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Embracing the Changes: A Study Examining the Career Intentions of Saudi Women Undergraduates

By Beverley McNally¹ and Carmen Winkel²

Abstract

This study explores the expressed career intentions of a group of Saudi Arabian women undergraduate students. Saudi Arabia is a society in transition and, as such, is undertaking a series of planned changes, several of which aim to increase the overall participation of women in economic and political life. These changes in turn will disrupt the traditional norms and values that have informed Saudi Arabian society. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the use of a survey methodology. The questions, both structured and unstructured, were designed to bring to the fore the participants' responses to the societal changes occurring and the perceived impact on their future career intentions. In addition, participants reflected on the challenges they may encounter, the available support mechanisms, and the changing nature of their roles in society. The findings revealed evidence of a sea change materializing. The traditional norms that have constrained the career choices of young women are no longer perceived as restrictive. The young women possess non-traditional career aspirations. There are implications for educationalists, policy-makers, and families to ensure that the appropriate supporting structures are available and that the participants achieve the level of personal agency required to make their career intentions a reality.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Women's careers, Higher Education, Gender roles, Social change

Introduction

This paper explores the perceptions of a group of young Saudi Arabian women concerning their career choices. Saudi Arabia is a traditional society with pre-ordained, deep-rooted norms that inform Saudi culture (Danish & Lawton-Smith, 2012). Some of the more predominant are those pertaining to the well-established gender roles and social separation. Historically, these traditional gender roles resulted in young women having to navigate carefully through a maze of individual sensitivities, wider social norms, and laws if they wished to enter non-traditional occupational fields (Danish & Lawton-Smith, 2012). Moreover, the role a young woman may play in society, their attitudes, self-esteem, and career intentions were often predetermined by the wishes of extended family and the traditional social mores (Al-Subaie, 2014; Krueger et al., 2000). However, behind the "sand curtain"³ a new reality is emerging.

Saudi Arabia is a society in transition. That is, it is engaged in the management of a significant program of planned change. Planned change is deemed to be the sign of societal transition (Levy, 1986) as cited in Sparkman (2015). As a member state of the United Nations, Saudi Arabia is a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which include

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³ A phrase used to explain a barrier between the West and countries in the Middle East, similar to how the phrase "iron curtain" is used to describe the barrier between the West and Russia.

commitments to ensuring gender equity and quality education, eliminating poverty, building resilient infrastructure, and ensuring sustainable and safe living conditions (United Nations, 2015).

Saudi Arabia, in response, has developed a transition program comprising two main strands. The first, Saudization, is a program designed to move from a high dependence on expatriate labor to a workforce composed primarily of Saudi nationals (Vision 2030, 2016). Expatriate labor comprises half of both the skilled and semi-skilled workforce. The reliance on this labor has contributed, in part, to a high Saudi youth unemployment rate (Staff-Writer, 2019). The second initiative is the Vision 2030 program with the strategic intent of reducing the country's dependence on oil as the main source of income. This requires diversification, development, and creation of alternative sources of income (Vision 2030, 2016). One of the main pillars of the Vision 2030 program is to increase women's workforce participation from 22% to 30% (Vision 2030, 2016). Thus, national strategies that have women's employment at their core are a feature of Vision 2030.

Consequently, there have been significant legislative changes enacted in Saudi Arabia to ensure the objectives of these programs are met. This includes a body of law with the specific aim of supporting women entering the business arena (The World Bank, 2021). Such changes include the oil industry opening positions for women in fields traditionally and legally not available to them (Al-Rasheed, 2019). This has included the lifting of restrictions in the mining and water management sectors, border security and more recently in 2021 the Saudi military (Saudi Gazette, 2021). Sectors previously only available to men are, now, by law, open to women. These significant legislative reforms have led to Saudi Arabia securing first place in the Middle East North Africa region (MENA) region in job creation for women (The World Bank, 2021). The latest World Bank (2021) report noted that Saudi Arabia has increased the percentage of women-owned businesses by 60% in the last two years. A summary of key changes obtained from a variety of sources are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1: Legislative Changes for Women in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)

