

Women academic leaders in Saudi universities: Educational and psychological vision



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 November 2023

Received in revised form

6 March 2024

Accepted 29 September 2024

Keywords:

Women's academic leadership

Saudi universities

Organizational barriers

Cultural and social barriers

Saudi vision 2030

ABSTRACT

There is limited understanding of women's leadership roles in Saudi Arabian university education, leading to a gap in scholarly literature despite significant advancements made by Saudi women in this field. However, they encounter several obstacles when striving for leadership roles at universities. This study seeks to examine the state of women's academic leadership within Saudi universities from an educational and psychological perspective, pinpointing the key challenges they face in obtaining such positions. The findings reveal that women leaders face various challenges, with organizational obstacles being the most significant, receiving a high average score of 4. Additionally, cultural and social barriers scored an average of 3.51, also rated highly, followed by psychological barriers with an average score of 3.26, which received a medium rating. Participants suggested comprehensive reforms to mitigate these challenges, notably implementing Saudi Vision 2030 principles and initiatives, which advocate for women faculty members to take on leadership roles at universities. These insights could not only benefit Saudi Arabia but also the wider Arab Gulf region, the Middle East, and other areas with similar conditions.

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1. Introduction

The literature on women and leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia is relatively limited (Alotaibi, 2020). Alotaibi notes that Saudi society is conservative, shaped by customs and traditions that often define women primarily as mothers and wives (Alghofaily, 2019; Budhwar et al., 2019; Hill and Wheat, 2017; Hodges, 2017; Alchoui, 2009; Hoyt, 2005). In the field of education, especially university education, the Saudi government is making great efforts to empower women, as it has been able to achieve great success in educating women. Statistics indicate an increase in the number of female graduates in university education from 23% in 1980 to 42% in 1994 until it reached 51.3% in 2011 to 58.1% in 2018 (MOE, 2022). There is an increase in the percentage of women in the teaching staff from

232, by 15.4% in 1977/1978, 4700 in 2003/2004 to about 19600 in 2008/2009. Even they reached 23.774 thousand, or 45.36%, in the year 2018/2019 (MOE, 2022).

On the other hand, it seems that the most criticized part is related to occupying leadership positions for them. The representation of women in academic leadership positions in Saudi universities is small, and it is not equivalent to the nature of their role (Budhwar et al., 2019; Akbar et al., 2023) as statistics indicated that there are 3% of women occupying the position of university director and that 9.3% are in the position of vice president, and often the university's vice president position is for the female's branch. In addition, 8.4% occupy the dean's position, with the exception of Princess Noura University, which is the largest women's university in the world (MOE, 2022).

In an attempt to change the current situation, the enlightened Saudi Vision 2030, which was launched in 2016, began to gradually change that outlook and contribute to transforming the role of women in Saudi universities so that they participate with men in assuming those positions, and even have a vital and effective role in drawing up policies and developing strategic plans.

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<https://doi.org/10.21833/ijaas.2024.10.008>

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Therefore, this study aims to identify the challenges that limit the access of Saudi women to leadership positions in universities, and the study can benefit non-Saudis, such as universities in the Arab Gulf region, the Middle East, and other areas that are similar in their circumstances and conditions with the current situation of Saudi universities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Historical background for girls' education.

Since 1941, Saudi women have had the right to education, beginning with their enrollment in Al-Katatib and schools in various cities and villages across the Kingdom (Alsudairy, 2017). Some parents expanded certain Al-Katatib to convert them into private schools, leading to the opening of 15 schools between 1943 and 1944, resulting in a total of 33 private schools nationwide, with 6,553 students enrolled (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). In 1955, Queen Effat Al-Thunayan, wife of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, established the Dar Al-Hanan School in Jeddah at her own expense, which offered five educational stages: kindergarten, pre-primary, primary, preparatory, and secondary, exclusively for girls. By 1957, the high demand for the school prompted the government to consider a formal system to ensure education for girls (Alsuwaida, 2016; Alameen et al., 2015).

