

THE LABYRINTH OF LEADERSHIP FOR FEMALE ACADEMICS IN SAUDI HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Article History: Submitted 14 Nov 2023 | Accepted 05 Sept 2024 | Online first 04 09 2026 | Published dd mm 202x

ABSTRACT. The study of women in academic leadership is an important research focus, particularly in countries like Saudi Arabia where gender inequality remains prevalent. This paper provides findings of a qualitative case study that explored Saudi women's experiences in academia and their complicated but rewarding pathways to leadership. Findings suggested that organizational and societal barriers were the major obstacles to Saudi women. However, many women experienced forms of social support that facilitated their leadership pursuits. Spirituality played a significant role in helping Saudi women overcome barriers and embrace their roles as leaders in the complex context of Saudi higher education institutions. Implications for policy, practice, and gender equity for women leaders in Saudi higher education institutions are delineated.

LE LABYRINTHE DU LEADERSHIP DES FEMMES UNIVERSITAIRES DANS LES ÉTABLISSEMENTS D'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR EN ARABIE SAOUDITE

RÉSUMÉ. L'étude des femmes exerçant des fonctions de direction dans l'enseignement supérieur est important, en particulier dans des pays où les disparités entre les sexes persistent. Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude qui se penche sur les expériences des femmes saoudiennes dans le milieu universitaire : leurs parcours complexes, mais gratifiants, vers des postes de direction. Les résultats ont montré que les femmes saoudiennes étaient confrontées à deux principaux défis : des obstacles organisationnels et sociétaux. Grâce à l'appui social, plusieurs d'entre elles ont réussi à atteindre des postes de leadership. La spiritualité a grandement aidé les femmes saoudiennes à surmonter les difficultés et à assumer leur rôle de leaders dans le milieu complexe de l'enseignement supérieur en Arabie saoudite.

The answer to the question of how Saudi women reach and sustain leadership positions in higher education institutions is complicated. The underrepresentation of Arabic women in leadership positions within higher education institutions has been well-documented in the literature (Aldawsari, 2016; Alghamdi & Almazroa, 2024; Dahlan, 2023). Although the last two

decades in Saudi Arabia have witnessed the growing participation of Saudi women in academia, emergent research on Saudi women demonstrates that they continue to face barriers that impede their career advancement. Understanding this reality requires a thorough consideration of the factors that impede and support Saudi women in their acquisition and enactment of these leadership roles.

Socio-cultural values in Saudi Arabia generate a set of norms and beliefs that govern women's behaviours and careers. These traditional norms have a major impact on the role of women in general, and their effectiveness as leaders in particular (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). This is because these norms may be internalized by men and women, and because they are reified within the policies, practices, and interpersonal relationships found within higher education institutions.

Although there is a growing body of literature regarding women's leadership in non-western contexts, the foundational leadership literature emerged primarily from western contexts (Alqahtani, 2021; Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). To that end, Arab women's leadership experiences remain an understudied space within this body of scholarship, and particularly, Saudi women's leadership experiences (Akbar et al., 2023; Alqahtani, 2021; Al-Asfour et al., 2017). This study applies the conceptual metaphor of the labyrinth first discussed by western researchers Eagly and Carli (2007b) to the Saudi context. The use of this metaphor is appealing because it serves as a means of discussing the women's experiences created by different contexts, which in turn create different demands and thus different routes to leadership.

This paper focuses on the findings of a qualitative case study that examined the societal, organizational, professional, and personal barriers and supports that hinder or facilitate Saudi women's advancement to and through leadership in the Makkah region. The paper opens by describing the Saudi context and its implications for women in leadership in higher education institutions. It then describes the methodology, methods, and findings of a qualitative case study of eight Saudi female academic leaders. The paper concludes by outlining the implications for facilitating Saudi women's academic leadership in the complex spaces of higher education.

BACKGROUND

Saudi Arabia is governed by a monarchy government headed by the Al-Saud Royal family. The official language in Saudi Arabia is Arabic, and the official religion is Islam. Religion significantly impacts the values that shape people and their relationships with others (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Islamic rules are strongly tied to culture and are entrenched in the governance system and laws

that are used to rule the country (Kattan et al., 2016). The patriarchal norms inherent in these rules have been illuminated as the primary reason for Saudi women's underrepresentation in leadership positions in higher education (Aldawsari, 2016; Dahlan, 2023). In addition, sex-segregation, touted as a method of respect and protection for Saudi women from sexual discrimination in the workplace (Alghamdi, 2012), continues to portray women as more vulnerable, less independent, and less capable than men.

Education in Saudi Arabia is based on the Islamic code of ethics. This ideology frames the lifestyle in the country and social relationships among people. Education in Saudi Arabia progressed through several stages before becoming accessible to women. Saudi women were allowed to attend sex-segregated public schools beginning in the mid-1970s (Almunajjed, 2009). By the 1980s, education became available to all Saudi women at all levels (Almaki et al., 2016). The gradual acceptance of primary and secondary education for women ultimately led to their presence in higher education in public and private universities and colleges (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). This era marks the beginning of sex-segregation in Saudi Arabia and the creation of women-only public spaces around the country.

