Female participation in the Saudi Workforce: A Saudi perspective of key barriers

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge from a Saudi perspective of female participation in professional occupations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is scarce particularly when compared to the global context. This paper focuses on one aspect of key findings of a doctoral study aimed at identifying enablers and barriers to female participation in the Saudi workforce. The focus of this paper is on the barriers to women's participation. Five important barriers have been identified and are discussed. They are (i) differences in attitudes across regions; (ii) female participation as a sensitive cultural issues; (iii) the impact of the 'Western eye' regarding Islam (iv) Islam as an enabler?; and (v) responsibilities to family and expectations.

Key words
Women and work, gender in organisations, occupational segregation, workforce diversity, valuing diversity.

Introduction

Feminism in Saudi Arabia is a both an important and a highly sensitive issue. There is a lack of literature by Saudi researchers that examines what feminism means for women in Saudi Arabia. However, the culture, traditions, and societal values provide valuable insights regarding female participation in Saudi Arabian society. Focusing on capturing Islamic cultural identity from a Saudi perspective and reflecting upon Saudi nationals' views and lifestyle is essential if we wish to gain greater clarity on the barriers to women's participation in paid employment in Saudi Arabia. The primary focus of this paper is to report on key findings relating to these barriers. Five important barriers have been identified and are discussed. They are (i) differences in attitudes across regions; (ii) female participation as a sensitive cultural issues; (iii) the impact of the 'Western eye' regarding Islam (iv) Islam as an enabler?; and (v) responsibilities to families and expectations. These findings are part of a larger doctoral study; the aim of which is to identify enablers and barriers to female participation in professional occupations in the Saudi workforce. A clear understanding from a Saudi perspective of the obstacles that stand in the way of female participation is an important first step. It is hoped that a greater understanding by Western researchers to the historical socio economical religious norms embedded in the Saudi society will also be an important outcome of the larger research project.

This paper is organised as follows. Firstly an explanation of Saudization is provide, this is followed by exploration of some of the relevant literature concerning female participation in Saudi Arabia. The methodology is then explained. Key barriers that have been identified are then discussed and related back to relevant literature.

Women in Saudi Arabia and Saudization

Saudi Arabia has made significant efforts in creating jobs for nationals and promoting female participation in employment (AlMunajjed 2010). Women's participation rate in the labour force has increased from 5.4 percent in 1992 to 14.4 percent with the majority working in education. Female university graduates comprise 57 precent of students enrolled (AlMunajjed 2010). Women are more likely to be employed in the public sector although there have been some significant increases in the private sector particularly in banking (AlMunajjed 2010).

Saudization is seen as having the potential to open up further opportunities for Saudi women to participate fully in the labour market. Looney (2004) explains Saudization as a government program that has three main goals: increasing employment opportunities for Saudi nationals; reducing the expatriate workforce and recapturing national and foreign investment (Looney 2004; Al-Dosary 2005). In 2011, the Ministry of Labour created a new system called Nitaqat.[1] to further embed Saudization. Nitqat considers both genders are equal as national employees (Wahab 2011) and promoting female development and participation has continued to be a focus of the Saudi government (AlMunajjed 2010; Fatany 2011).

At a global level the Saudi Government has ratified the United Nations Equal Remuneration Convention and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which calls for amongst other things equal economic opportunities (AlMunajjed

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[1]Nitaqat means categories and companies will be divided into groups of premium, green, yellow and red. The companies classified in premium and green are companies which have complied with the requirements of the Nitaqat system and as such will receive special benefits. Companies classified as yellow and red have not fulfilled the requirements and are subject to a range of sanctions. The main objective of this program is to lower the rate of foreign employees and increase the rate of hiring nationals.

2010). In 2006, to discuss matters concerning women six Saudi academic females were appointed to represent the country in international forums (Muzaffar 2006; Dahlan 2007; AlFaraj 2008).

