

**The Impact of Institutional Influences on HRM Practices
and Women's Workplace Experiences in Saudi Private
Sector Organisations**

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Abstract

This study examines how formal and informal institutions shape women's workplace experiences and the extent to which organisations in Saudi Arabia are developing their HRM policies and practices (recruitment, promotion, training, pay and working conditions) to respond to labour legislation and whether women perceive the working environment as supportive of them.

Through the lens of institutional theory, a qualitative case study design was adopted. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 36 employees and 8 managers in two private sector organisations, one Saudi-owned, with a segregated working environment and the other international, with a mixed working environment.

The findings show that institutions including regulatory authorities, and organisations' own policies and practices gave opportunities to women and provided privileges and protections to mothers. However, women's experiences of employment differed in relation to equality with men, the extent and effectiveness of women's voice, and organisations' supportiveness of female employees, with those working in the Saudi organisation perceiving less equality and more constraints. In both organisations, women's behaviour, experiences and work life balance were affected by the informal institutional influence of cultural norms and expectations.

Through the use of an institutional lens, the study contributes to an understanding of the factors influencing women's position in organisations, within Saudi Arabia. A gender perspective contributes to an area often neglected in institutional theory. The study also highlights informal institutional influences (culture, family and religion) which are often overlooked in Western studies. In so doing, it provides insights into the way in which organisation policies, practices and environments reflect interaction, and sometimes conflict between formal and informal institutions, simultaneously reinforcing and subverting efforts to improve the position of woman.

List of Contents

Abstract.....	2
List of Contents	3
List of Tables	6
List of Figures.....	7
List of Appendices.....	8
Acknowledgment.....	9
Declaration.....	10
Dedication.....	11
Chapter One: Introduction.....	12
Chapter Two: Literature Review	18
2.1 Introduction.....	18
2.2 Gender Discrimination.....	18
2.3 HRM and Women in the Workplace.....	21
2.3.1 Employee Involvement (EI).....	23
2.4 Institutional Theory	25
2.4.1 Historical Institutionalism and Path Dependency	31
2.4.2 Strengths and Limitations of Path Dependence	34
2.5 Gender and Institutional Theory.....	36
2.6 Summary.....	37
Chapter Three: The Saudi Context	39
3.1 Introduction	39
3.2 Overview of the Saudi Labour market	39
3.2.1 The Private Sector in Saudi Arabia	43
3.3 Gender Discrimination in Saudi Society	46
3.3.1 Cultural and Social Challenges.....	46
3.3.2 Patriarchal Structure	48
3.3.4 Family Centrality.....	48
3.4 Government Employment Policies with Implications for Women	50
3.5 Factors Affecting HRM in Saudi Organisations.....	55
3.6 Summary.....	59

Chapter Four: Methodology	61
4.1 Introduction.....	61
4.2 Research Paradigm.....	61
4.2.1 Critical Realism	63
4.3 Qualitative Approach	66
4.4 The Target Industry.....	68
4.5 Methods	68
4.5.1 Interview protocol.....	70
4.5.2 Translation of Interview Guide	71
4.5.3 Pilot Study.....	72
4.5.4 Access and Sampling	74
4.5.4.1 Profile of the Participating Organisations	74
4.5.4.2 Recruitment of Participants.....	77
4.5.5 Conducting the Interviews	78
4.5.6 Translating Collected Data.....	81
4.6 Data Analysis	82
4.7 Validity and Reliability	83
4.8 Ethical Considerations	84
4.9 Summary	85
Chapter Five: Interview Findings I.....	87
Theme 1: HRM Policies and Practices	87
5.1 Introduction.....	87
5.2 Recruitment.....	87
5.3 Promotion.....	100
5.4 Training.....	107
5.5 Pay.....	113
5.6 Working Conditions.....	120
5.7 Summary	132
Chapter Six: Interview Findings II	134
Theme 2: Employment Relations and Workplace Climate	134
6.1 Introduction.....	134
6.2 Employee Involvement	134
6.3 Treatment Compared to Men	143

6.4	Personal Control.....	148
6.5	Work-Life Balance.....	152
6.6	Summary	161
Chapter Seven: Interview Findings III		162
Theme 3: Institutional Environment.....		162
7.1	Introduction.....	162
7.2	Education	162
7.3	Regulatory Authorities.....	167
7.4	Organisation Environment	172
7.5	Socio-Cultural Norms	183
7.6	Summary	199
Chapter Eight: Discussion and Implications		201
8.1	Introduction.....	201
8.2	Research Question 1.....	201
8.3	Research Question 2.....	207
8.4	Research Question 3.....	213
8.5	Contributions of the Research.....	222
8.6	Implications.....	225
8.7	Limitations of the Study.....	227
8.8	Suggestions for Further Research	228
Appendices		230
References		241

List of Tables

Table 3.1: Labour Statistics by Sector, Gender and Citizenship	40
Table 3.2: Four Colour-Coded Categories of the Nitaqat Programme.....	53
Table 3.3: Comparison between HRM Practices for Saudis and Non-Saudis....	56
Table 4.1: Comments and Actions Taken According to Pre-Test and Pilot.....	73
Table 4.2: The Number of Branches of the Bank in Saudi Arabia.....	75
Table 4.3: Comparison between Org.1 and Org.2	77
Table 4.4: Data Collection Period by Weeks	79
Table 5.1: Comparison between the Two Organisations – Theme 1.....	129
Table 6.1: Comparison between the Two Organisations – Theme 2.....	160
Table 7.1: Comparison between the Two Organisations – Theme 3.....	197

List of Figures

Figure 3.1: Year-On-Year Change in Saudis Outside Labour Force	40
Figure 3.2: 2015 Employment Breakdown by Sector	45

List of Appendices

Appendix A- Interview guide	230
Appendix B- Profiles of the Participants	233
Appendix C - Coding and Category - Theme Identification	236

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Dedication

All praise and glory to the Almighty Allah (God) who gave me generous blessings in this life; courage, ability and patience, without which I would not have completed this work. Peace and blessings of Allah be upon the last Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be upon Him).

On my journey to achieving my educational dreams, it would have been very difficult to engage in this experience without the support and encouragement of others.

From the bottom of my heart, I dedicate this work to my beloved mother. She was waiting for this work to be done before she passed away, and I was hoping to show her this work while she was alive. Sadly, she left before I could complete my journey. Her passing away was painful and difficult. My mother is absent from our world, but I ask Allah to bring us together in Paradise.

Also, I dedicate this work to my proud dear father, who has been impatiently waiting over the past years to rejoice at my graduation. This gift is a small return for his grace and generosity to me. Soon, Allah willing, his hope and my dream will be achieved.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

Worldwide, evidence shows that gender discrimination exists in employment and in organisations (Ensher et al., 2001), and it has been claimed that gender bias is engrained in organisations' Human Resource Management (HRM) policies and practices (Metcalf, 2007). Women are disadvantaged in recruitment (Stamarski and Hing, 2015), pay (Zia, 2012), access to resources and networks, working conditions and training and development opportunities (McKnight-Compton, 1997, Chang et al., 2014). Formal practices in these areas as well as informal experiences of prejudice and disrespect (Chang et al., 2014) may deter women from participating in the workforce, or result in their demotivation, dissatisfaction and turnover or withdrawal. To prevent such waste of women's talent and potential, there is a need for a greater understanding of the underlying causes of discrimination, and of how organisational practices and environments are experienced by women themselves.

One approach for gaining such understanding, identifying areas for improvement and tracking change, is by looking at the role played by formal and informal institutions that set the 'rules of the game' in a particular society. From this perspective, opportunities and experiences can be influenced by formal institutions in society, such as the education system, the law, and professions, and informal institutions such as culture, family, and religion. The impact of these influences are played out, *inter alia*, in workplaces, where, for example, HRM can be viewed as an area in which informal cultural beliefs and expectations about women may be given formal expressions in policies and practices that systematically disadvantage female employees or, conversely, a locus of efforts (either internal to the organisation or imposed by legal/regulatory authorities) to support women. Cultural norms and beliefs may also influence women's experiences in organisations informally, for example through prejudice and disrespect (Chang et al., 2014) or conflict of roles between career and family (Metcalf and Afanassieva, 2005). Such considerations prompted this exploration of women's experiences in work settings, taking as an example the under-researched context of Saudi Arabia, where a long-standing tradition of rigid and strictly-enforced gender roles has recently been challenged by social pressures and legal reforms offering women new opportunities and freedoms inside and outside the workplace. It therefore offers a rich context for understanding the

roles played by various formal and informal institutions in shaping organisation policies, practices, and environments, and how these are experienced by female employees.

1.2 Research Problem

Across Arab countries historical, cultural and institutional factors have limited women's rights, and in particular, their right to work (Sidani, 2016). Since the mid twentieth century, for example, the legal context has begun to move towards improving the status of women. Notably in Egypt, the updating of legislation has influenced family laws in the wider Arab world (Esposito, 2001). These and other institutional changes, for example in education, organisations and family life highlight the growing importance of women's empowerment in Middle-Eastern society and their contributions to the workplace. Such institutional changes are challenging stereotypes, traditions, and cultural norms. In many regions in the Arab world, changes in the institutional context offer opportunities for women's personal and professional development and an improvement in the quality of their lives. Fakhro (2005) suggests that women's entrance into the workforce has positively impacted familial structures, increasing women's involvement in decision-making.

In Saudi Arabia, over the past decade, the government has introduced various measures intended to increase opportunities for women. In particular, women's empowerment is purportedly an aim of Vision 2030, an ambitious socio-economic development plan (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2017). Reformists view women's participation as a positive step. However, those more conservative members of society regard women's participation in the workplace as a threat to their conventional national identity and authority (Al-Shammari, 2009), so opposition still exists. In Saudi Arabia entrenched social conservatism and the slow pace of institutional change contribute to a high degree of restrictions on women and this has been reflected in low labour participation (Ministry of Labour, 2015).

The role of Saudi women in the workforce is inseparable from their position in society (Rajkhan, 2014). According to Budhwar and Mellahi (2007) and Varshney (2019), women face several barriers to employment, for example, patriarchal structures, discrimination, prejudice, inequity in participation and pay, which can be seen as reflecting both formal regulatory institutions (law and organisation policies) and informal cultural influences. Strong cultural norms

around gender have been institutionalised in organisation structures (e.g. segregated workplaces, subordination of woman's sections to men's) and law (e.g. what jobs are open to women, what hours they may work). Whilst previous research in Saudi contexts has acknowledged this in general terms and commented on the presence of inequalities (Afiouni and Karam, 2014, AlAlhareth et al., 2015), it offers little information of specific practices, or how they are experienced by women themselves, nor has it adequately explored how their situation came about, or the possibilities for change. Also there has, as yet, been little consideration of the impact of recent changes whereby the government has made steps towards changing women's position. It therefore remains unclear whether, how, or to what extent formal institutions are able to reverse or overcome the effects of deeply-entrenched informal cultural norms.

1.3 Research Aim

As noted above, the Saudi context is under-researched in the investigation of women's workplace experience, and in particular in research from an institutional perspective. This results in a gap in understanding the roles played by institutions, which may differ in presence, strength and operation from one context to another. In particular, the shortage of research in non-Western contexts such as Saudi Arabia leaves gaps in the understanding of the role played by informal institutional factors such as culture, and how these may interact with, reinforce or undermine formal institutional impacts. The scant research within Saudi Arabia discussed institutional impacts on organisation practices in ethnic (Saudi vs non-Saudi) rather than gender terms or has mentioned institutional pressures such as law and culture (see Chapter Three, on the Saudi context) but has not sufficiently unpicked the roles and interactions of these institutions, or the processes by which institutional impacts on women became entrenched or have been challenged. Moreover, such studies have often been theoretically based and lacked the voices of women themselves. This study aims to contribute in filling these gaps by critically exploring Saudi women's experiences in the workplace from an institutional perspective, through an in-depth investigation in two contrasting organisations, using information collected from the narratives of female employees.

1.4 Research Questions

In the light of the above discussion, this thesis seeks to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent, and in what way, are Saudi organisations responding to Saudi labour legislation via their use of HRM practices?
2. To what extent do women perceive the workplace/employee relations climate as supportive of them?
3. To what extent and in what ways do formal and informal institutions shape the work experiences of women?

1.5 Definition of Terms

Key terms and concepts, which are used throughout the thesis, are defined as follows:

Institutions:

Socially-constructed environments, entrenched by habit and general acceptance, that shape individual and organisational behaviour and outcomes (Scott, 2008). Institutions can be classed as either formal or informal, and may be of various types, as shown in the following definitions.

Formal Institutions:

Structures and arrangements that exist in tangible form (often state level and government led) such as regulatory systems, laws and government agencies (Hopp and Stephan, 2012).

Informal Institutions:

Implicit, culturally transmitted institutions (Stephan et al., 2015) (Stephen et al., 2015) representing codified attitudes in society (El Harbi and Anderson, 2010) including customs, codes of conduct and values. An example is ideas about the role of women that impose pressure on them to behave in socially accepted ways and refrain from behaviours that are disapproved of (Welter and Smallbone, 2008, Mair et al., 2012).

Regulatory Institutions:

Institutions based on sanctions and conformity, e.g. labour law.

Normative Institutions:

Set of socially-shared beliefs that define what behaviour is expected in a particular context, creating a sense of social obligation. Formal examples include professional standards and codes of ethics. Informal examples are social norms that support or inhibit particular behaviours.

Cultural-Cognitive Institutions:

Shared “knowledge”, socially constructed rules and meanings that become part of the social understanding in a particular society, whether or not they are supported by objective evidence. An example would be constructions of gender that view men as rational, active and powerful/ controlling, and women emotional, passive and subservient.

Saudization:

A set of laws and policies enacted by the government of Saudi Arabia aiming at localization of labour and reducing reliance on expatriates.

Shariah:

Islamic law: a body of rules and principles derived from the Quran and Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him) that covers every area of life.

Women’s Experiences of Employment:

This includes not only objective aspects (e.g. salary, position, terms and conditions of employment) but also women’s subjective feelings and perceptions of how they are treated in the workplace (e.g. fairness, support, voice) as expressed in their own words.

1.6 Structure of Thesis

Following on from this introductory chapter, the remainder of the thesis is structured in seven chapters, as follows:

Chapter Two is a literature review that sets out the theoretical and empirical background to the present research and provides a framework for the research questions and of the findings. It is divided into three parts. The first introduces the concept of gender as a social construction and shows how particular constructions of womanhood have been used to constrain women’s employment

opportunities. The second concerns HRM policies and practices and the way they affect female employees. The third explores institutional theory, historical institutionalism in particular, as a lens through which the disadvantages women face in employment can be interpreted.

Chapter Three focuses on the Saudi context. It introduces the employment structure in Saudi Arabia, key factors shaping HRM policies in the Kingdom, and specific cultural characteristics that have historically constrained women's participation in the workforce. It also discusses employment laws and policies introduced by the Saudi government, that have implications for women.

The strategies and methods employed to achieve the study's objectives and answer its questions are explained in Chapter Four. The chapter begins by introducing critical realism as the underpinning paradigm and goes on to discuss the collection and analysis of data obtained through semi-structured interviews with participants in two organisations. Issues of research ethics and quality are also considered.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven contain the findings in relation to each of the research questions in turn. They address, successively, HRM policies and practices in the participating organisations, employment relations and the workplace climate, and the institutional environment shaping women's workplace experiences.

The thesis concludes in Chapter Eight with a discussion of the research questions in the light of theory and previous empirical work, an assessment of the research implications, contributions and limitations, and suggestions for further research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter One, women worldwide experience gender discrimination in organisations, which may inhibit their participation in the workforce or result in frustration, dissatisfaction, high rates of turnover and exit, and wasted potential. It was suggested, also, that HRM may be, on the one hand, an area where such discrimination is manifested in formal policies and practices that systematically disadvantage women or, on the other hand, a locus of efforts to improve women's opportunities and experience at work. This chapter, therefore, begins by providing an introduction to the notion of gender and an overview of the problem of gender discrimination in organisations. It then looks at how gender discrimination is manifested in HRM policies and practices, in such areas as recruitment, pay, access to resources, training and development opportunities, and promotion. The third part of the chapter introduces institutional theory as the lens adopted in this study in an attempt to understand the origins and perpetuation of gender discrimination in organisations in a given context (in this study, Saudi Arabia) and, while reviewing a number of institutional perspectives, focuses particularly on historical institutionalism as the one considered especially relevant to the present study.

2.2 Gender Discrimination

According to Böhmer and Schinnenburg (2016), gender has two meanings, being considered as biological sex and as a social construction; the latter especially leads to culturally separate gender roles. As Risman (2004) argues, gender is a construction rooted in the social interactions of daily life and social organisations. The same author suggests that gender difference is a way of justifying sexual stratification. Gender, as socially constructed differences between men and women and the beliefs and identities that support difference and inequality, is also present in all organisations (Acker, 2006).

Gendered organisations are a logical consequence of understanding gender as socially constructed (Mastracci and Arreola, 2016). Acker (1990) defines this phenomenon in terms of the patterns of advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity through and in terms of a distinction between male and female.

Gender discrimination refers to all decisions that are made within an organisation that are based on gender instead of an individual's performance or qualifications

(Dubbelt et al., 2016). Within organisations, entrenched stereotypes of the characteristics and behaviour of each gender result in the differential evaluation and treatment of women and men (Dubbelt et al., 2016). As Thompson and McHugh (2009) observe, there are gender inequalities in organisations beyond what could be accounted for by differences in education, skill, effort and commitment. Such inequalities reflect deep-rooted gender discrimination. Risman (2004) indicated that men have a more privileged position because of their higher status within society. These privileges translate into organisational arrangements that support men's functioning and career progress in particular (Dubbelt et al., 2016).

Among the forms that discrimination may take are disadvantage in recruitment (Stamarski and Hing, 2015), differentials in pay (Zia, 2012), access to resources, working conditions and training and development opportunities, all combining to create the glass ceiling that limits women's career opportunities.

In recruitment and hiring, several studies have produced evidence of discrimination against pregnant women or those with family (Hebl et al., 2007, Morgan, 2013, Stamarski and Hing, 2015). Further, women may be employed on casual contracts to avoid responsibility for childcare provision (Metcalf and Afanassieva, 2005). With regard to access to resources, it is often the case that women have access to fewer resources than men, beginning with the education system and continuing into employment. For example, in the Middle East in general, society favours men's education over women's and this has led to disparities in the distribution of funds between boys and girls (Afiouni et al., 2014).

Gendered practices in society as a whole result in women often lacking financial and managerial expertise and industry knowledge for starting a business. It is more difficult for women than men to form social and business connections, which can be an obstacle to women's careers (Omair, 2010). For example, most women, in a recent survey across the Arab world, claimed that they would progress in their careers if they had a mentor, although 80 per cent of these women revealed they had not been assigned a mentor (Tlaiss and Dirani, 2015). This was considered as gender-based discrimination inhibiting women's professional development, since men are more likely to have a mentor who would help them to develop relevant skills and gain useful experience, as well as with networking, enabling them to discover and exploit opportunities for advancement.

Female employees also have weaker bargaining power over terms and conditions of employment; for example, working mothers may accept inferior terms and conditions to accommodate their domestic obligations (Brockbank and Airey, 1994, Munir Sidani, 2013). Chang et al. (2014) and McKnight-Compton (1997) found that women also tend to have fewer professional development opportunities at the workplace than men. Such discrimination can lead to low participation of women in work.

In addition to discrimination in official organisation policies and procedures, women face informal or covert discrimination in the form of suspicion and mistrust in the workplace. Professional women are constantly and unfairly scrutinised, and their abilities, capabilities, and suitability for organisational work are questioned (Tlaiss and Dirani, 2015). In a study of women managers in the United Arab Emirates, it was revealed that gender-based discrimination affected their aspirations to progress in their managerial jobs (Tlaiss, 2014b). This situation can occur even when men are the numerical minority in the workplace, due to 'traditional' workplace cultures, where women need to work harder to prove themselves in order to be at par with men (Chang et al., 2014).

According to McKnight-Compton (1997), another way in which women's careers are impeded is that they are forced to choose between family and career, in a way that is not required of men. Metcalfe and Afanassieva (2005) argued that in the Middle East, commitment to a traditional gender order where women's role is mainly confined to the private sphere creates difficulties to women's rise in professional and managerial employment constraints are not confined to the workplace, but imposed by the family, and even by women themselves. For example, Metcalfe (2008) found that many women working in Oman, Jordan, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia preferred to leave their jobs after getting married, as they considered that their jobs could be a source of conflict at home. In these nations, women were reluctant to accept promotion in the workplace, because they feared that holding higher ranks would undermine their husbands (Afiouni et al., 2013).

This may help to explain why the gender gap in the Arab world is greater than almost every other region in the world (Baroudi, 2004). In Saudi Arabia, organisations still support the traditional idea that women should stay at home and attend to the family, while men are busy at a place of work, to provide for the family (Tlaiss and Dirani, 2015). As such, men are given the priority of progressing in their careers, as they must support their family with their earnings.

In this respect, men stand to be rewarded at the place of work based on their life patterns. However, the life pattern of women cannot be rewarded, given the belief that they should be confined to the home (Moen and Roehling, 2005).

Indeed, a number of studies in various contexts have shown that gender discrimination is an important issue in organisations (Ensher et al., 2001, Walker and Smith, 2002). Discrimination has been found to affect organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and organisational citizenship behaviour (Ensher et al., 2001) as well as lower well-being of women (Dubbelt et al., 2016) and higher turnover intentions (Foley et al., 2015, Shaffer et al., 2000). The next section examines in more detail the role in gender discrimination played by HRM policies and practices and considers whether employee involvement (EI) mechanisms, if available, may offer potential for women to improve their position in workplaces.

2.3 HRM and Women in the Workplace

Despite growing awareness of gender bias in the workplace, there is still insufficient recognition of the extent to which such bias is engrained in organisational HRM practices (Reichel et al., 2010, Mastracci and Arreola, 2016). Stamarski and Hing (2015) based on a review of HRM policies and practices, comment on the discriminatory nature of the determinants of HR decisions, making inequality of opportunity for women almost inevitable, Woodall (1996) argues that HRM is insensitive to gender, while Mastracci and Arreola (2016) attribute the problem to the persistence of stereotyped expectations of male and female workers, which are reflected in gendered organisational norms and practices. Metcalfe (2006), with particular reference to the Middle East, reports that there is clear evidence of HR processes being gendered, and seemingly little impetus for organisations and HRM professionals to resolve gender inequalities. Metcalfe (2007) claims that specific management practices under the HRM umbrella, such as pay and training, are inherently gendered.

Consistent with the earlier discussion on discrimination in organisations, literature on HRM suggests that women are disadvantaged by HRM practices in the areas of recruitment, pay, training and promotion, and that these are generalised across cultures, although some of the reasons for and manifestations of gender bias may be specific to the Middle East. With regard to recruitment, Noon and Blyton (1997), Fernandez and Mors (2008) and Mastracci (2013) all report that women are more likely to be considered for low-paying positions such as clerical and administrative positions lower in the organisational hierarchy.

An impact of status and role differences between male and female employees is the existence of pay inequalities, reported in the international context by Mandel and Semyonov (2014), Mastracci and Arreola (2016) and Zia (2012) and in the Middle East specifically by Sidani and Showail (2013). It is commonly reported that women in Lebanon and other Arab countries earn less than men (Bank, 2007b) although Ismail and Nakkache (2015) found no significant difference between Lebanese men and women in satisfaction with pay, perhaps because women's expectations are conditioned by cultural perceptions of men as the main breadwinners (AHDR, 2005). Despite efforts by Middle Eastern governments to address such inequities (World Bank, 2003), Metcalfe (2007) reports that equal treatment for women has yet to be realized.

One way in which women might attain better positions within organisations is through training and development, but here again, organisations' HRM policies and practices are widely reported to disadvantage women. Researchers in a variety of contexts report that managers give women fewer training opportunities than men (King et al., 2012, Glick, 2013, Metcalfe, 2007). Tlaiss and Dirani (2015), in the Lebanese context, found a lack of training and development opportunity for women, which they attributed to cultural gender bias and tension around women's learning, resulting in organisational discrimination. Ismail and Nakkache (2015), also in Lebanon, found the same situation, although women's reports of their experiences of and satisfaction with training and development did not differ significantly from those of men. As with pay inequities, mentioned above, the authors suggested that women's satisfaction with the status quo may be related to their culturally-conditioned low expectations for work outcome.

Lastly, in the area of promotion, the scant Middle Eastern literature is again consistent with international reports in revealing fewer opportunities for promotion for women. In the West, Martell et al. (1996) and Eagly and Carli (2007) comment on the under-representation of women at higher levels in organisations, due to the tendency for them to receive fewer opportunities than men. According to De Pater et al. (2010), this phenomenon can be found in both male and female-centred lines of work. One reason for this may be Woodall's (1996) point about HRM insensitivity to gender aspects of employment. For example, if promotion is based on years of experience, it may be harder for women to qualify, due to career breaks when having children. Alternatively, if promotion depends on experience of responsibility and challenge at work, again, women are disadvantaged because they tend to have fewer access points to such

experiences (Stamarski and Hing, 2015). In the Middle Eastern context, similar disadvantages for women are reported by Parcheta et al. (2013) and Ramdani et al. (2014). In segregated organisations, women can rise to the top of their sections, but their career path is ultimately limited by the subordinate position of women's sections within the overall organisation. In non-segregated organisations, such as health services, women find it difficult to compete with men due to their limited networks, given the role of personal connections in securing promotion (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). It has also been suggested that men, being less constrained by family responsibilities than women, may be more willing and able to work longer hours, or to relocate, in order to secure a promotion (Parcheta et al., 2013).

The above literature, while clearly pointing to the existence of inequalities between men and women in HRM policies and practices, has a major limitation, that while authors make general comments about the existence of inequality, there is little detail of specific practices, or of how those are experienced by women. These are areas in which the present study can contribute to knowledge.

2.3.1 Employee Involvement (EI)

Given the evidence presented in previous sections regarding poor working environments and discriminatory practices impacting women's employment, the extent to which women are merely passive bystanders in their work environments or have opportunities to voice their needs and potentially improve their position needs to be examined. In some countries formal institutions exist for employee protection and participation, such as works councils and trade unions. Since such entities do not exist in Saudi Arabia, however, in this thesis the focus is on discretionary opportunities for employee involvement. Employee involvement is defined as "the exercise by employees of influence over how their work is organised and carried out" (Fenton O'Creevy, 2001:25), and it is considered here as an aspect of the workplace/employee relations climate that may provide opportunities and support for women. Equally, however, since its availability and form are controlled by management, who typically are predominantly male, it could serve to silence women or control the parameters of their exercise of voice and so reinforce discrimination.

Blyton and Turnbull (2004) and Wilkinson et al. (2013) differentiate between different types and levels of EI in terms of degree, form, level and range. Level concerns the level at which EI takes place: task, departmental and so on. Range concerns the subject-matter(s) on which EI takes place, while form relates to the structures and mechanisms through which EI occurs. Degree is the extent to

which employees are able to influence management decisions, which the authors express as a continuum, from receiving information, through two-way communication, consultation and joint decision-making to control, although Blyton and Turnbull (2004) note that in practice, if any employee influence is offered, it is likely to be confined to task arrangements.

Unless there are statutory right in this area, it is management who decide whether or not to offer opportunities for EI, and establishes the fields and forms of permissible EI according to its own interests (Donaghey et al., 2011b). Thus, EI is embodied in an institutional context that structures and limits the choice of means available to employees to express their ideas and concerns; organisations create cultures that may encourage or constrain EI, and opportunities for EI are shaped by the broader regulatory context (Barry and Wilkinson, 2016). As Blyton and Turnbull (2004) point out, employee relations take place in the context of environmental and institutional factors, including technology, the nature of the work community, the market, budgetary constraints and the locus and distribution of power, and these influence the expectations, decisions and actions of individuals and groups.

