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‘Open the gates!’ Barriers facing Saudi women academics

By: K. K.¹

Abstract

The purpose of my research is to explore Saudi women's experiences in academia. This research offers new insights into the nature of the challenges that Saudi women academics face in advancing their careers. In-depth interviews were undertaken with three Saudi women academics working at three different universities located in different Saudi cities and data were analysed thematically. The findings indicate that gender segregation regulations and male guardianship laws greatly shape the experiences of Saudi women academics. My research is significant as it contributes to academic literature on Saudi women, which remains under-researched. It provides profound descriptions of Saudi women's realities in academia rarely glimpsed and offers new insights into the role that politics and religion play in the structure of academia and how this enhanced, or hindered gender equality.

Keywords: Saudi women, academia, male guardianship, gender segregation

Introduction

In 1960, a large number of religious scholars and men protested against opening the first girls' school in Buraydah, the heartland of Wahabism² in Saudi Arabia (Al- Rasheed, 2013). Girls' education was perceived a threat to the Saudi society at that time. This is because of the inferior status Wahhabism accords to Muslim women. Women were perceived as no more than nurturing mothers, and obedient wives and daughters. Hence, education is not only unnecessary but also dangerous for it requires that women leave their house to receive education. Religious scholars used the qur'anic verse, which states that women must stay at home to justify their opposition to women's education. To control the demonstrations, King Faisal sent the national guard to keep the girl's school open (Hamdan, 2005). Since then progress has occurred, and thirty years later Norah Al-Fayez was appointed as Deputy Minister by the late King Abdullah and became the first Saudi woman to obtain this position (Al-Omran, 2015). The last two decades witnessed the growing participation of Saudi women in academia. Every year, a large number of Saudi women earn the opportunity to study abroad sponsored by the Ministry of Education scholarship program (Hamdan, 2005). Despite considerable improvements, emergent research on Saudi women academics demonstrates that they face unique challenges that impede their career advancement

¹ K. K. is a researcher currently undertaking a Ph.D. that focuses on women's lived experiences under oppressive regimes. Her research explores state-sponsored oppression, women crossing borders and education as an indoctrination tool.

² Wahhabism is a fundamentalist religious movement within the Sunni branch of Islam named after its founder Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century (Rakic & Jurisic, 2012; Shukla, 2014). The movement started with the aim to purify Islam from superstitions and innovations and return to the Islam of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (Rakic & Jurisic, 2012). Hence, Wahhabism follows the literal strict interpretation of the Qura'an (the holy book of Islam) and the Prophet's teachings, which are the main source of Saudi Arabia's legal system since its foundation in 1932 (Choksy & Choksy, 2015).

(Afiouni, 2014; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). These challenges include family-work conflict, gender discrimination practices, inadequate networks and lack of access to training programs (Aldoubi, 2014).

Research on women academics in Saudi Arabia is limited, which leaves many unanswered questions. In this study, I explore Saudi women's experiences in academia to deepen our understanding of the challenges that they face in advancing their careers in Saudi Arabia. This inquiry adds knowledge to an under-researched area, provides in-depth descriptions of Saudi women's realities, and offers insights into the role that politics, religion and society play in the structure of academia and how these have enhanced, or hindered gender equality. This research is driven by the following question:

What are the challenges that Saudi women face in seeking advancement in academia and why do such challenges occur?

The Researcher

I am a Saudi woman academic who migrated to the west several years ago. There is no doubt that my positionality as an insider/outsider has shaped and informed this study. My interest in conducting this research stemmed from my own life experience as a Saudi woman academic. Being a native researcher means that I have common knowledge and similar life and work experience of my participants which allowed for deeper understanding of my participants' lived experiences as Saudi women academics.