On a national level, in 2011 King Abdulla Bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud allowed female participation in the Consultative Council, a legislative body advising the King (Fatany 2011). The government has made considerable efforts towards female development and employment, including new laws facilitating female employment; offering female sections to various governmental departments; and funds and initiatives to support female participation (Dahlan 2007; AlMunajjed 2010; UNDP 2010; Fatany 2011). Despite this Saudi Arabia continues to have one of the lowest female participation rates in employment in the region (AlMunajjed 2010).

Women's Participation in Paid Employment

There has been significant focus in western world on the increasing participation of women and work, much of which can be seen as resulting from second wave feminisms of the 1960-70s which informed both research and research approaches (Olesen 1994; Olesen 2003) in relation to women's lives. In a Western context areas such as paid employment (Costa 2000), barriers to employment (Melamed 1995), career paths (Eagly and Carli 2007) women's ongoing under representation in senior roles (Catalyst 1998; Burke and Vinnicombe 2005; Bilimoria and Piderit 2007; Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency 2010), and work and family responsibilities (Pocock 2003) amongst others have received considerable attention. However, there has been comparatively little research that has focused on Saudi women's experiences and even less research that has examined the issues from a Saudi standpoint.

Female inequality stems from customs that see women as absent and silent figures of a society; women are taught to accept the role of being subordinate to men and to not challenge that (Smith 1987; Doumato 2002; Hamdan 2005). Second wave feminism focussed on exploring women's lives from their own perspective, Jackson and Scott (2002:270) however, remind us that 'the dominant definition of normal masculinity and femininity have been shaped largely by white western middle class and heterosexual views of the world". Calvini-Lefebvre et al (2010: 248) also remind us 'feminism' means very different things in different social contexts.

Gender ideologies are rooted in socio-economic traditions in Saudi Arabia (Hamdan 2005). Elamin and Omair, (2010: 9) note in their research that Saudi male participants strongly believed:

> *. . . that men are dominant, independent, competitive and capable of leadership and women are submissive, dependent, caring and good for domestic tasks and childrearing 2(Elamin and Omair p. 9).*

Charlebois (2012) provides further insights by drawing on Sunderland's notions of bounded masculinity and unbounded femininity (Charlebois 2012). Despite change brought about by the feminist movement, views of males as breadwinners and women in subordinate roles remain strong. Men are bound to provide, that is they are expected to be the breadwinners and to pursue careers. Women on the other hand can be considered as unbounded, with fewer expectations placed on them to excel and to pursue careers.

The lack of research regarding women's employment in Saudi Arabia has been noted as a gap in literature (Metcalfe 2008; Elamin and Omair 2010). Much of the western academic literature depicts females in the Middle Eastern region as subjective and dependant figures and suggests that this has its foundation in Islam and the cultural system. Metcalfe's work can be seen as something of an exception in that she does acknowledge a wider range of issues with respect to Islam and the Arabian culture. She (2008) proposes the concept of different but equal as an underlying principle in relation to women in employment in Saudi Arabia. This Different but Equal Philosophy explains that:

> *Arab states argue that they are not against the principles of CEDAW but wish to maintain their commitment to Islamic Shar'ia. This stresses that men and women be treated differently, not unequally (Metcalfe, 2008, p, 91).*

Metcalfe states that female empowerment could be achieved if organizations used different policies and management systems to govern females (Metcalfe 2008).

Saudi women are interested in participating in paid employment (Doumato 1999) and are becoming more aware of their rights, status and needs (AlMunajjed 2010). Despite increased access to education, economic opportunities and participation remain constrained for women in Saudi Arabia

(Hausmann 2010; Metcalfe 2011) As a result many of Saudi Arabia's educated women are unemployed (Sidani 2005; 2010; Elamin and Omair 2010) and a range of obstacles have been identified including the regulatory environment and access to finance (Ahmad (2011).