These different degrees, forms, levels and ranges of EI, and the context in which they take place, have implications for the effectiveness of EI in terms of employee interests. The existence of EI mechanisms does not, in itself, constitute a sharing of power (Wilkinson and Fay, 2011) or guarantee that employees are listened to or have real influence (Kaufman and Taras, 2010). EI can only be considered effective if employees feel their views are considered and make a difference (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009). Without such influence, there can be what Kaufman and Taras (2010) call voice without muscle – a focus on solving those issues that interest management but without any real transfer of decision making power (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2000, Poole et al., 2001).

Given the widely differing contexts in which EI may occur, and in the forms it may take, the rationale for offering EI and perspectives on its value are matters of debate. On the one hand, some authors, such as Foy (1994) appear to see EI in wholly positive terms as beneficial to employers and employees alike. The managerialist perspective assumes an alignment of interests between workers and managers, such that employees' ideas and suggestions are expected to be valuable to the organisation (Barry et al., 2018). EI is expected to increase employee commitment via better decisions and greater understanding enabled by employee input (Boxall and Purcell, 2003). It has been claimed to contribute to employee

loyalty, cooperative, relations, enhanced productivity and lower absenteeism (Wilkinson et al., 2004) and may enhance employees' sense of control and personal efficacy (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008). On the other hand, authors such as Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) suggest EI can be exploitative, strongly constrained by managerial control systems and serving only managers' interests. From this perspective, EI may be used for the purposes of control, identification of errors and ensuring compliance, and may be a source of peer pressure (Wilkinson et al., 1997).

2.4 Institutional Theory

Institutional theory (IT) examines the way in which 'institutions' influence thinking and practices (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010). IT suggests that social behaviour is not random (Bush, 1987). Individuals and organisations have a preference for predictability, certainty and sustainability (Evans, 2014), leading to guidelines on what is or not decided or accepted, in order to secure the sustainability of relevant interests. IT views society as a set of institutional systems, composed of individuals, groups or entities that share particular orientations (Morgan, 2013) and follow patterns of correlated behaviour that are socially prescribed in a given context (Bush, 1987). Institutions comprise sets of formal and informal procedures, norms, routines and conventions (some perspectives add cognitive scripts, moral codes and symbol systems) and these are manifested in the organisation's structure (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010).

A number of perspectives have been identified in IT. These differ in their emphases in explaining how institutions are formed and sustained, and whether or how they might be changed. This section introduces three of the major "new institutionalisms": rational choice, sociological institutionalism, and the more recent development of ideational or constructivist institutionalism as well as the institutional logics and institutional regimes perspectives, with their relevance to Saudi Arabia, before paying particular attention to historical institutionalism and path dependency, as the approach considered most relevant and useful for this research.

The rational choice perspective, for example, views institutions as the outcome of decisions made by rational actors to maximize their utility; typically to reduce complexity and uncertainty and, hence, the cost of errors or failures (Morgan, 2013). Such decisions are then reinforced by the increasing returns from the status quo, and the "sunk costs" invested in it, which make change difficult in practice, and induce reluctance towards it. In the Saudi context, organisations that employ

only men have invested in arrangements oriented towards men, in terms of physical facilities, working hours, training and so on. This could result in reluctance to employ women as this would incur new costs in providing new arrangements. Whilst this perspective offers insights into some kinds of decisions, a weakness is that it neglects the influence of social pressures which may create or sustain institutions that are not consistent with rational, material self-interest.

Somewhat contrasting from the above-mentioned perspective is sociological institutionalism, which arose in response to the neglect of cultural structures and processes; it focuses especially on the role of culture and ideology in shaping practice (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010). The sociological perspective focuses on the leverage of resources – human, financial, material, knowledge – to safeguard particular interests. DiMaggio (1988) argued that institutions are created when organised actors with sufficient resources perceive an opportunity to pursue and reinforce interests that are important to them. This perspective introduces the notion of institutional entrepreneurs, particular individuals, groups or organisations who are active in institution formation (Battilana and Leca, 2009). In the process of institution formation, patterns of behaviour perceived as vital to the survival of a particular community are carefully prescribed, and sanctions are imposed for non-compliance (Bush, 1987). In the Saudi context, for example, it is shown in Chapter Three that the institutionalization of particular gender roles serves the purpose of social stability through establishing a particular discourse around the ideology of the centrality of family, and preserves the interests of the dominant group (men) against potential disruptions to the status quo from women who might challenge the established order. (Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2018 note, for example, that in the Middle East, patriarchal regimes and relationality organise social and work relationships. Institutional and cultural barriers are embedded in work systems, affecting women's employment rights, development and progression at work. For example, the way women's social and working lives are organised around marriage and motherhood contributes to regulate gender roles. Such insights counter criticisms of the absence of gender in institutional theory, an issue discussed further, later in this chapter.

An important factor in the creation of institutions, from this perspective, is the concept of legitimacy, whereby alternatives to the institution's ways are seen as less appropriate, desirable or viable (Dacin et al., 2002). Social actors seek to gain the acceptance and approval of their actions from key stakeholders (Evans, 2014)

or indeed, society as a whole; thus, organisational behaviour is driven by values and beliefs in a particular context, and becomes self-reinforcing as social actors tend to accept the prevailing pattern as appropriate, right and proper (Evans, 2014). Conformity is enforced through three kinds of isomorphic pressures: coercive pressure from outside, mimetic pressure to behave in the same way as competitors, and normative pressure from sources such as education and professional associations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In the Saudi context, for instance, social expectations exert coercive pressure towards segregation and limitation of women's opportunities (Nasief, 2015, AlOmran, 2019) while the presence of multinationals and the influences of Western education might be expected to create mimetic and normative pressures towards more opportunities for women, although it remains to be seen whether or how far this is happening in practice.

A relatively recent development is the emergence of another form of 'new institutionalism', variously called ideational, discursive, or constructivist institutionalism, in response to the perceived inability of other forms of institutionalism to satisfactorily explain change. Hay (2006) for example, argues that rational choice and sociological institutionalism both make assumptions of equilibrium, albeit in different ways; the calculus logic of rational choice presumes equilibrium, at least as an initial condition, while sociological institutionalism adopts norm driven logics of appropriateness which have equilibrating effects, that is entrench 'approved' conditions. Thus, they cannot explain disequilibrium. However, he asserts that the explanations offered by historical institutionalism (explained later)– path dependence and exogenous shocks – are inadequate. Bell (2011) reports claims that path dependence is excessively structuralist, while the exogenous shock theory does not account for changes that occur within the institution itself. Constructivists argue that other approaches are too deterministic, or even mechanistic, emphasizing structures and processes, but neglecting human agents (Schmidt, 2006).

In contrast, constructivist/discursive instrumentalists focus on agency, downplaying the constraining role of institutions in favour of social actors who construct their 'realities', relying not so much on material interest (as per rational choice) or social norms (as per sociological institutionalism), but on their subjective perceptions of these (Bell, 2011). The basis for collective action and identity is ideas, which may not fit with rationalist interests, or be determined by structural factors, and may represent a rupture of a historical path (Schmidt,

2006). Change, from this perspective, is a function of the relationship between actors and context, and in particular, change in the ideas on which institutions are founded (Hay, 2006). This view draws on Kuhn's idea of paradigm shifts, bringing radical change when the existing paradigm is challenged and replaced (Hall, 1993). This is often under the influence of crisis, which Blyth (2002) explains as moments when "actors' perceptions of their own self-interest are problematized" (Hay, 2006 p:12). This idea, however, appears to have limited applicability to Saudi Arabia. Whilst on the one hand it can be suggested that Saudi unemployment and economic pressures constitute a "crisis" that has induced the government to rethink some aspects of its policies, on the other, past experience, such as opposition to the governments early efforts to provide education for girls and, more recently, to the feminization of certain jobs (see and respectively) suggest that the dominance of cultural and religious norms (including the ideology around gender and family) make it unlikely that radical change would result.

Although constructivist institutionalism appears to solve the dilemma of how change can occur within supposedly "static" institutions, it nevertheless has weaknesses. Hay (2006) for example, challenges Blyth's (2002) suggestion that crises cause uncertainty about social actors' interests. Bell (2011) adds a further criticism, that constructivist institutionalists, in seeking to correct the neglect of agency, go too far in assuming the power of ideas to shape and change institutions. Schmidt (2006) similarly warns against investing too much determining power in ideas. As she points out, "stuff happens" (p. 12) and it is not easy to assess the causative role of ideas and discourse.

Bell (2011), Hay (2006) and Schmidt (2006), however respond differently to the limitations of the constructivist/discursive approach. Bell (2011) argues that this form of institutionalism is unnecessary, because its concerns are adequately addressed in an existing strand of historical institutionalism. He agrees with the constructivists in rejecting path dependence and the "sticky" strand of historical institutionalism. However, he points to the existence of a more flexible strand within historical institutionalism that does not privilege either institutions or actors, but emphasises the dialectical exchange between them, in which each shapes the other over time. Hay (2006) and Schmidt (2006) take a more complementary position, acknowledging the limitations of constructivist/discursive institutionalism but suggesting that it is not necessary to take a rigid "ideas only" approach to explaining institutional change. Hay (2006) argues that

ideational factors need to be taken into account, but not at the expense of ignoring other factors that may contribute to change. Schmidt (2006) goes further to ponder whether it may be possible to combine institutionalisms within analysis of the same issue, since different institutionalisms share some common concepts, although with different uses and functions – ‘interest’ is one such concept.

Institutional theory is a very broad and dynamic field, and includes a number of perspectives in addition, and subsequent, to the ones discussed above. Johansen and Waldorff (2017) refer to a “third wave” of institutional theory, which they term “change and complexity institutionalism”. Within this trend, considerable attention has been paid to institutional logics, a perspective that seeks to understand abstract social structures at a meta-level of values, norms and symbols that make institutions what they are (Friedland, 2012). The idea was introduced by Friedland (1991:248) who suggested that important ‘institutional orders’ (which, in the West, they suggested are capitalism, family, the bureaucratic state, democracy and Christianity) are underpinned by ‘central logics’ – sets of ‘material practices and symbolic constructions’ that guide the institution; for example ‘participation’ in the case of democracy, or commodification of human activity, in the case of capitalism. Institutional logics are, thus, frames of reference that help actors make sense of their world and construct actions (Friedland, 2012). These logics are not pre-given social structures but are enacted and shaped in individual and organisation behaviour. Different logics, even potentially conflicting ones, co-exist and actors may draw on different logics simultaneously, or at different times.

Since Friedland and Alford’s (1991) original proposition, the list of institutional ‘orders’ has been modified many times. Thornton and Ocasio (2008) developed a theoretical framework consisting of seven institutions (market, corporation, profession, state, family, religion and community) theorized across nine categories, for example legitimacy, authority structure, mission and strategy, which has been employed in a number of studies. However, Johansen and Waldorff (2017) argue that institutional logics studies often conflate logics and institutions or fail to clarify the relationship between them. Moreover, most studies have been conducted in the West and tend to focus on the institutions seen as most relevant to Western organisations; family and religion, by comparison, have received relatively little attention.

Another perspective within institutional theory focuses on the operation and impacts of institutional regimes. Regimes were defined in an international

relations context by Krasner (1983: 2) cited in Young (1986 :105) as “sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors’ perceptions converge in a given area”. Elaborating on this definition, he explained that principles refer to beliefs about truth and rightness, norms are standards of behaviour defined in terms of rights and obligations, rules are specific prescriptions or proscription for actions and decision-making procedures are prevailing practices for making and implementing collective choice. These terms have, however, been criticized as ambiguous and open to interpretation (Kratochwil, 1984).

More recently, work at the Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration led to the development of an institutional regimes analytical framework, originally used for identification of the most relevant institutional dimensions that explain the sustainable or unsustainable use of a natural resource (Knoepfel et al., 2007). Under this framework, an institutional regime is understood as the more-or-less coordinated set of regulations that relate to all uses of the goods and services provided by a single resource. These regulations consist of public policies (laws, regulations, decisions and actions of government, dealing with relations between persons and the state, aiming to resolve a collective problem); property rights, and contracts (agreements between two or more parties, enforceable by law, to perform or refrain from performing same specific act) (Knoepfel et al., 2007, Nicol, 2011). Regimes are defined and categorized based on extent (the number of goods and services/activities regulated by the regime) and coherence (the degree of coordination among various actors within the regime).

Accordingly, four different types of regime are identified: non-existent, where there is no related regulation, perhaps because a need is not politically acknowledged; simple, where there is coherent regulation of a limited number of goods and services, with low risk of contradiction; complex, where regulation has wide coverage but is uncoordinated; and integrated, where all relevant goods and services are regulated in coherent way (Gerber et al., 2009). The aim of developing the framework was to provide an analytical tool for understanding actual resource management practices, although it can also be used normatively to improve the extent and coherence of the regulations affecting various goods and services, (Gerber et al., 2009). The framework has subsequently been adopted for the analysis of non-material and artificial resources, such as housing (Nicol, 2011). From this perspective, for example, women’s labour might be viewed as a resource and analysis conducted of the extent and coherence of regulations

governing its use. Such a perspective, however, focuses predominantly on formal influences such as the political and might neglect the influence of informal institutions such as culture and religion.

Despite the value of the above perspectives, another strand of institutionalism, historical institutionalism (albeit complemented as appropriate by insights from the other perspectives) is believed to be particularly salient to this research. This is because (as will be seen in Chapter Three) the current position of women's employment in Saudi Arabia has been shaped by historical events and decisions, notably, interpretations of Islam, and more recently, the discovery of oil, bringing urbanization, industrialization, economic development and interaction with global society, which have set employment policy on conflicting paths, through reinforcing and reactive sequences. For this reason, historical institutionalism and the idea of path dependency are examined in more details.

2.4.1 Historical Institutionalism and Path Dependency

The historical view sees institutions as formed as a result of specific events or conditions in a given context, at a particular point in time. Historical institutionalism rejects functionalist explanations and calls for historical research to trace the processes behind the creation and persistence of institutions and policies, commonly at the macro-political or macroeconomic level. A key aspect of this approach is the 'political', which tends to focus on the macro-political level, addressing issues such as the formation of states, political systems and political parties (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010). In historical institutionalism, path dependency (discussed below) is employed to explain how past events or decisions shape the alternatives for the future, although a path may be changed or even reversed by exogenous shocks or by reactive decisions; the Saudi government's Saudization policy, discussed further in section 2.3, can be seen as a reactive attempt to reverse the path of practices that had led to high Saudi unemployment and economic losses to the country.

An important concept in historical institutionalism is path dependency, although different writers offer a different understanding of the term. At its simplest and most basic level, path dependency reflects the recognition that the past shapes the future (Ebbinghaus, 2005). Mahoney (2000), however, argues that merely tracing back outcomes to past causes is not path dependency. He argues that path dependence refers specifically to historical sequences in which contingent events give rise to institutional patterns that are deterministic in nature. Similarly, Kay

(2005) explains that a process is path dependent if the trajectory of change up to a certain point constrains the options available after that point.

However, authors differ in the degree of determinism they perceive in the formation and reinforcement of institutions over time. In this respect, Ebbinghaus (2005:5) makes a distinction between two broad approaches to path dependency, which he calls the “trodden trail” or highly deterministic approach, and the “road juncture” approach, which is more open to possibilities of change. Some writers combine elements of both these approaches in a single account of path dependency, but Ebbinghaus’s distinction is useful to illustrate the concepts and debates related to path dependency, so it is used as a framework here.

Type 1: The “trodden trail”

This view of path dependency emphasises the spontaneous evolution of institutions, which become entrenched over time, through subsequent repeated use by others of a path originally chosen spontaneously. Scholars propose three criteria or steps for this kind of path-dependency. First, there is a contingent starting point, meaning an event where theory cannot explain or predict the selection of a particular alternative (Mahoney, 2000). Thelen (1999) explains such events as involving some elements of choice or even chance. However, contingent events can have lasting consequences.

Once an alternative is chosen, social processes gradually reinforce it, as increasing returns make it difficult or undesirable to switch to an alternative (Schwartz, 2004). Because of the “sunk costs” (time, money etc.) invested in the dominant alternative, people become reluctant to consider other alternatives; in addition to the practical difficulty of going against the prevailing trend, individuals have low expectations of the benefits of doing so (Schwartz, 2004). Thus, the dominant trend eventually becomes entrenched or ‘locked’ in, forming a stable pattern. According to Arthur (1994) in this way, even inefficient paths can become institutionalized.

Thelen (1999), however, criticizes this model of path dependency as both too contingent and too deterministic to be applicable to political contexts. She argues that in politics, the kind of ‘blank slate’ assumed for the original contingent choice is rare. Moreover, she questions whether the argument of deterministic reinforcement is valid. Whereas in economic contexts, the ‘losers’ are eventually forced out of the market, in politics, this is not the case. Those who oppose established institutions may wait for an opportunity for change, or work within

the existing framework to pursue alternative goals, rather than accepting and adapting to the institution.

Type 2: The “Road Juncture”

In his second model of path dependency, Ebbinghaus (2005) suggests a broader and less deterministic view of path dependence, which looks at the long-term developmental pathway of an institution, which is not only shaped by but also subsequently adapted by collective actors – although their actions are influenced by past and current institutions. It is this approach that Ebbinghaus (2005) and Thelen (1999) associate particularly with historical institutionalism. This approach, like the previous one, is described in terms of three criteria.

In this view, the starting point of a ‘path’ is a ‘critical juncture’, a branching of the road at which collective actors set new rules (Ebbinghaus, 2005). Such junctures are often precipitated by exogenous shocks that lead to institutional change. Thelen (1999) sees the critical junctures that set countries along different development paths as due to political struggles; Mahoney (2000) suggests that they are characterised by the ability of social actors to seize and exploit available opportunities to embark on a particular path, and then quickly reinforce it.

Once a development path is selected, it is institutionalised, similarly to the idea of self-reinforcing processes discussed above. Thelen (1999) describes such processes as feedback effects and identifies two kinds. The first is co-ordination effects, where social actors adapt their strategies in ways that both reflect and reinforce prevailing institutions. The second type of effects are distributional effects, whereby institutional arrangements actively facilitate and empower some alternatives, while constraining others; “decisions at one point in time can restrict future possibilities” (Thelen, 1999:594).

In addition to self-reinforcing sequences, which reproduce and reinforce early events, paths are shaped by reactive processes that transform and may even reverse early events. Such sequences are sets of events connected by tight causal linkages, and occurring in a clear time-sequence (Mahoney, 2000).

The combination of self-reinforcing and reactive sequences means this view of path dependency accommodates a variety of outcomes for institutions. In strongly entrenched institutions, path stabilisation occurs, not only because of ‘lock-in’ but because of gradual, successful adaptation, without change in core principles. In other cases, gradual, incremental change (path departure) may take place in

response to significant change in the environment. Earlier decisions narrow the choice, but do not determine the next step. The third possible outcome is path cessation or switching: a radical transformation when a critical juncture changes the opportunity structure.

2.4.2 Strengths and Limitations of Path Dependence

As Kay (2005) notes, path dependency is appealing because it offers an explanation for the observed phenomenon that established policies can be difficult to change or reform. It explains how decisions accumulate over time, in such a way that early decisions can restrict the options available for future policy makers, it is valuable in encouraging dynamic analyses, rather than static explanations that do not consider time (and so must rely on factors such as exogenous shock to explain change). Another advantage is its flexibility to explain change at some levels, even when changes at other levels may have different explanations.

However, Kay (2005) also makes some criticisms of path dependency, although these seem to depend on a rather selective interpretation of path dependency, and of the sources he cites. For example, he reports the view that path dependency is excessively deterministic and cites Thelen (1999) in support of this view. However, Thelen's criticism, as shown above, referred only to the Type 1 or "trodden path" approach to path determinacy and this is by no means universal among historical institutionalists. Kay also comments on the supposed "nature" aspects of path dependency, specifically, the view, derived from economics, that path dependency reinforces inefficient policies. Again, this view has been expressed in relation particularly to Type 1 path dependency, and even there, it is seen only as a possible consequence, not inevitable.

Nevertheless, even if Kay's criticisms can be challenged, there remain some theoretical and practical dilemmas that need to be addressed. As Mahoney (2000) points out, it is not always easy to decide at what point a sequence of events begins, and there is a risk of infinite regress. One solution is to choose a 'breakpoint' that marks a departure from expectations. Even then, it can be difficult to predict or explain the ultimate outcome of the sequence. Nevertheless, it is often possible to predict or explain smaller intervals of connected events within the overall sequence and in this way, as Kay (2005) admits, path dependency can help in providing finely detailed analysis of policy issues.

The idea of path dependency can offer several insights into Saudi employment policy and the position of women. Taking as a ‘critical juncture’ the discovery of oil, a set of reactive processes can be traced involving socio-economic development, urbanization, changes in family life and the nature of employment, and constraints on women. AlMunajjed (2011) has argued that many of the current constraints came only after urbanization; before that, women engaged in various economic activities, and drove vehicles on farms; it was urbanization that brought close proximity to strangers, leading to ‘protective’ constraints on women. Another path, from the same starting point, might take in reliance on foreign workers to execute development projects, Saudi unemployment, the economic burden on government and the introduction of the Saudization policy. These paths can be complemented with sociological insights on how gender relations have shaped women’s education, work opportunities and HRM practices, while the constructivist perspective offers insights into the role of social actors in challenging the existing paradigm of male dominance.

Institutional theory has been employed previously in a number of studies of factors influencing women’s careers in Saudi Arabia or the Middle East more generally. However, the studies have adopted a sociological, rather than a historical approach. They focus on the role of institutional norms and regulations as guidelines for socially acceptable behaviour, including gender. Examples include Sidani’s (2013) analysis of female labour participation and pay, Afiouni and Karam’s (2014) investigation of notions of career success, Afiouni’s (2013) exploration of institutional constraints on Middle Eastern women’s career paths, and Tlaiss and Elamin (2016) consideration of the training-related experiences of Lebanese women. Rodriguez and Ridgway (2018) and Rodriguez and Scurry (2019) showed how formal and informal institutions created disadvantages for female expatriate workers in the Middle East. The sociological institutional approach enabled these authors to identify the role played by institutions of various kinds, including national culture (masculinity and collectivism), academia and gender, in constraining women’s opportunities and shaping their work experiences.

Whilst providing valuable insights into current experience and processes, these studies, however, do not adequately account for the historical events and paths that contributed to these pressures and shaped the available alternatives. Such an omission also poses a difficulty for suggesting ways forward, since they imply a need for culture change. The historical approach, however, shows how an existing

path may be changed by reactive decisions, and the identification of such decisions at ‘critical junctures’ may help to indicate the potential for changes in HRM practices to benefit Saudi women. Before leaving this chapter, however, it would be worthwhile to address a common criticism of IT, its purported gender-neutrality, and how this criticism is countered in the present study.

2.5 Gender and Institutional Theory

A criticism frequently levelled at institutional theory concerns the neglect of gender. With a few exceptions e.g. (Thelen, 2003) the relationship between gender and institutions has been largely overlooked. There is little mention in scholarship of gender as an analytical category or of women as institutional actors; gender, if mentioned, is often a static background variable (Waylen, 2014). As a result, scholars of New Institutionalism have failed to engage with gendered dimensions of institutions and their performance, or gendered processes of change. For example, they have overlooked trends in the incorporation of women in formal institutions by mechanisms such as gender candidate quotas and equality blueprints, and missed the potential role of gender dynamics in broader institutional processes (Mackay et al., 2010).

Such omissions constitute a serious weakness, given that gender is a primary way of signifying and naturalizing relationships of power and hierarchy, and so is inherently implicated in institutions (Mackay et al., 2010). Gender is not a fixed characteristic of individuals, which they bring to the organisation: instead, constructions of gender are intertwined in the daily life of organisations (Kenny, 1996). Embedded gender relations shape social action in different kinds of institution and at different levels (Acker, 1990, Connell, 2002). The implication of gender in organisations occurs both nominally, through gender capture (men outnumber women in positions of power) and substantively, due to gender bias arising from social norms based on accepted ideas about masculinity and femininity. This, Lovenduski (2011) argues that “any good institutionalist should realize the importance of gender relations to the configuration of organisations. Indeed, there is no reason why institutional theory cannot be used for gendered analysis; scholars including Mackay et al. (2010) and Waylen (2014) argue that institutional theory concepts such as informal institutions, critical junctures and path dependency, and in HI the emphasis on context and power provide a useful framework to capture the gendered dynamics of continuity and change in society. At the same time, attention to gender can help IT to theorize better the gendered nature of formal institutions, the operation of informal institutions and power

relations, and help in understanding why institutional change does not always work as intended.

In this study, the gender-neutral criticism of institutional theory is countered by the gender as a major factor, both practically and theoretically. It looks specifically at how gendering, both inside and outside the organisation, shapes women's expectations and experiences in the workplace- for example, the gender composition of formal institutions, the location of power in organisations, and the gender-related implications for HRM policies and practices, and their impacts. Theoretical links are made, for example to Acker's (1990) concept of 'inequality regimes', highlighting gender as a specific locus of inequality. This gender focus, in turn, helps in understanding the interplay (and sometimes, tension) between formal institutions such as law, the education system, and organisations, and informal institutions- family, religion and culture- consistent with Waylen (2014) view that institutional analysis improves when gender dynamics are incorporated.

2.6 Summary

This chapter has provided the background to the present study and introduced the theoretical perspective adopted to guide the collection of data and the interpretation of findings. It began by arguing that gender is not a biological 'given', but a social construction, and that prevailing constructions of gender have, worldwide, been employed to rationalize discriminatory practices that support male privilege and domination, and place women in a subordinate, disadvantaged position, including in work organisations. In particular, literature in a variety of contexts points to discriminatory practices in the areas of recruitment, pay, training and promotion. Questions have been raised as to the potential for HRM policies and practices to be made more female-friendly, and for EI opportunities to enable women's interests to be better protected.

Whilst previous research has pointed out constraints on women's workforce participation and career paths, it has not adequately explained how this situation has arisen, or the possibilities for change. Insights from institutional theory and especially historical institutionalism/path dependency highlight the way past events and decisions are entrenched by reinforcing sequences to perpetuate an employment structure dominated by traditional gender roles that disadvantage women. The chapter introduced several perspectives of the nature of institutions in society, how they are formed and sustained, and the ways in which they may change. Among the 'new institutionalisms' the rational choice theory presents a primarily economic perspective, focusing on material interests and how

institutions formed on this basis are reinforced by increasing returns and sunk costs. However, this account neglects the role of society. This omission is rectified by the sociological perspective, which explains pressures towards conformity. The more recent constructivist or discursive institutionalism argues that the former perspectives neglect human agency and ideology, but in foregrounding agents, risks losing sight of the power of institutions. Consideration was also given to perspectives focusing on institutional logics and institutional regimes. Whilst it was acknowledged that all these perspectives are interesting and potentially offer insights into work policies and practices in organisations, they were largely rejected in favour of historical institutionalism, which uses the concept of path dependency to show how decisions and events in the past shape development processes and influence the options available in the future, through reinforcing and reactive sequences. It was suggested that this approach may be most helpful in explaining both the ways in which traditional views of gender roles have reinforced male privilege, and also the alternative paths by which government policy has reacted to the outcomes of the original path and tried to change direction, through its recent employment policies. It was also suggested that historical institutionalism, in particular, offers tools by which the dimension of gender, often claimed to be neglected in institutional theory, can be brought into institutional studies, a combination with potential to benefit both institutional theory and gender scholarship. With this background and theoretical foundation in place, the thesis moves, in the next chapter, to introduce Saudi Arabia, as the context of the present study, including the employment context and the position of women.

