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Article

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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Current state of female leadership in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia

Dina Abdullah Dahlan^{1*}

Abstract: In Saudi Arabia's higher education, women remain an untapped resource, with many limitations in holding key positions and pursuing professional career development. However, over the past few years, the government of Saudi Arabia has actively promoted female leadership by implementing Vision 2030. Considering the substantial progress made in female leadership, it is imperative to explore the present state of female leadership in higher education institutions in the country. Additionally, there is a general scarcity of research on the role of women in Saudi higher education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 academic professionals. The data were analyzed following a thematic approach using NVivo 12 software. The results indicated that the acceptance of female leaders in Saudi Arabia's higher education sector is highly subjective and depends on several factors (e.g. age, educational background, and leader's proficiency). Despite the perceived need to diversify the system and use females' potential capabilities to advance education, the participation of females in leadership positions still lags behind that of males. Based on our thematic analysis results, there is currently no specific process for identifying and selecting new leaders, and future leaders are mainly chosen by top powers in the university. Although the Saudi government strongly supports female leadership through Vision 2030, it is occurring at a slow pace. The findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge by prompting the government and decision-makers to consider taking actions that would foster females' talent, and consequently, the integration of more women into the educational system

Subjects: Leadership; Sustainability Education, Training & Leadership; School Leadership, Management & Administration;

Keywords: female leadership; higher education; Vision 2030; Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, women are becoming more dynamic and empowered to hold top positions, not only in industry, but also in higher education institutions (Caan-Palillo, 2022). The remarkable contribution of women to educational development has stimulated the need for their involvement in educational leadership positions (Djan, 2020). However, there is an ongoing and consistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in educational settings (Shaw & Hernandez-Gantes, 2021). As Olson-Strom and Rao (2020) acknowledged, despite the recent rapid growth in higher education worldwide, gender inequality remains a significant issue. Most women

in the higher education sector remain restricted to middle-ranking posts, rising as high as heads of department, deans, controllers of examination, and even registrars, but are rarely appointed vice-chancellors (Gandhi & Sen, 2021). Although a few steps have been taken to reduce the gap in gender imbalance in senior positions in higher education, more need to be done, as the current system is slow and ineffective (Power, 2020). Moreover, a bias toward male leadership in higher education has amplified the gender imbalance (Tran, 2020).

The world is moving towards recognizing the importance of gender balance in all elements of an organization. Educational institutions in particular have begun to invest more in leadership programs that encourage both men and women to participate (Kairys, 2018). In addition to financial investments, they are also moving towards more non-financial investments such as building leadership capacity and skills throughout the academic staff, linking resources to a gender-balanced leadership team, and seeding leadership posts in areas of specific gender imbalance are all positive moves to achieve a pool of academic leaders (Power, 2020). In Arab countries, women in organizations work under male supervisors, which negatively influences the female employees to groom their skills and enhance their performance, thus creating barriers to career mobility (Dopson et al., 2018; Mohnot, 2017). According to an empirical study completed by Hakiem (2022), Saudi higher education continues to offer generous career-advancing opportunities to men, while preventing women from accessing leadership positions. The author emphasized that leadership roles are predominantly held by men, hindering the full participation of their female colleagues in research, decision-making processes, and other higher education activities beyond teaching and administration (Hakiem, 2022).

In Saudi universities, women work in secretarial roles with limited power to implement the decisions made by male leaders (Gorondutse et al., 2019). Despite the current challenges regarding female leadership, Saudi Vision 2030 and its programs have received significant attention towards empowering women. Notably, this initiative resulted in the formulation of legislation that supports the empowerment of women's rights, including wages, and the provision of job opportunities in all sectors, thus supporting women in leadership positions and promoting women's rights (Shura Council, 2021). It is believed that giving women the opportunity to hold top positions will help increase the effectiveness of female leaders and positively influence the performance level of universities, enabling them to accomplish Saudi Vision 2030 (Gorondutse et al., 2019).

Although a large number of studies have been conducted to understand the barriers to female leadership in Saudi Arabia (Abalkhail, 2017; Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Hodges, 2017), other aspects of female leadership and its current status are less well understood, especially with the recent changes and developments that have been made as a result of implementing Vision 2030. Additionally, there is a general scarcity of research on women's roles in Saudi higher education (Bin Bakr & Alfayez, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by exploring the shared perception of the current state of female leadership in Saudi Arabia, considering the following objectives:

- (1) To identify the attributes of female leaders.
- (2) To understand the assumptions regarding the need for female leadership in universities.
- (3) To explore how future leaders are identified and chosen at universities
- (4) To understand the current state of participation and acceptance of females in leadership roles in universities
- (5) To assess perceived support for female leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia

