

The Rise of Saudi Women into Leadership Positions: Perspectives of Saudi Male Employees

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Abstract

This study identifies the perspectives of Saudi male employees on the capability of Saudi females to occupy leadership positions in the country's organizations. A survey was conducted among different employees in various organizations located in different parts of the country. A total of 206 public and private sector employees were selected randomly. The results show that male employees are not likely to trust or approve of females in leadership positions. Furthermore, females are not perceived as capable of playing essential leadership roles, such as handling problems in workplaces or negotiating effectively. However, male employees do not have negative perspectives on females in terms of organizational commitment. Organizational type and experience in work did not influence the participants' perspectives in general. Further, older employees have few negative perspectives on the capabilities of females to become successful leaders in organizations. This study prompts the need to increase awareness in organizations on the significance of Saudi females taking up leadership roles. This would reduce potential mismatches between male employees and female leaders, thus, preventing disagreements and resistance that may develop into conflicts.

Keywords: Leadership, Conflicts, Negotiation, Organizational commitment, Culture

Introduction

Traditionally, women have suffered from marginalization in most parts of the world, allowing men a free hand to manage and control families and societies. As a result, women's role in society was limited to family responsibilities for a long time. However, in the past century or so, more and more women have come out of home to work. Although women now and compete with men at the workplace, even for leadership positions, traditional attitudes continue to cast a shadow over their status, and more so at the workplace. Discrimination against women is one of the key concerns before human rights and women's organizations in many countries, especially in terms of equality in education and job opportunities, wages and payments, and the like.

Saudi women in the past did not play a vital role in society. For example, many Saudi families did not encourage the education of women in the 1960s (Hamdan, 2005). Some were reluctant to send their

daughters to school despite the government's encouragement and support for the education of Saudi girls. The teachings of the Islamic religion are consistent with empowering women to play a vital role in society. Islam encourages a woman to be a useful and active member of society (Alhareth, Alhareth, & Dighrir, 2015; Hamdan, 2005).

Recently, the Saudi government has taken major steps in enabling women to contribute more in building the society and developing the economy. In 2005, the Ministry of Higher Education launched the King Abdullah Scholarship Program for male and female students to pursue their education overseas in various educational and leadership fields (Alqahtani, 2014). Led by King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz, the government has given a push to women's participation on a larger scale. Vision 2030, implemented by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, focuses on increasing the contribution of women in organizational leadership and the workforce (Saudi Agency, 2019). As part of vision 2030, the government plan was to increase the participation of females in leadership positions by 2020 (Alghofaily, 2019). Accordingly, Saudi Arabia witnessed the appointment of the first female ambassador in the history of the Kingdom and female rectors in some universities. The government has also appointed the first female as the vice president of the Shura Council.

However, Saudi organizations, in both public and private sectors, remain dominated by male employees. In this backdrop, this study seeks to identify Saudi male employees' perspectives on Saudi females' capabilities of succeeding in leadership positions in organizations. We aim to reveal the potential mismatches between male employees and prospective female leaders to help avoid possible resistance and conflicts in future. This study makes an original contribution to the literature by focusing on female leadership in Saudi Arabia by capturing and measuring the perspectives of male employees in various aspects of leadership capability.

Literature Review

Culture is considered responsible for identifying and organizing relationships between individuals, shaping individual perspectives and determining acceptable social practices and norms (Günther, 2014). These effects are reflected in the behaviors of individuals and their ways of thinking. According to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, the Saudi society is classified as a high power-distance one, where individuals respect and obey others with high status (Gudykunst, 2003). Employees and managers in high power-distance societies admit and acknowledge inequality among them (Jandt, 2006).

Managers enjoy more privileges than regular employees, such as payment and power (Gudykunst, 2003). Disagreements between employees and management in this type of culture may be rare due to employees' obedience to their managers. On the contrary, in low power-distance cultures, employees desire to share authority and responsibilities with the management (Gudykunst, 2003). They tend to discuss decisions and express their thoughts, and may even object to some managerial decisions.

