

## [EMPOWERMENT OF SAUDI WOMEN FOR LEADERSHIP POSITION: IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES]

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### Abstract:

When women are empowered, that means empowering an entire nation. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia realized that empowering Saudi women to leadership roles is a societal, economic, and cultural necessity, which prompted officials in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to develop actual plans to empower women to lead.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the importance of empowering Saudi women in leadership positions in organizations and the impact of this empowerment on organizational and societal performance. Also, this paper aims to review the challenges facing Saudi women when assuming leadership positions and to suggest some solutions to them. Moreover, this study highlights the role of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 in achieving women's empowerment.

In this study, the quantitative approach was used because it is faster and easier to collect information, as surveys and interviews provide immediate and quick answers. The information was gathered from the primary data collection by sending an online questionnaire, which is created by Google Forms, to the target population, Saudi workers of different backgrounds, ages, and genders. The sample size for this study was 100 participants, chosen randomly, from Saudi Arabia. To analyze the survey data, SPSS was used to determine the statistical characteristics of the responses.

The results of this study indicate that although Saudi women have been empowered in leadership positions at a good rate, especially after Saudi Vision 2030, they still face challenges that hinder them from assuming leadership roles such as structural, cultural, and personal obstacles.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Leadership, Positions, Challenges, Saudi Vision 2030.



<https://doi.org/10.62690/ijssp1>

## [تمكين المرأة السعودية للمنصب القيادي: الآثار والتحديات]

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### الملخص:

عندما يتم تمكين المرأة، فهذا يعني تمكين أمة بأكملها. أدركت المملكة العربية السعودية أن تمكين المرأة السعودية لأدوار قيادية هو ضرورة مجتمعية واقتصادية وثقافية، مما دفع المسؤولين في المملكة العربية السعودية إلى وضع خطط فعلية لتمكين المرأة للقيادة.

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى فهم أهمية تمكين المرأة السعودية في المناصب القيادية في المنظمات وأثر هذا التمكين على الأداء التنظيمي والمجتمعي. كما تهدف هذه الورقة أيضاً إلى استعراض التحديات التي تواجه المرأة السعودية عند توليها المناصب القيادية واقتراح بعض الحلول لها. علاوة على ذلك، تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على دور رؤية المملكة العربية السعودية 2030 في تحقيق تمكين المرأة.

تم استخدام المنهج الكمي في هذه الدراسة لأنه أسرع وأسهل في جمع المعلومات، حيث توفر الاستطلاعات والمقابلات إجابات فورية وسريعة. تم جمع المعلومات من جمع البيانات الأولية عن طريق إرسال استبيان عبر الإنترنت، والذي تم إنشاؤه بواسطة Google Forms، إلى العينة المستهدفة، وهم العمال السعوديين من مختلف الخلفيات والأعمار والجنس. بلغ حجم عينة هذه الدراسة 100 مشارك، تم اختيارهم عشوائياً، من المملكة العربية السعودية. ولتحليل بيانات المسح تم استخدام برنامج SPSS لتحديد الخصائص الإحصائية للاستجابات.

تشير نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى أنه على الرغم من تمكين المرأة السعودية في المناصب القيادية بنسبة جيدة، خاصة بعد رؤية السعودية 2030، إلا أنها لا تزال تواجه تحديات تمنعها من تولي الأدوار القيادية مثل العوائق الهيكلية والثقافية والشخصية

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التمكين، القيادة، المناصب، التحديات، الرؤية السعودية 2030.

### Introduction:

Gender inequality is one of the biggest obstacles facing the business world. Globally, women's participation in the labor market is lower than that of men. According to the International Labor Organization, in 2018 the percentage of women's participation in the global labor force was 48.5%, which is 26.5% lower than the male rate (ILO, 2018). Half of the world's population is made up of women and girls, who represent half of the world's potential. Consequently, gender equality is critical to society's success and progress.

In Saudi Arabia, the principles of empowering women for leadership were largely not present in Saudi society, except for some attempts by some local NGOs that run projects aimed at supporting women in several ways (Riyadh Chamber, 2007) (as cited in Alghamdi, 2014). But in recent decades, the importance

of the women's role in serving their country and the wheel of the development has grown into the mind of the Saudi leadership and their economic, political, social, and cultural empowerment, which prompted officials in Saudi Arabia to set actual plans to empower women to lead and push them into the labor market to raise the level of equality between women and men. For example, the Saudi government made empowering women one of the goals of its vision 2030, as it aspires to raise the rate of Saudi women's participation in the labor market by 30% and to increase the proportion of women in senior positions (rank 11 and above) from 1.27% to 5% by 2020 (United Nations Development Programme, 2018)

On the other hand, While Saudi Arabia is making progress in empowering women, the representation of women in leadership positions in Saudi Arabia is weak due to the presence of some obstacles and challenges those women face when seeking higher positions (Al-Rasheed, 2013) (as cited in Hodges, 2017). The data showed that the percentage of Saudi women leaders in 2017 was 3.2%, which means that Saudi Arabia is still far from gender diversity, in the administrative boards (Alghofaily, 2019). According to Al-Ahmadi, women leaders in Saudi Arabia face five categories of challenges: structural challenges, lack of empowerment, cultural challenges, personal challenges, and challenges related to lack of resources (Alahmadi, 2011).

### **Problem of the Study**

Most industries face a series of challenges that necessitate optimal investment in the various national human resources, particularly the female component, which is one of the most important characteristics of Saudi Vision 2030. Following its release, several qualitative developments arose that focus on activating the role of women in leadership and society. Looking at the situation of Saudi women, we can see that they have been suffering for a long time from a variety of social and organizational challenges at all levels.