Saudi women and/in higher education

Despite global perspectives that suggest that Saudi Arabia is the most conservative country in the world (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017), the rapid economic progress in Saudi Arabia, driven by the discovery of oil, brought global attention to the country, and by extension, to women's issues. Major reforms were made by the Saudi government to increase women's opportunities as leaders. As a consequence of this policy, the Saudi government invested heavily in higher education programs, with Princess Nora University (PNU) offering courses in science and technology that were previously restricted to male students. In 2005, King Abdullah established a Sponsorship Program (KASP) for males and females to pursue education overseas (Aldawsari, 2016; Alshdiefat et al., 2024). Consequently, Saudi women made significant progress in education, witnessed by the rapid increase in the number of Saudi women obtaining degrees. In terms of academic positions, success was noted in the increase in the number of female lecturers from 4,700 in 2003/2004 to roughly 19,600 in 2008/2009 (Alhareth et al., 2015). Although this did not match the increase of Saudi male lecturers (from 7200 to around 48,800) over the same period, it serves as evidence that women were making gains in an environment that only recently allowed them to be publicly educated.

The creation of Saudi *Vision 2030 Policy*, introduced by the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, furthers the aims to increase Saudi women's

contribution to the Saudi workforce and provide equal educational opportunities (Saudi Vision, 2016). This policy signals a new era for Saudi women's progression in leadership (Akbar, et al., 2023). However, even though advancements have been made, the culture of sex-segregation in public sectors and in education necessitates that men and women enroll in separate facilities on the same university campus (Abalkhail, 2017). Due to these policies and the prevailing patriarchal norms in Saudi society, men occupy upper leadership positions and women are relegated to subordinate positions. To compound the situation, Saudi universities are structured in a way that men operate with other males in the male section and liaise with women in the female section. Cultural norms dictate how males and females communicate with each other and grant males the authority to dominate (Abo Khudair, 2012; Gonaim, 2020). Although women may hold leadership roles in the female section, they face institutional barriers because their positions are not granted the same legitimacy as similar positions held by men. Essentially, cultural practices have positioned men as superior to women and have shaped Saudi women's roles by restricting their success and preventing them from maximizing their leadership potential in higher education institutions (Abo Khudair, 2012; Dahlan, 2023). As a result, Saudi women who achieve leadership positions are often less equipped to successfully accomplish their roles as leaders. This study intended to find out whether the introduction of the new policy was improving the attainment and experience of Saudi women in leadership.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework utilized for this study is Eagly's and Carli's (2007a) metaphor of the labyrinth. The use of metaphors is compelling because they are "part of the storytelling that can compel change" (Eagly & Carli, 2007a, p. 2). The term "labyrinth" comes from the Greek "labyrinthos." This term was initially introduced in the 5th century BC by the Greek historian Herodotus (Soar, 2017). In Greek mythology, King Minos charged Daedalus to create the complex labyrinth to house the Minotaur, a mythical beast with the head and tail of a bull and the body of a man. Sent as part of a sacrifice of seven men and seven women from the Athenians, Theseus, son of King Aegeus, plotted to kill the Minotaur. King Minos' daughter, Princess Ariadne, fell in love with Theseus and offered him a golden thread to trail behind him to find his way out of the complex twists, turns and dead ends of the labyrinth. Ultimately, Theseus slew the Minotaur and saved the Athenians.

The metaphor of the labyrinth was employed by Eagly and Carli (2007a) to describe the complex pathways women face in their professional endeavors. According to them, it "conveys the idea of a complex journey toward a goal worth striving for. Passage through a labyrinth is meticulous and not straightforward for women" (para.1). Additionally, a woman's path "requires

persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead" (p. 2). The labyrinth differs from a maze in that it is unicursal and has only a single path to the center; a maze is multicursal with multiple paths and directions.

Carli and Eagly (2016) stated that the labyrinth is a useful metaphor for women leaders because "there has been slow steady improvement in women's access to leadership positions, women continue to face challenges that men do not face, and the labyrinth reflects the myriad obstacles women face throughout their careers" (p. 514). Saudi women leaders confront several barriers that hinder their progression to leadership positions in higher education institutions. Thereby, this metaphor is used as a conceptual framework to initiate conversations about Saudi female academic leaders' paths to leadership and the supports and obstacles they face as formal leaders in higher education institutions.

For women aspiring to leadership positions in higher education, pathways exist but are full of twists and turns, both unexpected and expected. Because all labyrinths have a feasible route to the center, the metaphor implies that goals are attainable. As such, the metaphor acknowledges challenges but is not ultimately discouraging. If we can understand the various challenges that make up this labyrinth, and how some women find their way around or through them, we can work more effectively to improve their navigation (Eagly & Carli, 2007a). In addition, the lengthy journey and twists and turns along the path of the labyrinth imply that women face barriers throughout their careers, from the moment they begin to chart a course until they reach their goals. Therefore, the "labyrinth is a more fitting image to help organizations understand and address the obstacles to women's progress. Rather than depicting just one absolute barrier at the penultimate stage of a distinguished career" (Eagly & Carli, 2007b, para, 1).