Chapter Three: The Saudi Context

3.1 Introduction

As noted in Chapter One, this study was conducted in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia represents an under-researched context, but one that is of interest since research in novel contexts has the potential to uncover institutional factors that may not exist, or may operate differently, in the more familiar Western contexts. Compared with the UK, for example, Saudi Arabia has a different system of government, and a very different culture.

The chapter begins with an overview of the Saudi economic context and structure of the labour market, pointing out the low participation of women, especially in the private sector. This is followed by a discussion of cultural factors in Saudi society that affect the opportunities for women, and their willingness and ability to avail themselves of those that are available. Government policies with implications for women, which might be seen to challenge the status quo are then outlined, leading to a consideration of factors influencing HRM in Saudi organisations.

3.2 Overview of the Saudi Labour market

Saudi Arabia is a large Arab Islamic country that has witnessed exponential economic growth since the discovery of oil in the 1930s (Tlaiss and Elamin, 2016). The discovery of oil led to the creation of millions of jobs across the country (World Bank, 2004), but almost 95 per cent of these jobs were secured by non-Saudi nationals (Jadwa, 2016). Saudi Arabia has historically relied heavily on workers from other countries to meet gaps in the Saudi labour force. These include professional and technical workers recruited from developed countries, as well as unskilled workers from developing countries such as India and the Philippines, employed as domestic servants and in a variety of low-paid manual jobs. At the same time, there has been growing unemployment among Saudis.

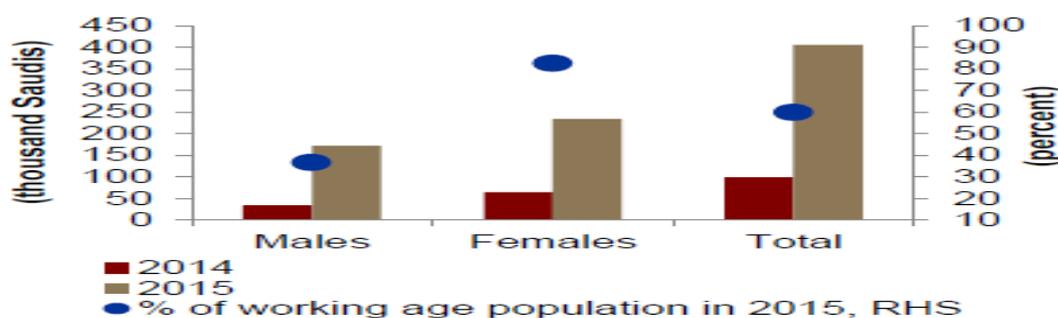
Table 3.1: Labour Statistics by Sector, Gender and Citizenship

Major Regions	Nationality	2013			2014		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Workers	Saudi	1,786,698	830,983	2,617,681	1,854,531	864,030	2,718,561
	Non-Saudi	8,087,597	199,178	8,286,775	8,337,677	205,849	8,543,526
	Total	9,874,295	1,030,161	10,904,456	10,192,208	1,069,879	11,262,087
Unemployment Rate	Saudi	6.3	34.8	12.0	6.0	33.3	11.8
	Non-Saudi	0.2	1.7	0.4	0.6	2.0	0.7
	Total	2.9	22.1	5.8	3.0	22.3	6.0
Government Sector Staff	Saudi	718,383	432,445	1,150,828	717,629	450,957	1,168,586
	Non-Saudi	36,203	37,790	73,993	36,125	63,037	72,162
	Total	754,586	470,235	1,224,821	753,754	486,994	1,240,748
Private Sector Staff	Saudi	1,068,315	398,538	1,466,853	1,136,902	413,073	1,549,975
	Non-Saudi	8,051,394	161,388	8,212,782	8,301,552	169,812	8,471,364
	Total	9,119,709	559,926	9,679,635	9,438,454	582,885	10,021,339

Source: Adapted from SAMA (2015).

Table 3.1 shows that unemployment is higher for females than males, although the gap is smaller among non-Saudis. Migrant women, for instance, are often recruited as domestic workers. The disparity in male and female Saudi employment is illustrated in Figure 3.1. It shows that from 2014 to 2015, the number of unemployed Saudi women increased from 65,000 to 234,000, around 85 per cent of the working age population (Jadwa, 2016).

Figure 3.1: Year-On-Year Change in Saudis Outside Labour Force



Source: (Jadwa, 2016)

According to Jadwa (2016), although the employment rate in 2014 grew, of approximately 237,000 new entrants into the labour market, women represented a paltry 12 per cent. This brought female participation to just 4.1 per cent of the total workers, Saudi and non-Saudi, in the country (SAMA, 2015) Women's participation in employment in Saudi Arabia compares unfavourably not only to other regions but also to its neighbours in the Gulf region (Al-Kibsi *et al.*, 2015; Ministry of Labour, 2016) . Omair (2008) argues that Saudi Arabia is among 12 world nations which are still very far from closing the gender gap. This is despite Saudi women accounting for 78.3 per cent of university graduates (Welsh *et al.*, 2014).

However, they lack access to the quality and range of courses and therefore the skills that would assist them in the labour market (Al-Dehailan, 2007, Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014). This means that the lack of an appropriate education background is a major impediment for women's employment (AlMunajjed, 2011). Their lack of qualifications has further been attributed to the traditional curricula and pedagogies in Saudi schools, which impact both sexes, but females face stereotyped cultural conceptions of "women's roles", and are encouraged to pursue over-subscribed areas such as teaching and discouraged or excluded from other fields such as engineering (Madhi and Barrientos, 2003, Baki, 2004, Al-Shammari, 2009, Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014) (discussed further in section 3.3).

This situation can be traced to the country's social norms and traditions. In the Arab nations, cultural and social norms encourage gender stereotypes. Sidani (2016) cites the example of Lebanon, where cultural and social norms promote men's rights and paternalism, such that organisations become the main social unit for men's dominance. A similar claim could be made for Saudi Arabia. Arab nations have long been masculine, creating rigidly defined and distinctive gender roles (Hofstede, 2003). Saudi cultural and social norms influence organisational cultures and structures that reflect discriminatory norms and rules governing women's careers (Al-Asfour *et al.*, 2017) (See section 3.3).

Another factor restricting women's employment opportunities is gender segregation, attributed to some Islamic interpretations (Al-Shammari, 2009) and institutionalised in Saudi law. Article 4 of the Saudi Labour Code indicates that employment must comply with Islamic shariah law, which has been understood to prohibit gender mixing and various Royal Decrees have explicitly banned gender mixing in workplaces. Organisations that wish to employ both men and women therefore face extra costs due to the need to provide separate offices and

recreational spaces for women (Jadwa, 2016). Women to women only organisations can be considered as an outcome of discrimination in society; but within these organisations, women work on equal terms with colleagues of the same sex. For example, gender segregated educational institutions give women opportunities to rise to higher positions, such as school principal or dean, as they do not compete with men in these areas. There are, however, some sectors where men and women work in the same organisation (although in separate departments) and even some, notably in Health care, where they work alongside each other; in such cases an exception to the norm of segregation is regarded as allowable due to the necessities of the work. In such contexts, there is evidence that women do, indeed, face discrimination. Moreover, until recently, Saudi women were barred from driving (Al-Kibsi, 2015) which meant that they had difficulty accessing work.

Although in the Arab world as a whole, new feminist movements (such as the work of the renowned activist, Huda Sahrowi) have brought some improvements in indicators of women's development, as yet they are far short of redressing the restrictions that have accrued over the centuries (Sidani, 2016). An interesting question at this point is whether or to what extent women have been considered in, and affected by, the government's attempts to rebalance the labour market by a policy of Saudization. In its original version of Saudization, initiated during the mid-1990s, the policy targeted a gradual substitution of foreign workers by 5 per cent, particularly in the private sector, which was dominated by foreign workers (Alotaibi, 2014, Al-Dosary and Rahman, 2009). The policy was not specifically targeted at women, in the sense that it did not include statistical targets for women in particular. However, it encouraged creation of job opportunities in the private sector for both genders, subject to women's jobs providing a Shariah-compliant environment (Alotaibi, 2014). Indeed, ALsheikh (2015) claims that the policy did in fact help somewhat in increasing female employment.

However, the policy met with resistance from employers, due to the cost and HRM implications of employing Saudis more generally (discussed in detail in section 3.4). Funds available from the government-created Human Resources Development Fund, intended to help with the cost of training Saudis, proved insufficient to meet the need of Saudization targets (Alghamedi, 2016). After some 10-15 years of the Saudization policy, it became clear that it was not meeting its goal, and the government decided to take a more forceful approach with the introduction of the *Nitaqat* scheme. *Nitaqat* is a set of regulations

intended to facilitate Saudization by applying rewards and sanctions to organisations, depending on the level of their employment of Saudis. These initiatives of Saudization have created a complex business environment and numerous challenges for human resource management in Saudi Arabia (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

Although scholars and the Saudi government have suggested that Saudization, supported by *Nitaqat*, should ideally increase the potential for women to contribute to the economy, *Nitaqat* does not mandate women's employment as such and there is no evidence indicating that women are specifically catered for (Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014).

The issue of women's employment remains a controversial issue between the Saudi government and religious leaders. According to Alghamedi (2016), to adhere to Shariah and permit women to work, the Saudi government has offered women working in the public sector an appropriate workplace environment separated from men, thereby fulfilling the cultural and religious norms of both Saudi culture and Shariah doctrines. However, the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA) has acknowledged that it is difficult to achieve this balance in the private sector. Moreover, even government attempts to increase opportunities for women have faced opposition. For example, the law on "Organisation of women selling in feminization shops [i.e. shops selling female orientated products]" (Labour, 2013) provided new opportunities for women to work in retail. However, a provision allowing men and women to work in department stores, provided they were in different sections, was challenged in the Board of Grievances, on the ground that it violated Saudi regulations and Islamic law. The Board upheld the complaint and overturned the relevant articles (Alshyea, 2013). Such setbacks pose obvious challenges to the government's declared aim of increasing the percentage of women in the total Saudi workforce to 30 per cent by 2030.

Since women's employment is reportedly particularly difficult, and their participation especially low in the private sector, the following paragraphs introduce the private sector as the focus of this study.

3.2.1 The Private Sector in Saudi Arabia

The private sector can be defined as the goods and services provided by organisations that are owned, run and managed by shareholders. Private

organisations work with an interest toward their related market and targeted customers (Al-Sharif, 2014).

Saudi Arabia has one of the largest foreign workforces in the world and the government is keen to redress the ethnic imbalance in the labour force to solve Saudi unemployment. Implementation of Saudization has had limited success in the private sector (Baqadir et al., 2011). This may be because of the reluctance of private sector employers to hire Saudi workers, or it may be due to negative attitudes of Saudis toward some forms of vocational training (Ramady, 2010). Mellahi and Wood (2013) stated that local workers in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) are less popular with private sector employees, because they are perceived as less disciplined in comparison to their foreign counterparts. Moreover, many private sector jobs are in manual work such as carpentry, blacksmithing, sewing and plumbing, occupations that are disdained by Saudis.

According to Al-Salamah and Wilson (2001), in Saudi Arabia, the type of work and social interactions at the workplace determine an individual's social status. Saudis are proud and they believe that they should work in prestigious (i.e. administrative and managerial) positions (Al-Salamah and Wilson, 2001), hence their preference for government jobs.

The imbalance in employment preferences between sectors is especially marked among women. In 2015, 89 per cent of working women were employed in the public sector, the majority of them in education, versus 11 per cent in the private sector. The preference for the public sector may be related to the relatively high salary, availability of segregated workspaces, and shorter working hours, which fit women's domestic responsibilities. Although the public sector dominates employment preferences generally, as compared to women, only 63% of men work in the public sector, as there are more private sector jobs open to them than to women (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: 2015 Employment Breakdown by Sector



Source: Jadwa (2016)

Nevertheless, a recent report states that the Saudi private sector registered a 130 per cent increase in the number of working women during the last four years, and that women now represent 30 per cent of the private sector workforce (Saudi Gazette, 2019).

Even though economic changes are needed for increasing Saudi employment within the private sector, there is a need for the private sector to adapt, creating a cultural and work environment favourable for including Saudi nationals, and in particular Saudi women (Iles et al., 2012). According to Afiouni et al. (2014), the process of integrating Saudi women within the private sector needs businesses to be sensitive to Saudi traditions and customs, for instance, the separation of male and female employees within the workplace, a situation which is by and large unique to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In the Saudi-owned bank [Org.1] that participated in this study, for example, women were employed in separate branches. However, women's branches were a minority, and subordinate to the men's branches. The next section explores in more detail the sources and forms of gender discrimination in Saudi society.

3.3 Gender Discrimination in Saudi Society

In the Middle East, there is a belief that women should live under male authority. Indeed, most of the countries in the Middle East are considered to be highly patriarchal in their social-cultural context, meaning they maintain a traditional division of labour (Metcalf, 2008). As such, women have been confined to socially approved gender roles, and this puts restrictions on the careers that they may want to pursue, the patterns of their lifestyle, and their perceptions in defining success (Afiouni et al., 2013). According to AlAlhareth et al. (2015), Saudi women face challenges such as acquiring appropriate training and gender discrimination; their main role is as wives and mothers.

Saudi Arabia is a conservative country with a high cultural homogeneity based on tribal and Islamic affiliations (Metz, 1992). Therefore, it is difficult to make distinctions between Arabic customs and Islamic principles (Al Lily, 2011). Some customs of the country, such as the prohibition on women driving (recently repealed) and their practice of law and engineering disciplines, come not from religious principles but from culture (Hamdan, 2005). This affects women's participation in Saudi society, which is very limited, and also comprises one of the lowest participation levels in the world (AlAlhareth et al., 2015).

Saudi Arabia is a male-dominated society, in which women's roles in the wider society have been limited (Budhwar and Mellahi, 2006). Cultural attitudes towards women, the patriarchal structure of society and family centrality combine to reduce women's workforce participation.

3.3.1 Cultural and Social Challenges

Women's roles in Saudi society, including employment, are governed by social constructions of gender based on the biological difference between the sexes and related assumptions about the mental and emotional differences between men and women. Women are seen primarily as wives, mothers and caregivers and perceived or expected to be gentle, nurturing and submissive (Alotaibi et al., 2017). These characteristics are assumed to render them suited to certain activities and preclude them from others.

Several restrictions have contributed to women being segregated from full utilisation of educational opportunities, for example, in the subjects of study available to them, and the cultural preference for women to study close to home, which limits their choice of institutions and programmes. However, e-learning has potential to transform the education sector and open more opportunities for

learners (AlAlhareth et al., 2015). While women face restrictions in their education, they will arguably have fewer career options. Whilst some progress has been made, it is still far short of the goals.

Even though the government has made great steps in empowering women, Afioni and Karam (2014) note the restrictions that women in KSA have suffered including “patriarchal biases embedded within cultural and legislative tradition” (Afioni and Karam, 2014: 506), and women’s limited social rights, which seem to inhibit their progress in their careers (AlAlhareth et al., 2015). There are still numerous obstacles to female education and employment in Saudi Arabia. Despite the government’s decision to invest millions in female education, employment for women remains limited and difficult, as partial government reforms face social conservatism (Al-Asfour et al., 2017, Tlaiss and Elamin, 2016, Varshney, 2019).

As observed by Metcalfe (2011b), globalisation has had different effects on genders and work organisation. In this respect, it is crucial to examine the social-cultural outlook of the region, as it would provide a greater understanding of the cultural realities. These offer a roadmap to women who want to shape their careers, and also point out the restrictions that may impede the progress of professional women (Afioni and Karam, 2014). Culturally, men are given the responsibility to head the family and support the family financially. The man is also charged with the mandate of protecting his family (Metcalfe, 2011b). A man’s role as protector of the family means that he has the authority to make all important decisions, with little regard to the views of his wife.

For example, in Saudi Arabia - as also in Bahrain, Oman, Egypt, and Kuwait - movement of women is limited. Women cannot make a decision to travel on their own; they need to seek permission from their husbands or guardians (Metcalfe, 2011a). In Saudi Arabia, laws to this effect have recently been repealed, but in practice, families may still insist on imposing such restrictions (AlOmran, 2019). Such cultural practices have contributed to gendered work relations, according to Metcalfe (2011a). In addition, she noted that women are not allowed to work night shifts in countries such as Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These cultural practices reduce women’s job opportunities, including opportunities to set up their own business. As such, women cannot fully participate in making the society a better place (Nasseef, 2015).

As Doumato (2010) notes, women are segregated based on their gender, contributing to these women being restricted in expressing themselves. It is worth remembering that the concept of sex segregation has had a pivotal role in the status of women. As Le Renard (2008) argues, sex segregation seen in educational institutes in KSA was influenced by religious scholars. The concept was institutionalised, given the need to create a public space for women in the country. Considering the popularity of this idea at its inception, it was widely embraced in KSA (Nasseef, 2015). Nasseef (2015) asserts that sex segregation is tied to the cultural demands instituted at the societal level. Nevertheless, women have used these cultural expectations to create new private and public spaces for themselves. Over the years, women have been actively involved in the creation of modern professional women's NGOs, which have acted as instruments that empower women in different aspects (Le Renard, 2008).

3.3.2 Patriarchal Structure

It is clear that the patriarchal social-cultural context in which these women work has great implications for their choices and a profound influence on their careers (McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003, Metle, 2002). Arab countries embrace the idea that men are powerful, and they are dominant figures in the society. On the other hand, women have an important role in taking care of the home (Tlaiss and Dirani, 2015). Even before the existence of Saudi Arabia, the Arab society had been predominantly patriarchal. Men have their niche, and their dominance is visible to the public. On the contrary, women are expected to care for their homes and be involved in activities that are restricted to women's affairs.

Afiouni and Karam (2014) support the idea that the Arab Middle Eastern society is dominantly patriarchal and gender roles are ascribed based on the traditional model of division of labour. However, a recent study argued that parental support reduces the magnitude of the cultural and social barriers to women entering the labour market. This means, for example, that those whose parents have tertiary-level education have a greater level of participation in the workplace (Rutledge et al., 2014).

3.3.4 Family Centrality

Institutionalized thinking around family, including its primacy for maintaining social stability results in social pressures on women through norms and beliefs that reward women's family role but not their career role. This influences their choices whether or not to participate in the workforce, and whether to stay or leave. This pressure is discriminatory, as men are not expected to sacrifice career

for family. Women believe that families are a source of their identity, and through family, they find their purpose in life (Nasseef, 2015). Indeed, (Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2018) note the centrality of marriage and motherhood to women's roles and status in Middle Eastern societies. For this reason, employed women strive to find a balance between caring for their families and fulfilling work responsibilities (Tlaiss and Dirani, 2015). Moreover, women struggle to balance between tending to families and professional obligations (Nasseef, 2015). In their work, Afiouni et al. (2013) assert that women in the region have to factor in family, as part of their career definitions. The findings are consistent with assertions by Omair (2009) and Metcalfe (2008) who found that work and family are inseparable domains among women in Saudi Arabia.

A recent study has reported that the family centrality witnessed in Saudi Arabia plays a crucial role in shaping professional choices and patterns (Afiouni and Karam, 2014). Arabian women are expected to prioritise family ahead of their professional careers. Professional women in Arabian countries do not expect their husbands to help them in housework chores, and they would prefer to hire a domestic worker (Fakhro, 2005). In order for women to realise their potential in influencing the community and have a positive impact on their families, they would need support. For instance, family connections, education, and recognition of their personal abilities would be important to women (Doumato, 2010). Women cannot excel in the labour market because of social pressures and lack of family support (Rajkhan, 2014). Working women's enormous responsibilities at work and home affect them physically and psychologically (Nasseef, 2015). This suggests that the revision of HRM policies to support women in the workplace would be a desirable move.

However, it is important to recognize the complexity of the social attitudes that perpetuate this situation. In fact, the majority of Saudi Arabians do not view the inequalities between men and women as discrimination, but as an equivalence (Metcalfe, 2011a). These citizens advocate a balance between the duties of men and women, which is in accordance with Islamic teachings (Doumato, 2010). The Islamic religion advocates the distribution of roles based on gender, in line with the biological differences between men and women. Women and men are expected to work in complementing each other, and they are assigned different roles and responsibilities (Metcalfe, 2011b). Men and women agree, for example, that men are charged with the mandate of protecting their wife and family (Metcalfe, 2011a). This principle of equivalent but distinct gender roles is widely

seen in the majority of Muslim nations and does not necessarily translate into legitimate spaces for women in the labour market (Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2018).

However, social change is beginning to challenge this position. With increased access to education, more women are delaying marriage in order to complete their studies and establish a career (Sidani, 2016). Moreover, the increasing cost of living makes it more necessary for women to contribute to the household income, and the Saudi government has articulated the need to tap the potential of Saudi women (Doumato, 2000). In the light of these insights, the next section examines how the Saudi government at a 'critical juncture' has tried to introduce and reinforce new policies on employment with potential implications for women.

3.4 Government Employment Policies with Implications for Women

Ever since the early development plans, the Saudi government has attempted to reduce unemployment among Saudis. The first development plan aimed at decreasing unemployment was launched in 1970. In order to counter the high unemployment rate amongst Saudis, the Ministry of Labour unveiled a national initiative dubbed Saudization (Koyame-Marsh, 2016), the substitution of expatriates with Saudis (Alshanbri et al., 2014). The government of Saudi Arabia enforced the implementation of the Saudization initiative via the Sixth development plan, 1995-1999 (Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014). Three objectives characterize the Saudization programme:

1. Increasing the employment rate among Saudis.
2. Decreasing the over-dependence on foreign workers who account for about 51%, of the Saudi workforce, the highest compared to those for other nations.
3. Cutting down remittances that foreign workers transfer back to their native countries; according to the World Migration and Remittances Factbook (2011), Saudi Arabia is ranked second globally in terms of remittances, with over 26 billion US dollars (World Bank, 2011).

The 5-year Development Plans of the Ministry of Economy and Planning (MOEP) introduced nationalization or Saudization targets for the job market. However, such targeted rates are not achieved for a variety of reasons, including the presence of cheap labour that foreign workers provide in the private sector compared to the high labour cost of Saudi workers, the lack of training for the job market among Saudis; and essentially, lack of alignment between required skills

and acquired skills, coupled with the ineffective nature of Saudi policies (Koyame-Marsh, 2016)

The government has been keen to address unemployment among male and female graduates, given the increased number of women and men graduating annually (Fakhro, 2005). The Ministry of Labour has introduced regulations and legislation aimed at encouraging the private sector to consider both men and women for job opportunities (policies specifically targeting women are discussed later in this section). However, Shalaby (2008) claims that the Saudi government through its Saudization plan (which does not explicitly refer to women) experiences a dilemma, as it is torn between providing work for its citizens and seeking cheap foreign labour.

The failure of the Saudization programme to reduce the rate of unemployment among Saudis to the intended degree compelled the Ministry of Labour to introduce other initiatives. These include supporting resettlement and employment by providing training, financial assistance to nationalization programmes, and mechanisms for matching trainees and job seekers on one side and employers on the other for employment sustainability.

Additionally, policies and programmes have been launched for stimulating the private sector to produce attractive and suitable job opportunities for female and male Saudis (Ministry of Labour, 2015b). The Saudi government has prioritized youth and women, and recognized that youth training, coupled with expanding the participation of women, play a crucial role in spurring economic sustainability for a rapidly developing and young country.

Three objectives form the basis for the Saudi employment strategy; they include:

1. Interim short-term control of unemployment via employment policies.
2. A mid- term goal of decreasing the rate of unemployment via policies of stimulating the rates of employment growth.
3. A long-term goal of attaining a competitive edge for the national economy, based upon human resources via policies that relate to job market and organisation restructuring.

In addition, the government has made women's employment a target in the Vision 2030 development plan (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2017); the Vision 2030 document declares a commitment to provide opportunities to all, invest in developing women's talents, and increase female participation in the workforce

to 30 per cent. Implications of Vision 2030 for the empowerment of women have been enthusiastically reported in Saudi media (Al-Ghalayini, 2018; Arab News, 2019, Saudi Gazette, 2019).

The most critical initiatives for influencing recruitment policies for women and men are the *Hafiz* and *Nitaqat* programmes, explained below.

1. Jobseeker's Allowance Programme, *Hafiz*

In 2011, the Saudi government unveiled *Hafiz* (a Jobseeker's Allowance Programme) to offer financial assistance to job seekers until they secure a job position in Saudi Arabia. Based on *Hafiz* benefits data, women account for 86% of Saudi job seekers (ALsheikh, 2015). This programme supports unemployed Saudis with a monthly allowance of SAR 2000 for a maximum period of one year, conditional on their participation in job search and training activities (International Monetary Fund, 2013).

The *Hafiz* programme has been subject to criticism. Al-Asfour and Khan (2014) argued that it needs to be more effective in providing for trained job seekers and attaining its goal of empowering unemployed youths. Rajkhan (2014) claimed that many of the programme's beneficiaries are not in fact genuinely seeking jobs; this implies that some of women joining the *Hafiz* programme are not actively seeking jobs.

2. *Nitaqat* Programme

“*Nitaqat*” is an Arabic word meaning ranges. The Ministry of Labour launched the programme; however, its enforcement lies with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (ALsheikh, 2015). The programme was aimed at stimulating the Saudization process and absorbing Saudi job seekers. Theoretically, this ought to decrease the rate of unemployment within the kingdom by making it mandatory for companies to recruit many Saudi nationals (Alshanbri et al., 2014) .

The programme classifies companies into four colour-coded categories, according to the number of Saudi nationals they employ. The categories are known as platinum, green, yellow, and red. The programme was intended to reduce the economic advantage of recruiting foreign workers at the expense of Saudis by increasing the maintenance costs of foreign workers for companies within the yellow and red ranges, as illustrated in Table 2.1 below. Sanctions apply to red zone companies (companies having less than 10 per cent local

workers) and yellow zone companies (from 10-20 per cent local workers). Saudi firms employing few Saudis risk losing their foreign workers through visa revocation, making it difficult to renew the working visas of current employees. According to Al-Asfour and Khan (2014), the Saudi private sector had attained a nationalization rate of 13 per cent by the close of 2012, compared to 10 per cent prior to the *Nitaqat* programme launch in 2011.

Table 3.2: Four Colour-Coded Categories of the *Nitaqat* Programme

<p>Excellent/Premium</p> <p>Entities achieving superior nationalization performance, with the highest percentage of Saudi employees.</p>	<p>Green</p> <p>Entities achieving good nationalization performance, with good percentage of Saudi employees.</p>
<p>Yellow</p> <p>Entities achieving below average performance with lower percentage of Saudi employees.</p>	<p>Red</p> <p>Entities Achieving superior nationalization performance with the highest percentage of Saudi employees</p> <p>These firms should represent no more than the bottom one fifth percentile of entities with same size and economic activity.</p>

Source: Saudi Ministry of Labor, 2011, Saudi Hollandi Capital, 2012

A drawback of the *Nitaqat* programme is that it results in higher operating costs for private businesses, mainly because of the outlay in training of Saudi employees, and the fact that Saudis are paid more than foreign workers (tending to reinforce the earlier decision to recruit foreign workers). According to the MOL, 200,000 private sector companies (11.1 per cent out of 1.8 million

companies) in the red category of the *Nitaqat* programme closed down in 2013 (News, 2014). The enforcement of the *Nitaqat* has also driven some firms in the red and yellow bands to try to avoid being penalized by inflating the numbers of their Saudi workers through “ghost Saudization”, that is, the false registering of Saudis as employees of the company, in order to give the appearance that the company meets the green zone criteria (Koyame-Marsh, 2016). Despite governmental efforts to address unemployment by utilizing national human resources, the lack of female participation remains unaddressed (Alselaimi, 2014).