A qualitative study was conducted to achieve these research objectives. First, a brief literature review is provided, followed by a research methodology explaining the study population, sampling, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Third, themes emerging from the interviews were

presented and discussed. In conclusion, the findings, implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. A theoretical lens for female leadership

The role of women as professionals in organizations has attracted considerable attention worldwide. Women's involvement in the workforce plays an essential role in economic growth and social well-being (Cortes et al., 2018; Grigoli et al., 2018). Despite the significant contribution of women in uplifting the economy, they have not achieved equal status to men (World Economic Forum, 2018). Studies have indicated that women's career positions as professionals and render services as leaders remain underrepresented (Murray & Mifsud, 2019; 2019) because of certain factors such as gender discrimination (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015) and cultural and societal norms (Al-Bakr et al., 2017; Alotaibi et al., 2017). Throughout history, various obstacles have hindered women from being accepted as leaders regardless of their accomplishments. Consequently, their potential capabilities are underestimated and underrepresented in leadership roles. The lack of representation of capable women in leadership roles exemplifies the gender gap in the workplace (Alqahtani, 2020). The Gender Inequality Index (GII), published by the United Nations Development Programme, highlighted that women are discriminated against in healthcare, education opportunities, political representation, employment prospects, and so on. The GII report shows the loss of potential human development due to the inequality between female and male achievements in these dimensions (UNDP, 2020). Gender justice can be achieved when females have equal access to fundamental rights in public institutions, schools, government, and private organizations (Belknap & Cruz, 2007; Chesney-Lind & Faith, 2001).

Feminist theory provides useful insights into gender segregation, which impedes females' advancement to leadership positions. Feminist leadership is defined as promoting gender equality, justice for all, and an intersectional understanding of all types of inequality (Barton, 2006; Lin, 2019; Ollilainen & Solomon, 2014). Feminism is concerned with creating equal opportunities for all genders, regardless of differences in nationality, social status, community, mentorship, and physical ability (Anderson & Solomon, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016; Mifsud, 2019). Feminist theory covers a wide range of ideas that originate from certain beliefs: first, a male-controlled society and favoritism for men. The second is the neglect of factors affecting females and the traditional way of thinking used to support them. Third, the male-centered approach should be replaced with a system in which both genders claim equality in their rights (Nielsen, 1987).

Feminism, as a framework for leadership, undermines leadership dominance, bureaucracy, and the misuse of power in academic organizations (Acker & Wagner, 2019; Barton, 2006). The feminist leadership approach also provides a unique work ideology to increase higher education leadership (Cole et al., 2017; De Welde et al., 2019). Lin (2019) argued that although females receive more education than males, they are neglected in the entire education system. However, scholars and practitioners have overlooked the leadership crisis faced by educational institutions (De Welde et al., 2019). Therefore, further scholarly efforts are required to understand female leadership status in educational settings.

2.2. Leadership in higher education

Social-cultural dynamics hamper females from obtaining equal rights and ensuring that their strong standing is equal to that of men in society and institutions (Miller, 2010; Miller & Mullins, 2006). Despite the recent rapid growth in higher education worldwide, gender inequality in higher education remains a significant issue (Olson-Strom & Rao, 2020). Most women in the higher education sector remain restricted to middle-ranking posts, rising as high as heads of department, deans, controllers of examination, and even registrars, but rarely become vice-chancellors (Gandhi & Sen, 2021). Females face limitations in providing educational and employment opportunities, as society gives more weight to their male counterparts. Unfortunately, females are not part of

strategic leadership in higher education (Mifsud, 2019), which means that female capital is mis-recognized and undervalued in the academic environment. Women also have limited access to workplace resources and are considered less important personnel for financial decision-making and strategic planning (Abalkhail, 2017). David (2015) acknowledged that the educational sector suffers from a gender gap because the power is held by males. This situation has increased the leadership crisis and poor practices of feminism in terms of assigning leadership roles based on equality (Savigny, 2014). Another dilemma is that the lack of females in management positions acts as a barrier for females to secure higher-level academic positions (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016).

2.3. Vision 2030, Advancing leadership in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, females have been well studied in terms of gender equality, career advancement, and management (Abalkhail, 2017; Syed et al., 2018). However, a limited number of studies have covered mixed-gender participation in leadership positions. The literature highlights that females in Saudi Arabia suffer from gender discrimination because of sociocultural and religious factors (Abalkhail, 2017; Fallatah & Syed, 2017). Although the current situation of female leadership is unsatisfactory, Vision 2030 and its programs have paid great attention to women's empowerment. One of the most prominent outputs of Vision 2030 is the formulation of legislation that supports the empowerment of women's rights, including wages and the provision of job opportunities in all sectors, supporting women in leadership positions, and promoting women's rights (Shura Council, 2021).