On October 24, 1959, King Saud bin Abdulaziz Al Saud approved girls' education in Saudi Arabia by issuing a royal decree to establish schools for girls. In 1960, the General Administration for Girls' Education was created, soon followed by the establishment of private schools for girls (Mate et al., 2019; Abalkhail and Allan, 2015). This decree officially granted females the right to education. The General Administration for Girls' Education was responsible for general education for girls, including primary, preparatory, and secondary levels, as well as adult education and female literacy programs (Alfaiz et al., 2022; Alsuwaida, 2016; Yizraeli, 2012). Allowing girls' education in Saudi Arabia faced criticism from some conservative groups who opposed it. However, the Saudi government remained committed to educating women and worked to convince Bedouin tribes of its importance, ensuring that education was accessible to all.

In 1970, the College of Education for Girls was opened in Riyadh for the first time with the aim of preparing and graduating female teachers to work in elementary, preparatory, and high schools. This college was the core of Princess Noura University now, which was established later in 2004 (Al Alhareth et al., 2015), and attention began to assign departments or branches for female students in universities, in addition to benefiting from scholarship programs abroad that began in 2001, in which the number of scholarships reached 31,900, 34% of the number of scholarships, which amounted to 93,000 scholarships for the year 2019 (MOE,

2022). Education is conservative; Sports education for women was not available, but in 2014, the Ministry of Education made a decision to allow the introduction of physical education classes in girls' schools (Yizraeli, 2012).

2.2. Women's leadership and higher education

One of the areas of female employment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the educational field (Hodges, 2017), where statistics indicate that the Ministry of Education is the largest government agency employing women, as the number of women working in the ministry is more than 405,878, a rate of 57.18%, while men are 303,849, or 42.82% (MOE, 2022). This is due to the fact that it is obligatory that she teaches in girls' schools, as the law forbids male teachers in the schools of female students, schools are everywhere which means it is close to teachers' homes, the quite high salaries compared to others, in addition to the prestigious social position of the teacher's job.

The number of universities in Saudi Arabia grew from 9 in 1990 to 61 public and private universities in 2020. Alongside this growth, the proportion of women among university teaching staff also increased. The number of female faculty members rose from 4,700 in 2003/04 to about 19,600 in 2008/09, eventually reaching 23,774, or 45.36%, by 2018/19 (MOE, 2022). In terms of academic rank, female professors numbered 291, comprising 14.8%, while male professors totaled 1,675, or 85.2%. Female associate professors numbered 853 (28.9%), while male associate professors totaled 2,102 (71.1%). Among assistant professors, women comprised 38.6%, with 3,512 members, compared to 5,594 men (61.4%). Female lecturers numbered 7,128 (57%), while male lecturers were 5,383 (43%). Female instructors totaled 10,455 (55.8%), with male instructors at 8,276 (44.2%) (MOE, 2022). Notably, the overall percentage of women in universities has continued to rise, surpassing male rates, with female numbers increasing at an annual rate of 12.7% and a total growth rate of 61.3% since 2014, compared to an annual rate of 7.6% and a total growth of 33.9% for males (MOE, 2022).

The Ministry of Education has implemented an ambitious plan to send teaching assistants and lecturers of both genders to prestigious universities in the United States, Canada, Britain, and Australia to pursue master's and Ph.D. degrees, with no restrictions based on gender (Tayan, 2017; Al Alhareth et al., 2015). As of 2020, the total number of scholarship students reached 81,455, with 55,265 male students (67.9%) and 26,190 female students (32.1%) (MOE, 2022).

A closer look at these statistics shows that the proportion of female faculty members is relatively acceptable, even with noticeable differences favoring men across academic ranks. Despite these disparities, the percentage of women remains valuable, particularly as women now outnumber men in lecturer and instructor roles for the first time

in Saudi university history. This shift highlights the Kingdom's commitment to women's higher education, offering them opportunities to pursue advanced studies at leading international universities. It also reflects the emphasis on academic excellence, as only those who excel academically can attain faculty positions in Saudi universities.