Date	Change
2015	Women appointed to the Shoura
2017	Allowing women to work in all retail sectors
October 10 2017	King Salman announced lifting ban on driving for women
January 2018	Women allowed attending sport events in stadiums
January 2019	Ending practice of secret divorce by husband
July 2019	Freedom to obtain passport
August 2 nd 2019	Women can travel without consent of guardian when above 21 years old
October 20, 2019	Workplace Anti-Harassment Regulations
January 1 st 2020	Lifting ban on women's night work
2020	Right to live alone
September 2020	Allowing women to choose where to live after marriage
April 2021	Women allowed to enter traditional male professions (armed and security forces)
September 2021	The first graduates from the military college

However, legal and political changes do not necessarily mean that societal and attitude changes will follow. Consequently, this paper explores the impact of this transitioning environment upon the career intentions of female undergraduate students. The study sought to identify attitudinal changes in response to these new initiatives. Accordingly, this gave rise to the following research questions:

- What factors do students see as important for their future career development?
- How do they perceive the level of support available for their future career development?
- What challenges, if any, do they envisage confronting them when working to achieve these goals?

Literature Review

Unfortunately, the academic literature examining the role of women in Saudi society and specifically their career development is sparse (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Varshney, 2019; Winkel & Strachan, 2020). Moreover, as Al-Asfour et al. (2017) argue, that while there is significant empirical research examining the careers of women in the USA and Europe, there has not been the same level of attention devoted to the women of the Arab world. Al Gharaibeh (2011) identified that where empirical research has been conducted it has focused on countries such as Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates. This situation has not altered in the intervening period. Consequently, there is a paucity of research examining women's careers in Saudi Arabia (Parveen, 2022; Hayfaa A. Tlaiss, 2014; H. A. Tlaiss, 2014). This is concerning as Saudi Arabia is a complex society with many institutional structures that inform the career choices of young women. For example, until relatively recently women were not permitted to open a bank account, obtain a national ID, leave the country, or register a business without the consent of their guardian (Almobaireek & Manolova, 2013). Lack of transportation and gender-segregated working spaces have limited women in many ways and made pursuing a career a difficult task (KK., 2020). While there is some empirical research examining Saudi women and their entrepreneurial motivations and success, there is still limited evidence pertaining to how women see these new changes and opportunities the government has granted them (Al-Kwafi et al., 2020; Basaffar et al., 2018).

Traditionally, women's roles have been defined as mother, wife, and daughter, and as such were required to accede to the family wishes. Only men were active in the public sphere and considered the breadwinner for the family. Women were restricted to the domestic sphere (Al-Farran et al., 2018). This public/private distinction has been legally mandated in Saudi Arabia. Every man was the legal guardian for his wife and unmarried daughters or sisters and had exclusive rights when it came to decisions pertaining to marriage, divorce, and child custody (Alfurayh & Burns, 2020). However, the traditional division between a public, male-dominated public sphere and a female-dominated domesticity has altered. A hallmark of this shift is an increasing number of women university graduates aspiring to a career, thereby postponing marriage and motherhood (Al-Bakr et al., 2017; Zoepf, 2016). Besides these well-educated women, less-educated women from lower income groups find they need to work outside the home. The increased cost of living makes it necessary for women to work to contribute to the household income. This has resulted in more young women challenging traditional gender roles and seeking new employment opportunities (Al-Sudairy, 2017; Bursztyn et al., 2020).

In recent years, the situation for women in Saudi Arabia has improved, not least due to the lifting of the driving ban for women in 2018 (Williams et al., 2019). Williams et al. (2019) contend that increased car ownership by women will lead to greater participation of women in the workforce. Therefore, it is important to develop a greater level of knowledge regarding the impact of the legal and political institutional changes on the career choices of young women. Consequently, this study aims to redress this imbalance.