Furthermore, a new initiative was implemented in Saudi Vision 2030 to increase females' roles in leadership positions by 2020 (Saudi Vision, 2017). The plan includes many initiatives to support this goal, such as training programs for female leaders, reforms, and legislation to help improve women's lives. Nevertheless, females are still far from making a significant contribution to leadership positions in the workplace. Evidence indicates that only 3.2 percent of females hold senior leadership positions in the MENA region and one percent from six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)) (Pande & Ford, 2011).

Despite these ongoing challenges, female leaders show remarkable performance compared with their male counterparts. Women professionals are becoming more dynamic and empowered, holding top positions in both industry and higher education institutions (Caan-Palillo, 2022). Research has established that, if women are given the opportunity, they can positively contribute to enhancing university performance. For example, when women were given opportunities at Princess Noura University (PNU), a public female university located in Saudi Arabia, the university received several scientific awards despite being founded recently (Gorondutse et al., 2019). The increasing number of female leaders proves their competence in this field. Aware of the challenges in their leadership journey, stepping back is not an option for women who desire to provide services in their respective institutions (Caan-Palillo, 2022).

3. Research methodology

3.1. Data collection

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has placed education as part of its vision as it contributes to economic growth and "aims to have at least five Saudi universities among the top 200 universities in international rankings" (Saudi Vision, 2017). Therefore, considering the national agenda for strengthening higher education institutions, public and private universities must track their progress under effective leadership. Furthermore, they need to overcome the leadership crisis and implement effective plans to achieve desired results. Consequently, the population of this study comprised academics working in public and private universities in Saudi Arabia.

In-depth interviews were conducted with participants to collect data. As interviews are interactive, interviewers can press for complete, clear answers, and probe emerging topics. Hence,

interviewing is expected to broaden the scope of understanding the investigated phenomena, as it is a more naturalistic and less-structured data collection tool (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Before data collection, the researcher contacted universities in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, via email and met potential participants. The researcher used an approval letter from the university to access the universities in Saudi Arabia for data collection. After setting a suitable time for the participants, interviews were conducted and recorded using Google Meet. The prospective participants signed a consent form prior to the interviews. Before the interview session, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the interview process, note-taking, audio recording, and anonymity. The researcher tried to remain open to all answers during the interviews and probed certain information for more clarity and detailed information. Data collection began in December 2020. Upon completion, the interview data were collected in a descriptive format based on the qualitative nature of the study. It is also important to note that the interviews were conducted in English or Arabic, depending on the proficiency of the participants. The interviews, which were conducted in Arabic, were transcribed and translated into English.

3.2. Sampling

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used. In a qualitative study, a purposive sampling strategy provides the most relevant information and rich data to answer study questions and achieve objectives (Saunders et al., 2015). Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to ensure the involvement of both male and female participants from both public and private universities, which consequently led to an exploration of the phenomenon from a broader perspective. Snowball sampling was also used as a strategy to identify key informants who could provide fruitful information for this study. Snowball sampling can be used in cases where the number of potential participants is limited (Browne, 2005). To this end, the researcher asked existing participants to provide referrals to potential individuals who fit this study's criteria.

The sample size in qualitative research is linked to the purpose of the study, what is known, what needs to be known, what ensures credibility, and what can be executed considering available resources (Patton, 2002). To estimate a suitable sample size for this study, theoretical saturation was considered. Saturation occurs when the researcher does not get something new from study participants. This method indicates that "data no longer produces new categories and coded incidents simply add further indicators of established properties" (Scott, 2007, p. 12). The approach to operationalizing this definition of saturation consists of three distinct elements: base size, run length, and the relative amount of incoming new information or the new information threshold (Guest et al., 2020). A base size of five interviews, a run length of three interviews, and a new information threshold of 0% were chosen to indicate attaining sufficient saturation. The first step was to detect the number of distinctive themes in the database. We began by examining the first 17 themes obtained from five interviews. Six unique themes were obtained for the first run. The next step is to calculate the saturation ratio. We divided the number of fresh themes in run (6) by the number of distinctive themes in the base set (17). The quotient contains 35% new information. In the fifth run, only one new theme was identified in interviews to 18–20 indicating 6% new information. Since our threshold is zero, the last run was conducted within interview 21–23 and no new information was obtained. Therefore, we stop here at the 23rd interview and have a good sense that the amount of new information diminishes to a level where saturation has been reached based on our subjective metric of 0%. Therefore, the sample size for this qualitative study was 23.

The study participants were senior management personnel (i.e., president, vice-president, dean, vice-dean, and head of department), HR managers, and instructors. In addition, senior personnel from the Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabia, were invited to record their perspectives on this study. The participants were asked to describe their perceptions of the current state of female leadership in Saudi Arabia's higher education. Regarding the participants' profiles, the study included 13 female and 10 male interviewees. Regarding qualifications, the vast majority of participants held

a doctoral degree. In terms of experience, a considerable number of participants had more than 14 years of working experience in higher education.