The Saudi Vision affirmed its support and empowerment of women in their role as a necessary and urgent national priority by announcing several decisions and plans aimed at developing a greater level of ability in various leadership positions for women. Despite the relative growth in the number of women leaders, because of implementing the goal of empowering women, and the arrival of a few of them to decision-making positions, their leadership role is still below the expected level. Given the recent empowerment of Saudi women in leadership positions and the limited number of women in these positions compared to their male counterparts, it is important to know the extent of Saudi women's empowerment in leadership positions.

### **Research Questions**

**This study seeks to answer the following questions:**

1. What is the role of the Saudi Vision 2030 in empowering Saudi women in leadership positions?
2. What is the impact of empowering Saudi women in leadership positions in the development of the nation and society?
3. What are the cultural, social, and personal challenges that prevent the appointment of Saudi women as leaders?
4. What is the role of the Saudi Vision 2030 in reducing the obstacles facing Saudi women in leadership positions?
5. How can the challenges faced by Saudi women to obtain leadership positions be solved or eliminated?

### **Hypotheses**

For this study, there are several hypotheses:

- (H1): Saudi women face different challenges to obtain leadership positions.  
(H1a): Saudi women face organizational and structural challenges to obtain leadership positions.  
(H1b): Saudi women face religious and cultural challenges to obtain leadership positions.  
(H1c): Saudi women face social and personal challenges to obtain leadership positions.  
(H3): Saudi women's assumption of leadership positions affects society and country.  
(H3a): Saudi women's assumption of leadership positions is considered a threat and competition for men to obtain leadership positions.  
(H3b): The Saudi women's assumption of leadership positions affects the development of the country.  
(H3c): Saudi women's assumption of leadership positions helped their financial independence.

### **Research Objectives**

This paper aims to understand the importance of empowering Saudi women in leadership positions in organizations and the impact of this empowerment on organizational and societal performance. This study also seeks to raise society's awareness of the necessity of the role of Saudi women in all sectors and encourage giving them greater opportunities by presenting some successful examples of Saudi women leaders.

Moreover, this study is highlighting the role of the Saudi vision 2030 in achieving women's empowerment. Finally, this paper will present the challenges facing Saudi women when assuming leadership positions and suggests some solutions to them. Additionally, the study will provide women with voices opportunities for their views and obstacles while trying to become leaders.

### **Significance of the Study**

#### **Managerial Relevance**

Emphasizing the advantages of Saudi women's empowerment will help managers to trust the ability of Saudi women to lead and break stereotypes of the workforce of Saudi women, thereby giving women greater opportunities for leadership positions. In other words, the results of this study may also help leaders in every area understand and provide equal opportunities for women leaders as their male counterparts, which are critical problems and challenges for Saudi women. Most importantly, this study will open Saudi leaders' eyes to women's right to lead departments fully.

#### **Scientific Relevance**

Some previous studies and scientific research have covered the issue of empowering Saudi women in leadership positions, as achieving this empowerment will generate a sense of long-term viability for businesses and the economy of the country. However, this study examines the challenges that hinder the empowerment of Saudi women in leadership positions as well as the implications of empowering Saudi women. The finding of this research will have important impacts on Saudi policymakers, multinationals, HR departments, academic researchers, and other stakeholders who seek institutionalization to help women to overcome these barriers and challenges.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

Each study has limitations that may affect the results. The sample size used in this study may become a limitation. The sample size for this study was small, which is 100 participants. This small sample size makes it difficult to determine the validity of the results. Therefore, it is recommended that the sample size must be large in future research so that the results are accurate.

Also, one of the limitations of this study is the limited time, as this study was established within two months. The limited time may be one of the reasons for the small sample size of this study, as there was not enough time to collect data from a larger sample. Therefore, it is advised to give enough time for future research to be effective.

#### **Terminology of the study**

**Empowerment:** procedure that gives people the ability to use their power for the benefit of their own lives, their communities, and society by acting on topics they deem essential (Page, & Czuba, 1999).

**Leadership:** a process by which a single person inspires a group of others to reach a common goal (Northouse, 2019)

**Positions:** a collection of tasks and obligations that call for a full-time or part-time employee's assistance (University of Wisconsin, 2014)

**Challenges:** A scenario that requires a lot of mental or physical effort to complete well, or a predicament that (Eklund, P, 2021)

**Saudi Vision 2030:** It is a post-oil strategy for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that was launched on April 25, 2016, and is being implemented collaboratively by the governmental, corporate, and non-profit sectors (Middle East (Ed.),2016).

## Previous Studies and Theoretical framework

### 1. Previous Studies

Alshamat and Asghar study (2021): the study entitled Empowering Saudi Women in Leadership Positions in the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah. The study aimed to evaluate the empowerment of women in administrative work and leadership positions in the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah. The study relied on the descriptive analytical method. The sample size was 108 people, including 63 female employees and 45 officials in the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The results of the study showed that there are several means that contribute to women assuming leadership positions in ministries, which are organizational, cognitive, educational and practical means. In addition to the results, there are some obstacles facing Saudi women in assuming leadership positions, such as organizational, social and environmental obstacles. The study recommended working to improve the role of women in the work environment and believing in their ability to achieve success in the operational job roles that they undertake. The study also recommended the need to attract women leaders with experience to work in departments and branches, and to benefit from technical development and electronic communication and adapt it to develop women's work through remote work. Training courses must be held to provide Saudi women with the leadership skills they need in all areas.

Alghofaily Study (2019): The title of the study is "Women's Leadership in Higher Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." The study aimed to identify the cultural, organizational and personal obstacles facing Saudi women when assuming leadership positions in Saudi higher education institutions. This study relied on the descriptive approach. The sample size was 15 female employees in Saudi universities, and interviews were used to obtain data. One of the most prominent results of this study is the existence of difficulties that limit Saudi women from reaching leadership positions in educational institutions. Also, the study showed that Saudi Vision 2030 includes directions that would reduce the difficulties faced by Saudi women in leadership positions.