The Role of Institutional Theory

It is important to note that institutional structures do not operate in isolation. As formal traditional institutions change, so will other norms, values, and social structures (Leaptrott, 2005). Therefore, in the transitioning context of Saudi Arabia, institutional structures must

mediate between diverse groups of stakeholders within that context. Hence, institutional effectiveness and responsiveness is subject to constant redefinition (Berthod, 2018). Berthod (2018) goes on to state that the changing beliefs, rules, and expectations help explain the choices formal organizations and structures generate. In the context of this study, this means exploring the decisions the research participants make about their lives and future career choices.

To examine these social and institutional structures still further we turn to the frameworks of feminist institutional theory (FIT) as proposed by (Kenney, 1996). The use of FIT examines how the gendered nature of the economic, socio-cultural, political, and legal institutional structures influence women's behavior and career choices. In doing so it highlights how the institutions in society reflect, structure, and reinforce gendered patterns of power (Kenny, 2007, 2013). Consequently, it is important to investigate how the changing social structures, norms, and values influence women. Specifically, how institutions frame and inform gender equity, roles, and behaviors (Lowndes, 2020). For example, many young Arab women find that the traditional social mores within their social context can influence their attitudes, intentions, and self-perceptions with respect to career choice (Krueger et al., 2000). Furthermore, the social mores of Arab societies involving the separation of men and women also limit the careers women are able to enter (Ahmad, 2011; Basaffar, 2012). In addition, there are also informal institutions which create restrictive societal norms and attitudes regarding women's participation in the job market which may, with the passage of time, become normalized and not viewed as discriminatory (Blanchard & Warnecke, 2010). It is situations such as these, combined with the need to diversify the economy, that have initiated the period of transition occurring within Saudi Arabia (Vision 2030, 2016).

Time for Transitions

The legal and political changes occurring in Saudi Arabia do not necessarily mean there is a resultant change in the social institutions. Although today's generation of Saudi women is the most highly educated in the history of the country (currently more women than men are enrolled at universities and colleges), they only account for 22% of the workforce (The World Bank, 2018). However, there is evidence of a paradigm shift occurring in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region (Zoepf, 2016). For example, the concept of a career woman in the MENA region is a relatively new phenomenon (Zoepf, 2016). This, in turn, has led to the creation of a new group or class of women—unmarried professionals—which was a concept virtually unknown until relatively recently (Zoepf, 2016). Zoepf (2016) maintains that while marriage is still a major milestone for young people, a number of Arab women have found a growing sense of personal agency. These young women choose education or a career over marriage, setting them apart from the traditional societal groups (Zoepf, 2016). Yet, as Alfurayh and Burns (2020) argue, there is still a high expectation for women to work inside the home raising children and tending to household tasks. However, the unpredictable economic environment of the past 10 years has created an impetus for change. As Murphy argued, in Saudi Arabia there will be an “escalating economic pressure on families to allow women to work, with rising costs of living, added taxes, and the lack of well-paid jobs in the government sector. Many families cannot afford to live exclusively on one income” (Murphy, 2013, p. 99). This signals a move away from the concept of men as the sole breadwinner toward a marriage partnership where both husband and wife work and husbands support their wives in their business endeavors (Le Renard, 2014).

Methodology

Situated in the qualitative interpretivist paradigm, this exploratory research examines the participants' intentions of their planned career choices and direction post-graduation.

Empirical Context

Unfortunately, the term MENA is used in an all-encompassing manner to describe theories and events as applicable to all countries in the region (McNally & Khoury, 2018; Sidani, 2018). The size of the MENA geographical region creates many disparate groups, each having their own specific historical, cultural, traditional, and institutional structures. These, in turn, contribute to diverse traditions and social norms (Jamali, 2009; McNally & Khoury, 2018; Mehtap et al., 2017; Sidani, 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that the research context is specified. Al-Asfour et al. (2017) contend the failure to specify the research context is responsible for a potential research gap when investigating the relationship between women's careers and institutional structures in a specific research context.