3.3. Data analysis procedure

For data analysis, thematic analysis was performed to develop themes aligned with the research objectives. To this end, the following steps were performed:

Step 1: The researcher familiarized herself with the content by manually transcribing the interviews and reading transcriptions. The final set of transcripts was transferred into NVivo 12 Plus to analyze the data and derive conclusions.

Step 2: Open coding was performed while reading and highlighting the transcripts in NVivo. Patton (2002) stated that the open coding phase is a conceptual ordering in which the researcher moves from lower-level concepts to higher-level theorizing. Open coding is used to generate concepts and interlink their properties. Each event or incident indicates a concept or property reflected as an indicator of that concept or category.

Step 3: The researcher synthesized the sub-categories and sorted the open code into a broader category (i.e., focused coding). According to Charmaz (2006), focused coding is performed by sifting through large amounts of data, and requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize data incisively and completely. In this study, focused codes were created by comparing data. Further, it is followed by a comparison of data with codes and refining moments as they emerge.

Step 4: Theoretical coding results in identifying theoretical codes that conceptualize how substantive codes relate to each other as a modeled, interrelated, multivariate set of hypotheses in accounting for resolving the main concern (Glaser, 2005). In this step, the researcher attempted to understand the relationship between subthemes, integrate similarities, and put them under a core category called theoretical coding. As a result of this procedure, several themes were identified and emerged.

Step 5: After the completion of the theoretical sorting, the report is written. The results are presented clearly and coherently under five themes and several sub-themes, which are presented in the following section.

4. Findings and discussion

This section discusses emerging themes for understanding the landscape of female leadership in Saudi Arabia's higher education, particularly regarding the acceptance of female leadership. The emerging themes from the transcribed interviews can be classified into six categories: a) attributes of female leaders, b) necessity for female leaders, c) selection of future leaders, d) participation of female leaders in top-level positions, e) accepting women as leaders, and f) perceived support for women to hold key posts. Details are presented in Table 1.

4.1. Theme 1: Attributes of female leaders

The findings demonstrated that innovativeness is a critical attribute of women in leadership roles. It was perceived that female leaders introduced novel concepts and exhibited innovative capabilities by providing creative solutions for issues. A22 noted that "*females introduce a new creative way to deal with some of the issues.*"

Strong communication skills were the second most important attribute required by female leaders, as stated by academics in Saudi Arabia. Such skills enable them to negotiate with and convince others. This observation aligns with the findings of Mumford's (2000) study characterized leaders as "motivated communicators" and "thoughtful innovators." A22 corroborates these findings by stating that "*they participate very well in the leadership role, they have the ability to manage a team and communicate well.*"

Table 1. Emerged themes from thematic analysis

Dimensions	Themes	Sub-themes
Attributes of Female Leaders	Innovativeness Strong communication skill Commitment Meticulousness Passion Ambition Diligence Sincerity Faithfulness	
Necessity for Female Leaders	Increasingly perceived need to include female leaders Lack of readiness to accept female leaders	Diversity is an undeniable component for including women
Selection of Future Leaders	Leaders are selected by top power HR and performance management system (PMS)	Network, relationship, and trust as criteria to select leaders by top power
Participation of Female Leaders in Top-level Positions	Male leaders outnumber female leaders Opportunities are slowly opening up for Saudi women	
Accepting Women as Leaders	Acceptance of women in leadership positions contingent upon various factors	Age Educational background Mentality and personality Organizational culture Geographical placement Leader proficiency
Perceived Support for Women to Hold Key Posts	Governmental support	Vision 2030 Ministry of Education

As per findings from the interviews, commitment, and meticulousness are additional characteristics exhibited by successful female leaders. These women adhere to workplace rules and timelines while ensuring that employees perform at the highest level and achieve outstanding results, as noted by A7.

They are very strict in terms of following the procedures, and commitment is high in terms of ensuring that performance is achieved, or the people will perform at the highest level [...] females are more committed to the work.

Similarly, A16 remarked, “I think females have the way to do things ... we do things more meticulously.”