Literature Review

Globally, there is a large body of research on women's career experiences in academia (Afiouni, 2014; Doherty & Manfredi, 2010; Zahedi, 1994). Much of this has focused on the phenomenon of female's under-representation in senior academic positions (Doherty & Manfredi, 2010; Metcalfe & González, 2013). There are many barriers hindering women's advancement to leadership positions in academia (Doherty & Manfredi, 2006; Lee & Won, 2014; Ogbogu, 2011). These are composed of a wide range of challenges that are shaped by social, cultural, economic and political factors (Petersen & Morgan, 1995; Winkler, 2000). Discriminatory promotion processes, payment gap between men and women, family-work conflicts and gender stereotypes have been frequently identified in the literature as common barriers women academics face in their career advancement (Funnell & Chi Dao, 2013; Hart, 2014; McNae & Vali, 2015).

Women academics in the Arab world have their own difficulties that inhibit career advancement (Afiouni, 2014; Al-Ahmadi, 2011). The barriers that Arab women face in seeking advancement are often shaped by the prevailing patriarchal culture embedded in academia (Afiouni, 2014; Samier, 2015). These barriers include cultural constraints, discriminatory gender stereotypes of women, lack of empowerment programs, and family-work conflicts (Afiouni, 2014; Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Aldoubi, 2014). For example, researchers have examined attitudes towards working women in the Arabian Gulf countries and concluded that women are still confined to traditional roles (Abdalla, 1996; Alibeli, 2015; Elamin & Omair, 2010). These attitudes play a significant role in limiting women academics' participation in decision-making positions and thus contribute to their under-representation in academia (Afiouni, 2014; Aldoubi, 2014). The experiences of Saudi women academics represent a different case from other women academics around the world.

Saudi Women in Academia

Saudi women's experiences in academia cannot be examined in isolation from the socio-political context in which they live. Unlike other Arab countries, Saudi Arabia embraces Wahhabism (a strict version of Sunni Islam) as the foundation of the state (Baki, 2004; Hamdan, 2005). Since the foundation of the Saudi Kingdom in 1932, Wahhabism has been the fundamental creed of the state. The partnership between the power of the state and that of religion has resulted in unifying the different tribes of the entire peninsula into one pious nation and unifying Saudi women under one black Abaya³ (Al-Rasheed, 2013). As the official religion of the Saudi state and its source of legitimacy, Wahhabism informs its internal and external policies (Choksy & Choksy, 2015). The strict ideologies of Wahhabism are embodied in all state organisations and it is through the education system that Saudi females learn from a very young age how to be pious modest women and are prepared for jobs suitable for their perceived nature as good mothers and housewives (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Hamdan, 2005). The institutional marginalization of Saudi women began with education as the system of girls' education was under the control of the Department of Religious Guidance whereas boys' education was under the Ministry of Education. It was only after a tragic fire accident that took place in a girls' school in Makkah in 2002 that the government decided to include female education within the Ministry of Education (Hamdan, 2005).

Drawing on these political and socio-cultural contexts, Saudi women academics face barriers in their journey towards advancing their careers. The most significant of these impediments are gender segregation regulations and male guardianship laws (Al-kayed, 2015; Baki, 2004).

Gender Segregation

Gender segregation policy⁴ poses structural challenges to Saudi women academics. Saudi universities are gender segregated and women's sections are isolated from men's sections (Baki, 2004). This segregation does not entitle women leaders to full involvement in the decision-making processes, not even those concerning their departments in the women's section (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Al-kayed, 2015). Women work as deputies for male deans and heads of departments (Aldoubi, 2014). Women academics have highlighted several obstacles stemming from this centralization of decision-making. For example, some women expressed their frustration that, in order for them to obtain approval for critical decisions concerning their careers, they have to wait for men's final word instead of obtaining immediate approval in the women's section (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Aldoubi, 2014). Another obstacle is women's lack of access to financial and material resources as those materials are under men's control (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Aldoubi, 2014). Segregation between women's and men's campuses contributes to inadequate interaction between women academics and decision-makers in men's section (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Aldoubi, 2014). Due to segregation, communication between men and women can never be in person thus women academics struggle to make their performance visible (Aldoubi, 2014). To gain promotion, women academics strive

³ According to Saudi Sharia law, all women (local and foreigners) in Saudi Arabia must wear a long black cloak known as Abaya, the purpose of which is to cover and confine the female body. Veil (face cover) is also imposed especially on Saudi women.