The gender-segregated policy prevailing in Saudi Arabia has resulted in numerous barriers in the labyrinth of leadership for Saudi women. This study focused on societal, organizational, professional, and personal barriers that have been found to exist for women leaders in Saudi Arabia, potentially explaining Saudi women's slow advancement to leadership positions in higher education. These ideas are demonstrated in Figure 1. The study also focused on the ways in which these leaders overcame or were supported in their advancement. This is important for offering positive examples of change, given recent initiatives in Saudi Arabia that appear to be opening up spaces for women's issues and development.

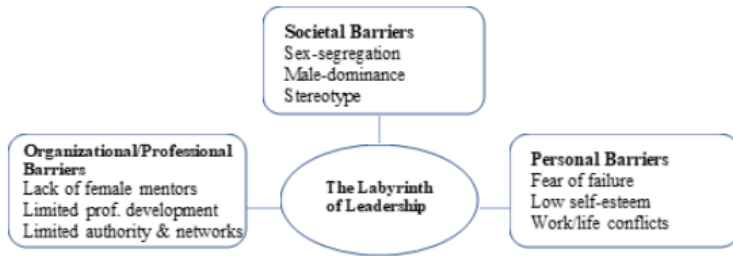


FIGURE 1. *Understanding the labyrinth of leadership*

Understanding Saudi women's advancement in the labyrinth of leadership provides a potential map for aspiring leaders. It may also lead to practical actions that can support women's leadership development and, thereby, promote capacity building within institutions of higher education that leads to organizational effectiveness and strengthened teaching, leading and learning environments.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Case study was used as the methodology for this qualitative research. As Cohen et al. (2011) argued, a case study provides "a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly [and] [enabling] readers to understand how ideas and abstract principles can fit together" (p. 289). The case for this study was a group of eight Saudi female academic leaders in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. To obtain rich data, semi-structured interviews were chosen. Interviews are fundamental processes through which knowledge and reality about the social world are constructed in normal human interaction (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In addition, interviews allow flexibility during interactions between the researcher and respondents and enhance the development of rapport between them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Through purposive sampling, eight Saudi academic leaders from three public universities agreed to be interviewed. Initial interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Follow-up interviews were conducted to affirm findings and/or collect additional or missing information. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, recorded, transcribed, and translated verbatim into English. Then, data were imported into a software analysis system, NVivo, for analysis. Data were analyzed thematically utilizing Braun's and Clarke's (2006) six steps of analysis: becoming familiar with data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining

themes; and writing results. Data were analyzed for evidence of barriers that were noted in the literature (Figure 1) as well as personal knowledge, skills, and behaviors that facilitated their individual paths through the labyrinth.

FINDINGS

The findings are framed to reflect the labyrinth as a metaphor that encapsulates the challenges and supports Saudi women faced as they traversed the leadership pathways. Although Eagly and Carli (2007b) used the metaphor of the 'labyrinth' in a Western context, the metaphor is also in common use in Saudi Arabia. To that end, this study considered whether the metaphor of the labyrinth could be utilized to frame Saudi women's experiences in leadership given the unique culture and sex-segregation policy and practices in educational settings. This section organizes the findings around three major themes: (1) women's pathways in the labyrinth; (2) leadership barriers and strategies for overcoming them; and (3) supports and opportunities that facilitate navigation of the labyrinth.

Women's pathways in the labyrinth

This section is divided into five subthemes related to women's pathways into leadership: leadership pathways; influential individuals; career progression; leadership opportunities; and *wasta* (nepotism).

Leadership pathways

Participants offered unique descriptions of their pathways to and through leadership. They all agreed that the labyrinth metaphor mirrored their leadership paths which were full of twists and turns, challenges and frustrations, successes, and triumphs. As one participant noted, the structure and pathways for women were "complicated." Similar to Theseus' journey, she stated "my journey to leadership was tedious and unclear. I accessed the labyrinth with no map or clear instructions, facing a lot of barriers".

Although all women discussed the utility of the labyrinth metaphor, they were also asked to be imaginative and provide any additional metaphors that could describe their pathways to leadership. One participant described her pathway as a "forest, I walk with no map, no clue where I am heading to or what is there." Another participant depicted her pathways like "swimming in the deep ocean" referring to the lack of leadership preparation for women on the path. Others reported that their paths were "vague and dark" and that they did not get the time to be trained for their leadership roles. One of them described the journey as an electrocardiogram (ECG) reading that is always fluctuating. Each of them offered metaphors whose descriptions included adjectives similar to those that could describe a labyrinth: dark and somewhat oppressive, into

which they were headed into the unknown without appropriate preparation. Although most of the participants painted rather gloomy descriptions of their leadership pathways, they all had a vision and desire to improve circumstances for those with whom they worked, articulating a heroic vision similar to that of Theseus who hoped to ensure the future livelihood of the Athenian people. Additionally, they all wanted to solve the labyrinth's puzzle and pave pathways for other females to succeed as leaders.

Influential individuals

A number of influential individuals supported participants' entrance and journey to and through the labyrinth of leadership. Three participants described the important role of their fathers as advisors. One declared, "whenever I am overwhelmed or stressed, I get my father's advice, he guides me to the path that I should take." A second participant suggested that her father essentially told her to align her actions with a masculine ideal when she stated, "my father instilled in me the need for equity and told me not to underestimate myself, be strong, solve your issues and depend on yourself." The third participant purported that her father was an ardent supporter of her leadership endeavours, and she "always seeks his advice."