Although managers belonging to a high power-distance culture enjoy obedience from subordinates, prospective Saudi women leaders are likely to face difficulties in male-dominated organizations. The Saudi society views women as inferior to men. This does not stem from Islamic teachings as much as from the wrong perceptions formed historically in society. Saudi women still suffer from stereotypes relating to their abilities and independence (Hodges, 2017). The Saudi society believes that a woman's role is restricted to family responsibilities, while men lead the families (Danish & Smith, 2012). The women's role in society is marginal compared to that of men (Alghofaily, 2019), as men in Saudi Arabia are accustomed from childhood to believe that they are superior to women.

Until very recently, the concept of leadership was associated with men rather than women. From the Saudi society perspective, leadership is considered part of men's roles (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). Saudi men seek control over society (Gazzaz, 2017). Some Saudis retain the old and traditional view that men are more capable of playing effective roles in society than women (Alomair, 2015; Esping-Andersen, 2009).

In summary, high power-distance characteristics show acceptance and respect for individuals with high status in society and organizations (e.g., managers and CEOs). However, many studies demonstrate that the prevailing view of women and their roles in Saudi society regarding leadership roles is not positive. Thus, I propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Male employees do not adequately trust and approve females as leaders.

There are several roles that an organization leader must play. Mintzberg's model of management states that a leader's key roles are to handle problems in workplace and act as a negotiator (Robbins & Judge, 2017). No organization in the world is free of problems, disagreements, and conflicts. In organizations, conflicts occur in different forms, i.e., between individuals, groups, or organizations (Rahim, 2017). This is a natural result of interactions and communications among human beings.

Nevertheless, these problems must be dealt with high competence to mitigate their consequences. In addition, a leader must undertake several negotiations within an organization. Moreover, the leader can conduct negotiations outside organizations, such as with suppliers and other governmental agencies, among others. Negotiations are the primary means of exchanging benefits between parties and satisfying needs, and are practiced daily (Smit, Cronjé, Brevis, & Vrba, 2007). Both handling problems in workplace and negotiation tasks require the leader to be powerful and skillful. In addition, a person assigned to these leadership tasks need to be assertive (O'Brien, 2013).

The prevailing view of the world is that women are less powerful, and thus, challenging tasks are entrusted to men. However, women currently share difficult jobs with men in various occupations, such as in diplomatic fields, police, intelligence, and the army. Many researchers have argued that difficult tasks are entrusted to men in a society on the belief that they are more powerful than women (AlDoubi, 2014). However, there is a widespread belief that jobs that benefit women are flexible, safe, and easy (Jaggar, 2014). These views vary from culture to culture. Vietnamese culture, a collectivistic society, believes that women are not powerful in negotiation as compared to American culture, an individualistic society (Van, 2009).

In the past, a Saudi woman was not independent enough to rely on herself to a large extent. Until recently, women could not drive or go to work without the help of men. Women in Saudi Arabia were facing difficulties in fulfilling a significant role in society (Forsythe, 2009). This has made the image of Saudi women unstable in the eyes of society. As a whole, the society does not see women with confidence and hesitates to accept them as leaders. Saudi employees retain a traditional viewpoint on women employees, which regards women as less powerful than men in different aspects of life (Elamin & Omair, 2010). Owing to the misconceptions prevailing among Saudi society, women are considered weak, unlike a man who can usually confront and defend his positions (Thompson, 2015). Saudi females are accustomed to being under a male's umbrella (AlMunajjed, 1997). This makes the Saudi society see women as being unable to control and manage their lives. In addition, conservative societies may not believe in women's capability and capacity (Kattan, Heredero, Botella, & Margalina, 2016).

Overall, only a few Saudi women have been in leadership positions in the past. Women formally started to climb the leadership ladder since 2013 (Alotaibi, Cutting, & Morgan, 2017). The Saudi government has recently appointed many women in strong leadership positions in public sectors:

ambassadors, university rectors, vice ministers, etc. Despite tremendous efforts to empower women to take leadership and pioneering positions in society, there remains a negative view toward women's capacity and power in the Saudi society. This may make Saudi males doubt the ability of female leaders to perform demanding managerial tasks in organizations. Thus, I propose the following hypotheses:

H2: Male employees believe that females are unable to handle problems in the workplace efficiently.

H3: Male employees believe that females are unable to play the role of effective negotiators.