Al-Hudithi and Rabiah study 2018: The title of the study is "Assessing the experience of Saudi women in leadership positions in government agencies." The study aimed to identify the reality of Saudi women's participation in the leadership of some government agencies. In the study, the researchers

relied on the descriptive approach. The sample size was 36 female leadership employees in government agencies. This study found that women leaders have personal characteristics, academic qualifications, and professional experiences that enabled them to exercise their leadership duties and roles. This study also concluded that the family circumstances of women leaders did not affect negatively their performance of their leadership roles in the institutions in which they work.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### Leadership

Leadership is one of the most powerful forces for change in the world, and it is frequently at the core of any success story. The progress of any organization depends on competent leadership because leadership helps in coordinating, motivating, building morale among employees, and building a good work environment. Therefore, no organization can function effectively without leadership. Most organizations believe that good leadership will bring valuable assets to them and thus enhance growth and income. So, worldwide organizations spend trillions of dollars on training and development in leadership. For more than a century, scholars and individuals have tried to define leadership. Some CEOs define business acumen as leadership, for example, to set out a vision or achieve objectives for a company (Morgan, 2020). Others focused on the qualities of people like empathy, modesty or diversity to define leadership. Each leader has a unique definition of leadership that influences how they lead as well as the culture and direction of their organization.

As leaders develop, so does their definition of leadership. New leaders bring new approaches to leadership, which affect the overall culture and employees. Leadership is described as a process by which a single person inspires a group of others to reach a common goal (Northouse, 2019). To be effective, the leader must distinguish between the different styles of leadership so that he must choose the style that is most consistent with his characteristics and work environment. A leader needs certain skills and characteristics that help him, or her succeed (Northouse, 2018). A successful leader has some characteristics such as listening, Confidence, Inspiration, motivation, taking responsibility, creativity, innovation, make a decision.

### 2.1 Women Empowerment

#### 2.2.1 Empowerment

The concept of empowerment first originated in the 1980s and gained popularity in the 1990s. As a result of the increased emphasis on what is known as (the internal customer), the human aspect within the organization. Employee participation in continuous development and improvement functions has begun to improve through the concept of empowerment.

Page, & Czuba define empowerment as procedure that gives people the ability to use their power for the benefit of their own lives, their communities, and society by acting on topics they deem essential. According to Kanter, management empowerment refers to how firms allow employees' access to knowledge, resources, opportunities, and support. This is only attainable if workers acquire two sorts of power: formal and informal. Formal power is associated with the use of vision and holds tremendous

value for the firm. While informal power stems from numerous ties or alliances with superiors and coworkers) Barni, 2014).

## 2.2.2 Women Empowerment in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government realized that empowering Saudi women is a societal, economic, and cultural necessity which led Saudi officials to set realistic plans for empowering women and pushing them to increase their participation in the labor market. Saudi Arabia implements several programs to empower women in the development of Saudi society. The development plans followed in Saudi Arabia seek to activate the role of women in various sectors, including the private sector, the investment sector, and the national economy, considering the Women in Health and Development Program, and the Healthy Cities Program, among the most prominent programs currently in existence, and falling under the programs of community-based initiatives of the World Health Organization, And concerned with empowering women to participate in the advancement of society effectively and pioneering in dealing with priority problems in society that affect the health of its members. A realistic example of women's empowerment in development and healthcare promotion is the healthy cities program in the Saudi Arabia Kingdom. The program comprises subcommittees for women in all Kingdom health towns.

## 2.2.3 Women Empowerment in Saudi Arabia in Leadership Position

### 2.2.3.1. Before Saudi Vision 2030

Due to the strict interpretation of Islamic law, women's empowerment for leadership positions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was limited in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries compared to women's empowerment in other countries. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the most conservative countries in the Islamic world since its establishment in 1932 (Al-Sharif, 2019). Islamic culture, traditions, and values are important to Saudi social life, which is sometimes misunderstood by conservative scholars.

Empowering Saudi women to occupy leadership positions has not been an acceptable issue for discussion due to patriarchal hegemony in society that considers women the "weakest" link and unable to lead or even take care of themselves, especially outside the home. The Saudi society did not contain the principles to empower women for leadership, except for several efforts by some local NGOs that carry out projects to support women in various ways (Riyadh Chamber, 2007) (as cited in Alghamdi, 2014). For example, The Foundation Alwaleed Bin Talal (ABTF) is focused to empower women and implement women's support projects to improve women's living conditions.

Over time, the empowerment of women for leadership positions in Saudi society is developing in small steps. In 2005, when the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud assumed power in Saudi Arabia, he strived to empower women as leaders in several areas. The patronage of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz enabled Saudi women to assume leadership positions in many governmental and private sectors and institutions. The educational field was the most empowering field for women during the reign of King Abdullah. For example, Dr. Al-Jawhara bint Fahd Al Saud was appointed as the leader of Princess Nourah University in 2007 (Sakr, 2017). As for the empowerment of women for political leadership in Saudi Arabia, Saudi women are the last to enter the

political field compared to the women of the Gulf, where the women of the Gulf states preceded her to the Shura Council.

### 2.2.3.2 After Saudi Vision 2030

In recent years, tremendous progress has been made in increasing the number of women not only in the workforce but also in senior management positions, when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia took a package of corrective measures for most areas when developing Saudi Vision 2030. Saudi Vision 2030 included reforms for Saudi women's rights, especially empowering women in leadership positions. The vision's goal in empowering women was to raise the participation rate of Saudi women in the labor market by 30% and to increase the proportion of women in senior positions (rank 11 and above) from 1.27% to 5% by 2020 (United Nations Development Programme, 2018).