A second group of supporters was found to be members of senior administrative teams who had worked with participants in the female section and supported them while they were faculty members. A third group of influential individuals were spouses and/or close friends who had boosted their confidence and ignited their pursuit of leadership.

Those who offered their support for these women served as the golden thread that tethered the women to notions of support and security. Regardless of the twists and turns of the labyrinth, they felt that they had connections to people to whom they could return who would encourage them whenever the labyrinth challenged the direction in which they were headed in their career.

Career progression

All participants had accessed leadership positions through traditional channels but progressed along different paths once they got into the labyrinth. Similar to Theseus, respondents in this study inevitably were drawn into leadership because of their continual engagement in acts that visibly demonstrated their skills and commitment to others. Respondents started their careers in teaching, after which they were awarded tenure and promoted to positions of leadership. Some participants declared that their career in leadership started while they were students in high school, or while they were pursuing their graduate studies abroad in leadership. Other participants noted that their leadership

progression started when senior administrators motivated them to serve on departmental committees. Such opportunities shaped their managerial skills and equipped them for leadership responsibilities. A participant shared that “accessing the labyrinth of leadership was an inevitable result of my hard work.” She intentionally mimicked the behaviours of senior administrators to hone her skills. Another respondent stated, “leadership placements in the university are often based on recommendations and or on relationships with supervisors.” Additionally, one of the women stated that for successful access to leadership, “it is essential to market yourself so that senior leaders get to know you and recommend you as a leader.” Another noted that her determination to pursue the journey and change the stereotypical picture of women leaders gave her the motivation to navigate the labyrinth. A final participant mentioned that her strong research reputation exemplified through “paper publications and conference presentations” facilitated her entry and progression into leadership positions. In sum, serving in various administrative roles in the university, being visible on committees, and building good relationships with senior administrators facilitated their leadership progression in accessing the labyrinth.

Leadership opportunities

All participants admitted that they would not be where they were if they had not engaged in leadership opportunities as soon as these opportunities presented themselves. Timing was a critical factor in gaining opportunities. One participant stressed, “if you do not take the opportunity as it pops up, you might not get it again for some time.” Participants also felt that academic females interested in administrative roles should pursue leadership opportunities that allow them to showcase their leadership capacities. One participant stated that aspiring leaders should:

take every opportunity to lead that comes their way because often it is the gate that opens the pathway to greater things. Do whatever needs to be accomplished and try to understand the organization’s culture. Do not ask for a prize or reward because these opportunities will shape your personality.

Another participant emphasized that aspiring leaders need to give of their time and service to obtain new skills and gain knowledge:

a prospective leader must give initially and indefinitely so that she can be able to work and reach the position of leadership. Work involves giving and taking and giving must be very large. Giving sometimes involves your time, health, or money, but at the end of the day, you will gain a lot.

The participant also explained that hard work might be exhausting but the reward would be worth the effort. A third participant declared that “women working in Saudi universities should seek and accept every opportunity to lead

because they may come and go in a nanosecond.” A fourth participant shared how hard work helped her to gain leadership opportunities. She also stated, “I found myself in a position where I was in a leadership role after coming back from the scholarship, so I worked hard to prove my ability so people in academia knew my name through my achievements.” Similar to the legend of Theseus who took the opportunity to serve his people when the opportunity to slay the Minotaur presented itself regardless of the risks involved, these women believed that if leadership opportunities were not taken up when they occurred, they may pass them by.

Wasta (nepotism)

Wasta is an Arabic term that means the cultural and institutional form of social networks that are misused and result in nepotism (Abalkhail, 2018). *Wasta* serves as a barrier or an entry point for women. Three participants indicated that *wasta* was an indirect but unfair path to the labyrinth of leadership that “destroys any form of equality in work.” Those participants felt that *wasta* increased leaders’ psychological distress (stress, anxiety, depression) especially when others were appointed ahead of those who were more deserving. One woman offered examples of new appointees who became leaders in her department because of “their family’s high societal status or the fact that their father was a leader who occupied a top position of leadership in the region.” She further stated that:

wasta had negative impacts not only on the person but on the educational setting as well. These newly appointed leaders lacked knowledge of leadership, and this resulted in conflicts in the department based on some of their decisions and/or indecisions.

In the same vein, another participant expressed with sorrow that *wasta* was instrumental in preventing her from accessing the opportunity to enroll in professional training. She stated that “the training was offered only to certain individuals who were favored through these social networks; thus, *wasta* prevents individuals from getting what they deserve and gives others what they do not deserve.” However, one participant declared that some women intentionally leveraged *wasta* and felt that they should receive “support from their male guardians to help them acquire what they want; they ignored the unfairness of the practice.” She shared an incident that occurred whereby some individuals had the opportunity to attend a training session for several years in a row. She investigated the enrollment sheets and discovered that for several years twenty names were always on the list. Thus, as a new leader, she gave the chance to others who had not had the opportunity to attend before. *Wasta* remains a contentious issue for women’s progression into leadership because it further undermines equity. However, such inequity has been leveraged by some women to facilitate their own entry into leadership positions at the expense of

others. Interestingly, the construct of *wasta* is embedded in the myth of Theseus as he used his role as son of King Aegeus in order to reserve his place in the group that sailed for the Island of Crete. In other words, his ambition was bolstered by his social privilege.