The coordination process between work and home duties is one of the challenges encountered by most employees. People may face pressure at home, which affects their obligation toward their organizations, and vice versa. This negatively affects either employees' performance at work or their commitment to household tasks and duties. Difficulty in coordinating between work and family tasks cause this type of conflict, leading to negative repercussions at work and home (Miller, Lerner, Schiamberg, & Anderson, 2003). According to researchers, some managers suffer from work-family conflicts, which reflect on their performances and ability to manage their family issues (Bauer, 2009).

Women in Arab and Middle Eastern societies are considered responsible for household affairs, where most of the household burden falls on their shoulders. The Saudi society is not exceptional; women bear burdens and great responsibilities of the household. They are responsible for managing a house, following up on children, and conducting other basic family tasks. The Saudi society is considered a conservative society (AlLily, 2011), where women are seen to be responsible for household tasks. A Saudi man avoids sharing these tasks with a woman; his role is often to provide sustenance for the family members. This setup is a custom that has been passed down through generations. Furthermore, such a tradition that has evolved over time cannot not be easily broken (Cubillo & Brown, 2003). Despite all this, Islam teachings provide women with the rights to learn, work, etc. They encourage being kind to women and not weighing them down with duties (Alhareth, Alhareth, & Dighrir, 2015).

The Saudi man, specifically, realizes the amount of housework entrusted to women compared with men, not to mention their responsibility of caring for their families. This affects the man's perception of women in terms of their ability to devote themselves to work tasks. Saudi men believe that women would not be effective leaders, who are anticipated to have loyalty to their organizations and be

patient in dealing with managerial workloads (Esping-Andersen, 2009). Thus, I propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Male employees believe that females have less organizational commitment than males.

Methodology

Participants

A survey was conducted randomly on Saudi male employees in different private and public organizations, which are male-dominated, in various regions of Saudi Arabia. There were a total of 206 participants, with 80% returned responses. Among the total participants, 75% work in the public sector, while 25% work in the private sector. The percentage of participants based on their regional residency are as follows: 27% for the western and southern regions, 36% for the middle and eastern regions,

and 37% for the northern region.

Instrument

The instrument consists of 29 questions, where the first four identify the demographic information of the participants: age, years of experience in work, type of organization, and geographic location. The rest of the questions are designed using the five-point Likert scale to measure the aspects related to leadership, addressed in the hypotheses: trust and approval (five questions), ability to handle problems in workplace (five questions), effective negotiation (five questions), and organizational commitment (five questions). The reliability of the survey has been tested using Cronbach's alpha (Table 1). The value of Cronbach's alpha for each aspect of leadership and the overall question is above 0.70. This value is statistically acceptable (Wan, 2009).

Table 1: Internal reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha

ASPECTS	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of survey questions
Trust and approval	0.77	5
Ability to handle problems	0.87	5
Effective negotiation	0.83	5
Organizational commitment	0.87	5
Overall	0.93	20

Results and Discussions

The results show that male employees still have no desire to have female leaders in their organizations (Table 2). Thus, the first hypothesis is accepted. Specifically, participants believe that female leaders will not deal appropriately with male subordinates and are less worthy of occupying leadership positions than males. Moreover, participants believe that passion may prevail in managerial decisions of female leaders, and it is hard for the men to be accustomed to the female leadership style. Finally, participants believe that female leaders may not be able to deal with threats facing organizations. This perspective of participants

stems from the traditional beliefs in society that women are inferior to men, as shown in the literature review. In addition, society sees men as more eligible and capable of occupying leadership positions than women.

Existing literature finds that men generally believe women are less powerful than them. In addition, males are not used to seeing females in leadership positions and hence have no faith in them. Therefore, we accept the second and third hypotheses (Table 2). This study shows that participants believe female leaders would not handle problems in the workplace properly (the second hypothesis). They believe that female employees may not have charismatic

leadership abilities, deal assertively with workplace abuses, effectively play the role of a mediator, create a cooperative environment in the workplace, and handle workplace issues in time. As for negotiation (the third hypothesis), participants view that compared with men, female employees are likely to be more accommodating, change their bargaining positions, not handle stress and pressures in negotiation, lack determination and assertiveness in negotiation, and not symbolize strength in negotiation.