Methodology:

The research takes a feminist approach in that the focus is on improving women's lives within the context of social changes that are occurring in Saudi Arabia. MacPherson (1983) (in Webb 1993: 417) states that feminist research 'should focus on women related questions . . . should analyse the condition of women's lives and should be grounded in actual experiences closely related to social change'. A qualitative approach was used as this was seen as the most appropriate when undertaking feminist research in a conservative society (Denzin 2003; Porta 2008). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to gain deeper understanding of meanings of religion, culture and gender and how these act as possible barriers or enablers to women's employment. This was further supported by two focus groups. Participants for the interviews consisted of three major groups. Group A consisted of ten men who were in senior positions in the government or industry. Group B consisted of ten female university graduates, who are currently not in the paid workforce. Group C was made up of seven educated females who are employed in senior positions. In addition two focus groups were conducted to gain further insight into any differences in attitudes towards employment between recently graduated females and older females. A thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Patton 2002) was undertaken to identify key themes arising from the interviews and focus groups.

Findings and Discussion:

The findings of this research contribute to the limited knowledge from a Saudi perspective of female participation in the Saudi workforce. The research remains in progress however this paper highlights key findings to date in relation to barriers to employment.

Attitudes to female participation differs across regions

Findings emphasize the differences in culture from city to city and region to region. Cultural implications identified through the data collected stressed that people from different regions think differently about female participation. Participants commented that people in the west of Saudi Arabia are generally more open to various cultures, understand various languages and welcome different

people from various places of the world. There is less focus on gender issues and the segregation of males and females in the western regions.

However, in central regions it was noted that people are more conservative about female issues and gender segregation issues. Participants noted that people from the central regions view people from the west as too open, while people from the west view people from the central parts as too strict and conservative. Hence, attitudes regarding female participation are reflected differently from region to region. As one participant explained:

> *Each city has its own culture, Saudi Arabia is a big country with different regions, each of these regions has its flavour of culture depending on exposure and history of these regions. The most open minded region is the western region, why? Because of the exposure over the years of history with pilgrims, educators and traders. And the more you go into cities and villages who have no exposure the more culture is concentrated, focused, conservative and fears changing.*

Attitudes to female participation is a sensitive cultural issue

As noted above participants spoke about the impact of regional differences and how this led to what they termed as dangerous accusations and segregation of thought. For example, people who were seen as being more liberal in their attitudes towards women's participation in employment could be subject to negative comments by those who are more conservative and vice versa.

A further example that participants commented on was that in some private sector organizations there was less gender segregation that would normally be expected in Saudi organizations. However others noted that gender segregation in the workforce depends on the industry sector.

One CEO suggested that cultural norms could be maintained and career opportunities still offered to women. Separate spaces, from his point of view need not mean that female employees would stop at a certain levels of seniority in the organization or would not be able to supervise men.

if there is a will there is a way, so we have the will and we have all communication technologies offered, so they don't need to be physically working together in order to progress.

However, participants in general expressed concerns regarding how females who wanted to achieve senior positions in the workforce will be able to do so without losing their cultural identity. It was not clear for the respondents how women could be successful without breaking cultural norms.

The western eye regarding Islam:

Participants noted that views of the western females are projected as the role model for females around the world. They saw this as invalid for women in Saudi Arabia as western females are not seen to be breaking their cultural customs but it would require Saudi women to do so. Participants noted that asking females from different ethnic cultures to be guided by the western feminist movement towards a more "civilized western lifestyle" might imply that females from different cultural backgrounds should grow out of their culture, customs religious observance. For example, women should not wear their 'abayas'[2] was seen by some of the respondents as an offensive request.

One respondent commented that western societies appear eager to change everyone. However as noted below they didn't necessarily see the western way as something they wanted to follow:

Every society has their own values and we respect their values even if we don't agree to them. Instead of respecting our values and trying to accept us as we are they want to change us, to modernize us, in their way of thinking.

Islam as an enabler?

Both male and female participants were asked if they thought Islam hindered women's participation. Some participants almost saw the question as an affront. The women who were interviewed saw Islam as being their motivation behind their efforts to grow and achieve their goals. They reflected upon Islamic stories and Hadeeth scripts that show female participation. As one participant shared:

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[2] Abaya refers to the traditional formal cover worn by women in public

Islam is far from such accusations. Islam since the day we knew it has always been calling for female respect. . . Islam has never prevented women from work. A lot of the verses in the Quraan has always called for seeking education and work - Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?- [verse 9 surat Alzumr]. And this is an ongoing invitation to learn and get educated. Islam is not a barrier between women and work, but the social status in Saudi Arabia was one of the main reasons for this.