In contrast, when it comes to leadership roles, a critical gap remains (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Koburtay and Abuhusseini, 2021; Akbar et al., 2023). According to the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2022), only 3% of academic leaders in Saudi universities are women holding the position of Rector, specifically at the Saudi Electronic University (a mixed-gender institution) and Princess Noura University (exclusively for women). Additionally, 8.4% of leadership roles at the dean's level are held by women, excluding Princess Noura University, the world's largest women's university. This disparity reveals that while the number of female faculty members has grown, this increase has not corresponded with a rise in leadership positions for women, highlighting a clear gap in gender representation.

2.3. Vision 2030 and women's empowerment

Under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, established in 2016, the issue of women's empowerment has received substantial attention from the government and relevant authorities, including the Ministry of Education. One of the Vision's objectives focuses on increasing women's participation in the labor market. To achieve this, various initiatives have been launched to support women's leadership roles (Alotaibi, 2020), aiming to boost women's representation across all government sectors, including universities, and at all career levels, particularly in leadership positions (Alqahtani, 2021). A series of supporting projects, such as the national platform for women leaders, were also introduced to facilitate the nomination and communication for female leadership roles.

One significant outcome of these efforts was the 2020 appointment of the first woman to lead a Saudi university with both male and female students, along with an increase in female college Deans, with women comprising 25% of college Deans at Taif University. Further positive developments are anticipated, driven by the strong commitment of the Saudi government, led by the King and Crown Prince, to empower women, particularly in Saudi universities.

3. Study methodology and procedures

3.1. Study population

The study population included academic leaders from three universities in Saudi Arabia: the University of Hail, King Saud University in Riyadh,

and King Khalid University in Abha, totaling 124 leaders. This group comprised 1 vice president, 1 dean, 22 college vice presidents, 32 department heads, and 68 assistant vice presidents.

3.2. Characteristics of the study population

Tables 1-3 show the distribution of study participants across various positions, including university vice-chancellors, deans, college vice-deans, department heads, and department vice-deans. Participants were also categorized based on years of experience, specifically 6-10 years, 10-20 years, and more than 20 years. Additionally, the distribution reflects academic ranks, covering professors, associate professors, and assistant professors.

Table 1: Distribution of the study personnel according to the variable of the occupational position

Position	Frequency	Percentage
Vice-chancellor	1	0.8%
Dean	1	0.8%
College agent	22	17.8%
Head of the department	32	25.8%
Department agent	68	54.8%
Total	124	100%

Table 2: Distribution of study individuals according to the experience variable

Years of experience	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 10 years	18	14.5%
10-20 years old	82	66.1%
More than 20 years	24	19.4%
Total	124	100%

Table 3: Distribution of study personnel according to the variable of academic rank

Academic position	Frequency	Percentage
Professor	8	6.5%
Associate professor	39	31.5%
Assistant professor	77	62%
Total	124	100%

3.3. The study tool

This study utilized a questionnaire as the primary research tool, structured in two parts:

1. First part: Collected basic demographic information, including job position, academic rank, and years of experience.
2. Second part: Contained 19 statements organized into three dimensions:
 - First dimension: Organizational and administrative challenges, comprising 8 statements.
 - Second dimension: Cultural and social challenges, comprising 6 statements.
 - Third dimension: Psychological challenges, comprising 5 statements.

Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale for all sections, with options ranging from "very high" to "very weak." Each response was assigned a relative weight as outlined in Table 4:

Very high (5 points), high (4 points), medium (3 points), weak (2 points), and very weak (1 point).

Table 4: Determining the categories of the five-graded Likert scale

Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very high
1-1.80	1.81- 2.60	2.61- 3.40	3.41- 4.20	4.21 - 5.0

3.4. The apparent validity of the study tool

After developing the initial version of the study tool, it was reviewed by five experts specializing in educational administration and leadership to ensure its validity.