Leadership barriers

The data indicated that participants faced numerous barriers in the labyrinth of the leadership. Participants revealed that their representation was not fairly proportioned in top administrative positions as compared to males and their paths were more complicated if they desired to move into the few available top leadership positions for women. Saudi culture and traditions favour male leaders over female ones, and some females continue to accept this societal view of leadership. These patriarchal ideas of leadership are reified in the myth of the Minotaur when Theseus uses Ariadne so that he can access the golden thread. Even if he had managed to slay the Minotaur, without Ariadne's support, he would have never been able to find his way out of the labyrinth. Whereas Theseus is credited as the hero, Ariadne is never uplifted as one of the liberators of the Athenian people. In fact, she is betrayed by Theseus who leaves her sleeping on the Island of Naxos. This section organizes findings as they related to societal, organizational, professional, and personal barriers that obstruct Saudi women's advancement in the labyrinth of leadership.

Societal barriers

Societal barriers included struggling against a male-dominated culture; dealing with stereotypes and discrimination; and having to work within the sex-segregation policy that granted more authority to males in both male and female settings.

Women in the study were frustrated with the male-dominated culture that stymied their career progression. One participant articulated that "most women's barriers stem from the tradition that favors men over women and grants more authority to men; hence, their dominance in leadership positions." Another participant explained how the patriarchal cultural norms had shaped her role and restricted her success. Due to this culture, Saudi women cannot make decisions, engage in strategic planning, or advance in leadership past certain roles. The respondent further stated, "men always feel they are superior and that they know better than us."

Stereotypes and negative perceptions of female leaders that exist in Saudi society prevent their progression to leadership positions. One of the participants expressed her struggle to work along with her manager, who was a male in the men's section. She stated "my manager did not expect me as a woman to be in leadership. He ignored me all the time and communicated

directly with my staff without my knowledge.” The respondent further noted that she complained about her manager to the upper management, but they did not support her because “he was a man and men are always trustworthy.” After a year and a half of her struggles with him, he was terminated. She said, “the sad thing is, he was terminated just because another man complained about him, not a woman.” Another participant shared that discrimination against women existed, especially in the process of selecting individuals to participate in professional growth opportunities. She noted that “there are some gatekeepers” for professional development (PD) training who believe that only males should train for leadership positions.

Finally, the sex-segregation policy based upon these patriarchal norms restricted Saudi women leaders’ networks. Women lacked opportunities for building professional relationships, and access to knowledge resources. Even though they were leaders in their own right in the women’s sections, if males had cause to work with the female section, men were automatically granted the authority to lead. It also meant that any decisions made collectively or by women were not granted due credit. Women were not attributed for their contributions to anything that led to campus-wide decisions. This was exemplified by one participant who stated that the sex-segregation policy effectively meant that female leaders were “not allowed to share in strategic decision-making” of the university even though they may have had an equal (or larger) part to play in the ideas discussed.

Organizational barriers

Limited authority, unclear rules and responsibilities, centralization in decision-making, and marginalization were the major organizational barriers mentioned by participants. Participants shared how the limited authority they were granted in the university impacted their progression in leadership. One of them expressed her disappointment when the proposal of developmental plans for her department was rejected by a male manager. She bemoaned the limited authority and inability to contact the dean because women were not supposed to disrupt the hierarchy. According to this participant, “I have no authority to respond or follow up on my requests. Male intervention restricted my effectiveness and limited my opportunities as a leader.” Another one stated, “if I want to make a change in my department, I have to obtain my dean’s approval from the male campus. Otherwise, it will be rejected.” A final participant echoed that limited authority “restricted our creativity at work and it has a bad impact on faculty members and students.” Respondents were of the view that if they were given greater autonomy, they could do so much more for their departments and universities.

Participants were discontented with the lack of clarity of rules in their organizations. Vague or unclear rules related to women's roles and authority led to uncertainty, and ambiguity in expectation or output. One of the participants indicated that the "ambiguous rules placed me and other female leaders in embarrassing situations with students and faculty members, especially if they were enquiring about issues relating to the department." A second participant shared her annoyance at the lack of job descriptions and clarity of leaders' responsibilities. She stated that the unclear rules "made me feel as if I had been lost in the forest and had to figure out how to exist." Other participants referred to the constant updates and changes in the rules and policies that were not communicated to women leaders. The lack of updates created confusion and "foggy views" which needed to be cleared to effectively deal with the situation.

The centralization in decision-making and the exclusion of women leaders were organizational hurdles that respondents tried to overcome. One participant shared an incident where a graduate female student wanted to defend her degree in the female section, however, "I had to ask my chairperson [in men's campus] to identify a suitable day in his timetable" for the defense. She further added, "I had no authority to decide on a day for my student although it would be held in the female section."