However it was also noted that whilst Islam wasn't seen as a barrier to women's employment women needed to stay within Islamic rules otherwise this might impact on them working.

People understand that Islam doesn't prevent females from working however; females haven't economically participated for generations so it's best that when she does it she doesn't break Islamic rules or else the working environment won't be a society's best option for their respected ladies.

Responsibilities to families and expectations
Females in the Saudi society show huge concern in relation to their family responsibilities and social ties. Hence, the need for flexibility is seen as essential. Unfortunately part time jobs catering for graduate females are not available in Saudi Arabia. Most of the unemployed females touched on this theme. The need for flexibility was also commented on with one participant noting that they had*:*

left a banking opportunity which paid very generously, and became a university lecturer just because the hours made a difference. Although the pay is nothing compared to the baking position I had but at least now I can go home attend to all my family needs and still have time for myself. When I was in the banking position I come back home around six and had very little time to spend with the kids before they went to sleep that is if I didn't sleep before they did!

Data indicates that this theme is one of the key reasons given by respondents to explain why they weren't seeking full time employment. Some also indicated that they are not pursuing their right to participate in the workforce, because they are financially relaxed because males are obliged by the

Shariaa Law to provide for all their needs and necessities. This indicates that some Saudi females seek to remain unemployed because of lack of flexibility and because they are aware of males obligations to provide for the family.

Metcalfe's (2008), "equal but different" philosophy was tested with participants. Participants thought that females were already treated equally in terms of those who joined the workforce and faced no discrimination as they received equal pay and same contracts as their male colleagues. In some organizations female development has opened up senior positions for female employees. Participants didn't agree with categorizing Saudi females as different, instead they recommended using Islam as an enabler as labelling them as different could lead to different and therefore less equal treatment in employment.

The more pressing need as noted above was need for flexibility. As one participant stated:

> we are females like all females around the world we just need flexibility. Instead of treating us differently, why not implementing family friendly policies like normal socially responsible organizations would do?

Discussion:

The findings relating to the barriers to women's employment in Saudi Arabia reveal the strong connections between culture, religion, the view of western culture as a role model, responsibilities towards family and expectations that are held regarding women's employment.

The difference in attitudes across different regions means that whilst women might participate in a wider range of occupations in one area they can face greater restrictions in another. This has the potential to impact on opportunities that are available to both participate in employment and to move to different areas because of work opportunities. It also impacts on the degree of segregation encountered in the workplace. It was noted by the participants that it was possible for women to build careers and to work in segregated office environments. However segregation does have the potential to restrict opportunities for development and to easily share ideas or learn from others. Occupational gender segregation is also a feature in other labour markets where some job categories are seen as

women's jobs. Although there are different reasons for this occurring the impact of such systems tends to be similar. For example, occupational gender segregation in the US is seen as a concern because of its economic inefficiency and because it prevents people moving into occupations for which they may be well suited (Hegewisch 2010). Grosen, Holt et al (2012) suggest that the way certain jobs are framed as   female jobs reinforces gender segregation within an organisation. Relevantly, Lievens and Highhouse, (2003), emphasize that organizations need to commit to their social attractiveness, meaning that how organizations are perceived through the society's eye reflects on their employers. Hence, they state that employees and job-seekers are much like their normal consumers (Lievens 2003; Highhouse 2007; DeArmond 2011). Moreover, social identity consciousness as suggested by Highhouse et al, (2007), is an individual's "*concern of attaining social approval through organizational affiliation (p. 138)"*. Hieghhouse states that a social approval is gained through social adjustment and value expression as two major social identity necessities (DeArmond 2011). Thus how organisations address the issue of increasing women's participation impacts on how they are viewed by society and by potential job seekers.