Whilst the *Nitaqat* programme does not specifically target women (although the need to meet the Saudization targets may encourage employers to expand their recruitment criteria, including consideration of women) other policies concern women more directly.

The Ministry of Labour has embarked on increasing Saudi women’s employment by setting up various mechanisms intended to increase rates of employment.

The first programme is a direct hiring (job creation) initiative, which includes:

- Organising women’s employment in stores that specialise in selling women’s products.
- Feminization and Saudization of vacancies considered suitable for women.

The second programme is developing the legal framework to facilitate employment, by:

- Introducing the possibility of tele-working
- Allowing part-time work.

Despite such programmes, intended by the Labour Ministry to increase women’s employment, their effect has been very limited (Al-Shammari, 2009). A large number have not joined the workforce, despite high levels of motivation and education (Ministry of Labour, 2015).

In the researcher’s view, the impact of government initiatives on women’s employment will depend on how organisations respond, particularly to initiatives that are not mandatory. Employing women requires organisations to provide segregated facilities, and/or adopt female-friendly recruitment practices and terms and conditions of work. Whether this is happening, the constraints faced, and the impact for women will be investigated in this study.

3.5 Factors Affecting HRM in Saudi Organisations

Writers on HRM in Saudi Arabia take one of two main perspectives (some, such as Mellahi and Wood, 2007, adopt both). The first focuses on the legal perspective and charts government intervention to shape HRM, particularly in the private sector (Looney, 2004, Mellahi, 2007, Tlaiss and Elamin, 2016). This perspective focuses particularly on changes to labour law, and especially the impacts of Saudization. The second perspective focuses on the impact of cultural factors, such as religion and tribal values, on HRM practices (Atiyyah, 1999, Doumato, 2010, Abalkhail, 2017). However, both perspectives suffer from a lack of attention to gender, perhaps because women have always constituted such a small proportion of the Saudi workforce.

Mellahi (2007), focusing on the legal perspective notes that, before the late 1990s, government regulation in the HR area was lax; the old labour law was more concerned with contracts than with how people were managed in the workplace (Mellahi, 2007). However, a distinction can be made between HRM in the private and public sectors, reflecting the general structure of the Saudi labour market, stratified into foreign and Saudi workers, leading to what (Budhwar and Mellahi, 2007:143) termed a “dual system”. The private sector, which relied heavily on foreign labour, especially in manual jobs, operated a ‘hire and fire’ culture (Bhuian and Abdul-Muhmin, 1997, Bhuian et al., 2001).

Foreign labour was recruited via agents, on work visas that tied them to a specific employer. They had little bargaining power and were forced to tolerate authoritarian management (Elamin, 2012). Foreign workers, who could be sent home at short notice, were generally recruited for unskilled work, resulting in a lack of training and development opportunities (Mellahi and Wood, 2001). This model of HRM, which is deeply rooted in the private sector, is based on an instrumental approach, focused on efficient performance of production activities, tight managerial control, and minimization of direct labour costs (Mellahi and Wood, 2001). This is in contrast to the HRM practices in the public sector, where Saudi nationals are concentrated (see Table 3.3 below).

Table 3.3: Comparison between HRM Practices for Saudis and Non-Saudis

	Non-Saudis	Saudis (in the Public Sector)
Recruitment	Mainly by foreign agent	HR department
Compensation	Fixed and few low	Negotiated
HRD	Very low	Extensive
Job Hopping	Very low	Extensive
Administrative Costs	High	Low
Management Style	Authoritarian	Paternalistic
Basis for Control	External, mechanistic, coercive	Internal, driven, normative
Basis for Compensation	Cost	Cost and social-cultural factor
Time Horizon	Short term	Long term

Source: Mellahi and Wood (2001, p 141).

Table 3.3 shows that a more flexible and less coercive approach to HRM exists in the public sector. The references to paternalistic management, normative control and socio-cultural factors suggest the important role played by informal social processes in the management of the indigenous work force, and these will be discussed later, in relation to the ‘cultural’ approach to HRM in Saudi Arabia.

Although, historically, the legal framework of HRM in Saudi Arabia was very limited, with an absence of legal provision for wages and job security for Saudi and foreign workers during the last two decades, the situation has been changing. Pressure from international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and World Trade Organisation (WTO) on labour rights and working conditions, combined with the economic and political pressures described earlier, focused attention on how to attract and retain Saudis in the traditionally unpopular private sector (Mellahi, 2007). Hence, the government has begun to intervene more directly in HRM issues. Nevertheless, the historical existence of dual HRM systems of workers of different nationality raises the

interesting possibility, explored in this research, that there may, similarly, be dual systems operating on the basis of gender.

As noted previously, Saudization law makes little explicit provision for women. However, there are a few other legal provisions specifically targeting women. For example, female workers are entitled to four weeks maternity leave before the due birth date and six after the birth. Firms with more than 50 female employees are required to provide (either on the premises or by contracting with a local provider) childcare facilities for children up to six years old – the school starting age (Mellahi, 2007). Other legislation relates to the provision of a safe working environment for women, including regulations on hours of work. One of the few laws explicitly linking women to Saudization is the “Saudization and Feminization of Industrial Jobs” initiative, introduced in 2011 (Ministry of Labour, 2015). This included provision for options such as home working and job sharing to reduce social pressures on working women, although there is no data on the extent to which these are made available or taken up by women in practice (Tlaiss and Elamin, 2016).

Such laws can be seen as attempts to cater for the increased incorporation of women into the workforce through more female-friendly HRM practices. Nevertheless, these provisions still clearly reflect traditional views as to the primacy of women’s childcare roles and also social constructions of women’s honour and reputation, which must be ‘protected’ by restricting interaction with the opposite sex. Thus, although more fields of work have been opened to women by law, the permissible fields are those where they may provide services for other women and in a segregated environment. Metcalfe (2007), for example, notes how, in Saudi Arabia, oil companies support gender segregation by subsidizing separate offices and educational facilities for women.

Apart from briefly mentioning such provisions, however, authors focusing on the legal perspective of Saudi HRM have generally had little to say about gender, focusing more on the responses to Saudization, in terms of foreign and Saudi workers. Meanwhile, Mellahi and Wood (2001) speculate on the possible emergence of a new evolving model of HRM as a result of Saudization, with more emphasis on legal rights, and greater workforce diversity. However, it is notable that these discussions, informed by interviews with private sector managers (Mellahi, 2007), discuss ethnic but not gender diversity.

The second core focus of the literature on Saudi HRM focuses on the impact of the Islamic religion and tribal and family traditions on HRM practices with a similar neglect of women's employment issues. According to Hashim (2010) and Budhwar and Mellahi (2007), religious norms and values have important explicit and implicit impacts on a broad variety of behaviours in the workplace. Ali (2010) suggests that Islamic norms advocate consultation in decision-making, as well as fairness, trust (*Al-Amanah*), honesty (*Al-sidq*), and justice in dealing with workers. Ali (2010) notes that Islamic values should encourage fairness and equity in promotion and employment, since Islam advocates equal opportunity and treatment of all employees, irrespective of their backgrounds (Ali, 2010), based on the principle of *Ehsan*, meaning integrity and kindness in personal and group interaction.

Hashim (2010) takes a narrower view of the Islamic perspective on HRM, focusing on hiring, selection, training, performance appraisal, and compensation and the shaping of these practices as specified in the Quran and Hadith (the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)). For example, Islam requires an individual responsible for hiring to ensure that all the candidates for a position are treated fairly. Such principles should be supportive to women. However, in practice, there is a discrepancy between prescriptive Islamic teachings and the practical experiences in the workplace in Islamic nations (Abuznaid, 2009, Ali, 2010). According to Budhwar and Mellahi (2007), favouritism in hiring and compensation is commonplace, although contradictory to the Islamic doctrines of equality and fairness. In the majority of the Islamic nations, HR frequently deviates from Islamic prescriptions because such principles are confounded by deeply entrenched political, tribal and cultural norms (Ali, 2010).

A characteristic of Saudi HRM commonly reported is a tendency towards informal decision making and personal connections (Atiyyah, 1996, Atiyyah, 1999). Individuals owe loyalty and commitment to a larger social group, such as family or tribe, which takes precedence over individual considerations (Mellahi and Wood, 2013). Managers in such a society face social pressure to use informal recruitment methods such as employee referral and word of mouth, and to help friends and relatives (Tanova and Violaris, 2011); this has been confirmed in the Saudi case by Andersen et al. (2012). As a result of this collectivist orientation, a strategy commonly used by Saudis to negotiate the complexities of HRM is the building of social networks, whose influence can be invoked to secure one's objectives, such as to obtain a job or fill a vacancy (Iles et al., 2012). Such

connections may carry more weight than merit, qualifications or entitlement (Aldossari and Robertson, 2016).

Similarly, within the organisation, career advancement can depend on having an influential ally to provide opportunities for training and promotion (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010). Few authors have considered the particular significance of such practices for women's employment and career advancement. However, given women's traditional absence from public life generally, and their current low level of workforce participation, it seems likely that they would have more difficulty than men in cultivating social networks that would facilitate their employment and career advancement.

Furthermore, with specific regard to gender, the Quran explicitly identifies different but complementary roles for men and women (Roald, 2003). In Metcalfe's (2008) view, such norms influence HRM policies and gender. She reports that generally women in the Middle East experience challenges to their career opportunities because of different gender functions, such that gender-associated equality concerns are commonly lacking in the formal HRM policies of organisations.

Authors on HRM in Saudi Arabia also point out a tendency towards resistance to change, low tolerance for new ideas, and strong adherence to established norms (Bjerke and Al-Meer, 1993). This could imply difficulty in changing HRM practices in ways that provide more opportunity to women.

3.6 Summary

Saudi Arabia is an oil-dependent economy, in which the government has been a major employer. However, an imbalance in the labour structure has occurred due to the institutional legacy of reliance on foreign workers to compensate for deficiencies in the local labour force, and societal expectations as to appropriate social roles for Saudi men and women. Meanwhile, however, a problem of Saudi unemployment has arisen, particularly since the public sector is saturated, while stereotyping of Saudi workers by employers and negative Saudi attitudes towards certain manual and vocational jobs limit the contribution of the private sector to employment. Women are particularly under-represented in the private sector, due to the perceived unsuitability (in view of social constructions of gender) of many private sector jobs for women's physique and abilities, the longer working hours, and the inability or unwillingness of private sector employees to provide segregated workplaces and facilities for women.

A number of contributory factors to the status quo have been identified, including social constructions of gender and associated gender role expectations, the patriarchal structure of society, the centrality of women's family obligations, and discrimination in work opportunities. There is also the question of training implications, if women's skill set (due to culturally conditioned choices of education specialisations) does not match the requirements of some jobs. However, the Saudi government is attempting to change the development path by introducing new employment policies that have potential implications for women. Their impact, however, will depend on responses in HR, which also reflect other pressures, such as social expectations.

It has been suggested by previous writers that there are barriers to women's employment in the Saudi context (Sidani, 2016, Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014, Nasief, 2015, Sabir and Zenaidi, 2019) but there are research gaps in this area with regard to women's experiences, particularly with regard to Saudization, where comment has generally focused on the impact in ethnic (Saudi versus non-Saudi) rather than gender terms. There is, moreover, a dearth of literature on HRM in the Saudi context generally, and the way HRM is responding to developments in legislation, and the impact on women's experiences, have not been explored. This study will contribute to address these gaps. The next chapter will explain the methodology applied in conducting the research.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

According to Saunders et al. (2009), research requires a clear strategy to show how the research questions will be approached. An effective strategy should include clear objectives derived from the research questions; it should also show the intended data source, the time frame, the location of the study and how ethical issues will be addressed.

As pointed out previously, the goal of the study was to explore the experiences of Saudi women in the workplace, with a particular focus on how HRM is responding to labour legislation, to what extent women perceive the workplace/employee relations climate as supportive of them, and to what extent and in what ways formal and informal institutions shape the work experience of women.

A qualitative approach was taken in the research, which enabled exploration and understanding of the way individuals made sense of their situations and problems. The process of the investigation entailed developing research questions, selecting procedures for collection of authentic data in the participants' context and the analysis of data by moving inductively from particular instances to general themes (Creswell et al., 2003).

A critical realist approach was adopted, enabling the understanding of how women's experiences of HRM are influenced by structures and mechanisms in the organisational and social environment. This chapter provides explanations of, and justifications for, the selected research paradigm, use of a qualitative approach, the data collection method (semi-structured interviews), sampling, translation and data analysis. It also addresses issues of research quality and ethical considerations.

4.2 Research Paradigm

Research is shaped by the researcher's adopted paradigm. In this respect, choices available include realism, interpretivism, pragmatism, phenomenology and even positivism (Moran, 2000). Saunders et al. (2009) explain that research philosophy aids in defining the logic and circumstantial scenario underlying a study. It equally helps in defining the type of research, the knowledge it produces and the justification for it. Cohen et al. (2013) defined a research paradigm as a broad framework that includes the perception, beliefs and possibly understanding of the various theories and practices that may be employed when conducting research.

Research paradigms take different positions with regard to ontological and epistemological assumptions (Saunders et al., 2009). Ontology is concerned with the nature of the social world and whether it has an objective existence or is experienced subjectively. The adopted ontology in turn has implications for epistemology, which is concerned with the basis of knowledge and justified belief (Steup, 2011). In other words, it is concerned with how a researcher can acquire a valid understanding on the study subject (Saunders et al., 2009). It hence focuses on the relationship that exists between the researcher and the research, and normally addresses the questions:

1. What are the crucial and necessary knowledge conditions?
2. How can knowledge be acquired?
3. What form and limits does knowledge have?
4. How can the legitimacy of knowledge be ascertained?
5. Are beliefs justified on the basis of internal and subjective constructions or based on external, objective evidence? (Steup, 2011).

There are two main philosophies commonly encountered in academic research, “positivism” and “interpretivism”, although both have been challenged in recent years by a variety of critical perspectives, including critical realism.

Positivism assumes the existence of an objective, fixed reality which exists irrespective of the observer, and which can be observed and measured (Guba and Lincoln, 2004). However, it does not explain why the observed regularities occur (Easton, 2010). The positivist philosophy seeks objectivity and analyses data collected from a wide social sample, rather than concentrating on details of the research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012). It is a philosophical approach that mainly makes use of observations and experiments to collect quantitative data. Such a stance would be problematic for this study, since it concerns perceptions, experiences and past events, which are not observable or measurable.

On the other hand, interpretivism, which is sometimes called constructionism, assumes the existence of multiple, subjectively experienced “realities”, which can be apprehended by close engagement with social actors in order to understand their lived experience, but does not explain by what standards one interpretation can be privileged over another (Easton, 2010). Compared to positivism, interpretivism allows greater subjectivity and deeper reasoning about the research

problem. It seeks interpretive understanding of social phenomena by investigating people and their actions (Gill and Johnson, 2010, Veal, 2006). Social constructionism is founded on the idea that social reality is not distinct from the observer and that there is a close interaction between people and their realities, which mutually interact in the course of day-to-day interactions (Cunliffe, 2008). Such an approach could have value in exploring women's experiences, but it fails to take into account the way in which individual experiences are influenced by deeper processes in society, such as institutions (material and cognitive) that shape the options available to individuals.

Critical realism offers an alternative to both the above positions, which share the weakness of limiting reality to human knowledge, whether in the sense of what is empirically known (the "epistemic fallacy" of positivism) or as actively constructed in human perceptions (Fletcher, 2017). Instead, it assumes an external reality, but one on which people have different perceptions, because human knowledge is partial and fallible (Easton, 2010). It assumes that the world can only be better understood by probing the deeper and wider reality that lies behind and influences human perspectives and behaviours.

Critical realism views existing social structures and phenomena as reflective of pre-existing interests vested in social positions (Delbridge and Edwards, 2013), and seeks to understand the underlying causes, structures and mechanisms that explain observed patterns (Nasief, 2015).

Such an approach appears more in keeping with the nature of this study, which assumes that HRM practices and women's experience of them will be influenced by institutionalised present and historical structures and mechanisms in the organisation and the wider society (for example labour law and social constructions of gender). The next section will elaborate further, therefore, on the nature of critical realism and the reasons for using it in this thesis.

4.2.1 Critical Realism

This research adopted a critical realist stance. Critical realism is a relatively recent paradigm, which originated with the works of (Bhaskar, 1979, 1989, 2014) and was developed by Archer (1998), Manicas (2006) and (Sayer, 1992, 2000). It is an alternative to both positivism and constructivism (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), reflecting an assumption that the world is real, existing independently of our knowledge of it (Sayer, 1992) but our representations of it are constructions (Maxwell, 2012a).

Critical realism proposes that reality is stratified at three levels (Delbridge and Edwards, 2013, Fletcher, 2017):

- First, the empirical, consisting of objects and events that can be observed and measured, although apprehension of them is mediated through human experience and interpretation. It includes social ideas, meanings, decisions and actions.
- Second, the actual, comprising events as they occur, unfiltered by human experience (which might be different from what we observe).
- Third, the real, consisting of causal structures and mechanisms that underlie the first two layers.

Fletcher (2017) depicts these layers through an “iceberg” metaphor; this does not mean that any layer is more ‘real’ than others, or that they do not interact, but is simply intended to show the limitations of the epistemic fallacy.

In an alternative explanation Fleetwood and Ackroyd (2004) suggest that ‘reality’ consists of four dimensions: the material (independently existing objects), the ideal (values and beliefs), the artefactual (human-created entities) and the social (structure, culture and relationships). They all constitute the context for action and produce consequences.

Whilst critical realism suggests that there is an independent reality ‘out there’, this does not mean that it is fixed, since individuals have different perceptions and knowledge of their context (Delbridge and Edwards, 2013) and moreover, they constantly renegotiate their notions of reality (Maxwell, 2012a). Thus, although critical realism rejects “multiple realities” in the sense of independent and incompatible social constructions, it accepts the possibility of different perspectives on reality (Maxwell, 2012a).

Since social phenomena are seen as concept – dependent, critical realist research seeks to understand and interpret the meanings that mediate perspectives on empirical reality (Sayer, 1992). Moreover, critical realism views the production of knowledge as a social practice, and holds that knowledge content depends on the conditions and social relations in which it is produced (Easton, 2010). Research informed by critical realism identifies and analyses objects or entities in the empirical world, external visible behaviours (termed events), and structures comprising sets of related objects which may be physical, such as departments or organisations, or individual, such as gender. It attempts to explain relations among objects, events and structures with reference to contexts or relevant

circumstances and mechanisms (Sayer, 1992). The latter are “ways in which structured entities by means of their powers and liabilities act and cause particular events” (Easton, 2010:122).

Social action is assumed to be influenced – though not determined – by “relatively enduring economic and social structural arrangements (e.g. established laws and institutions [that]... constitute the objective reality within which [action] takes place and hence are reflected in the motives and meaning systems of the actors” (Godderd, 1993:290-291). Hence, critical realist researchers aim not simply to identify patterns in behaviours, or describe experience, but to understand why events happened in the way they did (Nasief, 2015).

Critical realism is an appropriate perspective for this study, because it is compatible with institution theory, addressed in Chapter Two, and with the purpose of this research. For example, critical realism argues that knowledge can be gained through the use of theories, selected on the basis of their ability to get closer to reality by helping to identify causal mechanisms underlying social phenomena and activities (Archer, 1998).

Institutional theory serves such a purpose, because it draws attention to multiple factors that shape people’s thinking and behaviour, including markets, the state, family, religion and community, which are the kinds of structures seen to underpin empirical objects, entities and events (such as HRM practices) in critical realism. They both share a focus on how social structures and historical conditioning shape action but also consider the role of actors’ interaction with the social world, helping to explain how, despite the existence of influential structures and mechanisms (such as are provided by institutions), agency and change are possible (Delbridge and Edwards, 2013). Moreover, critical realism seeks to explain and critique social conditions (Fletcher, 2017). Such is the aim of this study, which seeks understanding of Saudi women’s experiences in the workplace, as a social situation, and of the social factors that shape such experiences.

It acknowledges the importance of socio-historical background in understanding the development of discourse, policies and practices (Nasief, 2015) such as the unique national and institutional context (such as labour law and religious-cultural constructions of gender) shaping Saudi women’s employment opportunities and experiences. Critical realism, with its stratified view of reality, helps in understanding the relationships between society, organisations and

individuals, and between institutional logics, context and action (Delbridge and Edwards, 2013). It can therefore be used to examine the relationship between a society's gender ideology and its laws (as causal structures and mechanisms), Saudi organisations (as context) and HRM practices (as action). Lastly, the focus of critical realism on causal analysis makes it useful for analysing social problems (in this case, the inequitable treatment of women in the Saudi workforce) and suggesting solutions for social change (Fletcher, 2017).

Critical realism has been employed in a number of disciplines, including management (Fleetwood and Ackroyd, 2004), but mainly in the West. One of the few studies focusing on women is Fletcher's (2017) study of Saskatchewan farm women, which revealed that gender ideology was more important than policy in shaping these women's experiences. However, in a Saudi or Middle Eastern context, only one study uses critical realism, Nasief's (2015) study of Saudization in the Saudi supermarket industry, aiming to find the rationale for Saudization – related HRM practices and how they have evolved over time. However, Nasief's study did not focus on women. Thus, in the Saudi context, the use of critical realism breaks new ground and has the potential to offer new insights and to extend thinking about research philosophy.

In conclusion, individual experiences of work shape the way women understand workplace reality. Thus, reality is powerful and dynamic, depending very much on institutional structures and mechanisms and as such can be best understood from a critical realist point of view.

Critical realism is not associated with any specific methods and recognises that both quantitative and qualitative methods may provide useful information. The choice depends on the nature of the research and which best helps in uncovering aspects of reality (Nasief, 2015). In this study, a qualitative approach was adopted, as explained in the next section.

4.3 Qualitative Approach

In business and management, research usually takes one of two forms, qualitative or quantitative. According to Neuman (2005), quantitative studies follow a deductive logic, starting with theory and moving on to measurement, sampling, data collection and analysis. The opposite path is taken by the qualitative method, which follows an inductive logic, starting with collection of rich, deep data from which generalisations or theories may emerge (Neuman, 2005). These approaches

are fundamentally different and one of the main distinctions evidenced in them is the nature of the data collected (Neuman, 2005).

Quantitative data are hard and take a numerical form, while qualitative data take a soft form of words and images. The approaches also differ in sample sizes. Quantitative studies use larger sample sizes as compared to qualitative and aim to represent a larger population, according to the structure of the sample (Punch, 2000). Qualitative research employs smaller, purposive samples and does not seek generalisation, although there is a possibility of theoretical generalisation regarding the trends of the problem being addressed.

As for the research purpose, in quantitative research, the expression of the research problem is in the form of variables or factors that shape the form of the results and explain the phenomenon investigated. Such research may be conducted in order to put theory to the test and answer questions formulated on the basis of literature (Creswell et al., 2003). In comparison, exploring a concept is more the focus of qualitative research, which often does not rely on pre-established theories or identified variables. As such, whereas “quantitative researchers emphasise precisely measuring variables and testing hypotheses that are linked to general causal explanations” (Neuman, 2005: 151), researchers who adopt a qualitative approach adopt an interpretive or critical perspective and thus do not follow a simple, direct path but explore cases and contexts (Neuman, 2005).

The qualitative approach was applied in this research, because it is consistent with the research aim, which calls for detailed information on the impacts of HRM practices on the employment experience of female bank employees, and it involves digging below this layer to uncover the underlying social structures and mechanisms (such as gender ideology and socialization, or institutional policy) that influence HRM practices. This is an interpretive process, necessitating what Sayer (1992) called “intensive” research, focusing on individual agents (in this study, female bank employees) in context (for example, Saudi culture, employment law and the like) which is associated with a qualitative approach. Qualitative data facilitate what Sayer (1992) called a “retrodictive” analytical process, which looks at existing conditions and phenomena and evaluates critically what mechanisms could have influenced them, rather than investigating patterns of relationship among variables.

4.4 The Target Industry

This study was carried out in the banking and finance industry. As noted previously, women in Saudi Arabia work predominantly in the public sector, in education and health, which are considered appropriate to socially constructed views of gender (e.g. woman as nurturing). Banking is the third major employer of women, after education and health) and the main private sector employer of women, making it an interesting focus for this study. Despite this only 2 per cent of Saudi women workers are employed in banking (SAMA, 2015), which has traditionally been an unpopular career choice for women because of its image as a ‘liberal’ sector contravening conservative social norms. The Saudi banking sector consists of three kinds of banks: Saudi commercial banks, foreign commercial banks, and Islamic banks.

In accordance with Saudi cultural norms, many of these offer women’s sections all branches, staffed solely by women and serving only female customers; even foreign banks headquartered in, for example, European countries where segregation is not practised, adapt their operations to conform to this norm in the Saudi context. Women’s branches, however, account for only a small proportion of the total. For example, Riyadh Bank has more than 337 branches, of which 79 are for women, while Saudi French Bank, with over 100 branches, has only 18 for women. Thus, although the precise gender split of banking employees is not disclosed, it can be inferred that women are in the minority. Moreover, they are concentrated in service roles, since women’s sections and branches are subordinate to the main (men’s) branches, where most managerial and technical functions, including HRM, are located. This is typical of women in the Saudi labour market; although the government has “feminized” (I.e. opened to women) occupations from which they were previously excluded, the occupations concerned are those considered “suitable to [women’s] nature” and conform to stereotypical constructions of femininity. The banking sector in Saudi Arabia offers one of the few opportunities to explore women’s experiences outside their traditional niches of education and health, which by comparison have attracted much more research and being one of the few employers of women in the private sector, offers an opportunity to see how prevailing social norms play out in a potentially different organisation culture.

4.5 Methods

Data can be collected in a variety of ways, including interviews, observations, questionnaires, and archival records. The choice depends on the nature of the study being conducted, whether the approach taken is qualitative, quantitative or both, the objectives and questions addressed, design, philosophy, and strategy.

The decision on the adoption of the critical realist paradigm made interviews a suitable choice of data collection method. The reason behind this is that critical realism aims to understand the participants' perspectives and thoughts on their experience (for example, in this study, of HRM practices) and their institutional context (including those rooted in the past), which can be done by hearing their stories and observing their body language. Consistent with critical realism's interpretive epistemology, the interviews were analysed qualitatively (Easton, 2010).

As Saunders, et al. (2009) note, there are various classifications of qualitative interviews, but a commonly accepted one is the division into unstructured, semi-structured, and structured. Matthews and Ross (2010) pointed out that semi-structured and unstructured interviews tend to be time-consuming and can pose a challenge in controlling the discussion. Analysis can be demanding; however, tape recording could be a welcome help with this. Even with these difficulties, there are, however, advantages of such interviews, for example, in drawing out the participant's opinion on the particular issue. On the other hand, structured interviews, even though they are easier to control and analyse, restrict the responses that are given and may limit the ability to capture participants' experiences.

Face to face semi-structured interviews were employed in this research, for the collection of data, since the study addresses a variety of subjective factors which needed in-depth exploration. Semi-structured interview was therefore a very appropriate data collection technique for this purpose.

As noted previously, while critical realism assumes a realist ontology, it recognises that individuals have different knowledge, perceptions and experiences of that reality. In order to answer the research questions, therefore, it was necessary to gain access to individuals' experiences and understandings. Departmental managers, for example, were assumed to have different knowledge of the labour law, different understandings of the organisation's needs, and different perceptions of women's suitability to meet those needs. Female employees, meanwhile, although subject to the same set of HRM policies and practices, will have different experiences of them, depending on factors such as age, education, marital status, motherhood, family background and social resources.