Female undergraduate students in a large Saudi Arabian private university were the target population. The researchers were expatriate faculty, with more than five years' experience in the university. English is the language of instruction in the university. Many of the students have spent considerable time outside Saudi Arabia, and English is their first language or they are bilingual. The remaining students all have learned English as a second language. Accordingly, English was the language of the survey. This minimized any misinterpretation that may have occurred if translation from Arabic was required.

Sample Process and Characteristics

The researchers approached student participants via email and social media such as WhatsApp. Hence, the sample technique was convenience sampling. The sampling process was conducted as a non-graded in-class exercise where students were given the choice to participate or not. Snowball sampling techniques were also employed as students were requested to forward the survey link to their peers. Participants were assured all responses would be anonymized. This encouraged participation and 262 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 92%. Table 2 provides an outline of the demographics of the participants.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Participants (N=262)

Gender	
Women	100%
Men	0%
Age	
Less than 20	34.3%
Between 20-24	61.5%
Older than 24	4.2%
Marital Status	
Unmarried	93.9%
Married	4.6%
Married with Children	1.5%
Major	
Human Resources	32.8%
Architecture	4.2%
Graphic Design	4.2%
Electrical Engineering	3.8%
Mechanical Engineering	3.8%
Civil Engineering	2.3%
Information Technology	1.9%
Computer Science	5.7%
Computer Engineering	3.8%
Software Engineering	5.0%
Accounting	3.1%
Finance	12.6%
Management Information Systems	5.3%
Law	7.3%
Interior Design	4.2%
Undergraduate Year	
Freshman	91.3%
Sophomore	5.0%
Junior	1.9%
Senior	1.9%
Do your parents own or operate a business?	
Yes	55.0%
No	45.0%
Do your relatives own or operate a business?	
Yes	74.0%
No	26.0%
Do you understand the idea of role models?	
Yes	93.9%
No	6.1%

Data Collection

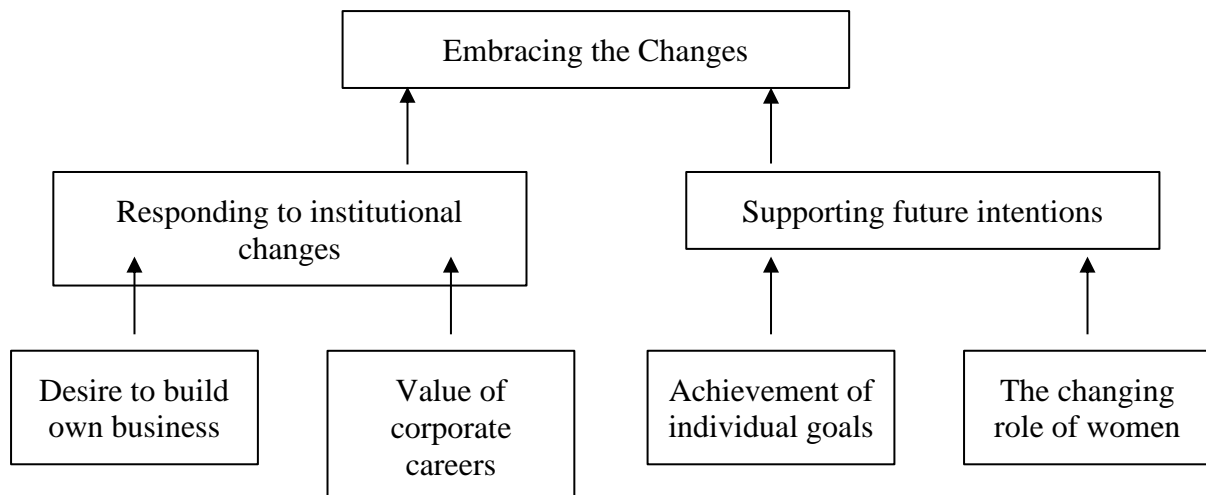
The COVID-19 pandemic restricted the method of data collection since personal safety was paramount during this period. The hard-lockdown measures in Saudi Arabia meant we were unable to meet with the participants and conduct face-to-face interviews. Consequently, an online survey administered via Google Forms was employed. The online method of data collection has been widely used in social sciences for efficiency of time and cost (De Leeuw, 2005). This study employed an online survey instrument with two key components. The first part of the questionnaire focused on the structured questions designed to obtain demographic