Marginalization was another organizational hurdle for participants because some men still did not accept that women should be leaders in higher education. A participant experienced marginalization as a female leader at the beginning of her journey in leadership. Her previous manager used to mute her while they were in a video conference. Another participant declared how marginalization from her male chairperson placed her in embarrassing situations with students or faculty members. She said, "he didn't update me with the new policy/decisions" that were discussed in the departmental meetings and sometimes "I found things happening without my knowledge." As evident in these examples, organizational barriers due to sexism in the workplace were major hindrances for Saudi women's progression in the labyrinth.

Professional barriers

The findings showed that participants' limited access to PD hindered their advancement in the labyrinth. Additionally, respondents declared that there was no formal preparation for their transitions from academic to leadership roles. They spoke about the importance of being prepared. They felt that leadership preparation should be provided either by mentors or through professional training. Although respondents alluded that their participation in departmental committees enhanced their managerial skills, they indicated that

being in a leadership position was significantly different. They also noted professional networks for growth were seldom accessible accessed to women, so they had to explore such networks on their own. The absence of mentorship or training programs complicated women's leadership paths and sometimes resulted in them quitting their roles as leaders.

Technology was also a barrier for participants, especially during the pandemic. It created positive and negative consequences for their work/life balance. Deciding when to make themselves accessible for meetings or when to reply to inquiries were ongoing challenges, particularly for women leaders with families. While technology allowed participants to be flexible because, as one participant stated, "it provided more choices in communication and easier ways to integrate work and family life", however, it also blurred the boundaries of work and family time. Respondents reported that because most of their work activity occurred through virtual means, they were constantly met ~~being contacted~~ with expectations to reply immediately. In addition, participants stated that they received work-related emails at "odd hours of the night" and were expected to respond; they did not believe these same expectations occurred for their male counterparts.

Personal barriers

A number of personal barriers developed for women leaders to which they had to respond: pressure of work; fear of failure and low self-confidence; leading diverse/difficult people; professional isolation; and managing work/life balance.

The workload these women carried created high levels of fear, stress, and anxiety. One participant noted, "the overload of work impacts my mind, so I keep thinking about work issues at home." In fact, due to the high level of stress in the workplace, two of the participants shared that they were going to quit their positions. In one woman's view, "although this position is important, I am not going to renew my contract. Stress, too much stress."

The findings also revealed that continual marginalization and low expectations of women impacted participants' self-confidence in their leadership abilities and made them fearful of making bad decisions or failing as leaders. One participant noted, "I sometimes hesitate to make urgent decisions to avoid mistakes." Additionally, having the ability to manage diverse or difficult personalities was a personal hurdle for some participants, especially those who were relatively new to leadership. One of the participants stated that women leaders tended to feel the brunt of criticism on a regular basis. Another participant shared her experience in dealing with colleagues at work, especially

“rigid faculty members who were fearful for change and resisted any notion of innovation.”

The findings also disclosed the negative impact of professional isolation. One of the participants stated that “my relationships with my close friends changed, they are apart from me because I have no time to spend with them.” Another one shared that “leadership isolated me from social life.” On the other hand, participants with greater social experiences at work better understood the importance of the informal side of organizational life. They recognized that information exchange and networking often took place outside of formal meetings.

Managing work/family conflicts was participants’ biggest personal hurdle and the most prominent reason for their exclusion. One participant professed that she was not able to balance family/work due to the lack of support from her family: “I have kids, I was pregnant and have to deal with research and activities.” Another participant stated that “the inability to make the balance between work/life, pushed me always to think about quitting the position.” A third participant indicated that she has two children with an infant boy who need most of her time and she “can’t find time to work on research or publication.” And a fourth: “it is hard to make the balance especially if my family doesn’t fully understand my role as a leader.” This participant revealed that she had two children, and although still young, she was thinking of not having more children.

Navigating the labyrinth

Theseus utilized a number of strategies to achieve success in the labyrinth: reliance on his own experiences, knowledge and skill sets; utilizing knowledge he gained from others; capitalizing on strategies like the golden thread and hiding his sword in his tunic; and reliance on the gods who gave him his strength and courage. In this study, women leaders evidenced some of the same kinds of strategies to achieve their success. For example, self-knowledge and acquiring leadership knowledge from experts proved important for Saudi women in leadership positions. One participant stated, “my experience in leadership helped me to understand my capabilities, what motivated me and others, people’s personalities, how to communicate with them, and how to spread positive words.” Another participant pointed to her wide knowledge:

I did not hesitate to ask my previous supervisor questions on issues that I did not know about; I did this not only at the beginning of my journey but throughout my career. I still ask questions and I am being asked too, because knowledge has no limit.

Experience in the role also facilitated participants' leadership progression. One respondent stated that "my long experience as a leader has taught me how to deal with staff, especially at conflict times. Building trust with others enhances a leader's ability to manage tasks and successfully mediate disputes during the leadership journey." Another discussed that experience helped her to value followers and ensure that everyone feels valued.

Personal support

All interviewees spoke of their personal efforts to support themselves professionally either by reading on leadership or enrolling in professional workshops. They stated that the lack of PD at the universities propelled them to personally improve their leadership abilities. Participants also expressed how family members and close friends influenced and guided them into pathways of leadership that they would likely not have taken on their own accord. The emotional support provided to participants from their family members and spouses in particular helped them with household duties, rearing children, and fulfilling their leadership responsibilities at work. One respondent noted:

I have two adult sons and my husband works late, so I spent longer hours at work. The structure of my family helped me a lot as I wouldn't have been able to work for long hours if my sons were young. My husband is so understanding and encourages me.