In order to gain access to such a variety of experience, and to explore the associated knowledge, attitudes and feelings, semi-structured interviews offered particular advantages. They offered the flexibility for participants to respond according to their own frames of reference, and for the researcher to follow up emergent issues, while also providing a degree of structure to ensure that the key topics of interest are covered.

Of fifteen previous studies reviewed, on women's careers and HRM in the Middle East, eight used qualitative methods, and of those, one used focus groups and all the rest used individual face-to-face interviews, albeit within a constructivist, rather than critical realist perspective. For example, Tlaiss (2015) explored Middle Eastern women's career success, while Tlaiss and Dirani (2015) investigated Lebanese women managers' experiences of professional training and HRD. Tlaiss (2014b) examined Emirati women's responses to gender discrimination in their careers. Yehuda Baruch et al. (2014) looked at constraints on women's careers in seven Arab Middle Eastern countries. In each case, the use of individual interviews was reported to allow deep understanding of women's experiences, and the meanings they attached to them. The researchers (Marmenout and Lirio, 2014) who used a focus group approach to investigate female talent retention in the Gulf countries commented on the efficiency of the approach, but described it as less researcher-controlled and providing less depth, compared to individual interviews. Thus, previous research in the area of this study supports the decision to use semi-structured interviews.

4.5.1 Interview protocol

An interview protocol was developed including an initial question guide based on the research questions and the literature review, with the aim of exploring participants' experiences of HRM practices in their work organisation, with particular reference to recruitment, pay, training and promotion, which the literature had suggested were common areas of inequality affecting women. The guide (see Appendix A) began with general questions about women's background, their reasons for joining the organisation, and their general feeling about working there. The purpose of this section was to build rapport with participants and encourage them to voice their opinions and experiences. This was followed by three sections, each designed around one of the research questions. The first of these asked about women's experiences of recruitment, pay, training, promotion and working conditions. The second explored perceptions of the workplace/ employee relations climate, including relations

with management, treatment compared to men, personal control and work-life balance. The third focused on the institutional environment. In order to test the suitability of this schedule and further refine it, peer review and a pilot study were carried out.

An initial review of the proposed interview questions was performed by four female and two male PhD students from the Business School at the University of Hull, chosen for their knowledge and experience in the HRM field, and their familiarity with the Arab Middle Eastern context. Their comments and suggestions were helpful in developing and arranging the interview questions and contributed to reformulating them more clearly.

Four of them said that the questions were clear, whereas two of them proposed that the question “If you felt dissatisfied, did you complain about this to anyone? Why? Why not?” which was written under the subtitle “Training”, should be moved under “Relations with management”, because it is related to management. Also, the interview questions were shown to three academic staff at the University of Hull, to ascertain their accuracy and relevance to the study questions and objectives. More importantly, I benefited greatly from my supervisors' comments and their guidance and I took them into consideration. This was followed by translating the interview questions from English to Arabic, to enable piloting.

4.5.2 Translation of Interview Guide

As the setting of the research was Saudi Arabia, the initial draft of the interview questions was prepared in English and then translated into Arabic. There are several types of translation, as suggested by Maxwell (2012b), They are: back translation, multiple-forward translation, statistical review and translation review done by bilingual judges. Brislin (1970) opined that back translation is an effective process of translation in cross-cultural translations and it was used for translating the English questions to Arabic in this research. This method has been adopted by Al-Harbi (2007) and most Arabic researchers for their PhD studies.

The process of back translation as explained by Brislin (1970) has four steps: (a) translation of the original script into the target language; (b) checking the grammar of the target transcript; (c) translating back to the original language to check it against the original; and (d) pre-testing the translation before final application. The translation procedure starts with the selection of the appropriate characteristics that require translation. Maxwell (2012b) stated that the translation process requires a superior level of knowledge in both the original (English) and

target languages, proper cultural understanding of the target language and sound skills in developing interview questions. For this research, two bilingual individuals who have experience in translating research questions and expertise in English-Arabic translation were employed. The task of reassessing the researcher's conversion of the interview questions from the original to the target language was assigned to the first expert, as he specialised in English-Arabic translation. The outcome of this assessment was handed over to the second expert for checking the grammar and soundness of the translation. The other two experts back-translated the transcript into the original language. They also checked it against the initial version.

4.5.3 Pilot Study

A pilot study can be explained as an initial study that is done with the aim of exploring the field, including the appropriateness of concepts, deciding on the issues of relevance for inclusion in the main study, and testing the suitability and precision of the tools used in the collection of individual data, and the relevant procedures, before the main study (Matthews and Ross, 2010). In the study, a pilot test of the semi-structured interview schedule was performed with the aim of addressing the above issues, checking the time needed to complete the interview, assessing the clarity of the questions, and assessing whether they would be able to produce useful data.

Surprisingly, for more than 9 months I had been trying to get approval to collect my data in many banks in Saudi Arabia, but unfortunately, some of them ignored my request for conducting my study there, and others refused to allow it, on the ground that my topic is sensitive. Finally, I got access to Org 1, where I was able to conduct the pilot study.

The pilot study was conducted during April 2018 with six women working in Org.1. Snowball sampling was used for the pilot study as it was difficult to conduct these interviews. Although Org.1 had given permission for the study and allowed the use of a private office for the interviews, women were reluctant to participate because they had work targets to achieve and they feared that time spent in interview would be work-time lost. Most women refused to be interviewed after work, due to their family responsibilities.

I gave the interview questions to the participants before the meeting to encourage participants to be trusting, comfortable, and free, and to reduce the likelihood of nervousness and shyness. At the end of the interview the participants were asked

to comment on any areas of ambiguity and were invited to offer their comments and criticisms about the questions. These responses were useful in improving the questions further. It also helped in structuring the interview more logically for the main study and provided useful feedback on semi structured interview techniques.

The findings highlighted the women’s difficulties in recruitment and differences in pay and promotion between men and women, confirming the relevance of these issues to the study, and supporting the framing of the research questions. Moreover, I obtained a general view of working practices in the bank, which helped in further developing the interview schedule. I also found that the interview schedule was long and needed to be more concise.

As part of the feedback, one participant (the head of the branch) said that the questions were clear and did not need any changes, whereas the other participants (the female employees) suggested that some questions needed to be relocated or reworded for clarity (see Table 4.1 for examples of changes).

Table 4.1: Comments and Actions Taken According to Pre-Test and Pilot*

Section	Comments	Actions
Work conditions	The question “What kind of contract do you have?” originally located under the subtitle Work conditions, should be moved under Recruitment.	Done
Relations with management	The question, “Does the bank provide any advantages to women?” under Relations with management should be moved to Work conditions.	Done
Third part HRM	All the HRM section should be incorporated with Work life balance.	Did not change. This section answers the third question of the study, so I preferred to leave it
Pay	How much is your monthly salary? Should be like this: 3-5, 5-10, 10-15, 15-20 (Thousand riyals).	Done

* Appendix A contains a copy of the final interview guide.

One advantage of this phase is that I increased my confidence in managing interviews well and even more, I built good relations with female employees, which facilitated collecting data from several branches and departments at the selected organisations in the main study. Also, this phase reinforced my

conviction that data collection needed personal skills and abilities that can only be gained through practice and good preparation. This was the main objective of this phase.

4.5.4 Access and Sampling

Obtaining permission to conduct interviews in two organisations was a prolonged and frustrating process. I approached several organisations, but most refused my request outright. For example, I received an approval from the one bank to conduct the data collection there, but after a few days I was informed by the bank's administration that they refused my request to start the data collection. They justified this by saying that the manager who signed the letter had retired and the bank was not bound by his approval. So, I contacted many companies and banks to accept conducting my fieldwork at these organisations.

Moreover, the pilot study conducted in Org.1 allowed me to form good relationships with a number of female staffs who were enthusiastic about this research project. Access was also granted to Org.2, again via correspondence with the HR manager.

Org.1 and Org.2 were the only two organisations to give me access (see Appendices B and C), after many failed attempts. A benefit of the participation of these two organisations, however, was the opportunity for comparison. Org.1 is a national organisation and the working environment separates male and female. In contrast, Org.2 is an international organisation and the working environment is mixed between men and women. This offered the potential for valuable insights on the impact of culture and an understanding of the differences between these organisations operating within the same environment.

4.5.4.1 Profile of the Participating Organisations

Two organisations participated in this study, a bank referred to in this study as Org.1 and an insurance company denoted Org.2. Despite the different nature of their activities, both organisations in Saudi Arabia are subject to oversight and regulation by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA). This section provides contextual information about the origins, ownership and activities of each organisation, and its employee profile.

Org.1

Org.1 is a prominent Saudi Arabian bank and the leading financial institution in the region. The bank is considered to be the largest and the first to be officially

licensed and operated in Saudi Arabia, following the Royal Decree of the 26th of December 1953. It was formed as a result of partnership and merger of Saudi Arabia’s largest currency exchange houses at the time. It has 459 branches (including 111 for women) throughout Saudi Arabia, with more than 8,000 employees, mostly Saudis. However, the bank refused to disclose the employee gender split.

In 1979, Org.1 became the first Saudi bank to launch a mutual fund product. The bank provides Islamic (Shariah-compliant) financial services whilst also being a pioneer in financial innovations such as real estate and auto-lease finance. In addition, Org.1 was the first Saudi bank to introduce credit cards, the first to operate an ATM (Automated Teller-Machine), the first to introduce students’ savings schemes, and the first to dedicate branches for women, consistent with its Islamic orientation.

Org.1 became a joint stock company in 1997. In 1999, the Saudi government, represented by the Public Investment Fund (PIF), acquired the majority of its shares. The remaining shares were distributed amongst the General Organisation for Social Insurance (GOSI), and a number of Saudi investors. In 2014, Org.1 offered 25% of its shares to the public through IPO subscription, In the same year, the bank announced its intention to become a fully Islamic bank within the next five years. This means that all products and services will be shariah- compliant; in particular, they will not involve the charging or payment of interest, which is regarded in Islam as Riba (usury) and prohibited. Instead, Islamic banks charge fixed fees or, in the case of business loans, for example, enter into various kinds of profit- sharing agreements. Org.1 has established a Shariah Board (Islamic law), whose duty is to check all products and services to ensure that they meet shariah requirements.

Org.1’s branches throughout the kingdom are distributed as follows (see Table 4.2):

Table 4.2: The Number of Branches of the Bank in Saudi Arabia

	Number of branches for men	Number of branches for women	Total
Saudi Arabia	348	111	459
Jeddah	54	19	73

In Jeddah (the location of this study) there are 54 men's branches and 19 women's. The bank refused to give information about the number and positions of employees. However, from observation in the women's branches visited, it seems there are generally four or five employees per branch, including the managers, giving a total for Jeddah of 70-95 women, including 19 managers.

Org.2

Org.2 is an international health care company founded in the UK by the amalgamation of 17 provident associations, with the mission of preventing, relieving and curing all kinds of ill-health. Health insurance constitutes around 70 per cent of the company's business, although it also operates clinics, dental centres, hospitals and care homes.

In 1971, the organisation went international, and now employs over 78,000 people in the UK, Australia, Spain, Poland, China, New Zealand, Hong Kong, the USA, Brazil and the Middle East. The Arabian arm of Org.2 was launched in 1997, through a joint venture with Nazer Group. Org.2 is now the largest healthcare service provider in Saudi Arabia. In 2008, Org.2 went public with the most successful insurance IPO in Saudi history.

Currently, Org.2 has six branches in Saudi Arabia – two in Jeddah (the headquarters housing the HR department and some other central facilities including the creche for children of employees and the Jeddah north office containing the customer service staff, one in Riyadh (the central region office), one in Khbar (the Eastern region office), one in Medina and one in Buraidah (Org.2 website, 2018). The total number of employees is 1,800. According to employment statistics, almost 5,000 employees have been employed over the last 10 years, with women accounting for 35 per cent of the total (personal communication with the Customer Services manager).

Org2 has declared its commitment to attracting, retaining and developing the best talent in the country and has launched initiatives such as the "Arabia Challenge" to attract young people and test their potential through assignment of case study projects under the 'Digital Transformation Strategy'.

For reasons of confidentiality, the organisation refused to provide details of male and female employment. This type of secrecy is typical of Saudi organisations, which fear to disclose any operational information, in order to avoid it coming to the attention of competitors (the rationale given by the organisation, when it

refused to provide this information). However, during the visit, it was observed that the majority of the staff were women, and interviewees suggested that about 70 per cent were female.

4.5.4.2 Recruitment of Participants

I chose to target female customer service employees and their managers in both organisations, using a combination of snowball and convenience sampling. Customer service staff were targeted because this is where the majority of female employees are located. In Org.2, first, I used snowball sampling to identify branch managers; both to interview them and to obtain permission to approach their employees. For this purpose, I contacted the employees with whom I did the pilot study, and they gave me the contact details of their friends (all women) who were managers in other branches. I contacted several branch managers and arranged with them specific dates to interview them and their staff. In each branch, I met the manager of the branch and asked for permission to recruit participants from among her employees in customer service, without her knowing who they were. Employees were approached on a convenience basis and asked if they would be interested to participate. After I finished interviewing these female employees, I then went to interview the manager concerned. When I had completed the interviewing in one branch, the manager gave me the phone number of the manager in the next branch, and so on. Altogether, I conducted 24 interviews. In Org.2, my cousin, who works there, facilitated my contact with staff working in customer service. I then made contact with them and asked them if I could interview them. I conducted 20 interviews with employees and their manager. Table 4.3 compares between Org1 and Org.2 in regard to the type of organisation, department participants work in, nature of the workplace, and the number of interviews in each organisation.

Table 4.3: Comparison between Org.1 and Org.2

Name of Organisation	Org.1	Org.2
Type of Organisation	National organisation	International organisation
Department Participants Worked in	Customer services	Customer services
Nature of Workplace	Separate working environments for men and women	Mixed working environment between men and women
Number of Interviews	24 interviews with women (7 of them managers)	20 interviews with women (one of them a manager)

The table shows that seven managers were interviewed in Org.1, and only one in Org.2. The reason is that several Org.1 branches in Jeddah were visited. In contrast, in Org.2 there was only one branch in Jeddah providing customer services and thus, only one customer service department manager. Profiles of the participants are provided in Appendix B.

4.5.5 Conducting the Interviews

In the first week of July 2018, I made contact with the women who had participated in the pilot study and who had contact with other staff. In early July 2018, I started interviewing some customer services staff at the Org.1, then in the third week I did interviews at Org2. The numbers and dates of interviews are shown in Table 4.4.

The interviews were organised at convenient times for participants. Interviews were stopped during the Hajj period, which did not exceed two weeks, from about 16 August to 27 of August. In this period, I did some transcription and translation of interviews that I had already conducted. A total of 24 personal interviews were completed at Org.2 and 20 interviews of customer service employees at Org.2 at Jeddah. Table 4.4 below indicates the number of participants based on their organisations and dates of data collection.

Although I had been granted permission to conduct research in Org.2, I faced some initial difficulty in conducting interviews there. Since, for the convenience of employees, and to reduce the necessity for travel, interviews were conducted in the workplace, I could not conduct them without management consent. The HR manager had the authority to allow or deny me access to the premises and to the employees, and only after gaining her permission could I negotiate with potential interviewees individually.

Although my letter requesting approval to conduct my fieldwork at Org.2 indicated clearly that I intended to interview employees to collect data, the first day at Org.2, the HR manager refused to allow me to conduct interviews with female employees, because she had assumed that I would use questionnaires, but not face to face interviews. I had a meeting with her and explained to her that doing interviews with women employees would better answer the questions of the study and meet its objectives and even more, they were very important and crucial for my study. She agreed to let me conduct the interviews in the morning, during break, at lunch time or at the end of the working day, so that work would

not be disrupted. Interviews were conducted in the staff rest room, well away from the work environment.

The assumption that research meant a questionnaire, and the suspicion towards interviews, is of particular interest in the Saudi context, as it reflects the immaturity of the research culture in Saudi Arabia. Until relatively recently, the majority of Saudi research conducted by Saudis relied largely on surveys, due to cultural norms of privacy and the lack of research awareness, which caused difficulties in implementing methods requiring more direct interaction and communication between participants and researcher and detailed investigation of experiences and attitudes. Qualitative methods, in recent times, have begun to be utilized by several researchers in Saudi Arabia, in particular, using interview methods, for example Abalkhail (2017) and Sabir and Zenaidi (2019). However, there is still a need to increase awareness of the research culture and support researchers to explore more fully the potential of qualitative research design (Alghtani, 2018).

Table 4.4: Data Collection Period by Weeks

	July				August				September				
Week	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	Total
Org.1													
Number of interviews		4	3	4	4	3		3	1	1	1	N/A	24
Dates of interviews		8, 10, 11	16, 18, 19	22, 23, 25, 30	6, 7	8, 10, 13		29	6	10	16	N/A	
Org.2													
Number of interviews		N/A	4	3	3	N/A			4	4	2	N/A	20
Dates of interviews		N/A	15, 16, 17	26, 29	1, 5	N/A			2, 4	10, 11, 13	16, 19	N/A	

At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself as a PhD student at the University of York and explained that I have a scholarship from the Saudi Cultural Bureau in London. I noticed that this introduction was welcomed by all interviewees. After that I gave them a brief introduction about the purpose of my study and its importance to knowledge and to their organisations and ultimately, to them.

I presented an Ethics Statement to each of the participants, which presented the research aims and provided the participants with some reassurance that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time or retract their views where they felt it was necessary. I also assured them that the data they provided would only be used for my research purposes and would not be seen by anyone else.

If a participant agreed to be interviewed, I asked her to allow me to record the interview and if she refused I wrote down all her answers on paper. Forty-two interviews were recorded and two were not recorded. One of the disadvantages of not recording these interviews was that they took a long time, about one and a half hours for each, and writing detailed notes on the whole interview was very exhausting work. At approximately 30 minutes intervals, I stopped writing for about two minutes then started again. To get all the answers provided by interviewees who did not agree to record the interview, I asked them to answer slowly so I could write down each answer. After completing each answer, I checked with them to make sure that there were no mistakes in reflecting their answers.

One of the interviewees who had initially agreed to record the interview, after completing it, changed her mind and asked me to delete what was recorded. I was ethically obligated to comply with her wishes, and I excluded this interview from the analysis. Her decision may be explained by the fact that this employee had problems with the administration and the relationship between the two parties was not good, so she feared that statements she provided might harm her future career, although I assured her that the information she provided would be treated in strict confidence.

In each interview, whether recorded or not, I concentrated on interviewees' reactions and their movements or body language. Some of them hesitated to answer some questions and others gave details about their complaints about the work environment and their dissatisfaction with their workplace. A few female

employees gave me details about their personal lives and their relationship with their families.

The fieldwork entailed a number of practical difficulties, as follows:

- Jeddah is the second largest city in Saudi Arabia, with a population of more than three and a half million. It was a very crowded city during summer due to the large number of visitors and tourists who came to the city, which made travel difficult.
- The Org.1 branches are spread throughout the city and sometimes I had to visit two different branches in one day, so much time was consumed in traveling across the city.
- During the summer, the temperature sometimes reached about 50°. This increased the difficulty of moving between many branches and different buildings at both organisations.
- Although I went very early each morning to do interviews, sometimes interviews were delayed until the end of working hours. This sometimes required me to wait for about 4 to 5 hours. In addition, some interviews were postponed for another day due to the organisation receiving a lot of customers, especially between 10 am and 12 pm, when many customers attend. Moreover, interviews had to be away from the work environment and in a quiet room, such as a meeting room.

These difficulties, however, were compensated by the high level of enthusiasm and cooperation shown by the research participants. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, during which participants provided valuable insight into their workplace experiences.

4.5.6 Translating Collected Data

Most of the interviews were recorded in Arabic and had to be transcribed to a written account in Arabic. Then, the data collected were translated from Arabic to English. I undertook the translation process myself, for two reasons. First, I had the advantage of being able to draw on my memories of the context of each interview. Secondly, it began the process of engagement and familiarisation with the data needed for the subsequent analysis process.

I found that it was difficult to translate and choose appropriate synonyms for some words spoken by some participants in dialect or colloquial language and the

equivalent in classical Arabic. Moreover, some used proverbs which have no equivalent in the classical language but were expressed as closely as possible in standard Arabic. Despite these difficulties, every effort was made to translate accurately, as any mistakes in translation can result in losing previous efforts and ultimately not answering the study questions. This meant that focus and accuracy at this stage were necessary and important, as any errors would be hard to correct later.

After I had completed my translations, I sent them to two language specialists, fluent in both Arabic and English, for checking. The same procedure was used as that described earlier for the interview schedule, except that time, the original language was Arabic, and the target language English.

4.6 Data Analysis

Data were analysed by a process of thematic analysis, an example of what Krippendorff (2004) calls an editing approach. It involved a recursive process of reading and constant comparison of transcripts, physically organising and classifying data into meaningful segments and looking for patterns in order to interpret meanings in the text, following the guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The first step in that analysis was to give each interview a code in order to preserve participants' anonymity. Each interview code began with the contextual designation, B (for bank) or C (for company) followed by a role designation (M for manager, or E employee) and a sequence number.

This was followed by repeated reading of the interview transcripts and listening to the audio-recordings. The latter provided an opportunity to check the transcription and note paralinguistic information, such as hesitation, laughter, or tone of voice.

In beginning the actual process of coding (labelling) and categorising the data, a decision had to be made whether to do so manually, or to use a computer software package. Each has its advantages and limitations. Manual analysis was selected as it allowed deep engagement with the data and guarded against the risk of data fragmentation and decontextualization.

A combination of two approaches was used when coding the data. One was the use of provisional codes derived a priori from the literature and the research questions. Such labels were used particularly for second order or category labels,

for example, the use of the labels recruitment, promotion, pay, training and working conditions, to categorise HRM policies and practices. The advantage of provisional codes is that they offer an initial starting point, and also facilitate linkage to theory and previous research. However, such labels were only retained so long as they were supported by the data and could be added to, removed or modified if required, during the recoding and interpretation of the text. This approach was complemented by a data- driven inductive process where codes were derived in *vivo* from participants' interview responses. This process (which accounted for the majority of codes) guarded against pre-conception and allowed codes and categories to emerge from the data, reflecting participants' declared understandings and experiences.

After working systematically through each transcript to identify segments of text related to the research questions and code them as appropriate, a process of critical reflection was employed to revise codes and group them into categories and themes. Where necessary, codes, categories and themes were refined by combining related ideas, further breaking down sub-themes or coding and data missed in the earlier stages (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The outcome was a set of three themes reflecting the three main areas of the research questions, categories representing the main analytical divisions within themes, and codes representing the detailed topics and nuances emerging from the data. A complete list of these hierarchical sets of labels can be found in Appendix C.

4.7 Validity and Reliability

The validity of research results concerns accuracy (Babbie, 2013). In this study, validity was pursued through careful design of the interview protocol, in the light of relevant literature on employment of women in the labour market. This assisted in making sure that the interview accurately reflected these constructs and could yield convincing information for understanding of Saudi women's experiences in the workplace. The back-translation process described above and piloting were used to ensure that the intended meaning of the interview questions was clearly reflected in the protocol and understandable to participants.

Reliability is another consideration when assessing research quality. This is often interpreted as meaning that researchers conducting a similar study in the same conditions and using similar methods and instruments would get similar results (Matthews and Ross, 2010). This view, however, is not appropriate for critical realist research as, although it subscribes to a single true reality, it recognises that participants' experiences and perspectives will not be the same over populations

or at different times. Instead, the concept of reliability is viewed in terms of trustworthiness, which can be aided by integrity in doing the research and keeping an audit trail of the materials used, to allow verification of data, and judgment as to the appropriateness of the conclusions drawn. Member-checks (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) were used to verify that my interpretation is a fair reflection of participants' meaning.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

Adhering to ethical rules and regulations is considered an important aspect of any research. In this regard, Resnik (2011) explains ethics as a set of behavioural norms that distinguish what behaviours are acceptable or unacceptable.

There are some specific issues unique to Saudi Arabia in this study, as well as broader principles of research ethics. As a citizen of Saudi Arabia, I am familiar with the country, and its society and culture, since I am a woman with university degrees, and I have not found a job yet. This makes me understand better the challenges faced by Saudi women. Being a Saudi citizen conducting research in my own culture had both advantages and drawbacks. An advantage was that it facilitated the process of gaining access and building rapport with participants, since I was able to draw on a background of shared experiences. It also made me better able to understand participants' responses since, for example, I knew the organisations and laws they referred to, and could understand any abbreviations, colloquialisms, idiomatic expressions and cultural references made in their narratives. At the same time, however, it posed a danger that I might take certain things for granted and that my questions, and interpretations of responses, might be influenced by my own pre-conceived notions. The potential influence of my assumptions on the interview questions was countered by careful piloting (see section 4.5.3) which confirmed the relevance of the proposed questions and gave pilot study participants an opportunity to raise questions and make suggestions about the content of the interview protocol and the framing of questions. As regards possible bias in the interpretation of results, this was countered, as noted previously, by having my translations of the data checked by two independent interpreters (see section 4.5.2) and by the member checking procedure referred to in section 4.7.

I was aware of potential issues related to power relations between myself and the participants. It was possible, for example, that some participants would perceive me (because of my education, role as a researcher and association with a Western

university) as in a powerful position, as a government or organisational ‘spy’ or someone with the power to influence practices in the organisation.

They could also have had concerns about possible impacts of their participation on their careers and working relationships. Such concerns could have led to reluctance to participate, or a tendency to give ‘socially desirable’ responses. In order to allay such concerns, when seeking informed consent from prospective respondents, I made clear to participants that I had no power to directly influence their careers or working environment, and that nothing they said would be reported to colleagues or superiors. Nor would I identify to senior management which specific individuals took part. I conducted interviews in a place of the interviewee’s choosing, for the sake of their comfort and convenience, and used personal disclosures and general, non-threatening questions to begin the interviews, in an attempt to build rapport. This was facilitated by my understanding of Saudi customs in social situations.

Referring to the general rules used in research, those who participated in the study were assured of the confidentiality of the information they provided and that the information would be used specifically for the study. During this study, participants were shown the proper documentation to assure them of the policy on data usage and the purpose of the research. Moreover, all information was stored on a password-protected computer kept in a secure place and not disclosed to any unauthorized persons. Materials in hardcopy, such as field notes and any documentation collected during the research, were stored in a locked cabinet in my office. In reporting, the participants have been given codes, as explained in Section 4.5. No information compromising the identity of the participants has been reported.

In conducting the research, care has been taken to conform to the code of conduct set by the university. In addition, the University of York Management School policy and procedures on ethical research were followed.

4.9 Summary

In order to explore the cultural and institutional factors influencing the experiences of Saudi women in the labour market, this study adopts a critical realist approach. Qualitative data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with 44 employees in the banking and finance sector, one of the main sectors open to women. An interview schedule was developed based on the literature and refined in the light of a pilot study. Integrity and trustworthiness

were pursued in conducting the research, and careful consideration has been given to matters of research ethics. The research findings are presented under three themes: HRM policies and practices, employee relations environment and institutional influences, in chapters five, six and seven, respectively.

Chapter Five: Interview Findings I

Theme 1: HRM Policies and Practices

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explained how qualitative data were collected via interviews with customer service employees and managers in two organisations: Org.1, a national organisation operating in a segregated working environment, and Org.2, an international company in which women work alongside men in the same branch and department. The purpose of this chapter is to present an analysis of the data collected, in relation to the first of the research questions presented in Chapter One. The question is:

To what extent, and in what ways, are Saudi organisations responding to Saudi labour legislation via their use of HRM practices?