information about the participants (see Table 2). The second set of questions was open-ended. The objective being to ascertain the participants' perceptions about their future career choices and what challenges they may encounter, the support that they anticipated would be essential to achieve their career aspirations.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis employing an elicitation approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2011) was applied to the survey responses. The elicitation approach in a survey is less common than when generating data from in-depth-interviews. However, it can provide rich and informative data in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2011). Specifically, in this study, thematic analysis was utilized to gather information from a large group of participants in order to discover the potential impact of decisions along with the resultant needs and expectations (Brandenburg, 2011). The concurrent data collection and thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of analysis. These steps include familiarization with the data, the generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing of themes, defining and naming of themes; and producing the report. The process began with open coding of the surveys. The codes were then assigned to themes through a comparative process with focus on information that could be extracted directly from the data. The process resulted in four lower order themes, two sub-themes, and one overarching explanatory theme. The overarching explanatory theme is "embracing the changes." The hierarchical development of the themes is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Hierarchy of Thematic Analysis



Results

The students who participated in this study are the first generation of Saudi women to experience and benefit from the current political, legal, and social institutional changes occurring in Saudi Arabia. The initial indication of this is shown in Table 2. The identified majors revealed young women enrolled in non-traditional majors such as Engineering. These majors were previously not readily available to women as a subject in universities let alone as a profession. This, in turn, is acknowledged as having significant implications for the participants and their career aspirations. It became evident from the responses received that the participants welcomed the changes being instigated and were confident they would receive the vital levels of support from family and others for them to realize their career intentions. The following discussion explores the sub-themes that contribute to the overarching theme—

Embracing the Changes. We have identified four sub-themes—the desire to build a business, the desire to pursue a corporate career, the achievement of individual goals, and changing views of women's role.

Desire to Build Own Business

The participants were asked to reflect on their goals for the next five years—where do they want to go with their career and what challenges they have faced so far in their educational journey. Around 70% of the participants expressed the desire to open their own business. Two participants stated that they already started small online businesses with the aim of developing them post-graduation. The following statement is typical of those received.

It is important to move step-by-step towards the future, and I am planning to increase my work experience and take some courses related to finance, then I will activate my future business. Although I have a small business right now, which is designing Abayas for girls, after getting enough knowledge in my career path, I will put my concentration to be a one of the most well-known female entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia and the most influential in this area.

The responses demonstrated a high degree of positivity and motivation. It was clear the participants perceived the institutional changes as empowering and enabling their career ambitions. There was no evidence that they saw constraints to achieving these goals.

Becoming involved in entrepreneurial endeavors is a more widely accepted career option for women in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Government has designed policy initiatives and law changes to encourage more entrepreneurial ventures. The participants greeted these initiatives with positivity. Establishing their own business was perceived as one means to achieve financial independence, as one respondent noted:

I want to open my own software engineering company. I am doing my best for the success of this work and I will study information security because it is a specialization that will benefit me in my work as well as some courses that help me in my work, such as taking business administration courses and learning new languages. In the end, I would like to be an active and beneficial person for society, and I like to rely on myself and learn useful things for me and not completely depend on my father because I believe that every person is talented in his own way.

The ability to work creatively and independently was associated with the achieving of social status within the community. In answer to the question asking where they see themselves in five years' time, one respondent commented: "Employed, independent, and having the time of my life. I don't want to become a housewife in 5 years. I want to work and have my own business, so nobody can tell me what to do."

The reasons proffered for starting a business included the ability to satisfy their own creative needs, the compatibility of work with family, and study responsibilities. Many of the respondents stated that they wanted to conduct a "side-hustle" while employed in a regular job. In addition to the perceived higher social status, private businesses provide additional income, thus, ensuring financial security. One respondent noted, "In the future, I see myself having a job in a great international company and running my own restaurant together with my family. I want my family always around me and working together would make them proud of me."