Finally, the results (Table 2) show no significant evidence that participants believe that females have less organizational commitment than males. Thus, the fourth

hypothesis is rejected. Perspectives of participants regarding the organizational commitment of females are measured from different aspects: prioritizing home duties over work duties, commitment to managerial positions, willingness to do voluntary work, and willingness to devote abilities and skills to serve the organization. The literature shows that male employees realize that females need to be involved in family engagements more than males, especially in conservative societies such as that of Saudi. However, this does not affect the perspectives of participants on the organizational commitment of female employees.

Table 2: One-sample t-test

Hypothesis	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
H1: Trust and approval	206	3.4290	.97380	6.338	0.000**
H2: Handling problems	206	3.2300	.99945	3.310	0.001**
H3: Effective negotiation	206	3.1440	1.02945	2.012	0.046**
H4: Organizational Commitment	206	3.1092	1.00651	1.561	0.120*

**Significant at the level of confidence 95 %, and α : 0.05

*Not significant at the level of confidence 95 %, and α : 0.05

The demographic variables are tested to identify whether they influence participants regarding the aspects addressed in this research. The results show an inverse relationship between age and the four dimensions (Table 3). Older employees have more optimistic perspectives on the capability of females in occupying leadership positions, indicating that they could be willing to work under female leadership as opposed to younger employees. Results show that experience in work has no influence on participants' perspectives except in organizational commitment. Experienced employees, compared with other employees, perceive that females may not have less organizational

commitment than males (Table 4). For the organizational type, there is no significant evidence of differences between participants in public and private organizations in terms of all the four hypotheses (Table 5).

Table 3: Influence of age on participants' perspectives using Pearson correlation coefficient.

H1: Trust and approval	Pearson Correlation	-0.158*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.023
	N	207
H2: Ability to handle problems	Pearson Correlation	-0.136*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.051
	N	207
H3: Effective negotiation	Pearson Correlation	-0.159*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.022
	N	207
H4: Organizational commitment	Pearson Correlation	-0.191**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006
	N	207

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4: Influence of experience in work on participants' perspectives using Pearson correlation coefficient.

H1: Trust and approval	Pearson Correlation	-.118
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.090
	N	207
H2: Ability to handle problems	Pearson Correlation	-.087
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.214
	N	207
H3: Effective negotiation	Pearson Correlation	-.106
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.129
	N	207
H4: Organizational commitment	Pearson Correlation	-.143*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.040
	N	207

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5: Comparison of the perspectives of participants in public organizations and private organizations using ANOVA regarding the aspects of leadership addressed in the four hypotheses.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
H1	Between Groups	2.948	3	.983	1.037	.377*
	Within Groups	192.398	203	.948		
	Total	195.346	206			
H2	Between Groups	5.908	3	1.969	2.000	.115*
	Within Groups	199.867	203	.985		
	Total	205.774	206			
H3	Between Groups	3.962	3	1.321	1.251	.293*
	Within Groups	214.348	203	1.056		
	Total	218.310	206			
H4	Between Groups	7.222	3	2.407	2.425	.067*
	Within Groups	201.471	203	.992		
	Total	208.693	206			

*No significant difference between the groups.

This study has important implications for managerial leadership, especially in terms of gender. The findings show that female leadership is not receiving the required trust and approval from male employees in Saudi organizations. Furthermore, male employees do not have confidence in female leaders to represent their organizations in negotiations or even to handle problems in organizations properly.

These findings indicate potential incompatibility that may eventually lead to resistance and conflicts affecting organizational performance. This requires raising awareness through media programs and the press about the importance of women's roles in society. Furthermore, organizations must enact strict rules and procedures that limit discrimination against women and show

zerotolerance for it. This will create a safe and peaceful work environment away from resistance and conflicts.

Conclusion

This research proposed different hypotheses to identify the perspectives of male employees regarding the capability and ability of females to lead Saudi organizations successfully. In general, participants have negative perspectives toward female employees becoming leaders. These perspectives are not necessarily valid and have been generated as a result of accumulated beliefs in society. As a part of its long-term developmental and strategic plans, the Saudi government has been encouraging women's participation in managerial positions and other jobs, believing in women's abilities and capabilities. Furthermore, women have asserted themselves as leaders and made remarkable achievements in leadership positions worldwide (McCann, 2020). Despite the significance of the study, it has a limitation in that the perspectives of females require to be understood as well, especially regarding the obstacles they might face in male-dominated organizations. Therefore, such type of research should be conducted to understand these obstacles to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

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