Another essential characteristic of leaders is that they are both passionate and ambitious. The following interviewees stated that such women show passion for improving their knowledge and acquiring more information about businesses and the world. A7 stated, “*They are showing passion towards improving their knowledge and acquiring more information about business, about the world.*” A11 noted that “*females are ambitious.*”

The findings also showed that female leaders are diligent and hardworking compared to their male counterparts. A23 offered, “*In my point of view, I see that the female employees are working very hard.*”

Sincerity and faithfulness are another set of attributes observed in Saudi Arabia’s higher education sector. Some participants stated that female leaders are trustworthy, sincere, and faithful, as highlighted by A1 who said, “*I think sincerity and faithfulness are most important.*” A11 offered, “*I noticed that women are trustworthy and capable of working under pressure.*”

4.2. Theme 2: Necessity for female leaders

In the pursuit of understanding assumptions for the necessity of female leaders in universities, the participants were presented with the question, “Do you think that universities should have female leaders? And if so, why?” The findings suggest a favorable view of female leadership for most participants. A considerable number of interviewees acknowledged the necessity of having female leaders, and all of them believed that men and women had the same potential to be effective leaders. For instance, A21 mentioned the following.

It is really important to let female academics be involved in the university administration, and that engagement and involvement should be very active ... They continued in their position as very effective and influential leaders, so, yes, we need them there, and they are doing a great job. (A 21)

However, two interviewees highlighted that they preferred male leaders or that there was no need to have female leaders. For instance, A7 was concerned with the readiness of Saudi society for female leaders and thought that Saudi Arabia was not ready to accept female leaders, and that it would take some time to prepare society for this. Currently, there is no need to place women in leadership positions.

We do not have, and we do not need a female dean at the moment ... If you ask me, would you like a female dean? Then, I can say, if I have a male dean, that would be better. In this culture, it will create some issues with communication and interaction because of different genders in Saudi [Arabia] at the moment. ... If you place a female leader now, the process of moving to perform will take some time or a slightly longer time to get everybody to familiarize themselves with the new gender of the new dean. (A7)

If you are asking me, would you prefer male or female, abstractly, I will go for a male? (A5)

When the participants were asked why it was important to have female leaders, they explained that diversity was an undeniable component for including men and women in leadership positions. Furthermore, they argued that diversity in the workplace leads to creativity and productivity, which eventually brings success and competitive advantage. This finding is supported by Kubik-Huch et al. (2020), who highlight that people with diverse genders, skill sets, and viewpoints in decision-making improve workforce engagement, critical analytical thinking, and innovation. The following are notable quotes from participants regarding this component:

Any organization should be diverse. We need to understand other perspectives, not only to focus on what men want but also, we need to understand what women want ... It is going to increase the productivity inside the organization, which is the aim for all organizations in the end, to achieve its competitive advantage. (A22)

When you have a mixture of voices, this element of diversity is extremely important in running a place ... In the world of education, diversity is a key issue, it's a very powerful learning tool, so when you have diverse people coming from diversity, including their gender and even their nationality. (A18)

for most participants as they believed that women were highly effective leaders. Additionally, incorporating people with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences is critical for improving the workplace. This amalgamation contributes to the team's overall success and competitive advantage; thus, emphasizing diversity is an important reason for including women in higher education settings.

Despite the increasing emphasis on promoting diversity, women are still underrepresented at the highest organizational level (Hekman et al., 2017). Therefore, there is a need to increase gender diversity in the top positions and reduce statistical discrimination (Maida & Weber, 2019). This aligns with the assumptions of feminist theory, which is concerned with creating equal opportunities for all genders regardless of differences.

4.3. Theme 3: Selection of future leaders

The thematic analysis of the transcripts revealed that future leaders are selected mainly by supreme powers in the university, i.e., senior management, the president, and the board of trustees.

... Usually, the idea of the top management is the deciding factor in who will hold that position. (A1)

Higher positions were nominated by the president and the top management. (A11)

A higher management will choose a lower management. (A16)

The President of the university chose people who wanted them to lead the university. It is based only on him, and only on him to pick the vice president. (A10)

While explaining the selection of future leaders, some interviewees also referred to the criteria that the supreme powers of the organization choose future leaders. For instance, the following participants highlighted that networks, relationships, and trust matter in the selection of leaders.

Maybe all of us know that all or most of the positions are held by males, not even in Saudi Arabia but the whole world, which is based on the relationship. (A14)

Some candidates are qualified and have high capabilities, but they do not have social relationships that would help them get nominated or recommended to be leaders. (A3)

I got employed by somebody who knew me, I didn't go through HR, it was an appointment I didn't apply for a job I got appointed (A4)

If the vice president knows somebody, he trusts them, and so trust is before anything. Before skill, before anything ... they always say that skill comes later. I can train them (A13)

Out of 23 participants, only one participant mentioned that the HR and performance management system (PMS) existed in the university, and another participant stated that the university follows a certain structure to nominate and appoint leaders. In this scenario, vacancies are announced, and every member has an equal chance of applying for a position. Finally, all submitted CVs were investigated by the university committee, and the best candidates were chosen based on their profile.