Overall, the participants spoke of very ambitious career plans with the desire for the social recognition associated with owning one's own business being the primary reason. For example:

Nevertheless, opening a business is like a must in our family. None of my family rely only on the salary from their job. They all have a second income which I know for sure is as important as the university degree, besides the financial payoff having a business has a huge reflection on the personality. It makes you wiser, more responsible, and even cultured. Currently, I have my own business; it is a partnership with my brother. Of course, in the future I have so many plans of making it bigger and bigger as well as opening other businesses hopefully.

The overall desire was to have a positive impact on themselves, their future, and become an active participant in the implemented institutional changes. One participant stated, "I would like to become the best version of myself while having a reputable reputation." Another mentioned the recent positive changes for young women in Saudi Arabia and the job opportunities that are available for her generation:

But more and more I felt that restrictions and rules for women are changing, now it has dramatically changed, girls are now everywhere, in all fields, like in coffee shops, in sports. They are working in many new fields, like design, producing, and media.

Pursuing a Corporate Career

Pursuing a career in an international company is perceived as an attractive option. One third of the participants named the Saudi oil company Aramco as the place they most aspired to work. Headquartered in the Eastern Province (where the study was conducted), Saudi Aramco is recognized as a company that provides significant opportunities for young women. As one commented:

In terms of my future, I have many preconceived ideas and objectives that I want to achieve. My first objective is to earn a bachelor's degree in software engineering. My second ambition is to work for ten years, no more, in one of the region's major corporations, such as Aramco, SABIC.

However, many of the participants also named multinational companies, for example, Siemens, Price Waterhouse & Coopers, and the tech giants as desired companies in which to build a career. Additionally, there were aspirations to work in non-traditional fields. For example, one respondent wants to work "as a field engineer for Saudi Aramco. Ever since I have been a little girl I wanted to work in the field even if it is a hard and dirty work environment."

The overriding view was that the dreams they had dreamt for a long time were now possible. The participants prioritize the necessity of a successful career prior to starting a family. It is not so much financial reasons that are cited here, but rather the idea of living independently and autonomously, with a career being an expression of this. There was a perception that a career in a large company would be supportive of the dual roles of career and mother:

As a married woman, I will talk from my perspective. All of them are very important to me, as my husband is supportive and he is my role model, and of course my family is a big part of my life. I am what I became now because of them, thank god. Moreover, career is very important for me as a woman to be independent. In addition, I will be a mother in the future, so for having children I will need a career to collaborate with my husband and provide my own family a decent life.

The responses highlighted that for some, social status and career directions are conscious actions and may create conflict with the traditional expectations of their extended family. However, all the responses outlined the importance of overcoming any objections. Their careers were self-fulfilling for them and viewed as beneficial for their families.

Achievement of Individual Goals

This theme explained what level of support the participants considered they received in their quest for the achievement of their career goals, focusing on opportunities as opposed to constraints. Again, there was evidence of the significant changes occurring in Saudi Arabia which were seen as leveraging the careers of the participants. There is a clear signal about the direction these young women wished their career journey to take. While the responses were illuminating and showed a high level of positivity and motivation, there was evidence that these goals were tempered by reality.

There were clear statements identifying how professional goals meshed with goals involving family, motherhood, a happy marriage, and educational goals (achieving master's or Ph.D. degrees). When asked what obstacles female students see in their career development, most respondents were extremely optimistic. The majority of the participants stated that they never faced any obstacles when it came to studying or following career plans. Only occasionally were cultural, social, and religious constraints cited as career barriers. One student referred to these barriers: "Religious limitations, cultural limitations from our culture and narrow-minded people." When challenges did occur, social norms or values were not considered to pose significant barriers. One respondent located the problem at the level of the individual: "I think ignorant people who are against making new positive changes can be a problem."