3.5. Validity of the internal consistency of the study tool

After confirming the face validity of the study tool, the researcher conducted a field application. The internal validity of the questionnaire was assessed by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient, measuring the correlation between each statement's score and the total score of its corresponding dimension, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Pearson correlation coefficients by dimensions

Dimension	Expression number	Coefficient of relationship
Organizational and administrative challenges	1	0.887**
	2	0.869**
	3	0.675**
	4	0.920**
	5	0.802**
	6	0.884**
	7	0.867**
	8	0.764**
Cultural and social challenges	1	0.867**
	2	0.871**
	3	0.929**
	4	0.792**
	5	0.796**
	6	0.841**
Psychological challenges	1	0.863**
	2	0.797**
	3	0.599**
	4	0.864**
	5	0.754**

** : Significance level of 0.01

3.6. Stability of the study tool

Cronbach's Alpha was employed to assess the reliability of the study tool. Table 6 presents the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for each item across

the three dimensions (organizational, cultural, and psychological challenges). Values closer to 1 indicate higher reliability.

Table 6: The reliability coefficient of the Cronbach's Alpha method to measure the stability of the study instrument

Dimension	Expression number	Reliability coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha)
Organizational and administrative challenges	1	0.858
	2	0.844
	3	0.904
	4	0.788
	5	0.810
	6	0.704
	7	0.807
	8	0.799
Cultural and social challenges	1	0.854
	2	0.735
	3	0.969
	4	0.786
	5	0.832
	6	0.801
Psychological challenges	1	0.785
	2	0.864
	3	0.753
	4	0.793
	5	0.721

Table 6 shows that the study scale has statistically acceptable stability, as the value of the reliability coefficient reached 0.810, which is a high degree of stability, and the stability coefficients of the study tool ranged between 0.721 - 0.969, which are high stability coefficients that can be trusted in the application of the current study tool.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Organizational challenges

Organizational challenges refer to issues related to the nature of academic roles, leadership positions, and associated academic and administrative relationships. Table 7 indicated an overall high rating of 4, with averages ranging from 3.19 to 4.85. Respondents highlighted the need for more training programs for women leaders to enhance their academic leadership skills, particularly in areas such as decision-making, crisis management, and administrative development. Table 7 provides respondents' feedback on various organizational challenges, including ratings, averages, and standard deviations for each statement.

Table 7: The respondents' responses to organizational challenges practices

Ranking	Level of acceptance	Standard deviation	Average	Description (sentences)
1	Very high	30.49	4.85	Sentence 1
2	Very high	36.85	4.64	Sentence 2
3	High	24.11	3.68	Sentence 3
4	High	23.39	3.81	Sentence 4
5	High	16.39	3.56	Sentence 5
6	Very high	32.42	4.35	Sentence 6
7	High	25.87	3.98	Sentence 7
8	Medium	14.45	3.19	Sentence 8

These findings align with previous studies (Almansour and Kempner, 2016; Alomair, 2015; Karam and Afiouni, 2014; Fondas, 1997), which recommend implementing training programs to

prepare women for leadership roles. The results also highlight the need for women academic leaders to have greater financial authority, as current financial procedures can be time-consuming. While Saudi

higher education laws and regulations do not restrict women from holding academic leadership positions, a key challenge remains in some university administrators' preference for male leaders. Additionally, the results stress the urgent need to enhance the professional culture among subordinates, who play a critical role in supporting leaders and boosting productivity. This need is consistent with other studies (Alqahtani, 2021; Alsubaie and Jones, 2017; Alyami, 2016; Al-Rasheed, 2013), which emphasize promoting a professional culture among female university administrators. Respondents expressed optimism about the ongoing development of university administration under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, anticipating positive outcomes as a result of this vision.

4.2. Cultural and social challenges

Social and cultural challenges refer to issues related to customs, traditions, and societal views on women holding leadership positions at universities. Table 8 shows a high overall rating of 3.51, with averages ranging from 3.16 to 4.89. The study revealed that certain societal beliefs persist, particularly among some men, favoring the managerial skills of male leaders over those of female leaders. Table 8 presents participants' responses to various cultural and social challenges, detailing averages, standard deviations, and acceptance levels for each statement.