⁴ Gender segregation policy in Saudi Arabia divides both the private and public spheres into two worlds: one for men and the 'other' for women. In practice, all educational institutions, banks, hospitals and other governmental or private institutions are gender segregated.

to obtain recommendation from senior female academics who, in turn, would send these recommendations to the decision makers in the men's section (Aldoubi, 2014).

Male Guardianship

Attending training courses, scientific forums and achieving doctoral degrees are vital ingredients for women academics to be promoted (Al-Tamimi, 2004; Aldoubi, 2014). The Saudi government offers sponsored scholarships for women to continue their studies abroad (Hamdan, 2005). Many women have stated that they were fortunate to have supportive husbands or fathers who allowed them to travel abroad to pursue post-graduate degrees (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004) which is a privilege not all women have (Al-Tamimi, 2004; Aldoubi, 2014). Male guardianship was found to be a significant barrier to Saudi women's academic career advancement (Al-kayed, 2015; Al-Tamimi, 2004; Aldoubi, 2014). Legally, Saudi women must have a male guardian's permission to obtain a passport, attend university, work, travel, marry, or even receive some medical treatments (Al-kayed, 2015; Hamdan, 2005; Le Renard, 2008). A male guardian, also called a Mahram, is typically a woman's father, husband, brother, or son (Le Renard, 2008). Addressing their under-representation in senior positions, some women academics emphasised their need to find a Mahram to study abroad (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004) while others explained that their male guardians would not allow them to accept positions that require traveling alone, appearing in media, or interacting with men (Aldoubi, 2014). Male guardianship laws, coupled with social conventions impose mobility restrictions on Saudi women (Baki, 2004; Mtango, 2004). Saudi female academics require a Mahram to travel to their place of work, or they are required to hire a private driver, which imposes financial burdens (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004).

Barriers

Lack of empowerment programs, absence of equality legislations, unequal distributions of facilities, social and family pressure, poor coordination between men's and women's campuses, and negative attitudes from men towards women are all examples of other common barriers that Saudi women academics face in their day-to-day lives (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Al-kayed, 2015; Al-Tamimi, 2004). Globally, female academics face similar barriers that hinder accessing or maintaining leadership positions. Most of these barriers stem from social, political and sometimes legal factors. Saudi female academics face a different set of institutionalised impediments that are related to the socio-cultural and legal system in which they live and are difficult to overcome. Research on Saudi women has focused on the evolution of women's education system in Saudi. Few studies have focused on the experiences of Saudi women academics. My research explores the experiences of Saudi female academics within the social, cultural and political context of Saudi Arabia to provide new insights into the topic of Saudi women in academia.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the theoretical work of Madawi Al-Rasheed (2013) in *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia*. Through her analysis of the history of Saudi Arabia, Saudi women's literary works and electronic campaigns, official statements, religious treaties, online and offline interviews with Saudi women, Al-Rasheed (2013) argued that religious nationalism was adopted by King Abdel Aziz, the founder of the kingdom,

who used Wahhabism to unify people through politicizing religion, thus gaining unquestioned legitimacy. She discussed that Saudi women were used as the visible symbol to represent this ideology of the pious state by being invisible under their must-wear black abaya. Al-Rasheed negotiated the use of Saudi women by the state as a tool to gain local and international legitimacy, perpetuating the situation of Saudi women as ‘hostages’ to the project of religious nationalism (Al-Rasheed 2013). In 1960, the state sent its national guard to secure the opening of the first girls’ school in Saudi Arabia defying religious scholars and conservative locals. In 1979, the state reacted to the events of Mecca uprising, which was an attempt to overthrow the house of Al-Saud by enforcing its religious leadership through empowering religious scholars. This has resulted in the imposition of more restrictions on Saudi women, the state’s tool “to exhibit its Islamic credentials” (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 25). In the post 9/11 period, the international community criticised the Saudi government’s radical religious establishment for its role in the 9/11 attacks. To promote itself as a moderate government, the state responded by including more women in employment and encouraging their participation in international forums. During the period of the Arab Spring in 2011, Saudi women were given the right to participate in the municipal elections which was a historic achievement for Saudi women. In all these events, women were manipulated by the state to gain legitimacy, quell internal unrest and improve its image before the international community (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

Methodology

This qualitative research was designed to explore human behaviour in its social context and to gain deep understanding of Saudi women’s experiences in academia. The study employed a feminist lens so as to place women’s experiences, perspectives and views at the heart of this research. Feminist research in higher education investigates how dynamics of power, control and authority operate in patriarchal institutions such as universities (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). This methodology allowed me to examine Saudi women’s experiences in academia as constructed by themselves in relation to power dynamics within their context.