Another participant, when providing a more in-depth answer, referred to the current social, legislative, and cultural changes within the Kingdom. She emphasized both the significance of the changes for the Kingdom and the implications for the careers of young Saudi women:

I think women's role is progressing and changing; there used to be years and years where they were only housewives, taking care of kids, the priority would be family. Then, through generations, there is more emphasis on building a career, but for years it was only certain careers. I think now we are living in a big revolution. Where girls are... their role is becoming more and more important. First, for the Kingdom's reputation in the world, as an open liberal country, and they are getting more chances to explore more careers.

As opposed to societal norms and expectations as a barrier, 25% of the participants cited their own personal weaknesses as a possible hindrance, for example "The only barrier standing in my way is my tendency to procrastinate." The interviewees frequently cited their own attitude towards studying or lack of experience as one of the biggest obstacles to achieving their goals: "sometimes I find myself getting lazy, but then I remind myself of how much I really want this to help me get back up on my feet."

The importance of gaining a postgraduate qualification, master's and doctoral degrees, is critical. However, those qualifications spoken of also included those disciplines that traditionally and legally were only available to men. The recent legislative changes (see Figure 1) have meant that women are now able to work in sectors that until very recently were prohibited to them. These changes were the catalyst for exploring new opportunities and shifting career directions. As one respondent said, "Nowadays, with the changes that are happening in Saudi Arabia today for women, I noted that there was a need for some female engineers, which inspired me to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering."

Rather than the traditional social norms and family expectations acting as constraints, the participants perceived the opposite was the case. When asked whom they would turn to for support in their career, 90% identified their family as being the most important source of support and encouragement in achieving their personal goals. In a traditional patriarchal society, recourse to family as a support mechanism is the norm. Consequently, this is not surprising. However, as many of the participants' career goals did not fit the traditional norm it is heartening that their families are deemed their strongest support mechanism.

The Changing View of Women's Role

The question querying the priority ascribed to marriage as opposed to a career resulted in the longest answers and widest range of opinions. The answers show a deeper level of reflection indicating how important this question is for the participants. The majority of the respondents stated that they would like to, firstly, develop a career and then get married:

I do not think about marriage a lot to be honest. Sure, it is nice to have a family and a partner to rely on, but I'm afraid considering our society's stances on women. They expect us to get married first and, if we're even lucky enough, to get a job. I don't want to follow the path society expects me to follow, to end up as a housewife with children to take care of without making use of all the hard work I've managed to get done in university. So, I believe a career comes first because women deserve to get a chance in that as much as men do.

In response to the question, whether it is important that both spouses work, most of the interviewees stated that both partners should work, even if financial necessity were not the main reason:

I believe yes. A wife should be working if she has the intentions, and nothing should stand in her way of accomplishing her goals in life. A woman's job is important just as a man's job is important and societies should understand. A wife should also be able to build her career and be on the top.

One participant pointed out that even after marriage women should not give up their jobs, a common practice in Saudi Arabia in the past:

Why would they give up their own jobs for being married? Why has nobody ever asked this exact question to a man once they get married? I wonder who said that women should be staying home while men must keep on going. I'm sure it was a man.

Another participant emphasized that financial pressure is not the main motivator for women to work, "For my situation, my husband's salary is enough. But if I decide to go into the workforce it will be for my own inner needs and not a financial need."

One frequent comment referred to the choices that may have to be made between work and family. This is not a unique choice as many women are faced with such dilemmas. However, Saudi Arabia is a country where the family will take priority in many instances over a more individualistic stance. It was evident the young women felt they had a degree of autonomy in making the choice, "my family always supports jobs. But I think if I cannot manage between them I will choose my family and my husband rather than the job." However, not all students seek employment after graduation or plan on pursuing a career. Often, they are more intent on pursuing individual artistic or creative interests, or charity work.