This chapter concerns the specific HRM policies and practices adopted by each organisation in the management of their female employees, and consists of five categories: recruitment, promotion, training, pay and working conditions. The rationale underpinning this theme is that policies and practices in these areas, whether mandated by law or developed by the organisation itself, have been identified in the literature (see Chapter Two) as often difficult for or discriminatory towards women; at the same time, it was noted in the section on women's employment in the Saudi context (section 3.4) that the government has in recent years undertaken reforms of employment law, some of which may benefit women. The policies and practices revealed in this chapter can be seen as tangible reflections of the impact of formal institutions, including the law, although they are also shaped by assumptions derived from informal (cultural) impacts. These factors, although alluded to briefly in this chapter are discussed more fully in Chapter 7, addressing RQ3.

5.2 Recruitment

Under the category of recruitment (discussed first for Org.1, then for Org.2) sub-categories include methods and criteria applied in recruitment, incentives offered specifically to attract women, and perceptions of the organisations' commitment to employing women.

Org.1

Factors that attracted and enabled women to choose banking as a career included education and changing social norms regarding women's work which, as

institutional factors, are discussed later in Theme 3. However, before looking at specific areas of policy and practice, it is interesting to note that one of the reasons given for seeking jobs in the bank was job security, mentioned by three participants. BE5, for example, mentioned that:

“[Org.1] had a reputation for job progress and security of tenure, which was one of the reasons I worked for the bank”.

Her colleague, BE8, explained in more detail how such security was an outcome of the clear regulations applied in the bank.

“Working in banks is secure compared to working in companies – I used to work in a company where I was not paid for three months. The Org.1 has clear policies, protects our rights, and does not abuse us”.

The participant here contrasts work in the bank, a private sector organisation and other private sector “companies”. The difference is that the bank was overseen by SAMA (the Saudi central bank and financial regulatory authority), and was thus subject to SAMA’s own regulation, as well as the general labour law. The participant’s report of “abuse” in a private sector company suggests the potential mistreatment of employees, in the absence of regulation and effective oversight, and helps to explain why banking, with its institutionalized safeguards, was attractive.

Whilst participants had their own individual reasons for being attracted to Org.1, HRM practices were considered central to the methods and criteria used for recruitment and selection. A shift towards a formal approach to women’s work was in many ways reflected in the recruitment methods and criteria used by the bank. Women reported responding to online advertisements, and going through selection procedures involving interviews and tests. Each emphasised qualifications and experience. Almost half the bank participants reported learning about, applying for and being selected for jobs through these formal means and indicated how, over time, selection had become more rigorous and selective, with requirements for qualifications in specific disciplines and a preference for overseas qualifications.

“I applied to the bank and had to go through several tests. Fourteen years ago, it was way easier to work in the bank, since it was flexible, and they accepted all disciplines. Nowadays, working in the bank is limited to those

with overseas qualifications, graduates of American and British universities, or those with administrative degrees” (BM3).

“Recently, however, the banks do not have anyone unless he or she has a bachelor’s degree in a related specialisation. By contrast, in the past, banks had no specific specialisation or certificate required” (BE9).

“In the past, the bank accepted any specialisation, and even a secondary school certificate, and those [recruited on that basis] are still at the bank. Now, recruitment has changed and become more specialised” (BE12).

BE15 noted that all the bank’s recent recruits were graduates of Western universities and lamented acceptance of “young irresponsible women”, just because they had Western qualifications.

These perceptions of the flexibility of the bank’s recruitment policy in the past is consistent with the experience of BM16, who had, more than ten years previously, been selected by the bank, even though her degree was in Biology. However, their claims as to the stringent criteria applied more recently are inconsistent with the experience of BE18 who, within the past five years, had been recruited having studied Media.

It may be that the recruitment criteria were not quite as strict as perceived by BM3 and BE9, or that BE18’s recruitment, although more recent than that of BM16 and BM3, was nevertheless before the new criteria were introduced, sometime within the past five years. Thus, the interviewees, whose work experience at the bank ranged from less than a year, to twenty years, had been recruited under different policies and criteria.

One participant, BM2, suggested that one of the changes in recruitment had been a move away from traditional cultural practices involving social connections:

“Up to five years ago, people knew about vacancies from relatives and friends; nowadays, one applies formally and is interviewed by management in a system that has credibility” (BM2).

Her reference to the past alludes to the well-known cultural phenomenon of “*wasta*”, an informal cultural factor which originated as a way of allocating resources and mediating conflicts among members of a tribal society struggling with harsh living conditions via the use of personal contacts and networks. More recently it has been used to secure opportunity and privilege of various kinds. At

one time, when a large proportion of the Saudi population had relatively little education, it may have been difficult to find candidates with formal qualifications and there may have been more scope for *wasta*. Formalization of recruitment is in part a reflection of greater educational opportunity and the aspiration to modernize the country. Nevertheless, there were signs that cultural practices remain deeply rooted (the institutional impact of socio-cultural factors is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, section 7.4)

While BM2 seemed to suggest that *wasta* was a phenomenon of the past her colleagues suggested this was far from being the case. It seemed that despite the formalization occurring within the practice of HRM, scope still existed for *wasta* within or in addition to the formal procedures. Half the participants in the bank referred to the assistance of friends and relatives, at least in learning about the job, and in some cases, securing acceptance. For example, BE11, who first heard about the job through her cousins, went on to say

“As a first step I submitted all the required papers, CV and official documents to the bank. Then my cousins who work at the same bank supported me by mediating”.

She did not elaborate on what this entailed, but it is widely accepted in Saudi Arabia that ‘mediation’ refers to the mediator(s) speaking persuasively to the person with decision making power to encourage him/her to look favourably on their protégée and/or ease any formalities involved.

While several interviewees in Org.1 admitted taking advantage of *wasta*, BM2 (despite the remark quoted earlier, suggesting practices have changed) complained that it is a problem for the organisation:

“Currently *wasta* plays a big role in getting a job, without qualifications or merit. Often the daughters of “big” [i.e. influential, important] families come to work here for a limited time, then leave work without a care”.

BE12 similarly perceived *wasta* as still prevalent, and suggested that it resulted in the acceptance of applicants who were not necessarily qualified for the job:

“Recruitment policy in general is based on nepotism. I don’t think that it’s based on a well-thought-out mechanism or procedures, or on whether the employee is qualified for the job or not”.

Such comments illustrate the resentment that can be felt towards those who can take advantage of *wasta*, suggesting a tension in the bank between modern HRM practices and the deeply-rooted cultural norms and expectations of assistance between kin.

Moreover, more recent, formal recruitment practices based on qualifications rather than *Wasta* were not necessarily seen as any more fair than those they were beginning to replace. A new sense of unfairness was being generated due to the disparities emerging between employees, particularly managers, who were recruited under the less stringent requirements of the past, and newer recruits meeting current qualification criteria.

In Org.1, the following comments reflect the frustration felt by experienced employees, recruited with bachelor's degrees, who were being equalled or surpassed on the pay scale by new recruits, on the basis of their higher academic qualifications (Master's degrees):

“I worked for 17 years until I got a grade 6, while the new employee got a grade 6 just because she has a Master's degree. In my opinion, experience is better than certificates, so the bank should not equal between 17 years of experience and a new employee just because she has a Master” (BM2).

“Currently, the bank's policy is unfair to experienced employees. They hire employees without any experience on the same position and salary scale [as us]. Experienced female employees end up on grade 6. So, when the bank hires an employee with overseas qualifications, and who is able to speak fluent English, she will be on the same level as an experienced employee who has worked in the bank for 14 years... a grade 5 employee with long experience trains the new employee who is on grade 6” (BM3).

Thus, the new systems placed more emphasis on qualifications than experience which suggests an embrace of new policies in education but at the expense of hard-earned experience. There were also particular concerns that staffing levels were generally being reduced, although the interviewees did not anticipate being affected by staff reductions themselves. All the women had permanent, full-time contracts, and they perceived their jobs as secure. There are several possible reasons for women's confidence in their job security. Although redundancies are now legally permissible, this is still a new and uncommon practice. Staffing levels were more likely to be reduced by lower levels of recruitment. In women's branches in particular, staffing levels were already low, reflected in the smaller

range of positions available (see promotion, section 5.3), so there was little or no ‘slack’. Moreover, many of the women held sought-after qualifications from overseas or technical and language skills required by the bank.

Although a recent change in the law enables organisations to make surplus staff redundant, in order to address problems of overmanning and low productivity, women felt that by working hard, they could demonstrate their worth and justify their position; as BE4 remarked:

“I feel secure in my work because, if I work hard and achieve all the objectives required, the bank will not make me redundant”.

Despite BE4’s confidence, however, her words also reveal the pressure and threat inherent in the bank’s performance-based culture. At one time, a banking job was regarded as a sinecure, but the new concern with efficiency and productivity changes the demands of private sector jobs. This is discussed further as an aspect of institutional impacts on women’s experience of work (see Chapter Seven, section 7.4).

Nevertheless, two participants suggested the trend to reduce staffing was particularly disadvantageous to women. One participant suggested that with increased competition for jobs, men would be favoured over women:

“If a man and a woman apply for the same job, the man is accepted” (BE5).

BE5 suggests that gender discrimination still prevailed in the job market, notwithstanding the opportunities for women provided in the bank and, indeed, the formal opening of new fields to women under labour law (discussed in Chapter Three (section 3.4)). This was, however, an isolated viewpoint; BE5 did not offer any evidence to support her claim and since Org.1 ran a number of women- only branches, applicants to these would not be competing with men.

The other participant who suggested that staffing reductions disadvantaged women was a manager who suggested that lower staffing levels increased workload and pressure, which she perceived as affecting women more than men because, as she explained:

“Time is not enough to accomplish all the work for women and men, but for a woman, the workload is greater because she has additional responsibilities at home” (BM1).

BM1 was a married woman in her thirties, and appeared to enact cultural stereotypes (an informal institutional factor) where men are seen as breadwinners and women primarily as housewives with responsibility for the home and children, despite a woman holding a job outside the home. This is a theme that will be revisited in later sections.

In a different sense, however, cultural restrictions and norms were perceived as advantageous to women, since the bank's adoption of gender segregation necessitated a commitment to employing women, as almost all the participants suggested. Most of the women made short simple statements such as

“Yes, as long as there are female branches, the bank commits to hiring women” (BE17).

In other words, they simply accepted that, since the bank was operating some women-only branches, it had to employ women. They interpreted this as a “commitment”, but it can be argued that this was not a commitment specifically to women's advancement through employment, but a necessity arising from the concern to be able to serve female customers without their having to interact with men. Thus, the employment of women had some empowering effects, but the primary rationale for employing women was the preservation of traditional, socially constructed constraints on gender roles and relations. Indeed, as will be seen in a later section (5.3), there were indications that the women's branches and their staff were accorded lower status than the men's branches and male workforce, which casts doubt on the genuineness and depth of the bank's ‘commitment’, and shows that segregation, as a formal institutionalized practice reflecting informal norms and beliefs was a locus of tension, with both positive and negative effects for women.

BE11, however, went further to explain the social and religious rationale for segregation:

“Banks are considered as the most committed entity in terms of employing women because they have many women's branches. However, Saudi society is conservative, and the religious nature prevails even in everyday transactions. For example, many women prefer to be served in women's sections, because some services require uncovering the face in order to compare it with the ID card. Therefore, the existence of women's sections may help them a lot and make them feel comfortable as customers”.

Thus, paradoxically, an environment that is in many ways restrictive to women was seen to offer opportunities through the demand for women to serve other women. In contrast to this culture-based view, one participant suggested that the commitment to hiring women was in line with recent government policy, which provided another (formal) source of institutional) pressure for women's employment:

“I think the bank policy comes hand in hand with the country's policy, the 2030 Vision, which aims to recruit women and reduce the unemployment rate” (BE15).

This was not a common perception, even though Vision 2030 and its implications for women have been much publicised and discussed in the media (Al-Ghalayini, 2018 2019, Saudi Gazette,2019). This may be because they were not aware of relevant regulations and policy within the bank, or they may not have been interested in social and political changes that did not affect them personally (since they already had jobs). Another explanation is that the impact of Vision 2030 would be felt more in other areas that had more recently been opened to women under the new policy. Women had been allowed to work in banks before Vision 2030 and, in Org.1 specifically, it was their Islamic orientation that led to the establishment of women-only branches. Thus, it is possible that women did not generally see Vision 2030 as the driving factor for employment in the bank.

Despite perceptions of the bank's supportiveness of female recruitment, employees in Org.1 did not perceive any specific policies to support women's employment, other than maternity allowance, and the right to take an hour out from work to breastfeed, if needed (see Chapter Six, section 6.5). Both these rights are mandated by law, rather than company policy, but it was suggested by BE4, based on previous experience, that some private organisations refuse to give these financial and time allowances.

A large proportion of private organisations in Saudi Arabia are small family firms, which may find it financially and practically difficult to comply with these regulations, and be less open to scrutiny than organisations in the regulated financial sectors. Some women may be compelled by financial need and lack of other opportunities to work under such conditions. Such abuses, however, help to explain why public sector jobs are so sought after and why, in the private sector, the highly regulated banking sector was attractive to women.

Org.2

Although a large proportion of the Org.2 employees referred to formal online applications, tests and interviews, there were indications that academic specialisation was not necessarily a deciding factor if other relevant skills were in evidence. CM6, for example, who only had a high school certificate, had demonstrated her interpersonal skills during a role play as part of the interview:

“He (the HR manager) asked me to show how I could sell a pen, and pretend he was the client. He wanted to discover my skills and abilities”.

Moreover, several participants suggested that, rather than academic specialisations, the company was interested in work experience, computer proficiency, and suitable personality traits. On the latter point, CM6 suggested:

“People who want to work in Org2 must [be able to] take responsibility, [face] challenge and have the ability to work under pressure”.

Despite these instances, however, the general perception was that, over time, the company had become more focused on formal qualifications and generally expected applicants to have a university degree. A point of contention in the organisation was a perception that the recent focus on qualifications was unfair to those who, while having lower formal qualifications, might have a wealth of experience in the relevant field. In Org.2, the majority of participants noted that getting a job was not as easy as had previously been the case, due to the emphasis on university degrees and (according to some employees) English language proficiency.

However, in the view of one of the participants, a benefit of the more rigorous selection process was that conscious attempts had been made to discourage *wasta*. As CE16 described:

“The company does not seek to employ relatives at the same place, to avoid nepotism. Also, before employment you have to go through three HR interviews, then an interview with your manager. Then you have to pass the online test sent by HR getting a job with [Org.2] is not easy”.

Nevertheless, despite such evidence of the organisation’s adoption of formal recruitment methods and selection criteria, which should in theory be fair to all, these were indications in some responses that traditional cultural practices of *wasta* still prevail to some extent. Five participants from Org.2 admitted their

connections had played a role in their appointment, as in the case of CE1, who explained:

“My sister’s fiancé had worked in the company and he had connections, so he helped me get accepted”.

She acknowledged that she would not qualify under the current official criteria and was careful to conceal her lack of formal qualifications.

“The company only recruits candidates with at least a Bachelor’s degree, which I don’t have. I consider myself very lucky to have this job, and most colleagues do not know that I don’t have a degree” (CE1).

It is not always the case that someone who takes advantage of *wasta* lacks qualifications. Participant CE3, for example, acknowledged having relatives in the company who had helped her get a job, but also pointed out that “the position is related to my studies” (CE3). Moreover, in other cases, participants acknowledged that connections had helped secure an opportunity for them to be considered as applicants, but they still had to go through a formal selection procedure. As CE11 recalled:

“My husband has connections in HR [the HR department] so he made some calls and I received a call from HR one month after my application submission. I sat for the interview, then I was accepted”.

It seems the husband’s intervention speeded the process because CE14, for example, spoke of a 4-month interval between application and acceptance.

A distinctive feature of recruitment in Org.2, reported by six participants, was the new phenomenon of recruitment as a “trainee”, rather than a permanent employee. These trainees were often recruited at busy times, as supplementary staff, and were on temporary contracts- usually for six months- but might, through the trainee position, have the opportunity of a permanent position. The practice of hiring trainees, was perceived as cheaper than hiring permanent staff.

“There is a summer job, which means that the company hires employees ... to help the permanent employees, which is an opportunity for the new employees to gain experience and practise the duties of the job” (CE17).

“The company’s new policy is to have new female employees as trainees for 6 months. At the end of that period, if the employee has proved herself to be adequate, the company will hire her officially” (CE18).

“In the last two years, [Org.2] has recruited on a temporary contract and I think it’s because the company doesn’t have the budget to recruit on a permanent contract” (CE21).

It was not clear whether the practice of employing trainees applied to men as well as women. What did become apparent, as will be seen in later sections, is that there were differences between trainees and those on permanent contracts, in pay and other terms and conditions of employment.

When asked about the organisation’s commitment to employing women, all the participants agreed that such a commitment was apparent, from the fact that women greatly outnumber men; interviewees suggested that 70 percent of the staff are women, and that woman held high positions in the company. As noted previously, the company would not provide information on its employees, but observation suggested that a wider range of positions were available for women in Org.2 than in Org.1. As CE9 asserted:

“[Org.2] does not consider a gender-based perspective, since it is a mixed environment.”

In contrast to the prevailing view of gender neutrality, eight women in Org.2 suggested that women have more favourable characteristics- they are more serious, committed, hard-working and productive than men, less prone to “sleeping and sitting with friends” (CE14). The participant who used this expression did not mean that men were sleeping or socializing at work, but was contrasting men’s and women’s behaviour in the home to support her perception of the different mind-sets of men and women. She believed that, because women have multiple responsibilities at work and in the home, they are less able than men to relax and as such are more accustomed to being industrious.

There were also perceptions of measures to attract female employees: three participants mentioned the company’s crèche, one mentioned that the option is available for women to work from home (see section 5.2.5), while another mentioned

“nice offers for women, such as pedicure and manicure offer from time to time and discounts on *abaya* (the body-covering cloak that Saudi women are required to wear over their other clothing when outside) (CE21).

However, two of these participants noted that there was a clear preference for single women. CE4 recalled:

“I remember them asking me if I was married or have kids. I think they care because married women take the breastfeeding hour and more vacations and excuses [for time off]. They also asked me if I could work overtime”.

From this comment, it seems that CE4 assumes (as, in her view, does the company) that married women will have children. In fact, in Saudi culture, this is not an unreasonable assumption, as it is common for couples to start a family soon after marriage, and large families are still common. Indeed, CE14 described pregnancy-related absences which were so extended (due to complications) beyond the normal maternity leave that the company, rather than fire her, suggested she resign voluntarily then reapply when she was ready. She did so and, on later returning to her job, was supplied with a computer so she could work from home. In this case, the company showed flexibility in meeting the needs of an employee with young children. However, the reluctance to employ married women with children, as suggested by CE4, illustrates how, even in this international organisation, stereotypical conceptualizations of women’s domestic role arguably resulted in discrimination, since married status or parenthood would not be a factor considered in men’s employment. Similar themes also emerged in relation to promotion and pay, as will be seen.

Comparison between the two organisations

Comparing the experience of recruitment policies and practices between the two organisations reveals similarities and differences. In both organisations, the majority of participants perceived that recruitment had become more selective over time, with an increasing tendency to recruit candidates with university degrees (preferably from overseas) and with language and computer skills. However, Org.2, more than Org.1, seemed to value experience, and also personal attributes, assessed through extensive interviews. The greater reliance on formal criteria in Org.2, compared to Org.1, may reflect the multinational nature of the former, resulting in policies and practices transferred from the country of origin, especially as many managers were trained in London.

While both organisations had reportedly taken steps in the formalization of recruitment and selection procedures, nevertheless, deep-rooted cultural norms of *wasta* seemed to prevail to varying degrees – more so in Org.1, where about half the participants admitted they had been helped and supported in getting their jobs by friends or relatives. Org.2, as a global organisation, was perhaps less influenced by local norms and expectations than Org.1, a local organisation, rooted in Saudi culture. It is also possible that the two organisations; one local, Islamic and segregated, the other global, ‘Western’, and non-segregated, attracted employees with somewhat different value-orientations. That is, Org.1 was perhaps more appealing to more conservative and traditionally-minded Saudis, who adhered more closely to long-established practices.

In a society where, mutual assistance among kin or members of social networks is expected, *wasta* is clearly difficult to eradicate, although Org.2, a global company, was making conscious efforts to do so, and perhaps with some success, since obtaining a job with the help of *wasta* was reported by only half as many women in Org.2 as in Org.1.

Both organisations were perceived as committed to employing women, albeit for different reasons. Women in Org.2 saw this as a conscious preference of the organisation, and more than a third of them attributed this to women’s greater diligence and productivity. Moreover, employment of women was seen by several employees as supported by flexible conditions (such as home working) and “nice offers” that went beyond the statutory requirements of maternity leave and allowances, and entitlement to an hour per day in breaks for breastfeeding. In contrast, support for women’s employment in Org.1 was seen as a necessity imposed by this Islamic bank’s decision to operate separate women-only branches. In this way, cultural restrictions on women’s activities in the public sphere opened opportunities for women’s employment in providing segregated services.

However, the women working in the bank did not perceive the existence of any HR policies to attract women, other than the statutory maternity and breastfeeding provisions. This suggests that legislation may be significant in the provision of policies that support working women, and women’s experiences in the workplace. It also raises the question whether women in the bank were really accepted and valued, or whether, as suggested earlier, the employment of women to provide segregated services merely reinforced traditional cultural constraints.

Indeed, there were indications that women were not accorded the same status as their male counterparts, and this will be seen more clearly in later sections.

5.3 Promotion

Participants' views on the availability of promotion opportunities, and whether or not these were similar for men and women, yielded two clusters: criteria and constraints. The criteria on which promotion was said to be awarded were performance, experience and (in Org.1 only) customer feedback. A few women in Org.1 also suggested that *wasta* played a part in promotion decisions. The cluster labelled 'constraints' identified perceived factors that impede women's promotion, and included the codes, speed, positions available, pay grade (in Org.1 only) and family considerations.

Org.1

Although one participant, BE14, claimed there was no promotion available within the bank, the majority, approximately three-quarters of the bank participants, indicated that promotion was available and was awarded on the basis of the 'performance card'. BM10 elaborated on the kinds of performance being evaluated:

“[Promotion] is awarded according to the employee's accomplishments, such as commitment, excellence, customer service and the absence of any irregularities in the employee's profile”.

The second most frequently maintained criterion was customer feedback. Several employees referred to a customer service survey system whereby customers were asked to rate the service they had received. BE18 suggested that more weight was attached to these ratings than to other aspects of the employee's work and personality, such as her relationship with colleagues.

“If there is a vacant branch manager position and two [employees] have applied, one with good client ratings, who behaved badly with colleagues and who was unpopular with them, and another [applicant] with average client ratings but who had behaved well with her colleagues in terms of attitude and support, the bank will choose the unpopular employee with good client ratings. It is not logical; the bank seeks to please customers irrespective of other factors”.

The importance attached to client feedback may be because, as BM23 noted:

“We are a profit-driven institution... Now it is [all about] customer service and selling”

As a profit driven organisation, the bank might be expected to be concerned to attract and retain customers, in order to maximise its revenue. However, BE11, who had two brothers working in the same bank, reported that this criterion was not applied to male employees:

“Banks are using an assessment system called “Client Voice”, whereby employees are evaluated and being identified with their performance level based on this programme. However, dealing with this system differs between men’s and women’s sections. In the men's section, the Client's Voice programme does not affect the employee's assessment at all and their performance level is not measured, whether the employees receive weak evaluation from the customer or not. On the other hand, in the women’s section, the Client's Voice programme affects the employee’s assessment, even if the employee gets a bad or low rating from her clients. This may lead to her being fired from work immediately”.

The difference in the use of Clients’ Voice shows that female employees are expected to be more customer-oriented, and are monitored more strictly from this point of view than their male counterparts. Explanations for this inequality can be found in gender stereotyping. On the one hand, in Saudi culture, women are brought up to serve and nurture - roles perceived to be consistent with their supposedly “natural” tendencies. From this perspective, a woman who gives poor customer service doubly disappoints, because her professional mistake can also be seen as a dereliction of her feminine role. On the other hand, men are seen as family breadwinners, who “need” their jobs. There may be, thus, a reluctance to fire them and so a greater degree of tolerance shown when evaluating their performance, compared to women.

Although women were evaluated based on client ratings, BE18, quoted above, suggested that the client rating system could be manipulated by employees seeking to influence the client’s evaluation.

“So, if there is a good employee who does her job but does not notify the client that she wants an A rating, and another one who is also good and lets the client know that she wants an A rating, she [the latter] will get the promotion”.

Although BE18 was the only interviewee from the bank who criticized the customer feedback system in this way, she was not the only one to perceive that the basis on which promotion was awarded was not always fair or transparent. Three employees specifically suggested that *wasta* – the award of a position based on one’s relationship with the decision-maker – influenced some promotion decisions. BE7, for example, asserted:

“*Wasta* plays a significant role with regard to promotion, so if you have acquaintances or relatives [in influential positions] within the bank you work in your promotion will be higher and faster”.

Such perceptions of unfair practices call to mind the claims made about the role of *wasta* in recruitment and provide a further indication of the tension between official management practice (promotion based on performance) and traditional cultural practices.

One reason why women might seek to exploit such relationships, if they had the opportunity, was that they perceived very limited opportunities for women’s promotion, within the formal system. Promotion was said to be ‘slow’; three quarters of the women interviewed in the bank suggested this was because there were fewer positions open to women than to men. This was explained in part by the disparity in the number of branches (as noted earlier, in Jeddah, there are 54 for men and only 19 for women) and also because, in smaller branches (such as the women’s branches) certain positions such as ATM manager or public relations manager were not available.

Regarding the positions available, BM3 explained:

“For men, there are more jobs so the opportunity to get a promotion is higher”

While women, according to BM3, were limited to “teller, branch manager, customer services”, men had additional options such as chief teller and operations manager. Whilst several interviewees thought women could progress further, to area or network manager, there were nevertheless indications that women did not get promotions for which they were eligible. Some attributed this to structural factors within the organisation, for example:

“I should now be a branch manager and I deserve this promotion, but because of the small number of [women’s] branches and the large numbers of women, I did not get this promotion” (BE5).

“I think this is an internal problem, because they [management] reason that there are more branches for men and the number of female employees is less than that of males. I believe the number of female clients is equal to the male clients and they receive the same services as provided in the men’s branches” (BM3).

BE5’s comment suggests that the small number of women’s branches creates a more competitive environment for women, while BM3 implied that as there are as many female clients as male, requiring the same range and quality of service, there should be more branches for women – which in turn would lead to more positions being available for the female staff who serve them.

Moreover, women complained that even if appointed to an equivalent position to a man, a woman would not be on the same salary grade. BM2, for example, noted that, despite excellent performance, she could not get a salary increase, because she had reached the top of her pay grade and “I do not get grade 7 because I’m just a woman, but a man gets grade 7”. The use of the word “just”, here, implies a lesser status. This is not to suggest that this participant agreed that, as a woman, she had a lower value. Rather, this was her attempt to express what she perceived to be the management rationale behind the differential treatment of men and women. BM3 and BE18 similarly explained that female branch managers are limited to grade 6, whereas male branch managers are on grade 7. The former described how different terminology was applied to men’s and women’s jobs to justify the disparity:

“We have filed complaints to the management and asked for equality, but they always say we work in a bank ‘office’, while the men work in a ‘branch’, though the tasks required ... are the same” (BM3).