Research Design

Three case studies of Saudi female academics who work in Saudi universities were used in this research. Purposeful homogenous sampling was used to select three female Saudi academics who share similar characteristics that are relevant to the researched phenomenon. Recruitment was based on personal knowledge and through contacts (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used as the main source of data collection. Typical in this method, questions are open-ended to enable the participants to expand on the issues that are essential and relevant to them (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010). Names and locations of the universities are not mentioned to eliminate the likelihood of identifying the respondents. Interview arrangements with the participants were made using emails to clarify the purpose of the study, obtain consent, and to ensure the anonymity of the participants’ identities. I used snowballing sampling to select my research participants. I asked a former colleague of mine in a Saudi university to forward my email to women academics who would be interested in

participating. I contacted one participant who then forwarded my email to two other women academics from two different universities. I conducted the one-on-one interviews in Arabic over Skype audio call due to geographical limitations. The questions of the interviews revolved around their academic careers and invited them to reflect on their experiences as constructed within the context of Saudi Arabia. For example:

1. Why did you choose academia as a career?
2. Describe a typical day at work.
3. Identify the main factors that facilitate or impede your career advancement.
4. Describe your relationship with your colleagues, and with your female and male superiors.
5. How do you see yourself in 10 years from now?

I conducted all the semi-structured interviews and each one lasted for approximately an hour. The responses of my participants during the interviews reflected their awareness of my insider-ness as they repeatedly commented, “I don’t need to explain as you know what I mean”. Being an immigrant in the west positions me as an outsider and my participants’ awareness of this has also allowed for openness. My position provided them with the opportunity to voice their opinions freely, which in turn facilitated rich data.

Data analysis

After completing the interviews, I manually transcribed the recordings and translated the transcripts into English. I checked the accuracy of each transcript by listening to the recordings. I also sent each participant a copy of her interview transcript to review. I added non-verbal information as they convey hidden messages or meanings (Ary et al., 2010). I used thematic analysis to analyse my data. First, I read the transcripts thoroughly to gain a general idea of details and simultaneously noted down any occurring thoughts. The following step was data coding in which significant and recurrent text segments were identified first, and then labelled by certain codes that best describe them. I made a list of all code words and reduced the number of these codes by grouping the similar ones together. Then, I re-examined the data to identify new codes, and to highlight quotes that support these codes. In the final stage themes were identified as they started to merge together forming main ideas. They accumulated to provide in-depth narratives, self-reflections and monologues of Saudi women academics which are presented in the findings.

Findings

My Participants

Maha is a lecturer at a governmental university. She has a Master’s degree in Arabic Literature and she is currently doing her PhD at the same university she works at. She has been an academic for nine years. Karima is a lecturer at a governmental university. She received a scholarship and did her Master’s in Accounting at an American university. She has been an academic for six years. Nora has worked as a Teaching Assistant in a governmental university for almost nine years. She graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English Language and Literature from the same university she currently works at. The participants provided detailed description of the barriers to their career advancement that can be grouped under these two main themes: Male guardianship, and gender segregation.