Among the aspects of empowering Saudi women is the leadership's interest in promoting them to leadership positions, providing the opportunity for creative, educated, and distinguished women to participate in the renaissance and construction, and encouraging them to be productive while adhering to their traditions, veils, and authentic customs. To confirm the support to the vision, and its belief that empowering women is an urgent national priority, many options, initiatives and programs have been announced to improve female leadership skills. Several actions were therefore initiated including the initiative to empower women and increase their leading role in civil service and the launch of the National Program for Administrative Leaders' Preparation and Development. As a result of launching the vision programs, these important goals have been achieved, which ensure greater participation of women to occupy the highest positions and job grades in decision-making positions. Danielle Atkins, chief marketing, and communications officer at Diriyah Gate Development Authority (DGDA) in Riyadh, said "Today, women are being appointed to senior governmental roles and are leading in fields such as science and medicine, which were traditionally male-oriented" (Arab News, 2020).

In the implementation of one of the goals of Vision 2030, to empower women in leadership positions, the Ministry of Education has increased women's participation in all educational sectors to unleash their potential for senior positions. Women in the Ministry of Education have occupied high leadership positions such as Deputy Minister, Deputy Minister of Private University Education, Deputy Minister for Educational Programs, and Deputy Minister for Scholarships. For example, Dr. Lailak Al-Safadi was appointed as President of the Saudi Electronic University, as the first woman to head a Saudi university with students of Both sexes. Because of the number of women who have held high positions, the Ministry of Education ranks first in the Kingdom in terms of women's empowerment (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Moreover, the economic field had a big share of the Kingdom's reforms during Vision 2030. In bold and strong actions to inject new blood into the Saudi economy, famous women are listed to lead the country. For example, Dr. Iman bint Habbas Al-Mutairi was appointed Assistant Minister of Commerce and Investment at the excellent rank.

Furthermore, according to the vice president for strategy and development, Noor Shabib, the Saudi Industrial Development Fund (SIDF) has made the achievement of gender equality and the promotion of women in senior positions the main priority (Arab News, 2020). Indeed, the Saudi Industrial Development Fund has achieved some of the main objectives of the reform strategy of the Kingdom's

Vision 2030, which is to have more women in leadership positions, as the percentage of women was raised from zero to 17% in less than three years (Arab News, 2020). "We have women working in each department separately, we distribute women leaders and young talents to all departments and in different ranks and positions, starting with the Vice President for Planning" (Arab News, 2020), said Nour Shabib.

On the other hand, A diplomatic mission to empower women as leaders were assigned to Saudi Arabia. On February 23, 2019, Princess Rima bint Bandar was the first woman to hold this position as ambassador to the United States, the most prominent local and international event (Saudi Embassy, 2021). In Norway, Professor Amal al-Moallimi has also been assigned to a diplomatic mission by Saudi Arabia (Krimly, 2020).

### 2.3 Impacts of Empowering Saudi Women in Leadership Positions

In Saudi Arabia, women leaders were able to think and do everything they could to advance the path of National development, since they became active partners for the upliftment and development of the nation, achieving qualitative leaps with different fields of science, economics, politics, and social. In other words, the impact of empowering Saudi women for leadership roles can be seen in Saudi society, the economy, and culture.

Women leaders constituted a percentage of the economic value resulting from the investment of human resources. Santosh Bay, President of Landmark Arabia in Saudi Arabia, said: "Saudi women are expected to play a vital role in the development strategy of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 ... A significant increase in the number of Saudi women occupying managerial positions in various sectors during the past decade ". "This increase is reflected in the strengthening of women's economic empowerment, and thus their ability to spend and buy, leading to more growth in the retail sector." Of course, all of this will lead to a growth in job opportunities that will have a positive impact on the Saudi economy as a whole" (Yusef, 2020). As a result, empowering women in leadership positions has helped achieve two of the main goals of Vision 2030, which are related to the economy, namely reducing the unemployment rate, and increasing the rate of women's participation in the labor force. Also, the participation of Saudi women achieved economic balance and confirmed their role in supporting the national economy and comprehensive development plans and contributing to raising the competitiveness of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia regionally and globally, which made it the focus of the world's attention.

On the other hand, by empowering Saudi women for leadership positions, Saudi women have made qualitative leaps that reflect boundless ambition in various fields, most notably the sports field. Credit goes to Princess Rima Bint Bandar, former undersecretary of the Public Authority for Sports, for removing the social and cultural obstacles that pertain to women's participation in sports. As a result, the percentage of women participating in local and foreign tournaments has increased. For example, the Asian Olympic Games witnessed prominent Saudi participation.

Moreover, due to the empowerment of women in leadership positions and they are being part of the decision-making process in the public and private sectors, Forbes Middle East selected nine Saudi women in the 2017 list of the 100 most powerful Arab businesswomen (Network News, 2017). Also, in 2020, Riyadh was crowned as the capital of Arab women by the Arab Women's Committee, which advances Saudi women and holds them to leadership positions in all political, economic, and social fields (Arab News, 2020). The increase in the percentage of women leaders in Saudi Arabia has

encouraged new graduates to think boldly about their ambitions and to look for opportunities that match their skills and achieve their ambitions.

## 2.4 The Challenges of Empowering Saudi Women for Leadership Positions

Despite the obvious expansion of the role of women in Saudi society, their participation in the labor force is still among the lowest in the world (Al-Ahmadi, 2001). The data showed that the percentage of female Saudi leadership in 2017 was 3.2%, thus still far from gender diversity, in the Saudi boardrooms (Alghofaily, 2019). The government of Saudi Arabia is working to promote women's empowerment, but certain challenges and obstacles facing Saudi women are limiting their empowerment. Saudi Arabia's women face similar difficulties and barriers that many other women in the world face to reach leadership positions (Sobehart, 2015). According to Al-Ahmadi, women leaders in Saudi Arabia face five categories of challenges: structural challenges, lack of empowerment, cultural challenges, personal challenges, and challenges related to lack of resources (Alahmadi, 2011).