Interviewees also spoke of the support they received from close friends. A participant stated that she "was so blessed to have received a lot of support" from her close friends. Some of them, though, stated that it was often difficult to maintain these friendships because of the heavy time commitment to their work.

Organizational support

Respondents shared stories about the organizational support they received from their universities; they agreed that without organizational support their efforts to effect changes would not be sustainable. However, they professed that the organizational support was not adequate to meet their needs. As one of the participants explained, "there is no parity between the PD offered to men and women. In addition, men are given the chance to attend international conferences, but we don't."

Participants expressed gratitude for the government's support in providing free education throughout their lives. Others referred to scholarship opportunities that enabled them to pursue their studies abroad. These scholarships helped Saudi leaders to gain international experience and advance their academic careers. Nevertheless, not all benefited from this opportunity. Some stated that

the scholarship was not feasible for them because it created major disruptions in their families to move to another country. They suggested that this opportunity was more beneficial to younger single women who did not have family obligations.

Participants were extremely optimistic about the Saudi *Vision 2030 Policy* and highlighted how it supported their status as women and leaders. This vision aims to increase women's contribution and empower them by enhancing their skills to meet workforce needs. *Vision 2030*, as one of the participants indicated, "provides various opportunities as well as support for women's advancements." In the same vein, another respondent stated:

the vision aims to clarify the tasks of each person in the organization, and places focus on how to measure each performance. The vision sets forth employees as assets who must be invested in to improve the performance of their organizations.

The participant continued by stating that the *Vision 2030 Policy* supports women by increasing the national awareness of their competencies and that "people have started to become more aware of the role of women than before. Younger generations especially those who studied abroad, have become more open-minded about the role of women."

Spiritual support

One of the key findings of this study was that the Islamic faith served as an important support for participants. Women's spirituality helped leaders face and overcome barriers during their journeys. As one of the participants confessed, "the more barriers I face, the more I trust in God to help me pass through them." This significant finding added much value to this study. Women articulated that spirituality helped them have peace with God, with themselves, and with others in the organization as they willingly submitted to God's will. It also allowed them to display the love of God, and this love stimulated them to monitor and fulfill their work to gain God's blessings. It compelled respondents to be fair and just with their followers. Some of these female leaders declared that faith and trust in God were what motivated them to exert more effort because of the assurance that their ultimate reward would come from God, and not a man. This view was clearly stated when a participant cited a verse from the Quran: "And my success can only come from God. In Him I trust, and unto Him I return" (11:88). Another participant stated, "we as Muslims put Islamic principles and values into practices that are entrenched in our daily lives." In the view of these women, their leadership progression, as all other aspects of their lives, functions in accordance with God's will.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the metaphor of the labyrinth can offer a useful avenue for characterizing Saudi women's progression into formal leadership roles in higher education institutions. The women participants described leadership journeys that depicted the darkness, oppression and unease that can characterize the labyrinth. They acknowledged those who supported them in their desire to become leaders, and who tethered them to what is important in their lives while they navigated difficult leadership spaces. These women had to continually develop and rely on their own knowledge, skills and experiences to help them navigate the labyrinth, while gratefully acknowledging what they learned from the few who have mentored them along the way. As their leadership abilities became more visible, participants accepted more leadership responsibilities. They noted that these windows of opportunity were limited, and that once accepted, they had to continually strategize against the sexism they faced daily. However, these women accepted the challenges because of their strong faith that God would help them find their way through the labyrinth to create more equitable flourishing higher education environments for men and women.

The findings demonstrate that women's pathways and challenges in leadership have some similarities but also many differences from the western literature that examines women's leadership (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Alghofaily, 2019; Almaki et al., 2016; Alqahtani, 2021). Very different is the sex-segregated space of Saudi higher education institutions, which creates unique challenges for women. As noted by a number of researchers (Akbar et al., 2023; Alghofaily, 2019; Gonaim, 2020), Saudi society has even farther to go than women in western countries before females will achieve representative parity with males in leadership positions.

The findings highlight a paradoxical reality in women's career progression as fathers and husbands are significant sources of encouragement, similar to findings in other studies (Alghamdi & Almazroa, 2024; Nakamanya et al., 2017; Ruhi, et al., 2018), yet as colleagues, males overtly discriminate against women and minimize their roles and authority in ways that appear to be more blatant than what occurs in the western context (Carli & Eagly, 2016). There appears to be a significant disconnect between how local families currently support women and what is enacted as social norms in the workplace. Men appear to personally support women's careers when they are in the confines of the private sphere but women's abilities in the workplace remain publicly minimized due to perpetuation of patriarchal social norms.

In order to change some of these attitudes, higher education institutions should provide men with workshops/training on the value of women as

leaders. Such training should highlight women leaders' roles, and their vital contribution to decision-making in higher education environments. Initiatives such as the Saudi Vision 2030 Policy will demonstrate to men in Saudi higher education environments and in the wider society the value that women's contributions, as equals, can bring to their organizations. Changing the perspectives of men towards women leaders is necessary to minimize sexism and discrimination against future female academic leaders in Saudi higher education institutions. Participants noted that norms are shifting for younger generations more attuned to gender equity who are more apt to return home from study abroad with progressive ideas regarding leadership.