Table 8: Illustrates the responses of the sample members to the cultural and social challenges practices

Sentence	Average	Standard deviation	Level of acceptance	Rank
1	3.89	26.86	High	1
2	3.81	21.42	High	2
3	3.33	9.95	Medium	4
4	3.32	17.41	Medium	5
5	3.16	13.29	Medium	6
6	3.52	15.64	High	3
Overall	3.51	—	High	—

The Saudi government actively addresses these misconceptions, promoting a culture of tolerance and the inclusive values of Islam, as well as the principles of Vision 2030, which advocate for gender equality. Studies (Abalkhail, 2017; Hodges, 2017; Islam, 2014; Metcalfe and Rees, 2010; Elamin and Omair, 2010) confirm that both men and women possess the administrative skills needed to succeed in university roles. However, the study highlighted that some men view women leaders as overly emotional. Elamin and Omair (2010) and Fotaki (2013) noted that in Saudi culture, women are often perceived primarily as mothers, wives, and daughters, expected to focus on family responsibilities rather than leadership roles, which can create a conflict between their personal and professional lives, impacting their assessment as leaders.

The study also found that some conservative religious scholars in Saudi Arabia discourage women from pursuing university leadership positions. In response, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has publicly emphasized the need to shift this perspective, advocating for a return to a

moderate, globally inclusive Islam that does not distinguish between men and women. Notably, the study indicated that frequent academic activities, such as conferences and social events, posed minimal challenges to women's access to leadership roles. This is consistent with Dwairy (2019), as recent societal changes under Vision 2030, including a 2019 law allowing women over 21 to travel independently, have reduced these barriers.

4.3. Psychological challenges

Psychological challenges encompass issues related to women's personality, psychological state, abilities, qualifications, and educational skills. Table 9 shows that participants' responses to these challenges were moderate, with an overall rating of 3.22 and averages ranging from 3.05 to 3.17, indicating that these challenges are the least impactful compared to others. Table 9 provides participants' responses to psychological challenges, including averages, standard deviations, and acceptance levels for each item.

Table 9: shows the respondents of the sample to the psychological challenges

Sentence	Average	Standard deviation	Level of acceptance	Rank
1	3.35	16.84	Medium	1
2	3.35	16.84	Medium	2
3	3.19	14.45	Medium	3
4	3.17	10.76	Medium	4
5	3.05	10.94	Medium	5

Overall: Average = 3.22, Level of acceptance = Medium

The study identified several challenges faced by women leaders, including hesitation in making work-related decisions when opportunities arise, fear of taking responsibility, fear of failure, and occasionally low self-confidence. While these challenges are due to individual differences and vary

among women within the same college or university, they are not universally characteristic. A more significant concern is the high level of pressures women face within universities, which can affect their personality, sometimes leading to feelings of fear, panic, or frustration when handling complex

situations. This aligns with studies (Vogel and Alhudithi, 2018; Budhwar et al., 2019; Hill and Wheat, 2017), which found that high pressure on women leaders reduces their productivity and impairs their decision-making abilities. Additionally, Salih and Al-Dulaimi (2017) observed a statistically significant impact of women's leadership qualities on psychological development, recommending increased attention to women leaders' psychological well-being.

5. Conclusion

This research offers a comprehensive analysis of the status of women in academia within Saudi universities, identifying key challenges related to empowering women in university leadership roles. It highlights the potential to effectively address these challenges through the ambitious framework of Saudi Vision 2030. This study is among the few that have clearly investigated these conditions and obstacles. According to participants, these challenges are ranked by importance as follows: organizational challenges, cultural and social challenges, and psychological challenges. The current study offers the following recommendations:

1. Ensure adherence to Vision 2030 projects and initiatives aimed at empowering women to assume leadership roles in Saudi universities.
2. Continue implementing modern approaches in the management and leadership of Saudi universities.
3. Improve current practices that restrict women's opportunities for leadership positions in universities.
4. Provide psychological support to women in Saudi universities, fostering self-confidence by creating an encouraging environment for attaining higher academic roles.
5. Conduct further studies on:
 - The roles of female faculty members in strategic planning and policy-making in Saudi universities.
 - An analytical examination of female faculty members' approaches to addressing academic challenges in Saudi universities.

Additionally, develop a future outlook for enhancing the practices of women leaders in Saudi universities under Vision 2030, considering the vision's impact on women's leadership practices and evolving roles.

Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, who were

assured of their anonymity and the voluntary nature of their participation. The research adhered to ethical standards appropriate to the cultural context and institutional requirements.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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