the researcher to answer the questions about the phenomena, often with the purpose of describing thoughts, feelings, beliefs and values from the participants' point of view. In addition, Austin (2011) explains that qualitative research aims to illuminate the individual voices who were marginalized or eliminated in the research paradigm. Moreover, Creswell (2007) describes that

in qualitative research the researcher uses inductive and interpretive approaches to access critical information from the participant's perspectives, and through interpretation and discussions with the participants, the researcher is able to identify themes and patterns for more in-depth understanding of the problem under study. Therefore, this study used qualitative methods because it allowed the researcher to provide a verbal explanation to the research questions from the participants' points of view and described stories, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values of their lived experiences.

## Research Design

For this study, the researcher chose the narrative inquiry design that allowed for the examination of a phenomenon using stories that related to individuals' lived experience and looked at the story's holistic content and context without fragmenting the participants' narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative design was best suited for this study because it best fit the study's research questions, which sought to explain participants' stories through hearing their voices to make sense of their experiences, understand the issues they encountered, and how they negotiated those issues. Using narrative inquiry as a design supported the theoretical framework and the purpose of the study, which used research to empower Saudi women leaders as a marginalized group by presenting their voices on how they negotiated their challenges as administrators in Saudi Arabian higher education institution. According to Lemley and Mitchell (2012) in narrative inquiry research, the voice of the narrator is central to the research and altered positions of power and privilege as it focuses on the voices of historically marginalized groups by actively incorporating their voices in the research process. This was applicable to the researcher's topic of interest for the following three reasons: (1) Saudi women were historically marginalized in higher education and leadership; (2) Saudi women empowerment in Saudi Arabia is a trendy issue for the higher education community with little academic research about how they negotiated their challenges within the field; and (3) being able to provide their stories and voices added to the academic research and increased awareness on a variety of issues and topic related to administrators within the higher education community.

## Participant Sample

The researcher selected 10 participants with purposeful sampling from three public universities located in the eastern, western, and central regions in Saudi Arabia. The criteria for selecting the participants in this study included (a) Saudi women who held any form of administrative position at a gender-segregated public university that was titled director, department chair, deputy department head, dean, or vice dean. male campus; (b) Women who worked within the institution for at least 2 years at the administrative level. This length of time allowed the respondents to answer the questions regarding negotiating the challenges that they experienced in higher education; and (c) Women willing to participate in the study, to review their answers, and to be contacted for additional information, if necessary. The researcher used

email and phone to contact 30 women leaders from three universities' public records of the employees' directory found on the three university's websites.

## Information Collection

With the qualitative narrative inquiry design, the researcher used interviews to collect information about how Saudi women leaders in administrative positions negotiated their challenges in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. Qualitative research interviews attempt to “understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, and to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations”.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

This chapter is an analysis of the information gathered in the participant interviews to answer the four research sub-questions and the overarching question of the study, “How do Saudi women working in administrative positions negotiate their challenges as leaders in higher-education institutions in Saudi Arabia?” The researcher analyzed the participants' responses to the sub-questions of the study. The findings show that the two most common challenges that the women leaders faced in their leadership journeys were lack of administrative and financial authority and lack of communication between the female and the male departments. The next most common challenges, expressed by half of the participant, and the least common challenges that the participants described were stereotypes of Saudi women's leadership in higher education and university policies and regulations that empowered women leaders by not helping them develop their full capabilities as administrators.

The results also showed that when the participants talked about what helped or empowered them, they did not talk about organizational support from their institutions. They relied on themselves, tried to solve their issues on their own, and did not depend on anyone from outside their departments. The findings also reflect the participants' thoughts and perceptions about what hindered their career advancement and achieving their leadership goals. Half believed that their ability to lead depended on the personal and professional support, flexibility, collaboration of their male leader and his understanding of the female departments' needs. Fewer than half of the women said that what hindered their leadership were not being aware of their legal or civil rights; their lack of promotion, good occupational opportunities, or motivation; and, finally, their difficulty in coordinating teaching and administrative responsibilities. Most of the participants also advised a woman leader to develop her leadership skills by reading about new trends in her

field, training under a mentor, and learning skills of leadership. The majority of participants' advised women leaders to be patient, persistent, ambitious, diplomatic, and insistent. Half of the interviewees advised future leaders to believe in themselves and in their ability to lead; to find a goal, vision and mission in their life and work; determine their objectives and design a clear performance plan; and to have a good work ethic, be transparent, and respect others. Fewer than half of the participants also advised that a women leader should be selfless towards others, praise their work, and share her success. Some advised women to find a balance and between family and occupational duties. Finally, fewer than half of the Saudi women leaders' advice for other women was that they should have the skills of strategic planning, prioritizing, and organizing. The research findings added to the understanding of Saudi women's leadership challenges and negotiations in higher-education institutions in Saudi Arabia. The findings indicate that most of the challenges that were identified by the participants are reflected in the literature. The participants' views on their lack of administrative and financial authority and lack of communications were consistent with the literature. They agreed that male leaders had the overall authority over the decisions made concerning their departments and that the lack of face-to-face communication with the male departments resulted in ineffective decisions coming from the male leaders, as they were unfamiliar with the concerns of the women's colleges. The participants' responses also agreed with the literature in that the patriarchal organizational structures of higher-education institutions prevented women leaders from having full and equal participation in decision making and placed the women in subordinate roles. Finally, the participants and the literature both found that there are stereotypes in the workplace surrounding women's positions and their ability to lead their institutions.

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