The Need for a Male Guardian

Maha and Nora provided examples in which they face barriers because of their need for a male guardian. Maha named mobility restriction as her first barrier towards career advancement as she said: 'Before I found the private students' bus that I go with currently, I had to miss important meetings because I wasn't able to organize my schedule in accordance to my sisters' as we would all go with my father'. She added, 'although the bus takes one hour and a half to arrive my workplace, I enjoy it now...It used to annoy me, but I'm used to it now'. Unlike Maha, Nora did not highlight transportation as a barrier to her career, but she mentioned that she arrives too early to her workplace because her father would drive her. The need for a male guardian was also emphasised by Nora as the first barrier to her academic progression. She said that she is still unable to apply for a scholarship to continue her studies because of the 'male guardian condition' which she attributes as a social constraint although it is actually institutionalized by Saudi law. Karima, on the other hand, managed to obtain a Master degree scholarship. She stated that she 'was lucky' to have her brother studying abroad who acted as her guardian. So, although she did not highlight the need for the male guardian as a barrier, she attributed her ability to attain the scholarship to sheer luck of having her brother already studying abroad to act as her guardian.

Excluding the 'Harem': Women as Harem

The participants shared experiences in which they were excluded by men's administration. The prevalent misogynist treatment of Saudi women in society was also extended to academia and its management. Maha and Nora mentioned incidents where men would decide on their behalf and deem female academics as *harem*⁵ or minors. Maha explicitly stated, 'You know how Mattawa (religious men) deem us as Harem.' She explained to me how women academics were excluded from designing the faculty goals and syllabus because their male counterparts would gather and design everything on their behalf then impose that on women academics to follow. Because women academics were regarded as 'naïve Harem', the Dean decided to move Maha's faculty into a building separate from the main university ostensibly to solve the problem of crowding. Women academics were not included in the decision. She angrily asked, 'On what basis did he make a decision that he himself won't endure any of its consequences!' and added, 'we paid the price because we are women.' She explained how difficult it would be for women academics to move between buildings to deliver lectures in the main university building and the new branch, to attend activities and courses, and to benefit from the facilities located in the main building. In Maha's experience, women academics were excluded from the department council until one female academic who recently graduated from Britain demanded change. Only then were women academics provided with equipment to facilitate communication between men's and women's segregated sections.

Voicing her anger, Nora said, 'because we're adults...I can have control over myself...I'm not a little girl so that they lock me in.' By these words, she protested against locking women academics in the university. She explained that the university gates are closed by security men from the outside and guarded by women keepers from the inside until the end of working hours. She said that once the gates are locked, women academics (except those in key positions), all employees and even students are not allowed to leave until the end of the official day. She said that even if she finishes her work requirements early, she would still have to wait until the end of

⁵ During the Islamic Ottoman Empire, wives and female servants of the Sultan were allotted a secluded portion of his household. Nowadays, all Saudi households are separated in two parts: one for men and the other for women conventionally known as 'Al-Harem' part.

the working day. An attendance sheet is also provided to ensure the compliance of women academics with this rule. She commented, 'this is waste of energy,' a point she kept stressing during the whole interview. She strives to be given recognition and respect as an academic and not treated as a minor. This example illustrates that male guardianship over Saudi women extends into their workplace as they are not allowed to leave without a permission, mirroring the case in wider Saudi society.

Nora mentioned that this rule of gates closing was first enforced by men but that women academics in leadership positions are content about it to ensure their positions and authority over women in lower levels. Nora also said that whenever she calls the men's section enquiring about any of her matters, they respond with a condescending tone implying that she has no relation to her own matter, as they are the ones who will decide. She added, 'I got psychologically tired from calling them.' Women academics are unable to communicate with the rector of the university; Nora said that she can only call his secretary to enquire or deliver a certain message, but he would only deliver what he deems important.

As for Karima, she expressed her frustration with enforced restricted clothing codes. Strict clothing codes are applied in all Saudi educational institutions. For example, women academics, employees and even students are not allowed to wear pants, short skirts or dresses, and sometimes some colours are not allowed. The notion of women's modesty is imbedded in universities even though they are completely gender segregated. These examples provided by the participants illustrate that male guardianship over women in its many forms (authority over the body and the mind) is manifested in both the culture and regulations of academia.

Segregated and Unequal

Gender-segregated administrations have created many barriers to the participants' academic progression. The participants have listed a number of impediments that stem from gender segregation.