### 2.4.1 Structural and Organizational Challenges

Several organizational barriers prevent Saudi women from advancing to positions of leadership. Also, the lack to develop professional and access to programs for professional development constitute one of the key barriers facing Saudi women in their search for leadership and job opportunities. Saudi women face difficulty in accessing professional networks (AlDoubi, 2014). Often, Saudi women are excluded from large networks of professionals because most programs for professional development are masculine.

Furthermore, the absence of mentors for women who seek to take leadership positions or make decisions is one of the obstacles that prevent women from taking up leadership. According to Abalkhailb and Allana (2014), mentorship and communication play an important role in a woman's career development. In Saudi Arabia, there is a lack of mentoring programs for women leaders, as mentoring programs are limited to men (Abalkhailb and Allana, 2014).

In other words, the organizational and administrative obstacles facing the empowerment of Saudi women in leadership positions are the lack of appropriate professional guidance, the lack of readily available information, and the complexity of administrative procedures. In addition, the centralized system of governance that most Saudi organizations adopt brings power to the highest position, which is often male-occupied and thus is a hindrance to women assuming senior positions.

Regarding the structural obstacles facing Saudi women, they include the centralization of the decision-making process, the lack of participation of women in the formulation of strategies, and a lack of or lack of power. Saudi women usually have little chance to take power. According to Hodges (2017), in organizations, women's authority is limited and is therefore restricted to lower positions in management. Also, lack of confidence in their leadership talents, managerial competence, and abilities could all be contributing elements to structural hurdles.

### 2.4.2 Cultural Challenges

Islamic culture is a unique set of challenges for women in Saudi Arabia. Islam's conservative attitude toward women is mostly regarded as a contribution to the culture and practices of tribal communities that existed in the Arabian Peninsula long before Islam (Al-bakr et al., 2017). Regardless of globalization, the media revolution, and the country's socio-economic developments during the last few decades, hard-line religious scholars in Saudi Arabia believe that a woman's place is at home. Such hardliners see women as incompatible with the moral role of Muslim women in their quest for professional excellence. Conservatively dominated institutions regard women's career growth and higher learning as challenging their patriarchal hegemony (Arar & Oplatka, 2016) (as cited in Alghofaily, 2019).

Moreover, the second cultural obstacle that women face in leadership is the Saudi philosophy towards the way of life of men and women. It is agreed upon in the Saudi culture that men have responsibilities and duties to protect and support women financially and to be their guardians, and this was recently abolished during the reign of King Salman Al Saud. Also, gender segregation in Saudi Arabia contributes to limiting women's opportunities to assume leadership positions. This separation prevents female leaders from communicating freely and thus the number of female leaders is low.

### 2.4.3 Social Challenges

Social challenges are represented in the emergence of sexual stereotypes in Saudi society, making it difficult for Saudi women to rise to positions of leadership. Al-Ahmadi (2011) says: "probably the single the most important hurdle for women in management in all industrialized countries is the persistent stereotype that associated management with being male" (as cited in Alghofaily, 2019). The main sexual stereotype in Saudi Arabia is that, even if men have fewer skills, women are inferior to men. Even though qualified and educated women are available in Saudi Arabia, men oversee running the country's various sectors. The existence of a stereotype in Saudi society helped to divide the roles of women and men so that the role of men lies in hegemony and control, while the role of women lies in education and home affairs. Although Saudi Arabia has qualified and educated women, the men are responsible for managing all sectors throughout the country.

Moreover, another factor that limits women's opportunities to serve in leadership positions in Saudi institutions is gender segregation. Saudi Arabia is perhaps one of the most contentious countries due to the fundamental separation of men and women. Gender segregation does not allow women leaders to communicate freely, as a result, fewer women hold leadership roles. Gender segregation restricts a woman's ability to learn new skills and pursue new opportunities for professional and social advancement. "Because of long-established traditions that have encouraged the practice of segregation within the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, socio-economic and political conditions that affect women have been defined by vehement prohibitions that have inevitably weakened a woman's position in society" (Kéchichian 2015, p. 107) (as cited in Alsharif, 2019).

#### 2.4.4 Personal Challenges

The experiences and personal characteristics of Saudi women affect their ability to acquire management and leadership positions. The lack of self-confidence of women constitutes the greatest personal barrier to the absence of occupation and high positions. The reason for Saudi women to lose confidence in leadership is due to males occupying senior positions in most cases.

Moreover, women in Saudi Arabia are suffering from increased psychological stress because they often face social, and cultural pressures. (Marinakou, 2014) (as cited in Alghofaily, 2019). Saudi women face a problem balancing professional and personal life, which causes pressures that prevent them from concentrating on taking leadership positions. The reason for women's difficulty in fulfilling family obligations and professional requirements is due to the lack of structural support within organizations. As a result, many Saudi women tend to abandon leadership opportunities, which means that they are unaware of their family life and do not leave time to relax. In other words, Due to low self-confidence, fear of responsibility, and the difficulties of balance between family and professional responsibilities, women are not able to play their leadership role efficiently. (Albakry, 2016; Tlaiss, 2014) (as cited in Alghofaily, 2019).

In addition, Saudi women lack the drive to lead. Saudi women often tend not to be highly competitive for leadership positions. Saudi women feel that they are inferior to men because they have grown up in an environment where men are seen as superior, which causes them to feel suffering, frustration, and marginalization that hinders them from assuming leadership positions.

### Study Methodology

#### 1. Research Approach

For this study, a quantitative approach was used, which is used to examine the relationship between variables using numbers and statistics. In this study, the relationship between empowering Saudi women in leadership positions and its effects and challenges they face will be examining. The reason for choosing the quantitative approach for this study is that it is faster and easier to collect information, as surveys and interviews provide immediate and quick answers. Also, this type of approach allows obtaining a large sample size that leads to accurate conclusions. Furthermore, the quantitative approach does not require direct participant monitoring.