By applying different terminology, Management appeared not only to be referring to the small size of the women’s branches, but also downgrading their status to that of a subsidiary or support service, even though they offered clients the same range of services as are available in the men’s branches. The difference in terminology is also significant because Saudi labour law stipulates that a woman should be paid the same as a man for equal work, in the same position. By saying that a woman manages an “office” rather than a branch, Management can claim that the work/positions are not the same, and therefore justify pay inequality. This seems to be reflected in BM3’s comment, quoted above. By such means,

organisations can avoid problems with the regulatory authorities by complying with the letter of the law, while failing to observe its spirit.

Both these women felt this was doubly unfair as women, not being supported by an assistant or operations manager (positions available only in the larger men's branches) have more responsibilities than a male branch manager. Moreover, BM3 attributed this specifically to the "bank's policy and HR", claiming that "other banks do not have this imbalance". She did not indicate which banks she thought had a more female-friendly promotion policy or offer any evidence in support of her claim, but it is possible that there are differences among banks related to the size and ownership.

Despite such constraints, the employees interviewed had ambitions to reach higher positions. However, BM1 believed that, as a branch manager, she had reached the limit of the opportunity available to her, arguing that a female employee "will be unable to achieve her ambitions because of the limits placed by the bank" and would question "why [she should] exert all [her] efforts for nothing" (BM1). In her view, an ambitious woman would have to think of moving to other employment, in order to achieve a high position. Whether or not it was realistic to believe that greater opportunity was available elsewhere is debatable. It would depend on a number of factors, such as the region and sector concerned.

Interestingly, just one interviewee in Org.1, BM10, suggested that women's promotion might be curtailed by their family circumstances:

"Women quit their job more than men because of the nature of their responsibilities, such as children and family circumstances, marriage etc".

The participant concerned, however, mentioned this as a secondary factor. Like the majority of her colleagues, she perceived that there are fewer opportunities for women than for men, because of the smaller number of women's branches and the narrower range of positions available in them.

Org.2

In Org.2, although a few of the newer employees and trainees said they did not know the criteria for promotion, the majority of interviewees in the company stated clearly that promotion was on the basis of performance (expressed in terms of managerial evaluation) and/or experience. However, of the two criteria, performance appeared to be the more important, as CE10 explained:

“It is possible that an employee spends years in the same job without promotions. It depends on the employee’s response to performance feedback about strengths and weaknesses, if the employee works on the weaknesses and improves them. They also take managers’ and teams’ feedback into consideration as well. They also take into account whether the employee is an effective team member or not and is able to work under pressure”.

Half the employees interviewed in this non-segregated environment perceived “opportunities for all” (CE2) regardless of gender; while CE18 added, “The proof is, most of the managers are women”. The same point was made by CE9, who explained:

“My manager is a woman and the senior manager [is female]as well. Even Senior management [positions] are held by women, and PR managers are female”.

Indeed, the same employee indicated:

“I’ve started to believe that we are the only female company”.

Others illustrated the availability of promotion by describing their own experiences. For example, CE8 explained:

“Currently I’m Grade C, ‘Senior Officer’ and I’m hoping for Grade D where I can be a manager. From 2014 to 2017 I was on Grade B, ‘officer’, then I got promoted to Grade C”.

Nevertheless, almost half the employees in the company commented that promotion was slow, with employees staying in the same job for three or four years without a promotion. They differed, however, in their perceptions as to whether men and women were treated differently, and if so, who had the advantage. CE9, for example, thought promotion was faster for women, because they were in the majority in the company, whereas CE15 saw this as a reason for women facing more competition than men:

“Men get promoted faster than women. In my opinion, it's because the number of men is fewer than that of women. The chances for women to get promoted are fewer than those for men”.

Several, however, perceived that women suffered discrimination compared to men, in terms of the speed of promotion, and expressed the argument that stereotypical perceptions of gender played a role in this situation. For example, CE1 explained:

“Men get promotion faster and I think they [management] are trying to support men’s financial needs as they have more financial commitments” (CE1).

Similarly, CE12 suggested:

“I think this [men’s allegedly faster promotion] is because of the social belief that men should be in a higher position due to their responsibilities for their home and family expenses”.

CE17, however, while acknowledging the prevalent assumption regarding men's financial obligations, also challenged this view as a rationale for differential promotion:

“Men get promoted faster than women. I believe the reason is that men have more responsibilities and expenses than women do. However nowadays in my opinion women are also responsible for household expenses”.

Her view can be seen as an expression of social change, whether that be the greater number of single or divorced women, or the increase in necessity and acceptance of woman contributing to the household budget in order to afford a higher standard of living.

Comparison between the two organisations

The main bases of promotion in both organisations were performance and experience. Performance, in particular, was the criterion mentioned most frequently in each organisation. In Org.1, however, two other factors were cited that were not mentioned in Org.2. One was customer feedback, which it seemed could be manipulated if employees were able to persuade customers to give them a high rating. The other, claimed by a small number of employees, was *wasta*, whereby it was alleged some employees were able to achieve promotion more quickly and reach higher positions due to their connections with those in decision-making power. The fact that this route was mentioned only in Org.1 reinforces the impression, gained earlier (in the section on Recruitment) that in this locally-

owned bank, traditional social norms and practices co-existed alongside the formal managerial practices, creating a tension that was not noticed to the same degree in Org.2, an international company.

In both organisations, promotion was said to be slow but compared to Org.1, women in Org.2 described a wider range of opportunity and cited both their own experience of progressing through the grades, and the examples of women managers around them in order to demonstrate the opportunities for women in the company. In contrast, employees in Org.1 perceived fewer opportunities. Although the bank practised segregation, therefore offering managerial positions to women in its women-only branches, the smaller number and size of these branches, compared to men's, meant that in practice fewer positions were available to women. Moreover, women who reached the position of branch manager were paid on a lower grade than their male counterparts, apparently on the rationale that they headed “offices” rather than full branches.

Whilst women in Org.1 were more prone to reporting constraints on their promotion opportunities, there were a few in Org.2, who perceived men as privileged in promotion, based on stereotypical ideas of the man as responsible for all household expenses. One participant, however, challenged this view highlighting that women also have financial obligations.

5.4 Training

The ‘training’ sub – theme includes participants’ perspectives of the availability of training for women, their experience of the number of courses provided, methods of training delivery, the participants’ level of satisfaction with training and, in the few cases where these were expressed, their views regarding training appropriateness and effectiveness.

Org.1

All participants in this segregated organisation perceived that training was available for women. However, no-one was able to express an opinion as to whether the opportunities available were comparable to those given to men as, they did not have any experience of how male colleagues were treated.

Reports on the number of courses made available to women differed and ranged from one to four per year. For example, BM13 indicated:

“There are training courses provided by HR. Normally two or more courses are provided every year by HR. Also, the employee can ask for specific courses, based on what they want to develop”.

Two employees explained how places on training courses were allocated. In this respect, BE 15 explained:

“The HR department elects employees to prepare a list of courses needed. Then the employees would set a scheme of courses for the whole year. Then the branch manager assigns each employee to the courses that suit her need most”.

Similarly, BE20 explained:

“The bank gives annual courses, continuously. The area manager directs it [the programme] to the section manager and then based on that, she sees what the appropriate course is for every employee [according to] what skills she needs to improve, for example, courses in marketing, dealing with customers and time management, around four courses in the year”.

Thus, the general picture was that the bank was committed to training women in a variety of skills, and that training was offered in an ongoing programme every year, throughout the period of employment. Nevertheless, one or two interviewees indicated the amount of training available had declined in recent years; one employee suggested that this was because “it costs the bank a lot” (BM2).

Regarding modes of training delivery, several different methods were mentioned; however, since most of the participants did not address this aspect of training, and no individual method was mentioned by more than one or two employees, it was not possible to tell which methods were most common.

BE7 and BE15 is both referred to a mandatory external course, provided by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA) – the central bank that oversees the whole financial sector:

“Nowadays, each employee is entitled to a 3-month training opportunity at the International Monetary institution, starting from the first day of her employment, then she will have practical training in the bank for a week” (BE7).

“An employee is required to attend a mandatory preparatory course provided by the Saudi Monetary Authority for two months” (BE15).

Various forms of in-house training including workshops were mentioned and one employee explained the use of a cascade model, to reduce the cost of training and aid its dissemination:

“The bank chooses the best women for training, to train others afterwards” (BE5).

Another strategy, mentioned by only one employee, was online training. BE 19 contrasted this with the face-to-face training provided in the past, or in the initial preparatory training:

“Yes, in the past there were training courses provided by the training centre. Now it is online. It used to be better, because it had a sense of renewal and change. It also involved meeting new people and exchanging experiences. Now it is online. A female employee takes [preparatory] courses, and after she commences the job, the training is provided online”.

Although this participant voices an implied criticism, generally women in Org.1 appeared to be satisfied with the training provided; around three-quarters of the bank interviewees expressed complete satisfaction. For example, BE11 commented:

“I am definitely satisfied with the training courses of all kinds offered by the bank. The bank is keen to qualify its employees well before they start work, to raise their awareness and to develop them in various aspects...”.

In contrast, only four employees expressed dissatisfaction. One of these was BE19, who claimed:

“Well, it is now far less than in the past. The quality has also changed and there is no certificate of attendance”.

Other criticisms were voiced by a handful of employees who declared themselves to be only partially satisfied. The criticisms were that courses were repetitive and overly theoretical:

“I didn’t get any benefit from some courses, they were a waste of time... Most courses are repetitive. I didn't feel they gave me anything new. I could

learn more from my daily work and practices than from attending a training course” (BE12).

“Personally, I find the training opportunities are not useful... they do not represent the reality of the work environment” (BE9).

A particular criticism voiced by BE24 was that training focuses on improving employees’ skills in their present position, but does not prepare them for advancement:

“In my opinion, the provided training serves employees very well. At the same time, the bank is training us in general matters; it does not provide training on how to head higher positions in the workplace. All the bank focuses on, is developing employees in their current positions. Therefore, I wish the bank would offer courses that encourage employees to aspire to higher positions and clarify the required standards to reach these positions”.

Thus, the overall picture emerging in Org.1 was that the bank provided a regular, ongoing programme of training on various topics related to employees’ current roles and delivered in a variety of ways. The majority of the women interviewed had attended several training courses and found them beneficial, but a small number criticized their relevance or wanted more developmental training to prepare them for future opportunities.

Org.2

In Org.2, responses to questions about training focused on availability, method of delivery, and level of satisfaction. There were no specific criticisms; only expressions of the desire for more training.

Eleven interviewees (just over half of the sample in this organisation), when discussing the availability of training, mentioned specific numbers of courses, but their responses varied considerably. Some spoke of two or three training courses per year, whereas CE11, for example, spoke of receiving training only five times in eight years of employment at the company. Regarding allocation to training, CE13 explained:

“HR sends us the [list of] courses and calls the employees to tell them about the courses that each employee should have”.

CE16, however, gave a more detailed explanation, indicating:

“HR provides training courses and sends [the details] to the director. The director agrees with her employees about the appropriate courses for each employee. Then she sets a schedule from the beginning of the year. The courses are distributed to develop the employees’ skills for the work”.

However, a system of rotation or “priorities” was also reported:

“If you took courses last year, this year you have to let your colleagues attend” (CE5).

Moreover, although training was agreed to be available and (according to CE9) opportunities were the same for men and women, several women suggested that the number of opportunities had declined, and attributed this to economic pressures:

“Training currently is less than it used to be. I’m not sure if it is because of the country's low economy, which has affected the company’s finances” (CE11).

It also emerged that training was only available for employees on permanent contracts. Ironically, employees designated “trainees”, who were on short-term contracts, were not eligible for training courses. As CE14 explained:

“Now I can’t take courses, because I am working on a temporary contract, but when I was working on an annual contract (in a previous period of employment at the company, before she resigned due to pregnancy), every employee took three courses a year”.

The lack of training for short-term employees can be seen as reflecting limitations on the support for women, and could adversely affect the organisation’s image in the longer-term.

A variety of methods of training delivery were mentioned. Several participants indicated that training was provided externally, and certificated. For example,

“I got many courses inside and outside the company, with accredited certificates” (CM6).

Other employees disagreed as to the availability of external courses and reported being trained by colleagues. For example:

“At the beginning of my job, my workmate trained me on just how the work is done. When I finished working in the wanted way, I was assigned to another role and then another colleague trained me in it. I didn't take any external courses” (CE12).

Such training was especially important for employees on temporary contracts who, as noted above, were not eligible for the formal courses run by the company or external trainers. In this respect, CE18 indicated:

“The permanent employees are the ones who trained us, and they are very supportive even though our training consumes their time, so we can benefit”.

In addition, two interviewees referred to opportunities for learning by job rotation:

“I go to another department where I work with them to learn their tasks and experiences” (CE1).

“If I want to learn about other departments, my manager allows me to do so and facilitates the process” (CE5).

Whatever the form(s) of training experienced, women reported finding them beneficial and being satisfied with them. However, a widespread response (expressed by 10 participants, half of the Org.2 sample) was the wish for more training:

“We need training every year as we are asked to do more tasks” (CE8).

“I want a lot of external training courses to improve my skills” (CE12).

Moreover, CE19 suggested that such courses should be provided by specialised bodies and certified trainers, rather than by senior company staff, because “these employees have their own work pressures”.

Comparison between the two organisations

Comparing the responses from participants within Org.1 and Org.2, it appeared that employees in both organisations were generally in agreement that a variety of training opportunities are available for women. Most employees reported attending several courses, two or more per year. However, in both organisations, there were a few responses indicating a recent reduction in the number of

opportunities available, and attributing this to economic pressures. As a result, a few employees in Org.2 reported not receiving training apart from that received when they first joined the organisation. In both organisations, training reportedly took a variety of forms, external and in-house, formal and informal, and the majority of respondents expressed satisfaction. However, in Org.1, a few employees expressed criticisms of the quality and relevance of training, whereas in Org.2 the only criticism voiced (albeit a widespread one) was the need for more training. Overall, it seems that the different cultures (Saudi and international) of the two organisations produced no clear differences in the area of training. This may to some extent be attributable to the formal institutional impact of regulatory requirements, discussed in Chapter7.

5.5 Pay

The sub-theme, pay, refers to the regular monthly remuneration paid to each woman, including basic pay and any allowances (statutory entitlements, such as maternity allowances, and organisation-determined allowances for, e.g. transportation or uniform) received. Women were asked how much they earned (expressed as a broad range, rather than a specific sum) and how they perceived their pay relative to that of men. In addition, some women who perceived gender disparity in pay offered what they thought to be the reasons why this occurred. In what follows it should be noted that the reported salaries are monthly, and include allowances, where applicable. Salaries in Saudi Arabia are not subject to income Tax. 1000SR equals approximately £204.

Org.1

The majority of women in Org.1 reported earning between 11 and 15,000 SR (approx. £2240 -£3060) or less. Three women, who were managers, reported earning considerably more than 15,000 SR, while just six women earned 10,000 SR (£2400) or less. More than three quarters of the women interviewed explicitly noted that the amount they had stated was "with allowances", which accounted for a large proportion of their take-home pay. BE7, for example, explained that her basic salary was 6626 SR, but this was almost doubled to 12000 SR (approx. £2445) by allowances. Among the allowances were transportation allowances. These were available as a fixed sum (approx. 500SR or £240), to both men and women, but affected the sexes differently, because of the differences in their travel options. Men, who normally drove their own cars to work, used the allowance to buy petrol, and might not need to spend the whole allowance. In

contrast women, who at the time of the study were not allowed to drive, spent the money on private hire cars or employing a driver, which was very expensive.

Participants also reported receiving certain allowances that were payable only to women, including a "dress"/uniform allowance (1000SR £204). All women working for Org.1 were required to wear a uniform of blue trousers and jacket, with a white t-shirt, in order to present a smart corporate image. Interestingly, however, there was no uniform requirement for men and, hence, no allowance. This may be because Saudi men tend to wear, for work, the traditional costume of a long, white robe and a coloured woven head-dress, and so naturally present a uniform appearance. However, this was not a stated requirement. Thus, women's work clothing was controlled in a way men's was not.

Women who became pregnant or had young children were also entitled to maternity allowances of 850SR (approx. £172,25), and a childcare allowance for children up to six years old (the school starting age). For example, BE18 reported her salary as "10,000 SR with a nursery allowance of around 840 SR (approx. £170) for a 2-year-old kid, up to 6 years of age", while BE21 broke her salary down as follows:

"My salary is 9500 with allowances: 400 for transportation allowances and 1000 [each]for dress and housing allowances".

Of these, the transportation and housing allowances would apply to male employees also, whereas the dress allowance was only for women.

The complexities of the pay structure caused conflicting perceptions of the relative treatment of male and female employees in Org.1.

On the one hand, there were seven women who, focusing on the basic pay scales, asserted that men and women were treated equally, as indicated in the following examples:

"I think we have the same in the salaries and of course this is as a result of the development in life and the 2030 Vision" (BE12).

"Yes. [there were differences] in the past. I think now they are equal since HR works to a unified scale based on experience in the bank" (BE23).

It is interesting to note that both women see the perceived equality in pay as a departure from past practice and that BE12 in particular associates it specifically

with the 2030 Vision for socio-economic development, which seeks *inter alia*, to harness the abilities of women (see Chapter 1, section 1.1 and Chapter 2, section 2.3).

On the other hand, the majority of the interviewees (17 out of 24) perceived disparities in pay between men and women, although they interpreted such disparities in different ways. Twelve women – half the interviewees in the bank - perceived men as advantaged over women, and almost all of those expressing this view attributed the difference to the fact that men have more opportunities to reach higher pay grades (for example, the disparity between male and female branch managers and the wider range of positions available in men’s branches, reported previously). A few women, however, perceived that men were privileged in pay for cultural reasons related to the traditional constructions of male and female roles in the household (as an informal institutional factor)

“It is possible that society finds that the obligations of men are more than those of women - providing for the needs of the family” (BE14).

“Maybe as a result of social conditioning that men are the breadwinners and women are not” (BE16).

“Of course, men have higher salaries due to the social and cultural reasoning that the man is the breadwinner” (BE19).

Nevertheless, there was also a small number of women, all married, who perceived that women earn more than men, because they receive more allowances.

“Here, women are better than men in the salary because women get a maternity allowance of 838 riyals, a transfer allowance and a dress allowance. A man does not get these allowances”. (BE5)

“With regard to monthly salaries, women usually take a higher salary than men because women are entitled to conditional allowances, such as uniform and nursery allowances. So, if a female employee is on Grade 4 and a male employee is on the same grade, the salary of the woman will definitely be higher than the man’s” (BM7).

However, it can be seen that women’s allowances in Org.1, although reflecting formal organisation regulations, depend on the informal institutional impact of cultural constructions of womanhood; they ‘need’ a dress allowance in order to

maintain professional standards of smartness in public and, above all, the allowances presume and prioritise marriage and motherhood.

Moreover, two employees asserted that even the allowances paid to women did not compensate for the grade differentials caused by the organisation structure, with fewer (and lower-level) branches for women than for men. According to one of the female managers interviewed:

“Yes, men’s salaries are higher than women's, [because] men have more promotion opportunities. We have allowances for nursery and dress, but still they [men] have higher salaries. I have seven years of experience with a salary of 19,000 SR (approx. £3876), while a man with four years of experience earns 22,000 SR (approx. £4488) (BM8).

This woman’s perception is coloured by her position as a manager whereby, as a woman, she could not progress beyond Grade 6, whereas her male counterparts would be on Grade 7, as noted earlier.

To summarize, women in Org.1 reported salaries mostly in the range of 11 to 15,000 SR, with allowances; without them, it could be between 4-5, SR 000 (approx.£816-1020). Salaries for women depend on the type of job and the companies’ criteria. However, according to the Ministry of Labour, the minimum in the private sector is 3,500 SR (approx. £721). Thus, the reported salaries appear relatively generous.

However, a large proportion of this was in the form of allowances, many of which were only payable to women with children. Women saw their treatment relative to men's as dependent on the allowances to which an individual was entitled - benefiting (some) women, and the pay grade attained - benefiting men. Thus, although the bank operated a standard pay scale applicable to men and women, these two factors, allowances and grades, complicated the issue considerably.

Org.2

Salaries in Org.2 fell into two distinct groups, depending on the nature of the employee’s contract. Women working on a full-time permanent contract reported earnings from 5,000-8,000 SR (£1020-£1632) a month, whereas so-called 'trainees', working on temporary contracts, earned 3,500 SR (£721) a month. An important distinction, moreover, was that the 'trainees', unlike their permanent

colleagues, were not entitled to allowances. The difference is illustrated in these two quotations:

“[My salary] is 5,000 riyals, with housing allowance, transportation and living expenses [cost of living allowances]” (CE7).

“My salary is 3, 500 riyals, because I have [only] a secondary school certificate. I don’t get allowances, because I am working on a temporary contract” (CE14).

Since the lowest reported salary ‘with allowances’ for a permanent employee was 4,600 SR (around £940), it seems that the contribution of allowances in the salary was at least 1,100 SR (around £224). The majority of the women who reported salaries inclusive of allowances did not report in detail what allowances they received. The five women who specified the allowances named three allowances, which seemed to be payable to both men and women: a transportation allowance, housing allowance, and a high- cost - of-living allowance - the latter said to be payable only for that one year.

None of the women interviewed in Org.2 reported receiving maternity or childcare allowances. Some possible reasons for this may be suggested by comments reported earlier in this chapter: a possible preference for employing single women, women (such as CE14) resigning in pregnancy and resuming work with the company later, and the provision of a company crèche for employees with young children.

When asked about the comparability of salaries between men and women in the company, four women were unable to respond. Of those who commented on this issue, the majority (12 out of 17) expressed the belief that the company applied gender equality in salaries - any difference in pay between individuals, they thought, was due to qualifications, performance and experience, rather than gender. For example:

“There are no differences between men’s and women’s salary in the company. The salary depends on the educational certificate and experience, so if an employee has a higher educational qualification, he or she gets more salary” (CE14).

Nevertheless, a few women perceived that women were paid less than men, for a variety of reasons. A suggestion made by only one participant was that men and women may be remunerated differently because of differences in their job duties:

“Men’s salaries are higher than women’s, for many reasons. Men can go into the field and meet clients (for coffee, in restaurants etc) but we [women] cannot as we only have phone communications with clients. One of my colleagues receives 10,000 SR (£2040), which is 3,600 (around £730) more than my salary, because he is in the field more” (CE9).

A number of practical and cultural considerations underlie the difference in duties mentioned by CE9. One is the difficulty for women of making field visits under the driving ban prevailing at that time. Another is that, in Saudi Arabia’s hot climate, travelling is often arduous and uncomfortable, and the prevailing cultural construction is that men are more able to bear such conditions, while women, being more delicate, should be protected from them. Both the driving restrictions and the rationale of protection may, however, also serve as ways of sustaining traditional rules restricting women’s movement in order to maintain segregation. Thus, it is interesting to note that Org.2, although an international organisation operating a non-segregated environment, and with significant female presence in the workforce, nevertheless has to adhere to prevailing cultural norms regarding the public behaviour of female employees. As CE9 suggests, such constraints might limit the extent of female employees’ work with clients, which she saw as a reason for salary differentials.

Four participants saw salary differentials as having cultural origins, in terms of social expectations of gender roles. CE5 claimed, “Of course, the male employee receives a higher salary”, her use of “of course” apparently implying acceptance of disparity as an established fact. She went on to explain the rationale for this as rooted in cultural stereotypes of gender roles:

“I think the reason is from the society. They think that since you are a woman, you will have a man to cover your expenses, housing and living expenses, while a man has to cover home expenses and monetary commitments”.

CE8 and CE11 expressed a similar view, while CE16 explained in more detail:

“Men’s wages are higher than women’s in the same job, I think, because men have family responsibilities. That may be because, in the Saudi culture, a man is the one who looks after his wife and he is the one who, after marriage, pays the expenses of his wife and family.

According to the culture, a woman's family will pay her expenses when she is single. So, women don't have responsibilities, like men".

The idea that women are assumed not to be responsible for their own living costs seems contradictory to indications that women in Org.2 receive housing and cost-of-living allowances on the same terms as men, and indeed was a minority view in this non-segregated organisation. It also overlooks the fact that even women who are married are often expected to cover their own personal expenses. Nevertheless, it suggests the possibility of a tension within the organisation, between traditional and newer constructions of gender roles.

A third explanation for perceived gender disparities in pay was offered by CE5, quoted earlier. In addition to expressing the view that women are assumed to be financially dependent on men, she suggested, moreover, that women were more willing than men to accept a low salary because:

"Recruitment opportunities [for women] aren't that many. Even though there are many positions, the obstacle is [lack of] experience, especially for companies that ask for years of experience" (CE5).

The difficulty for women, of meeting experience criteria can be attributed to their comparatively recent entry into the workforce and admission into areas of employment that have only recently been opened up to them under changes in the law.

Comparison between the two organisations

Information about pay, and perceptions of equality or disparity compared to men, showed interesting similarities and differences in the two organisations. With regard to the amount of pay, it was seen that salaries in Org.2 were very much lower than in Org.1, on a scale of 3,000-8,000 SR as compared to 6,000-15,000 SR or more. There appear to be two major factors contributing to this differential. First, Org.1 employed women only on full-time contracts, whereas in Org.2, several of the women, classed as "trainees" were on temporary contracts, with a fixed salary at the low end of the scale -3,500 SR. The second factor was the different roles played by allowances in the two organisations. Both organisations made use of allowances, in addition to the basic pay, and these accounted for a large portion of the pay for those women who were entitled to them. However, the allowances paid, and their proportion of the salary, differed between the organisations. In Org.2, transportation, housing and cost of living allowances were paid; comparison between recipients and non-recipients suggested that these

might be worth 1,100 SR or more and account for perhaps a quarter of the salary. In contrast, in Org.1, allowances could double the salary, largely due to the addition of some allowances, specific to women (for those with children) that were not reported in Org.2. These included uniform allowance, and maternity and childcare allowances, linked to traditional cultural constructions of women's role as wives and mothers.

As for treatment relative to men, there were mixed opinions in both organisations. It was only in Org.1 that a few women thought they earned more than men, and this was explained solely in terms of the women's allowances referred to above. Other than this small group, in Org.1 the majority perceived women's pay as lower than men's, whereas in Org.2, the majority view was that men and women were paid equally. Differences in pay were, in Org1., attributed to pay grades, where men were thought to have an advantage because of the wider range of positions open to them. In contrast, in Org.2, pay differences were seen as related to differences in qualifications, performance and experience, and not to gender.

However, a small number of individuals in each organisation perceived pay disparities which they attributed specifically to women's position in society, with the assumption that they were not breadwinners, because culturally, they were expected to be provided for by their fathers or husbands. An interesting insight into the role of culture, moreover, was the suggestion by an employee in Org.2 that, in this non-segregated, female-dominated organisation, women were nevertheless constrained in their interactions with the public, which could lead to their being paid less than men. Paradoxically, in Org.1, because it was a segregated organisation serving only women, female employees could interact face-to-face with customers and take a full role in service provision. Further insights into the implications of segregated versus mixed environments, for female employees, will be discussed in the next sub-section, concerning working conditions.

5.6 Working Conditions

This sub-theme encompasses both statutory terms and conditions of employment and participants' perceptions of their working environment.

Org.1

As regards the availability of flexible work patterns for women, the bank was said not to offer, for example, part time work, job sharing, flexitime or a compressed working week. Participants worked a standard 8-hour day, with an hour in breaks

to cover the Aldhuhr and AlAsr prayer times. Moreover, they all had a statutory 22 days annual leave, which they could take at times of their choice, subject to coordination with their manager.

As participant BE7 explained:

“I can take my annual leave whenever I want to, but I also have to take my colleagues’ circumstances into consideration, because they will cover my work during my absence. In addition, I have to schedule it with the concerned management”.