Lack of control and authority

For Maha, gender segregated administrations are the 'biggest dilemma' as it means that 'no matter what your achievements are, you will remain a female deputy, you will never be the Dean of the faculty', a point that was also mentioned by Karima and Nora. 'I am a branch, just like you'. By this statement, Maha explained to her students and to me the fact that they are all extensions of men which results in their limited authority as female academics. Maha explained that this is why it takes longer time to address students' issues than it normally does at the men's administration. She said, 'my students think that I am making it hard for them deliberately'. She always tries to convince her students that she has limited access to the computer database and that is why she cannot sometimes help her students. She was resentful of the stereotype that women academics are insufficient and tend to complicate things for female students.

Women academics have also limited authority on money related matters. Maha explained that the department budget is handed to men's section first and the Head of department would spend it on the male's branch before the female's section. Because of this unequal distribution of budget, she did not get a desk until after two years after she was first assigned the job in the university. Lack of control was also an issue that Nora stressed in her narrations of the barriers she struggle with in her career. She repeatedly emphasised that gender segregation has resulted in lack of transparency and loss of control on her own matters. Since all the participants stated that women academics cannot communicate directly or indirectly with the rector of the university, and since

all critical decisions are made by male superiors in the men's section, Nora expressed her frustration that she is in constant struggle to follow up on her own requests and applications, and again, she would need her Mahram to go to men's section to act on her behalf.

Facilitators

Maha explained that her academic job does not entail social restrictions or any member of her family questioning its nature. She said, 'They will not look at you the way they look down upon a physician, or an employee at a Bank,' to the contrary, it has an excellent social status'. This is because academic jobs do not entail mingling and interacting directly with men. Karima stated that working hours are flexible and that the university is providing good quality facilities, and different training courses. She then emphasised the scholarship program provided by the university as a significant enabler to her career. As for Nora, the scholarship program happens to be the only enabler provided by the university to further advance her academic career, yet she was unable to benefit from the program because of her need of a guardian.

Discussion

In this research, I have highlighted the experiences of women academics in Saudi Arabia and identified the enablers and barriers towards their career advancement. The data revealed that the experiences of Saudi women academics were extremely influenced by social and political constraints imposed on women by the state. Power, authority, and control are dynamics manifested in both their social and academic lives. In other words, social and political constraints are deeply embedded in their workplace contexts as shown in the data and the literature.

Male guardianship over women and gender segregation are found to be major themes in this study. The participants have discussed a number of barriers and enablers that are grouped under these major themes. The enablers mentioned by my participants are fewer than the barriers towards their academic progression. A major enabler is the scholarship program which is conditioned by finding a Mahram for a woman academic to be eligible (Al-kayed, 2015; Al-Tamimi, 2004; Hamdan, 2005). Other enablers include family support, good technological facilities, prestigious social status, and flexible working hours (Aldoubi, 2014; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004).

The law of male guardianship over Saudi women academics creates several barriers towards career advancement. The most significant barrier is their constant need for a Mahram to act on their behalf and follow up their applications and formal requests in the men's section, to drive them to their workplace, and to act as their legal guardian if they wish to get a scholarship or attend educational conferences abroad. In this study, two participants provided paradoxical examples emphasizing their need for a Mahram. These participants shared the same opinion that obtaining a scholarship to study abroad is a great opportunity to enable them to further advance their academic careers. One participant stated that she was lucky to already have her legal guardian studying abroad, the other explained that she was still unable to have a Mahram and fulfil the scholarship condition. Other Saudi female academics emphasised the importance of the scholarship to gain qualifications to advance, apply for promotion and gain key positions (Al-kayed, 2015; Al-Tamimi, 2004; Aldoubi, 2014).

Mobility restrictions imposed on Saudi women academics are also forms of male guardianship. Because they are not allowed to drive, or to be alone with a non-relative male driver without permission from their legal guardians, Saudi women academics stated the mere act of

going to their workplace was a significant daily issue. One participant recognises that she is privileged in having a private driver while the two other participants need their fathers to drive them to their workplace. Attending scientific forums, conferences abroad, and training programs are vital factors in women academics' careers that are bounded by the restricted mobility imposed on Saudi women (Al-kayed, 2015; Al-Tamimi, 2004; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Some women may be fortunate to have supportive family or husbands who would allow them to attend conferences or study abroad while many others may not have this luck. Unfortunately, even the factors highlighted as enablers by women academics are actually reliant on sheer luck and a male guardian's will. In this sense, women academics have no effective role in obtaining any of these enablers.