They announce vacancies and whoever wants to be in that position, submit a CV ... they have a very important committee, and usually, the rector of the university sends every nominee for any position to that committee, and they can provide him with their opinion. (A19)

We have this PMS HR system ... it's by scores, the scores are not subjective because other than their competencies, you measure their objective so their annual achieved percentage you can know the exact score of each individual and you look at them both administratively and as lecturers. (A17)

4.4. Theme 4: Participation of female leaders in top-level positions

Acknowledging the need for female leaders does not necessarily mean that women enjoy equal opportunities in Saudi Arabian education. Similar to many other parts of the world, Saudi Arabia has difficulty defining equality, contextual justice, and discrimination in leadership. Despite recent advancements, it has been observed that male leaders still outnumber female ones. For instance, there are no women on the boards of trustees, nor are they given the possibility of joining as members. All leadership positions are held by men, while female administrative staff occupy lower

managerial positions. A6 mentioned that “*still the male leaders are more than female leaders. The board of trustees does not have any female leader*”. Similarly, A15 highlighted:

I have not seen a dean who is female; they are mostly associated chairs, some administrative ladies, and they take some management roles. To date, they have not yet occupied any top management level. (A15)

This result is consistent with the findings of previous studies. According to Semela et al. (2017), women have not been able to break through the glass ceiling to reach top management and leadership positions in almost all professions, including in higher education. Gandhi and Sen (2021) stated that most women in the higher education sector remain restricted to middle-ranking posts as heads of departments, deans, controllers of examination, and registrars; however, not one woman has been appointed as vice-chancellor. Bompolaki et al. (2022) found that in US dental schools, there is one female dean for every five male deans, thus indicating the significant underrepresentation of women in academic leadership.

While explaining the current low involvement of women in leadership, some participants expressed optimism about the future by referring to the improvements and new opportunities that are slowly opening up for Saudi women.

Whether we like it or not, the country is heading towards women’s empowerment . . . What’s happening is nice in a way because it’s giving these women great chances of being leaders and of trying new things. (A18)

Women will have the chance to be presidents soon; it happens gradually. Even today, women hold the seats of the Scientific Council, although in the past, all seats were held by men. (A20)

According to Bin Bakr and Alfayez (2021), notable leadership positions newly and recently occupied by women in Saudi Arabia include ambassador to the United States, deputy minister of higher education, members of the Shura Council, and board positions in municipal chambers of commerce.

4.5. Theme 5: Accepting women as leaders

This theme addresses the perceptions of participants regarding the acceptance of women in leadership roles in Saudi Arabian universities. The results obtained through the interviews indicate that the acceptance of women in leadership positions is contingent upon various factors, namely, age, educational background, mentality, personality, organizational culture, geographical placement, and leader proficiency. Certain participants believed that their acceptance depended on their mentality and personality.

This depends on men’s mentality. Some men might not accept cooperation with women, which goes back to their mentality and culture. Some might wonder why a woman holds a higher position. (A11)

This depends on the mentality and personality of the person. If he was an open-minded person, he would accept that as a matter of fact. I have witnessed a similar situation. (A20)

Additionally, the interviews revealed that age and educational background played a significant role in the acceptance of female leaders. To illustrate, a senior-aged man raised in a conservative culture and family is likely to reject a female leader, primarily because he is used to leading men rather than leading women. However, acceptance is easier if the same group is educated abroad. Overall, the acceptance rate is higher for the younger generation of Saudis, who are more open-minded, have been living abroad, and have grown accustomed to interacting with female colleagues and superiors. This was highlighted by some interviewees:

People are not alike ... For older people, it is going to be very difficult to face something new. Thus, positions that have been held by men for ages and suddenly a woman take that position, they cannot take it easily. However, younger people can see that women can be treated like men. I think that younger people are different from older people. (A8)

Someone who studied abroad and who came back to this country, with all this experience, and with all this kind of exposure to women working outside, should be able to transfer this experience to the new places he is working. (A18)

It was also stated that older leaders may obtain higher acceptance than young leaders, even if the young leader is more experienced. A9 highlighted:

If she is a little bit older than them in age, not even in experience, maybe this will help them to accept ... if there is one older than them, they will accept that if the woman is older than them. (A9)

The findings also revealed that there are different levels of acceptance and rejection in local universities depending on the geographical placement of the university and organizational culture. For instance, a university in Jeddah might perceive female leadership differently from a university in a more conservative area, like Bisha. Some universities are unready to accept this concept because of their conservative cultural norms and religious values. However, as highlighted by A7 and A11, their low acceptance levels may increase over time.