#### 2. Target Population

Equal rights between man and women at all levels of organizations is the focus of this study. This paper aims to shed light on the extent to which Saudi women are empowered to leadership positions, their positive effects, and the challenges they face. The first stage in sampling is identifying the target population. This research targets Saudi citizen workers regardless of their gender, age, career, and education level. The reason behind targeting Saudi citizens workers for this research is to know the extent of their understanding of the importance of empowering Saudi women so that their views should be consistent with Saudi Vision 2030 regarding women's empowerment.

### 3. Sample Size

A sample that covers the entire population is considered one of the best samples, but it is often difficult to obtain. As a result, we choose a random sample that represents the overall community. The sample size for this study was 100 Saudi individuals of both sexes. The ages of the participants ranged between 18 and 55, who differed in the level of education and practical experience. Some information was collected through a questionnaire that was given to 100 Saudi individuals about their views regarding empowering Saudi women in leadership positions. In addition to obtaining some information on the challenges and implications of empowering women in leadership positions.

### 4. Survey Design

For this study, a questionnaire was created using Google Form. The questionnaire measured 4 different criteria. The first criterion represents the personal data of the participants, such as gender, age, work experience, educational level, and work sector. As for the second criterion, it is about gender equality in Saudi Arabia, which included 3 questions. This criterion measures the extent to which Saudi women are empowered to assume leadership positions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. While the third criterion is about the challenges facing Saudi women in leadership positions, as it measures the extent to which each challenge affects women in leadership positions. This criterion is divided into 4 challenges, which are structural and organizational challenges, religious and cultural challenges, personal challenges, and social challenges. Each challenge included 3 questions. The fourth and final criterion is the impact of empowering Saudi women. This criterion measures the impact of empowering Saudi women in leadership positions on society and the nation.

A Likert scale consisting of five choices ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree was used for all questions of the questionnaire. Moreover, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants via internet networks such as e-mail and social media. In addition, the questionnaire was translated into the mother tongue of Saudi Arabia, Arabic, to ensure that the participants understood the elements of the questionnaire.

### 5. Data Analysis Method

There are several ways to analyze data for studies, whether the approach used for the study is qualitative or quantitative. Since the quantitative approach was used for this study, some methods that fall under this quantitative analysis will be used, the most important of which is the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). In addition, mean, mode, hypothesis testing, determination of sample size, and frequency will be used. Furthermore, a graphical inferential analysis will be represented by graphs and tables.

### 6. Study Reliability

Before analyzing the data, the reliability of this study's questionnaire was tested using SPSS. The Cronbach's alpha for the 24 questions is 0.829, ( $<0.7$ ). This means that the questions are reliable, and they will all be used in the analysis.

## Study Results and Discussion

### 1. The Results

#### 1.1 Demographic Characteristics

Through the questionnaire for this study, data from 100 participants were collected. Demographic characteristics include gender, age, educational qualification, work sector, and years of experience. As a result of the demographic characteristics of the participants we found that most of the participants are females, where their percentage is 73%, while the percentage of male participants is 27%. The highest age group that responded to the questionnaire was 31-45, with a rate of 58%. The percentage of participants with a bachelor's degree reached 50%, which is the highest percentage of educational level among the participants. Most respondents are working in the private sector (37%), where their years of experience were between 11-15 years (32%).

#### 1.2 The Challenges of Empowering Saudi Women in Leadership Positions

This section of the questionnaire measures the strength of challenges facing Saudi women in obtaining leadership positions. The challenges include structural and organizational, religious and cultural, social, and personal challenges. Descriptive statistics were applied to the questionnaire responses for this section such as the mean, standard deviation, and RII (Relative Important Index).

##### 1.2.1 Structural and Organizational Challenges

Structural and organizational challenges are some of the challenges facing Saudi women in obtaining leadership positions. The Structural and organizational challenges that were mentioned and studied to determine the extent of their impact on Saudi women's access to leadership positions include the lack of clarity in the structure of the system, unequal opportunities for women and men in the organization to obtain appropriate vocational training, and the absence of mentoring programs for women. Saudi women face Structural and organizational challenges that limit their access to leadership positions, with an average RII of 70.5%, which is the second-highest challenge facing Saudi women. This means that most of the participants agree that this type of challenge exists for Saudi women.

The unequal of opportunities between women and men in the organization in obtaining appropriate vocational training is the highest structural challenge facing Saudi women with a percentage of 72.8% RII (high - medium importance level), a mean of 3.64 and a standard deviation of 1.235. After that, lack of clarity in the structure of the system comes as the second-highest structural challenge with a 71.8% RII (high-medium importance level), a mean of 3.59, and a standard deviation of 1.120. The lack or absence of counseling programs for women constitutes the lowest percentage of importance among the Structural and organizational challenges, where the relative importance of them is RII 67%, mean 3.35, and standard deviation amounted to 1.201.

##### 1.2.2 Religious and Cultural Challenges

Culture is a set of actions and beliefs that are acquired and developed by a specific group of people who share similar traits and adhere to them in problem-solving and living (Schein,1991). Islamic culture poses a unique set of challenges for women in Saudi Arabia where the conservative Islamic attitude towards women is often seen as a contribution to the culture and practices of societies. The cultural and religious challenges included in the questionnaire contain 3 statements, and they are:

- 1/ The Islamic religion was taken as a pretext for not empowering women in leadership positions in some organizations.
- 2/ The separation between men and women in the workplace is an obstacle to Saudi women taking leadership positions.
- 3/ The prevailing belief in Saudi Arabia that men have leadership abilities and skills affects the inability of women to assume leadership roles.