Al-Rasheed (2013), highlighted that Saudi women are always portrayed in local media, religious discourse and Saudi Kings' speeches as precious mothers and daughters who should be provided for and protected. Through education, women learn from a very young age that they are jewels that should be protected by male guardians and because they are precious jewels, the ban on women driving⁶ and travelling is enforced by the state and blessed by state-appointed religious scholars (Al-Rasheed, 2013). As an insider, I know that the majority of Saudi men are also advocates for this system as it entitles them to full authority over women. Religious women believe that male guardianship is meant to keep women's dignity. They have even raised mottos like 'my male guardian knows what is best for me' defying liberal women's calls to end this system in social media. All of these factors make it difficult to dislodge barriers stemming from male guardianship.

The participants have also negotiated their continuous exclusion by the men's section. For Saudi women in academia, being treated as harem does not only entail physical exclusion the literal meaning held by the word, but it extends to other forms of marginalisation. One participant mentioned that religious male counterparts would plan and design the faculty goals on their behalf and then impose them on women academics; another participant stated that men in the administration would always make decisions on her behalf even those pertaining to her own issues; and all participants emphasized that women academics are not included in making decisions especially critical ones. Excluding women in decision making processes even those relating to their departments was also found in the literature. For example, Al-Ahmadi (2011) highlighted the centralization of decision-making processes by men as a major barrier to Saudi women leaders in academia and other sectors. Similarly, Al-Tamimi (2004) showed that Saudi women academics are excluded from senior positions because it would entitle them to make critical decisions, a process that women are deemed as incapable of in Saudi norms. Al-kayed (2015) and Aldoubi (2014) have also reached same conclusions.

Deeming women as harem and depriving them from making decisions conjure up negative stereotypes about women in terms of their mental abilities. Other researchers have found that many women academics have often preferred men's leadership over women's leadership and have argued that women's hormones, emotions and moods can intervene with their decisions, and therefore, they are not effective decision makers (Al-kayed, 2015). In other studies, women academics attributed their inability to be promoted and obtain leadership positions because of these negative stereotypes about their mental abilities and the notion that men are perceived to be wiser and better decisions makers (Al-Tamimi, 2004; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Al-Rasheed (2013) explained that excluding women from gaining leadership positions in the public sphere traces back

⁶ Saudi women were banned from driving until September 2018. While women are allowed to drive in Saudi, the law does not ensure the all women practice their right to drive as this is still under the authority of male guardians.

to strict interpretations of Islamic teachings by Saudi religious scholars that are delivered in their fatwas⁷ and are the basis of the religious curriculum in all Saudi schools and universities. In these fatwas, women are clearly described as weak creatures, unable to make right decisions because of their perceived sensitive and emotional nature. In the Qur'an (the holy book of Islam), the testimonies of two women are equivalent to the testimony of one man and this is attributed to bodily functions of women such as giving birth and menstruation. Because of their perceived excessive emotions, women cannot initiate divorce in Islam (Al-Rasheed, 2013). These fatwas deeming women as mentally incapable are embedded in almost all the state institutions including academia perpetuating the exclusion of women from leadership positions.