Perhaps not at the moment due to societal pressure in the Qassim area, which is somewhat stricter in terms of religious activities. People here are stricter in terms of holding cultural or religious beliefs. So, that can be one of the social pressures having women in top positions ... Maybe another three to five years; perhaps [then] the acceptance will be better. (A7)

People in the southern region are [more] conservative. Bisha is a conservative city, as mentioned before. When I held my position at Bisha University, it was the first time that the entire city had higher education institutes. It was a huge step to appoint a woman as vice-chancellor. Later, people started accepting the idea of female leadership. (A11)

During the interviews, some participants felt that female leadership is well-accepted in their universities and work environment, while others admitted that their university culture was not ready to accept female leaders; women were only offered lower- and middle-level positions.

The upper management supports women as leaders here. Everybody is always encouraging and supportive. The top management has spent a lot of money on training us as instructors; even I attended a training course four years ago, in leadership. (A12)

In our university, unfortunately, women can only get called vice deans or vice chairs ... The only way that the women in our university can get to be chairs of the department is when there is no male section. (A8)

The management roles assigned to women are mostly lower- and middle-level management. And they're actually trying ... but to date, they have not yet occupied any top management level. (A15)

Interestingly, one experienced academic mentioned that his university designed different initiatives to change organizational behavior toward female leadership. Some of these activities have raised organizational awareness to support and empower female leaders.

We tried to change the organizational behavior at our university ... We started by letting them know that the owners and boards of trustees are supporting women. We provided empowerment and encouragement to senior management, who adopted the same vision.

After that, we tried to work at middle and lower employment levels. We work or create work awareness sessions for them, and create different events. (A22)

Another important finding is that, despite these limitations and the slow acceptance rate, acceptance highly depends on a leader's competency and capability. It is expected that truly qualified leaders will ultimately gain respect for and acceptance of the organization through their exemplary performance. In other words, if a female leader can prove that they are as efficient and capable as a male leader, the issue of acceptance will be quickly resolved. A highly qualified and distinguished female leader may face less resistance in Saudi Arabia's higher education institutions than in other sectors, as offered by some of the participants:

It depends on the leader herself, whether she is capable of leading a team. (A23)

If I am qualified, then I will get respect for everybody and acceptance. (A2)

I do not mind either of them [women and men]; efficiency and competency are the only measures. (A20)

4.6. Theme 6: Perceived support for women to hold key posts

A significant proportion of the participants perceived substantial support from the government, as manifested in Vision 2030 and the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, it is widely held that the Kingdom is promoting the societal acceptance of female leaders and enhancing their participation via Vision 2030.

Vision twenty-thirty is pushing women everywhere. They cannot ignore it; they have to assist now. The government is with the women. (A2)

The situation is improving because of the change that is taking place in Saudi society to Saudi Vision 2030. ... The Kingdom's Vision 2030 liberated our community from these wrong concepts. (A3)

These individuals stressed the importance of Vision 2030 in breaking the glass ceiling in Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030 paves the way for women to become future leaders and is supported by the Ministry of Education.

Vision 2030 focuses on teaching young women how to become leaders. There is a vision, and we have that vision and it's going to happen. We are going toward Vision 2030, open community, all the stuff is going to happen (A4)

As you know we are under the Ministry of Higher Education, we have rules ... and we trying to follow Vision 2030 for the country and each school trying to cover that part of the vision ... (A10)

Although the government is paving the way for women by designing new policies and initiatives, female leadership still faces challenges in higher education. (A2) acknowledged that *"Most of the leaders are men, but there are female leaders as well ... It's changing, yes, true, but not to the extreme that we need"*. As acknowledged by Saad Alshalawi (2020), opportunities for women in higher education in Saudi Arabia have increased due to changes in government policy. However, despite these improvements, the level of effort required to provide equality across the country has not yet been met.

5. Conclusion, implications, and limitations

This study aimed to understand the current state of female leadership in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia. To do so, an in-depth interview was conducted with 23 female and male academicians who had active roles in the educational sector, followed by analyzing transcriptions

using a qualitative thematic approach. The emerging themes acknowledge that female leaders are characterized as innovative, committed, diligent, passionate, and ambitious. Strong communication skills, sincerity, and faithfulness were also identified as the characteristics of female leaders in Saudi Arabia. Based on the findings, the following propositions were developed:

- Proposition 1: There is an increasingly perceived need to include female leaders in Saudi Arabia's higher-education sector.
- Proposition 2: There is no specific process for identifying and selecting new leaders. Future leaders are mainly chosen based on the top power of the university.
- Proposition 3: The current participation of women in leadership positions is far behind that of men in Saudi Arabia's higher education sector.
- Proposition 4: The current acceptance of female leaders in Saudi Arabia's higher education sector is highly subjective and depends on several factors.
- Proposition 5: Female leadership is supported by the Saudi Arabian government.