As a result, the cultural and religious challenges are the least challenges that Saudi women face to access to leadership positions from the participants' perspective, with an average RII of 63.6%. Most of the participants agree that the prevailing belief that men have leadership abilities and skills is the highest cultural challenge facing Saudi women and limits their assumption of leadership roles with an average RII of 69.8%, mean is 3.49, and a standard deviation is 1.235. After that, the participants agree that in some organizations the Islamic religion is taken as a pretext for not empowering women in leadership positions, but with a lesser percentage than their approval for the first challenge, where the RII for this challenge is 63.8%, mean is 3.19, and Standard deviation is 1.269. While the participants are neutral with separation between men and women in the workplace constitutes an obstacle to Saudi women assuming leadership positions with RII 57.4%, a mean of 2.87, and a standard deviation of 1.323.

### 1.2.3 Social Challenges

Social challenges represent one of the challenges that Saudi women face in obtaining leadership positions. From the participants' perspective, social challenges in Saudi Arabia obtained an average RII 68.6%, which means that they are considered the third most powerful challenge facing Saudi women compared to other challenges.

The social challenges mentioned in the questionnaire include the following 3 statements:

- 1/ Society's view and stereotyped image of women play a major role in not empowering women to occupy leadership positions, as women are weak in all fields.
- 2/ In Saudi society, women are considered inferior to men, despite the presence of qualified and educated women.
- 3/ The division of roles between women and men in Saudi society hinders women from taking on certain leadership positions (where the role of men is the authority, and the role of women is in education and domestic affairs).

As a result, we found that most of the participants agree that the stereotype towards women in Saudi society plays a major role in hindering women from taking on leadership roles, as the biggest social challenge is considered with RII 73.6%, a mean of 3.68, and a standard deviation of 1.091. After that, the participants agreed that in Saudi society, the division of roles between men and women is one of the social challenges but less significant than the stereotype in which it gained RII 68.8%, a mean of 3.44, and a standard deviation of 1.234. Also, the participants agreed that there is a social challenge that lies in considering women to be inferior to men in Saudi society despite the presence of qualified and educated women, considering that this challenge is the least social challenge facing Saudi women with importance of 63.4%, a mean of 3.44, and a standard deviation of 1.234.

### 1.2.4 Personal Challenges

Many studies indicate the presence of personal challenges facing Saudi women, which may reduce their effectiveness in leadership positions. The questionnaire of this study measured the strength of the personal challenges facing Saudi women, as these challenges include lack of self-confidence, difficulty balancing personal and professional life, difficulty traveling for work, and the impact of encouragement on women's pursuit of a leadership role. As a result, we found that personal challenges constituted the highest percentage of challenges facing Saudi women, with an average RII% 72.3%.

Also, we found that most of the participants agree that there are personal challenges for Saudi women to varying degrees. Participants strongly agree that family encouragement plays a major role in women's pursuit of a leadership role with RII % of 83.8%, mean of 4.19, and standard deviation of 0.929. The participants agreed with RII% of 71.6%, a mean of 3.58, and a standard deviation of 1.224 those Saudi women face difficulty in traveling for work, as they bear the greatest responsibility for the family. Also, the participants agreed in similar degrees on the difficulty of balancing the personal and professional life of women and the lack of self-confidence as an obstacle to Saudi women assuming leadership positions, as the difficulty of balancing obtained RII% of 68.2%, mean 3.41, and standard deviation 1.102. While the low self-confidence had RII% of 65.6%, a mean of 3.28, and a standard deviation of 1.356.

### 1.3 The Effects of Empowering Saudi Women in Leadership Positions

This section measures the extent of the impact of empowering Saudi women for leadership positions on society and the nation. For this section of the questionnaire, a five-point Likert scale was used (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree). This section includes the participants' opinions regarding if empowering Saudi women in leadership positions is considered a threat to men and competition for leadership positions with large financial incomes, empowering women in leadership roles helped their financial independence, and empowering women in the country's development.

#### 1.3.1 Empowering Women in Leadership Positions is a Threat to Men

As a result, we found that the statement (Empowering women in leadership positions is a threat to men and a competition for them in leadership positions with large financial incomes) had the lowest percentage of RII in this section, where the percentage of RII was 69.6% corresponding to the level (agree) with a mean of 3.48, and a standard deviation of 1.251.

It is clear from the table that more than half of the participants believe that empowering women in leadership positions is a threat to men and a competition for them in leadership positions with large financial incomes, as they agreed with the statement to varying degrees. The percentage of participants who agreed was 29% and 26% strongly agreed. While 18% of the participants expressed neutrality with the statement. In contrast, 21% of respondents disagreed with this statement and 6% strongly disagreed.

#### 1.3.2 Empowering women in leadership roles helped in their financial independence.

We found through the questionnaire, that the participants have a high level of agreement towards the fact that empowering women in leadership roles helped in their financial independence, as it obtained an RII of 81.6%, a mean of 4.08, and a standard deviation of 1.107. Also, 31% of the participants agree and 46% strongly agree that Saudi women have been able to become financially independent because of their empowerment in leadership roles. 12% of respondents were neutral with this statement. While there were few percentages of participants who opposed this statement with 7% disagree and 4% strongly disagree.

### 1.3.3 Empowerment of Women Helped in the Development of the Country

As a result of the questionnaire, we found that most of the participants agreed on the statement that the empowerment of Saudi women helped in the development of the country, so that the RII for this statement was 83.6%, which is the highest RII level in this section, corresponding to (strongly agreed) with a mean of 4.18 and a standard deviation of 0.978. The percentage of those who agreed that empowering women affects and helps in the development of the country reached 35%, while the percentage of those who strongly agreed with this statement reached 46%. 13% of the participants preferred to register their neutrality regarding the impact of empowering women in helping the country's development. On the other hand, we find that the participants who disagree and strongly disagree with this statement got the same percentage, which is 3%.