Female participation has developed quickly in Saudi Arabia and conservative groups worry that this will affect the Saudi culture. There is concern that females will lose respect in relation to their Muslim identity and become similar to western females who are seen as having different priorities and values. Siraj however has noted that females shape their femineity according to their society and culture (Metcalfe 2011; Siraj 2012) and Metcalfe, (2011) sees the importance of *"women's right to define their own feminist agendas and not to merely implant western conceptualizations (Metcalfe 2011, p. 132)"*.

Despite the strategic direction of leaders in Saudi Arabia to increase women's participation in employment women remain underrepresented in public life. Al Ahmadi (2011) suggests that women face organizational, personal and cultural challenges that impact on their effectiveness particularly in leadership roles. In a study of 160 women leaders Al Ahmadi (2011) found that the main challenges women leaders faced were structural challenges, lack of resources and lack of empowerment.

Interestingly and in line with and contrasting to the findings from this research relating to barriers cultural and personal challenges ranked last with cultural issues ranking highly as a barrier.

Responsibilities to family were identified as a major barrier but in many respects it impacts differently to the challenges Western women face. Working mothers generally are found to be more time poor that working fathers and to carry a greater responsibility for care of children and elders (Cheung 2010). However, for women in Saudi Arabia the challenges relate to both responsibilities for family which has been the focus of much of the research to date in the West and responsibilities to family which relates to the cultural expectations that are held in relation to women's roles as family carers.

Culture and religion were identified as both separate and intertwined. It has been noted by other researchers that there can be considerable confusion regarding what is religion and what is culture (Umayma Abu Bakr in Metcalfe 2011). Mussalli, (2009), states that Islamic groups view Western attempts to modernize Arabic societies as an attempt to break cultural traditions and more importantly to break and loosen Islamic fundamentals that govern the legal systems:

> *In response to American efforts to bring democracy to the Arab world, salafists, neo-salafists, and Wahhabis and neo-Wahhabis contend that democracy is a ...campaign of colonialism and the historical conspiracy against the Muslim world. (Moussalli, P. 22)*

Islam was generally not seen by participants in this research as a barrier to women's employment and participants provided examples from the teachings of Islam that supported women's participation in employment. Cultural or societal attitudes however were seen as a major barrier that prevented women from participating fully in public life and this is supported by Metcalfe who states that:

> *Cultural processes assume that a woman will marry early; that her contribution to the family will be as homemaker; that the household will be headed by a man and that the man will provide financially and 'protect' the family. Male protection is seen as justification for the exercise of authority over women in all areas of decision making that relates to the public sphere (Metcalfe 2011: 133).*

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Conclusion:

This paper has highlighted key findings relating to barriers to women's employment in professional occupations in Saudi Arabia. It forms part of a larger study that will identify enablers as well as barriers. The larger study aims to fill a gap in literature by examining these issues from a Saudi rather than Western centric perspective which may not show a full appreciation of the cultural context.

Participants in this research showed a high level of enthusiasm regarding increasing female participation in the Saudi workforce. However, they showed concerns regarding different cultural norms across regions which results in higher levels of conservatism and segregation in some areas. The potential negative impact and influence of Western views was also noted and the results suggest that female participation and progress will need to be approached in ways that respect societal values otherwise such developments may be viewed as negative Western influences. Women's family responsibilities and responsibility for family impacts on their ability to engage in full time employment and the lack of part time employment opportunities was found to be a major concern.

Other key findings show the essential need of organizational cooperation to facilitate increased female employment. Whilst the government has actively promoted increasing female participation, the private sector has remained relatively silent and unaccommodating in terms of offering family friendly opportunities, flexibility and childcare services. Metcalfe's (2008), philosophy, may describe females of Saudi Arabia as different from other females in western cultures, in terms of culturally and religiously attached however, treating them differently but equal in areas such as employment may only take them backwards.

As seen from the above discussion, female employment in Saudi Arabia, is influenced by regional cultural norms. It can also be seen negatively as a western influence if not approached in a socio respectful manner. Finally, instead of treating females equally but differently, Islam was seen as enabler that could be used to promote increased female participation in paid employment.

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