The use of the word harem as a metaphor by my participants was not an exaggeration because just like the Turkish harem, Saudi women academics are entirely separated from but completely dependent on the men's administration. This segregation is manifested in many forms. It is not only that women and men are on two separate campuses, but also female campuses are not located on the same street or area with the men's campus to ensure that no interaction can happen between the two sexes. Moreover, Saudi female universities are surrounded by long concrete walls to ensure females are not to be seen or contacted by men (Al Lily, 2011) which perpetuates women status as 'harem' as emphasised in this study. The theme of regarding women as harem is inseparable from the theme of treating women as legal minors as presented in this study. In fact, locking women academics inside the university by closing the gates and assigning safeguards to these gates was one of the unprecedented and outstanding findings of this study which provides a clear manifestation of how Saudi women are legally treated as minors in almost all aspects of their lives. As an insider, I would also add that religious police are always present outside most, if not all, Saudi female universities to guard women's behaviour. I argue that locking female academics and students in the university is closely related to the bigger notion of controlling women's bodies and sexuality which is rooted in the Wahhabi ideologies. We have been lectured from a young age that we hold the responsibility of keeping our families' honour by not engaging in any sexual or non-sexual relationships with men until marriage, and it is men who hold the responsibility of ensuring women's chastity. Men's obsession of women's bodies and family honour has resulted in obligating women to veil their bodies with black Abayas (Al Lily, 2011), lest they provoke men with their bodies (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Our bodies belong to the family, the tribe and the state but never to us. And it is our veiled pious bodies that act as walking representative for the Godly nation (Al-Rasheed, 2013). In her analysis of the Saudi woman's question, Al-Rasheed (2013) explained that the obsession of women's bodies, sexuality and appearances stem from men's fear that women's bodies deviate from what is permissible to them by the law of God. In her analysis of religious scholars' fatwas on Saudi women's bodies, Al-Rasheed (2013) provided an example illustrating men's anxiety to control women behaviour and guard their sexuality in the fatwa that bans changing rooms in female clothes shops stressing that a woman can only take her clothes off in her family or husband's house lest they become intimate with men or women. In this research, one participant expressed her anger with strict clothing codes imposed on them as academics and students although it is a woman-only workplace. This demonstrates the idea of extra surveillance of women's bodies even at their segregated workplaces.

In summary, the experiences of Saudi women academics are closely related to their experiences in their daily lives. Segregated Female Saudi institutions including universities are

⁷ Members of the Saudi religious establishment, known as Sheikhs, serve to enact fatwas (religious legal edicts) on different matters, which inform Sharia laws in Saudi Arabia.

similar to the Turkish Harem or, as Al-Rasheed (2013, p. 116) puts it ‘segregated ghettos,’ mentally and physically restrained by the system of male guardianship.

Conclusion

There are very few publications found in the literature that address the issue of Saudi women’s experiences in academia. As a Saudi female researcher, I found that these few studies avoid highlighting the crucial role of the Wahhabi-state partnership in shaping the experiences of women inside and outside academia. Most of these few studies discuss the experiences of Saudi women in academia and other sectors apart from the political structure of the state. This study attempted to fill a gap in the literature by openly discussing the social and political challenges that Saudi women academics face in their careers. Some findings accord with the ones found in the literature and others offered new insights. Although prior studies have highlighted issues of gender-segregation and male guardianship regulations and some of the barriers that stem from these regulations, these studies did not address the underpinning agendas adopted by the state which continues to enforce these arbitrary regulations over women. To address constant exclusion of Saudi women academics and restricted mobility imposed on them by law without negotiating the roots of these barriers is yet another form of silencing Saudi women.

I attempted to discuss with my participants the real causes of the barriers hindering the progression of their academic careers. As such, themes of gender segregation and male guardianship regulations have also appeared but at a deeper level. Continuous exclusion of Saudi women academics by treating them as harem and legal minors, controlling their bodies and sexuality by locking them inside universities, depriving them the right to travel alone, to drive a car, and forcing them to be extremely dependant on a Mahram to act on their behalf in the men’s administrations are the main manifestations of Wahhabi ideologies enforced by the religious scholars and blessed by the state. If we understand that women are deemed as half men and the holder of their family’s chastity and that it is the responsibility of men to guard women’s bodies lest they contaminate their honour, then barriers such as lack of authority, exclusion from the process of decision making, restricted mobility, restricted dress codes, and unequal distribution of academic jobs and budgets are just by-products of institutionalised Wahhabi ideologies.

Given that this is a small-scale study, other barriers that Saudi women academics face in their careers have not been explored such as the extended role that tribalism plays in Saudi universities. It is hoped that this study has filled a gap in the literature by providing new insights into Saudi women’s experiences in academia, and it is also hoped that these insights will increase awareness and pave the way for the process of un-silencing Saudi women.

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