## 2. Discussion

From the results of the study, that found by using SPSS, we find that hypothesis (H1), which is the Saudi women facing various challenges to assume leadership positions is true. Structural and organizational challenges are the first challenges (H1a). All statements in this category were accepted by the respondents with an average RII of 70.5%. The following are the obstacles that Saudi women leaders face in this category: lack of clarity in the structure of the system, unequal opportunities for women and men in the organization to obtain appropriate vocational training, and the absence of indicative programs for women. Where the lack of clarity in the structure of the system, and unequal opportunities between women and men in the organization in obtaining appropriate vocational training, had close percentages of an RII 71.8% and 72.8%, respectively. While the lack of counseling programs for women had the less percentage of RII, which is 67%.

Religious and cultural challenges are the second challenge facing Saudi women for obtaining leadership positions(H1b), as the participants agreed on most of the statements for this category with an average RII of 63.6%. Religious and cultural challenges included using the Islamic religion as a pretext, separating men and women in the workplace, and the widespread belief that men have more leadership abilities and

skills than women. The participants, with an RII of 63.8%, agreed that the Islamic religion is taken as a pretext for not empowering women in leadership positions in some organizations. Also, the participants agreed that the prevailing belief that men have leadership abilities and skills more than women may hinder women's access to leadership positions with an RII of 69.8%. On the other hand, the participants expressed their neutrality that the separation between men and women in the workplace hinders women from assuming leadership positions with an RII of 57.4%.

Social challenges come as the third challenge that hinders Saudi women from obtaining leadership positions (H1c), with an RII of 68.6%. Social challenges include the society's view and stereotyped image of women, the consideration of women as inferior to men in Saudi society, and the division of roles between women and men in Saudi society. The participants agreed and supported all the statements for this category of challenges, as the first statement, the society's view, and stereotyped image of women, had the highest RII with 73.6%. While the other two statements, which are considered women as inferior to men in Saudi society and the division of roles between women and men in Saudi society, had the approval of the participants with an RII of 63.4% and 68.8% respectively.

The last challenge facing Saudi women in obtaining leadership positions is the personal challenges(H1d). The participants have a high level of agreement for this challenge with the highest RII of 72.3%. The personal challenges that hinder.

Saudi women's access to leadership roles includes low self-confidence, difficulty balancing personal and professional life, difficulty traveling for work, and encouraging family. Most of the participants agreed on the statements of this category of challenges in close percentage, as the lack of self-confidence and the difficulty of balancing personal and professional life had a close RII with 65.6% and 68.2% respectively. While the challenge which lies in the difficulty of traveling for work had RII of 71.2%, where the woman bears the greatest responsibility for the family. On the other hand, family encouragement got the highest RII in this category with 83.3%.

As for the Second hypothesis (H2), which is the empowerment of Saudi women in leadership positions affects the country and society, is true where the results of this study showed the existence of a statistically significant relationship between the empowerment of Saudi women in leadership positions and the growth and development of the country and society. Most of the participants agreed with the hypothesis (H2a), which is empowering women in leadership positions is a threat to men, with an RII of 69.6%. Also, we find that the hypotheses (H2b) and (H2c), which are empowering women helped in the development of the country and helped women to become financially independent, are true. Where (H2b) had RII of 83.6% and (H2c) had 81.6%. As a result, we find that the following hypotheses are true:

(H1): Saudi women face different challenges to obtain leadership positions.

(H1a): Saudi women face organizational and structural challenges to obtain leadership positions.

(H1b): Saudi women face religious and cultural challenges to obtain leadership positions.

(H1c): Saudi women face social challenges to obtain leadership positions.

(H1d): Saudi women face personal challenges to obtain leadership positions.

(H2): Saudi women's assumption of leadership positions affects society.

(H2a): Saudi women's assumption of leadership positions is considered a threat and competition for men to obtain leadership positions.

(H2b): The Saudi women's assumption of leadership positions affects the development of the country.

(H2c): Saudi women's assumption of leadership positions helped their financial independence.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

### 1. Recommendations

Women represent half of the society, so they must contribute to the country's development and the achievement of the Vision 2030 goals. In other words, to obtain Saudi Vision 2030, we need the entire society, including both genders, to work together to make it a reality. Based on the study's findings, here are some recommendations:

- 1/ The more women participate, the more the country develops and rises. Therefore, a greater percentage of women should be promoted to leadership positions.
- 2 / Establishing special mentoring programs for women to help them lead, as most of the participants find that the lack of mentoring programs is one of the challenges faced by Saudi women, which limits their access to leadership positions, with an RII of 67%
- 3 / Encouraging women leaders to publish their experiences so that they become positive examples for other women and make them seek greater positions.
- 4/ Changing the stereotype and prevailing belief in Saudi society that men have more leadership skills than men, as most of the participants believe in this belief with RII 69.8%, by including some examples of successful Saudi women leaders in education curricula.
- 5/ Increasing society's awareness of the role of Saudi women and their impact on the country's development through holding conferences that focus and encourage the empowerment of Saudi women.
- 6 / Providing training courses to increase Saudi women's self-confidence so as not to be an obstacle for them to obtain leadership positions, as most of the participants agreed that lack of self-confidence is one of the personal challenges facing Saudi women from obtaining leadership.

## 2. Conclusion

Recently, Saudi Arabia has grown in many ways, and women's empowerment is an integral part of this growth. The recognition of the role of Saudi women has increased more than ever, especially after the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030, where increasing the percentage of women's empowerment was one of the vision's goals. As a result of this study, we find that since the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030, the percentage of empowered Saudi women has expanded although some challenges are facing Saudi women to gain leadership positions. The aim of the research was to shedding light on the challenges facing Saudi women in obtaining leadership positions such as social, personal, and cultural challenges. In addition to increasing society's awareness of the necessity of empowering Saudi women in all sectors. Several projects in Saudi Arabia have been launched to increase the involvement of women in leadership positions, which helped to achieve gender equality in leadership positions with a fair percentage. Moreover, it was found in this study, that the opportunities given to some women to lead, had positive effects that helped the development of the country and society. Therefore, it is good to launch more projects and initiatives that encourage empowerment.

of Saudi women and thus achieve more prosperity for society and the country.

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