It was also recognized that despite the perceived need to have female leaders, women are still underrepresented in leadership positions. Additionally, the degree of acceptance of female leaders depends on multiple factors, including an individual's personality, age, educational background, organizational culture, and geographical placement at the university. An important finding of this study is that a competent female leader can gain acceptance and support from subordinates even when the environment is not ready to embrace female leaders. The findings also indicate that despite the currently low distribution of women in academic leadership positions, the government has begun to provide considerable support in line with Vision 2030. Concerning the selection of future leaders, the findings revealed that leaders are mainly selected by top powers, and there is no structure or system to select and appoint future leaders.

Gender disparity in leadership positions raises the need for appropriate action; otherwise, the concepts of gender equality and social justice in the domain of higher education leadership remain controversial (Tran, 2020). The importance of this study arises from the critical role of female academic leaders in driving this change by advancing the process and operations and coping with challenges and difficulties in a creative way. Furthermore, the present study contributes to the body of knowledge by understanding the current situation of female leadership in connection with Vision 2030, based on the fact that the literature on female leadership in Saudi Arabia might not be truly applicable to contemporary society.

The findings of this study also provide valuable insights for the government, higher education institutions, and key decision-makers. The current study raises the awareness of decision-makers and the top management of Saudi Arabian universities to consider taking measures that would help integrate more women into the academic structure. The number of female leaders may increase if all stakeholders are committed to Vision 2030 and move along with defined goals and objectives. Central to these efforts is creating a supportive institutional environment (Semela et al., 2020) by developing suitable succession planning. It is also necessary to invest in fostering female talent by providing required training and experience through a strict quota system. When women do not have the opportunity to develop their skills, knowledge, and experience in holding leadership positions, the appointment of a sufficient number of women in leadership positions can result in the selection of ineffective leaders. Training, educating, and mentoring females is a reliable tool to overcome this issue. The findings of a study by Djan (2020) confirmed that mentoring and professional development are coupled with providing the best support for women in leadership positions. The findings of this study may be directed to decision-makers to determine educational policies and underline the required change aspects, leadership methods, and demands toward achieving the desired educational objectives (Al-Jaradat, 2014). Local authorities should decide on suitable strategies to change men's conservative attitudes and mindsets toward women's roles in society and their capacity to contribute to society in all sectors, including education. Saudi Arabia's Ministry

of Education and all higher education institutions are expected to develop succession planning strategies considering the fact that Saudi women are under pressure to create a balance between life and work.

Several limitations became apparent when conducting the current study to provide guidelines and recommendations for future research. The first limitation is that this study was conducted in a Saudi Arabian setting, and its findings may not be readily generalized to other contexts. Second, the findings may not be generalizable to Saudi Arabia itself, as the sample size is relatively limited in a qualitative study. Therefore, similar studies should be conducted in other contexts and include a wider geographical sample from local higher education institutions. Third, future research could employ a mixed methodology and triangulation to validate the results and overcome the limitations of the qualitative method. The fourth limitation relates to the scope of this investigation. This study focused on exploring the current situation of female leadership; however, future studies could cover other aspects of female leadership, such as finding suitable strategies to overcome national, organizational, and individual-level barriers. Another interesting area of further investigation could be the ethical behavior of female leaders. The literature highlights that women tend to show higher ethical awareness and ethical decision making than men (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2019). Women have more ethical sensitivity and show more ethical-based reactions to justice. Additionally, the salience of ethical behavior may be somewhat stable over time, which makes it more feasible to predict female behavior (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2019). Leaders' fair treatment and genuine concern demonstrate clear intentions to care for their employees' welfare and benefits, consequently enhancing their followers' ethical behaviors (Al Halbusi et al., 2022). Additionally, ethical leadership has emerged as a critical driver of financial performance and competitive advantage in various industries (Alabdullah & AL-Qallaf, 2023). The ethical acts of female leaders in the workplace suggest that having more female leaders may foster justice and positive outcomes in the workplace.

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Author contributions

Conduct of the research, data collection, qualitative analysis, and data processing were carried out by the author. Drafting of the manuscript was manually done by the researcher. The overall responsibility of this study is solely to the author.

Data availability statement

Interview recordings are available upon request. However, some interviews were conducted in Arabic, and some participants may not have agreed to disclose the interviews. All transcripts are available, too.

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Appendix (Interview questions)

Research questions	Interview Questions
RQ: How is the current situation of female leadership in Saudi Arabian universities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the attributes and characteristics of female leaders in Saudi Arabia?• Do you think that universities should have female leaders? And why? <i>Probe: Assumptions and reasons for the need for female leaders in universities</i>• What are the current practices that support female leadership in universities?• Do people accept female leaders in universities? <i>Probe: How and why?</i>• How are future or top management positions chosen to lead in the universities?• Does the university have a specific process for identifying and developing new leaders?