Study findings show that *wasta* remains a source of injustice and unfairness in Saudi higher education institutions. This finding is supported by Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) and Abalkhail (2018) who reported that *wasta* was a negative influence because it supports some women's career progression and inhibits the careers of others. Western studies have found that women have often received less opportunities for formal networking and mentoring (Carli & Eagly, 2016). However, *wasta* moves beyond professional advantages brought about by networking and is more akin to blatant social privileging received through nepotism that intentionally favours certain individuals over others.

Despite their established experience in academia, participants' escalation to leadership positions remains very slow, because women are perceived to be inferior or incapable of leadership (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Alqahtani, 2021; Alshdiefat et al., 2024). Organizational barriers remain ubiquitous (Abo Khudair, 2012; Akbar et al.; 2023 Gonaim, 2020). Women who aspire to leadership know that they do not have the same opportunities as men (Abalkhail, 2017) and therefore have to accept opportunities as soon as they come their way, regardless of whether or not they feel ready for them. High workloads and little work-life balance make some women question whether or not they wish to persist in their leadership roles. Their self-confidence only develops as they learn to be self-sufficient independent learners (Nakamanya et al., 2017) who challenge stereotypes and persevere amidst the regular undermining of their authority (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Their demonstration of hard work, appreciation, and respect for followers helps them build trust and gain influence with colleagues (Kattan et al., 2016).

Perhaps the most exciting finding of this study links women's pursuit of leadership to their spirituality. Women's spirituality inspires them to fulfill their roles as leaders from a faith-based perspective. Their strong faith in God increases their intrinsic motivation to excel and offers them support when they face hardship. In addition, participants' faith makes them feel more responsible for serving and cooperating with others with care and compassion. They aspire to lead by displaying spiritual values of fairness, patience, trustworthiness,

humility, empathy, and acting in the service of others which is aligned with the thinking of Mohammad et al. (2015) who claimed that great leaders are remembered for the spiritual core values they impart to their followers. Their belief that their ultimate reward will come from God, and not a man, inspires them to continue their journeys in leadership and find ways to burst through the walls of the labyrinth to create spaces of openness, light, and support for the women leaders who come after them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study hold several implications for Saudi academic women leaders in institutions of higher education. First, the study highlights the independence of Saudi women leaders who have to prepare themselves prior to, and during, their time in leadership roles. However, it also demonstrates the isolation women face when they are deliberately excluded from professional growth opportunities, mentoring and networks that allow them to learn, grow, and proceed in their leadership ambitions. It is clear that the stories of Saudi female leaders need to be published so that the underlying sexism hindering their career progression can be acknowledged and rectified. Fortunately, it appears that the home situations for many women are shifting as the men in their lives encourage their ambitions. This provides hope that more men in Saudi universities and in the society will become allies in support of women leaders beyond the use of *wasta* that has been used as a means of inequitable nepotistic leadership advancement. Higher education policy and practices also must be re-examined around issues of sex segregation, professional growth opportunities, and equity in role authority.

The global political and economic realities within which Saudi Arabia now sits are putting pressure on the government to open up space for women. Increasing scholarships for women to pursue graduate studies abroad opened doors for women to obtain training and come home to leadership positions. Women are keen to see how the Saudi *Vision 2030 Policy* will open new opportunities for women as this policy lever-driving equity considerations unfolds. With the tremendous changes occurring in Saudi Arabia and the drive towards achieving the *Vision 2030 Policy*, it is hoped that women leaders' barriers in the labyrinth of leadership will ease and their representation in leadership positions will increase. This study found that, while women are obtaining leadership positions and they are more apt to receive support from home, the socio-cultural environment of the workplace remains difficult for women, and they are continually facing overt and covert resistance to their leadership efforts. It is also hoped that future research will continue to study the direct impacts of the new policy Saudi *Vision 2030* on women, and how this vision may or may not empower them and/or change the contexts of women leadership in Saudi higher education institutions.

Ultimately, the metaphor of the labyrinth proved useful characterizing the current state of Saudi women leaders who navigate leadership roles while having faith that persevering against sexism will bring them (and others) great rewards. Although we agree with Eagly and Carli (2007b) who stated, “the labyrinth metaphor remains viable even as conditions change for women aspiring to lead” (p. 522), we suggest that the spiritual aspect of women’s leadership is much more apparent in the Saudi Arabian context than in western settings, and this is an exciting avenue to pursue for future leadership studies.

Saudi Arabia is a historic inflection point that provides an exciting baseline moment for illuminating women’s experiences. Current female leaders must learn that they are not alone in their experiences and must be encouraged to collectively organize against the organizational barriers and sexism they face. It is also hoped that aspiring female leaders will increase their resolve to pursue leadership opportunities and leverage the findings from this study to their advantage. This new generation of female leaders will stand on the shoulders of those who have fought for rights and recognition in an environment more open to their presence, with fresh insights and a clearer map, perhaps no longer a labyrinth but a clearer pathway where women can navigate leadership opportunities with greater confidence and support.

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