Discussion

The qualitative approach to this study contributes to the empirical literature by bringing to the fore the voices of the young women participants at a time when the empowerment of women in the Kingdom is changing rapidly. As such, there is a danger these voices during this period may be lost. As the study progressed, it became evident that there was a sea change occurring. A sea change is an idiom to explain a paradigm shift or a substantial change in perspective, particularly one impacting a group (McMillian, 2004, pp. 61-62). The legislative and political changes are creating opportunities that were not previously available and an environment where it is possible to plan career and life goals outside those proscribed by the traditional norms (KK., 2020; Williams et al., 2019). The findings indicate that the young women who took part in this study were embracing these societal and legal changes occurring in Saudi Arabia (Al-Farran et al., 2018).

While the participants are aware of the social norms and values that could constrain their future intentions, it was evident they intended to overcome these and to try new career paths, for example, in engineering or the oil industry. The findings are supported by the recent World Bank (2021) report. Saudi Arabia scored 80 points out of 100, up from the 70.6 achieved in 2020, to become among the leading countries in the MENA region for improvement in economic opportunity and equality for women. The Kingdom achieved a full score of 100 in five main indicators out of eight measured by the World Bank report: mobility, pension, entrepreneurship, workplace, and pay. This research provides evidence that women are taking advantage of these opportunities.

These findings answer the concerns raised by Al-Kwif et al. (2020) and Basaffar (2012). This study provided evidence of the willingness of the women participants to signal their future ambitions and to take advantage of the changes occurring within the Kingdom. They expressed specific career plans, some with very ambitious goals. However, further research is recommended to ascertain the extent career intentions have been influenced by the political and social changes occurring.

The thematic analysis indicated the young women anticipate few obstacles to achieving their career goals. The findings also suggest that in addition to a career in prestigious multinational corporations, entrepreneurial endeavors are also one means to ensure economic well-being. In addition to the economic factors, priority was accorded to the factors of social standing and self-fulfillment. This finding is in contrast to the situation highlighted by Danish & Lawton-Smith (2012) and Almobaireek & Manolova (2013), which found significant obstacles to young women's career aspirations.

As the data analysis progressed, the findings showed that the participants perceived the changes occurring as revolutionary and welcomed them with enthusiasm. There was a high level of awareness of the significant social, political, and legislative changes occurring (Al-Bakr et al., 2017; Bursztyn et al., 2020). This, in turn, is allowing them to develop independent career goals, goals that are significantly different from those of their mothers.

Limitations

Although the research provides insight into the goals and dreams of a group of female undergraduates, there are limitations. The research was conducted in Saudi Arabia which has its own unique institutional and social norms. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalizable to other countries without further research. Second, the outcomes of the research are limited to a group of female undergraduates who are comparatively well educated and from a middle to high socio-economic demographic. Consequently, the findings are unable to be applied to groups outside this demographic without further research. Future research comparing the experiences of men and women students would be desirable. Third, the study examines the perceptions of the participants at a specific moment in time, but not the actual

long-term outcomes or future directions of their career. Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to examining the relationship between perceptions and intentions and eventual outcomes in more depth. There were limitations imposed by coronavirus that restricted the researchers from using follow-up interviews. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers conduct in-depth interviews once the current COVID-19 situation is ameliorated.

Conclusion and Implications

This research constitutes a first step in examining the planned career intentions of young Saudi Arabian women during a period of significant transitional change. As such, it will provide a base for future longitudinal studies in the Kingdom. The women are aware of the need and the challenge to balance the traditional norms and social structures with those evolving from the transitioning strategies. None of the participants expressed doubts as to their ability to cope with the new career opportunities and with managing their personal life. In fact, a majority spoke of the support their families provided for them. The study is one of the first to elicit qualitative responses to the institutional changes—political, economic, and societal—that are occurring. There are practical implications for the Saudi Arabian Government and higher education providers to ensure that the necessary curriculum changes are made to support these changing career ambitions.

There are implications for future research. This includes cross-country comparisons researching the phenomenon of single female professionals in the MENA region. Future studies may benefit by focusing directly on young women from government universities and vocational education institutes—institutions not covered by this study—in order to ascertain if they too are embracing the changes. The thematic analysis offers evidence that the women taking part in this study are embracing the changes occurring in Saudi Arabia and intend to ensure that their future career options are as diverse as possible.

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