In all these matters, which were part of the statutory terms and conditions of employment, women worked on the same terms as men.

Outside these arrangements, nine interviewees asserted that there was no flexibility in work patterns, but responses varied according to what individual participants perceived as reflecting flexibility, some referring to statutory provisions or standard policies in the organisation, and others to managerial discretion.

The idea of ‘flexibility’ in work was interpreted by participants in three main ways. The first was to focus on the maternity and childcare provisions mentioned earlier. For example:

“There are no flexible working patterns in the bank. We are like men in this regard and I’ve got used to it, but it only provides [concessions] to women who have a child, such as maternity leave, childcare allowance and the breastfeeding hour; for me, I do not benefit from any of them” (BM2).

“Banks give maternity leave to women in the ninth month of pregnancy; the leave is 40 days. During this period, all their work is assigned to the branch manager or to any of the employees who work in the same branch” (BE11).

“No benefit is offered to women working in the bank, only to be granted... the breastfeeding hour” (BE14).

Participants who referred to those policies made clear that they were “from the Labour Ministry and Labour Office, and not from the bank” (BM1). In other words, these are mandatory provisions under the labour law.

A second interpretation, mentioned by a small number of participants, concerned provision for sick leave, although women's understanding of the policy on this differed, as the following examples illustrate:

“For instance, if a staff member is sick and cannot come to work, she can be absent and this absence may be deducted from her annual leave, after obtaining permission from the head manager” (BM10).

“Sometimes an employee has circumstances that make him or her unable to work. Accordingly, the employee has to ask the head manager for sick leave. Some head managers are flexible in granting it and others do not allow this. According to the HRD decision, if it is a one-day absence there is no need for a medical report from the hospital; however, if it is two days or more, a medical report is required. Generally, these matters are not entirely clear for us” (BE24).

It seems surprising that “sick leave” should be granted at the discretion of the manager, and this may reflect a gap in the labour law and/or lack of clarity in the bank’s policy. It is also possible that “sick leave”, particularly for single days without a medical report, might actually be taken to cover a variety of personal circumstances other than the illness of the employee concerned. This is especially likely in the absence of any provision for leave in the case of illness of a child or spouse. For example, BM8 noted:

“When my 9-year-old daughter was admitted to hospital, I was not given leave, so I had to take it from my annual leave”.

The other interpretation of “flexibility” was the possibility of being excused late arrival or take time out of the working day, or leave early for personal reasons. Although this kind of flexibility was available, it was made clear that it was at the discretion of the branch manager. One of the managers interviewed explained her own willingness to support her employees in this way:

“I understand that employees may go through circumstances, so I allow them to leave earlier when needed. Once the manager recognizes and understands the circumstances that an employee goes through, the more productive the employee will be and the more sincere [committed, conscientious] she will be” (BM3).

Employees recognised that not all managers were equally accommodating, but agreed that a degree of tolerance in such matters was conducive to productivity.

“The more she [the manager] is flexible, co-operative, provides flexible work patterns and allows us to take permissions [for lateness, absence or early departure] and leave, the more the workplace is productive” (BE21).

One interviewee, however, suggested that managers had less discretion than in the past, and that there had been a move towards greater formality, with all absences having to be notified to HR, and deductions made from employees’ salary accordingly.

“In the past we used to agree with the branch manager on leaving work early and skipping work and we were allowed to do so if the branch manager agreed, so there was more flexibility. Now, HR has to know of latecomers, early leavers and skippers in order to deduct it from their salary. So now the bank is very strict and there is no flexibility in this regard” (BE18).

Thus, although formalized work policies protected women by giving them breaks and holidays on the same terms as men, it is possible that they brought a greater rigidity and less opportunity for women to negotiate concessions according to their personal circumstances. The same would also apply to men, but might be perceived as more difficult for women who traditionally have the responsibility for caring for children and elderly relatives.

When asked about the general working environment, almost all the Org.1 interviewees responded in terms of the high level of pressure experienced in the workplace as a result of the intensity of work demands and the long hours. For example:

“Often the employee may be asked to achieve goals that are almost impossible. In addition, customer satisfaction has to be met and any mistake made by the employee is unacceptable. Personally, I think the bank’s working environment is difficult. The bank gives a good salary, but in return, you will find you are tired of the many pressures and long hours” (BE7).

“There are huge work pressures... because we in client services are also selling products and every employee should achieve a target, and the targets are not easily achieved” (BE21).

According to BE21, one reason for work pressure was that given the decline in the country's economy, the bank's clients had less disposable income to spend on new products and services. She thought that the bank should reduce its sales targets accordingly, and that its failure to do so added to the pressure on employees.

In contrast, however, nine participants, while admitting the existence of pressure in the work environment saw this as no more than existed in any job and they were able to adapt to it. Some suggested that coping with the experience of pressure was a woman's own responsibility:

“Everywhere has difficulties and our job is to adapt to pressure” (BM13).

“This [pressure] depends on the woman herself and how she distributes her time, mission and priorities. I believe the employee can control all of this” (BE12).

“The client enters the bank very stressed and if she clashes with an employee who feels under pressure too, this will lead to problems... the employee who understands this should be patient, flexible, smile, and able to separate her personal life and problems from her work” (BE20).

Thus, while there was an almost unanimous perception that bank work involved high pressure, interviewees seemed to perceive it differently, according to their different experiences and their beliefs and expectations.

In light of their different experiences, the participants responded differently as to whether they expected to continue working for the bank. Fifteen of the women declared a clear intention to remain. However eight expressed a desire to leave, either to retire (when they had completed the required number of years of service) or to find a better job.

Org.2

In Org.2, employees worked a standard 8-hour day, with an hour in breaks. While some employees related breaks to prayer times, others also mentioned a breakfast break. There were also suggestions that there was some flexibility in how the break time was divided, and that employees could exercise some choice in this matter.

“There are breaks for praying and breakfast. I divide my breaks according to what I need. It’s the same for men” (CE7).

Not only did employees - male and female – have flexibility in the timing of their breaks, but they also had a variety of facilities available, giving them various options as to where and how to spend the break.

“For example, there is a gym in the company, I can have a break and go there. And there’s a place to smoke” (CE16).

The same employee, returning, later in the conversation, to the subject of breaks, made a particularly interesting point:

“There is a beautiful feature available only in Org.2; I can leave the company [premises] during the break” (CE16).

The participant sees this as unique, and that she does so reflects a prevailing culture in which constraints are commonly placed on women’s movements, on the rationale of ‘protection’. CE16 clearly appreciated the freedom that Org.2 offered in this respect.

Where women’s breaks differed from men’s was in the provision of the statutory 1 hour breastfeeding time for nursing mothers. One employee indicated that this hour could be taken at the beginning or end of the working day, while another cited the example of a colleague who used this entitlement in order to leave work early.

“My friend has a baby, so she leaves 1 hour before us, because she has a 1-hour break for breastfeeding” (CE18).

Another concession made for women, according to CE14, was the possibility of additional breaks for women who were feeling unwell due to menstruation.

“The employee can take her medication and take a rest for an hour or two, and she can go to the cafeteria or the mosque [prayer room] inside the building to rest”.

It is possible that Org.2’s management (see the section on promotion) may have contributed to this arrangement, which was not a part of any statutory provision.

Apart from the above-mentioned special provisions, women in Org.2 worked on the same terms as men, and this applied to areas such as leave entitlements. Any differences were related to the nature (permanent or short-term) of the contracts not to gender. Employees on a permanent contract (the majority) had a standard 22 days annual leave, which they could take at the time(s) of their choice, subject to coordination with their manager.

“I have the entire right to choose the time of my leave, based on agreement with the head manager” (CE19).

Only one employee expressed any restriction on this freedom of choice, saying:

“but I can’t take a holiday in the last month of the year, because there is work pressure” (CE16).

Employees on a short-term or “trainee” contract, did not receive the full 22 days leave; four stated that they had an entitlement to 15 days leave written in their contracts. However, CE20 claimed that as a trainee, she was not entitled to annual leave.

When asked about flexibility in work patterns, fifteen of the twenty employees in Org.2 asserted that the company was very flexible, although the majority interpreted this in terms of the timing of breaks and holidays, referred to above. There were, however, a few women who suggested the existence of other kinds of flexibility, such as the possibility of transferring between departments (CE9) and one woman claimed that home working and overtime are available.

“The company allows flexible work patterns, such as allowing a woman to work from home, and it provides overtime at two days’ salary for one day’s work. All these things help us in the workplace” (CE11).

There was also an interpretation of "flexibility" in terms of permission for late arrival, early departure, or absence, for personal reasons. This was seen as widely available and readily granted, as in the following examples:

“There aren’t any patterns, but there are flexible circumstances. Rarely do I need to leave earlier or miss work, but I’ve never had a problem if I needed to be absent or leave in an emergency” (CE3).

“If my daughter’s school calls for an urgent matter, I can leave. They tell us that our family comes first” (CE5).

“There is great flexibility with regards to absence, exit permission excuses and other matters. Employees can easily get what they want by agreement with their head manager. For example, I had an urgent situation that made me unable to attend work, so I sent an email to the HRD requesting permission for a day off. The department was very co-operative and I got the approval on the same day” (CE19).

This flexibility was available to both male and female employees, but might be more relevant to one than the other, depending on the circumstances. For example, CE5, quoted above, reflects the impact of the strict segregation in Saudi education. Girls are taught by female teachers, in girls-only schools to which men are normally not allowed admittance. If a problem arises with a pupil, the teacher will call the girl’s mother. Similarly, if a problem arises in a boy’s school, the (male) teacher will call the boy’s father. The social constraints on mixing between the sexes are so strongly upheld that it is difficult for a teacher to have a private conversation with a parent of the opposite sex, even for professional reasons. In such a culture, both men and women may be called away from work by family obligations and appreciate some tolerance on the part of their employers.

With so much flexibility reportedly available in working arrangements, women in Org.2 generally declared themselves satisfied with the working environment. Although 16 interviewees mentioned pressure arising from the large volume of work, all but three claimed to find it tolerable, noting that pressure is inevitable in any job, that the company did its best to relieve the pressure by taking on temporary staff during busy periods, and that the physical environment was comfortable. CE13, for example, mentioned the “comfortable offices and calm atmosphere”, while CE17 said employees were provided with “all the facilities we need”. In this situation, all but two of the interviewees expressed a wish to continue working in Org.2. This applied even to those on short-term contracts. As CE18 declared:

“Insha Allah [God willing] I will prove myself in this job until I become a permanent employee”.

Comparison between the two organisations

In comparing between the working conditions in the two organisations, a distinction can be made between the statutory provisions under the labour law, and those areas where the organisations had a degree of discretion.

In terms of statutory provision, both organisations adhered to the current regulations regarding working hours, leave entitlements, and the national provisions related to maternity and motherhood. The only difference between them, with regard to the formal, contractual arrangement, was that Org.2 had a few staff on temporary contracts who were not entitled to the full 22 days annual leave.

With regard to the more discretionary elements, there seemed to be considerable differences in the two settings, with much more flexibility available in Org.2 than in Org.1. Compared to Org.1, interviewees in Org.2 reported more flexibility in the timing of their breaks, which were not necessarily confined to prayer times and had the facilities to spend their breaks in more varied ways, as well as being allowed to spend them off the premises. Women in Org.2 also reported greater tolerance and flexibility with regard to time off for personal reasons. In this respect, the situation in Org.1 was said to have become less flexible, with a move towards more formal procedures, as opposed to relying on managerial discretion.

As for the work environment, employees in both organisations reported the existence of pressure, related to workload and the drive to meet targets. However, women in Org.2 seemed more inclined to believe they could cope with the pressure and referred to various compensatory factors in the work environment. This may help to explain why only two of the interviewees in Org.2 expressed any wish to change jobs, whereas a third of those in Org.1 were hoping to move.

Table 5.1 summarises the results of comparison between Org.1 and Org.2 based on theme 1.

Table 5.1: Comparison between the Two Organisations – Theme 1

Category	Subcategory	Code	Org.1	Org.2
1. Recruitment	Attraction	Job security	Attracted 3 women	-
	Method/ Criteria	Online	About half the women were recruited by formal means; selection more rigorous than formally	Mentioned by a large proportion, but not always a deciding factor if other skills were available
		Interviews tests	-	-
		Qualification/ Experience	Related specialisation Western qualifications preferred	Flexible
		<i>Wasta</i>	Half participants learned of job and/or had support in application through friends/relatives	Conscious attempts to discourage <i>wasta</i> - used by only 5 women
		Trainees	Not applicable	New phenomenon of temporary employment in busy periods
	Incentives	Maternity allowance, breastfeeding hour	Mandatory under labour law	Mandatory under labour law
		Others	-	Creche, home working, "nice offers"
	Commitment to Female Employment	Necessity	Women employees	Female majority
		Govt Policy under Vision 2030	Required by segregation	Perception of gender neutrality
			-	Single preferred

Table 5.1 (continued)

Category	Subcategory	Code	Org.1	Org.2
2. Promotion	Criteria	Performance/ experience	Employee evaluation based on the “performance card”	Promotion mainly based on manager’s evaluation. Gender neutral.
		Customer feedback	High weight attached to ratings on “Client’s Voice”	Not mentioned
		<i>Wasta</i>	Perceived by 3 women to influence promotion	Not mentioned
	Constraints	Speed	Promotion slow	Promotion slow
		Positions	Fewer positions available in women’s than men’s branches	Opportunities demonstrated by number of female managers
		Pay grade	Women restricted to Grade 6; men can reach Grade 7	Not mentioned
		Family	Women more likely to leave because of marriage, children	Not mentioned

Table 5.1 (continued)

Category	Subcategory	Code	Org.1	Org.2
3. Training	Availability	Number	1-4 courses per year	Highly variable; some less than once a year
		Allocation	By branch manager according to employee needs	Agreed between director and employees based on list from HR
		Reduction	Reduction in training perceived to be due to the high cost	Reduction attributed to economic pressures; only for employees with permanent contracts
	Method	External	Mandatory courses provided by SAMA	Many certified courses
		Cascade	Mentioned by 1 woman	-
		On the job rotation	Mentioned by 1 woman	-
		Job rotation		Especially for temps, mentioned by 2 women
	Satisfaction	Yes	Around three-quarters	
		No	Low quality; not certified	No criticism mentioned; only a wish for more
		Mixed	Too repetitive and theoretical	
4. Pay		Amount earned	Majority earned 11-15,000 SR/month	Permanent 5-8,000 SR Temporary 3,500 SR
		Allowances	Transportation Uniform Maternity Childcare Housing	Transportation Cost of living (1 year) Maternity Childcare Housing
		Gender disparity	Some thought men earned more; others that women earned more due to allowances	Majority perceived equality with men; a few perceived disparity

Table 5.1 (continued)

Category	Subcategory	Code	Org.1	Org.2
5. Working conditions	Statutory provision	Contract	All permanent, full time	Most permanent, full-time a few temporary
		Hours	8 hours p/d	9 hours p/d
		Breaks	1 hr to cover prayer times	1 hr or more covering prayers + breakfast; flexible
		Holidays	-	22 days per year (or up to 15 for temps)
		Motherhood	Mandatory concessions for women with children	Mandatory concessions for women with children
		Flexibility	Some managerial discretion to grant leave of absence	Timing of breaks + leaves; possibility of transfers, home working, overtime
	Pressure	High, due to sales targets and customer ratings	Pressure perceived to exist, but seen as tolerable	
	Environment	Physical environment	-	Comfortable offices. Good facilities for breaks – e.g. gym

Table 5.1 (continued)

5.7 Summary

This chapter has provided an analysis of data arising from interviews in Org.1 and Org.2 in relation to the first theme. This theme addressed HRM policies and practices in the two organisations in the areas of recruitment, promotion, training, pay and working conditions, and the extent to which these respond to labour law. In both organisations, recruitment was said to be more formalized than previously, with stricter requirements. Nevertheless, *wasta* played a large part in recruitment especially in Org.1. The impact of labour law was felt in the mandatory maternity allowances and the concession of one hour per day breastfeeding time for nursing mothers, available in both organisations. Other incentives, such as home working options, mentioned only in Org.2.

Promotion opportunities based on performance were available in both organisations, but in Org.1 these were strongly influenced by ratings in customer satisfaction surveys. Moreover, in the bank, there were fewer positions available for women than men, and women managers were appointed on Grade 6, other

rather than 7, like men. Training was available in both organisations, but opportunities had reportedly decreased, although mandatory training by SAMA was mentioned in Org.1. The quality of training was, however, criticised.

Pay was higher in Org.1 than in Org.2 (perhaps because Org.2 employed staff with more basic skills, and also because Org.2 offered other incentives and perquisites) and included various statutory allowances, although some of these benefited only married women with children. In Org.1, legislation on pay equality seemed to be contravened by the lower pay given to female managers than male, on the basis that they managed “offices” rather than “branches”. However, in Org.2, the majority perception was that men and women were paid equally. Statutory terms and conditions of employment were observed in both organisations, e.g., holiday entitlement and concession for women with children, but some flexibility in working hours was available at managerial discretion, especially in Org.2. Both environments involved work pressure, but in Org.2, this was perceived to be alleviated by the comfortable physical environment and availability of social facilities.

Overall, the data suggest that, where clear provisions existed in the Saudi Labour Law, such as statutory provisions benefiting married women with children (maternity and children allowances, for example) the two organisations complied with them and the additional safeguards provided by the regulatory role of SAMA contributed to make employment in this sector attractive to women who could meet the increasingly stringent criteria. In general, statutory terms and conditions of employment gave women parity with men. However, in Org.1, in practice, the smaller number and size of branches made fewer positions available for women than for men, affecting both promotion and pay prospects. Moreover, the designation of women - only premises as “offices” rather than branches allowed the equal pay principle to be circumvented, confining women to grade 6 on the pay scale. In other areas, silence or ambiguity in the law left scope for managerial discretion in matters such as sick leave and breaks and for the continued presence of *wasta* . In general, despite the lower pay in Org.2, women working there expressed greater satisfaction and perceptions of opportunity than those in Org.1.

Chapter Six: Interview Findings II

Theme 2: Employment Relations and Workplace Climate

6.1 Introduction

This theme addresses the second research question, concerning the extent to which female employees perceived the workplace climate as supportive to them. Whereas the first theme concerned specific practices, this theme is concerned with women's perceptions of the organisation more broadly, and reflects a mixture of formal and informal institutional impacts (although, as with Chapter Five, institutional factors are only briefly noted here, paving the way for the detailed attention to institutional impacts as the subject of RQ3, in Chapter Seven. The data falls into four categories: employee involvement, treatment of women compared to men, personal control, and work-life balance.

6.2 Employee Involvement

This category is concerned with the extent of employee involvement, including the extent to which they are able to offer ideas and express concerns to management, the frequency and content of communication between them and the perceived responsiveness of management in listening to women and acting on their ideas and concerns. It should be noted that there is no specific legislation in Saudi Arabia regarding employment relations matters such as the provision of mechanisms for employee involvement, and there are no trade unions. The nature and scope of employees' communications with management, and their potential impact, are therefore matters of management discretion. Soltani et al. (2018), highlight this as a typical situation in the Middle East, and assert that there is a lack of employee involvement mechanisms in the region. Where formal channels and mechanisms exist, they can be seen as part of the formal institution of organisation policies and practices. However, the availability or absence of such mechanisms, the form they take and the way they are used also reflect the impact of informal attitudes and norms.

Org.1

Participants in Org.1 generally expressed perceptions that they were given opportunities for involvement in the organisation. This was reflected in a multiplicity of ways in which they could express their ideas and concerns to management either directly or via HR. Three mentioned the filing of formal complaints, which according to BM23 progressed upward through the management hierarchy, starting with the branch manager then, if necessary, the

area and regional manager. The majority said they could contact management and/or HR by telephone, email, or in person. In this respect, it was pointed out that there was an “open line” to facilitate such contacts, as BE3 pointed out:

“Yes, any employee can raise her concerns to the management. There is also an open line to the management, HR, the area manager and the regional manager”.

In addition, several interviewees referred to a website called “Employees’ Voice”. This website seems to serve multiple purposes. Some employees referred to it as a general website “dedicated to employees’ ideas and concerns” (BE6) through which employees could raise “whatever matter” (BM10). However, the website also appeared to include a function comparable to 360° evaluation, whereby employees were given the opportunity at regular intervals (every six months) to evaluate their managers and colleagues.

“Yes, employees can raise their concerns to the manager, and there is ‘Employees’ Voice’, which is an evaluation every 6 months. The employee evaluates the manager and her co-workers and then this evaluation goes to the upper management” (BE12).

This use of the website is not an employee involvement mechanism in the generally accepted sense (see section 2.3 in the literature review) and the use of the website for this purpose suggests a lack of understanding of the different purposes of communication with management. There is a danger that, if employees perceive the website as an evaluation tool, this may deter them from using it to raise other issues (no employee specifically made this claim, but BE11 suggested, without giving a reason, that sometimes employees are “afraid” to raise problems and complaints).

The use of “Employees’ Voice” in this way raises questions about the depth of employee involvement mechanisms in the organisation, in terms of the areas in which employee input is allowed or enabled (Barry et al., 2018), since such matters are decided by management according to their interests (Donaghey et al., 2011a). This issue is discussed further, later in this section.

In addition to the formal ‘voice’ mechanisms, one interviewee referred to more informal communication via WhatsApp:

“Yes, we can share our fears and concerns with the manager and we already have a WhatsApp group to contact the area manager and in

the case of an urgent problem, a female employee can communicate with the manager directly” (BE17).

A potential disadvantage of the WhatsApp group is its public nature, which might deter employees from using it to express their needs and concerns beyond day-to-day operational issues, and no indication was given of it being used in this way. The only employee who mentioned it appeared to be referring simply to the opportunity to raise operational problems.

There were, however, a number of dissenting voices on the subject of the accessibility of management, or the ease of using the channels and mechanisms available. BE3, for example, said it was difficult to contact HR BE24 suggested it was not clear who to talk to while BE5 claimed that:

“[since] our responsibilities are great, we do not have time to raise our complaints to the management”.

BE5 implied that the workload and pressure imposed on women constituted an indirect barrier to the use of opportunities for involvement.

BE15 suggested that in practice, very few employees raise issues to management. She seemed reluctant to explain further, and hesitated, but eventually responded, “A bank is a bank, in the end”. She meant that, as a profit-oriented institution, the bank had certain interests and priorities which would always come first, regardless of any concerns raised by employees. Thus, at different levels, the economic system, the sector and the banking profession, all exert institutional impacts that limit the power of employees, regardless of gender. The same point was made more explicitly by a few other employees, as indicated below in the discussion of management responsiveness. Employees may think that to raise problems and complaints in a public forum, would jeopardize their jobs (Dwomoh, 2012). The institutional structuring of involvement opportunities through the “Employees’ Voice” website, which is also an evaluative tool, may contribute to such perceptions. Depending on how organisations respond to expressions of employee’ concerns and interests, they can create a culture of silence that deters involvement.

Whereas the types of communications discussed above occurred on an ad hoc basis, there were also formal communications institutionalised through regular meetings. The frequency of these differed according to the level(s) of hierarchy involved. For example, 17 participants indicated that short meetings (sometimes during break times) were held between managers and their teams every day.

Meetings involving area and regional managers were said to be held weekly, while meetings with top management might take place two or three times a year. The most frequently stated purpose of those meetings, mentioned by 12 women, was to discuss objectives. Other frequently mentioned topics were problems and how to solve them, and client satisfaction. For example, according to BM10:

“The main objective of holding daily meetings is to motivate employees to produce more and provide the best [service] to customers. In addition, working hard to make the bank the best choice of customers”.

Another participant, BE24, more clearly reflected the wide and varied purposes of meetings, while also identifying them as another forum in which employees could report problems:

“Every day, the meeting has its own objective or idea to be discussed collectively. Staff can also discuss the problems and challenges they faced during the week, so that they can easily avoid them in the future. In addition, the discussion may include new information, products, procedures, and so on”.

It seems from the above comments that the main purpose of meetings was to address management interests such as productivity, rather than as an explicit mechanism for employee involvement. Even the ‘problems and challenges’ mentioned by BE24 would likely be of an operational kind, and the notion that raising problems in a meeting would enable employees to ‘easily avoid’ them in future supports this interpretation, as it suggests the provision of normative solutions seen as unquestioned and unproblematic in their application. Indeed, more sensitive issues would be difficult to raise in such a public forum.

While the above data suggest that managers were accessible to employees and that various formal (e.g. the website and meetings) and informal (the WhatsApp group) means of communication with them were available, opinions differed on whether managers were responsive to employees’ ideas and concerns. A number of women said that although management listened to them, they were not necessarily able or willing to act to resolve the issue.

“Sometimes the administration responds, but for the most part they do not respond, and they say, “This is the situation and you have to accept it” (BE1).

“The management always listens to female employees but does not always solve the problem and can take a long time” (BE4).

BE18, moreover, claimed that management responded ‘in a way that suits them’ and reported that when a friend raised a problem regarding the branch manager, not only was the matter not resolved, but her friend was told to cooperate with her manager, “accept the reality” and not make trouble. Such responses call into question the impact or effectiveness of women’s involvement and the provision of channels for voice does not constitute a sharing of power, or provide a guarantee that the issues raised will be heeded. In such a circumstance, women have only ‘voice without muscle’ (Kaufman and Taras, 2010).

It is interesting to note that when women spoke of raising issues to management, they seemed generally to be talking about raising problems and complaints, rather than making suggestions. Cohen et al. (2013) refer to such comments as ‘venting’, i.e. intended solely for the release of negative feeling rather than bringing constructive change, and argues that this is not what is meant by employee involvement.

Others had a more favorable perception. For example, BE9 claimed:

“Yes, the management always listens to employees and their needs, and strives to meet these needs properly and quickly”.

Nevertheless, it can be questioned whether the bank’s sole concern was employees’ comfort and satisfaction for their own sake. As BE20 suggested:

“The management cares that employees are comfortable and don’t have problems so they can be productive”.

Two factors were suggested as influencing the bank’s response to women's ideas and concerns. The first was the number of women involved in expressing a particular view; it was suggested that the management would not take notice of individual opinions, but might be influenced by multiple voices:

“The management cannot listen to [only] one. They may listen if we presented the matter as a group in the long run” (BE19).

This was, however, the only expression of such a view and the woman concerned did not refer to any specific exercise of collective power. Indeed, all the women’s responses in relation to employee involvement seemed to suggest that women viewed it primarily in terms of expressing and finding solutions to their own

immediate problems, rather than serving the pro-social function assumed in much of the literature (Van Dyne et al, 2003).

A more frequently mentioned factor, however, was that the interests of the bank would always take priority, and any issues raised by employees would be evaluated from this perspective, as these excerpts illustrate:

“The administration listens to every problem but takes into account what suits the bank most” (BE3).

“Mostly there are no solutions unless these solutions will be beneficial, first, for the bank” (BE12).

“The management responds to the “Employee’s Voice” but the response has to be in the bank’s interest too” (BE2).

Such comments suggest, again, that employees’ involvement in the organisation has little ‘depth’ or ‘muscle’.

Thus, in Org.1, the picture of relations with management was mixed. On one hand, the women interviewed generally found management accessible and willing to listen, but there were suggestions that problems might not be resolved, and that the response to ideas and concerns depended on their alignment with the bank’s interest. The seeming belief by the majority of the employees that they had opportunities for involvement suggests their limited understanding of the idea and the low level of their expectations.

Org.2

In Org.2, again, management was seen as accessible by various channels, such as telephone and direct contact, and concerns could be raised either with the manager concerned or with HR.

“Any employee can reach out to the management and it is very helpful and always tends to resolve our issues. I can discuss [my concern] with HR by calling them or going to them personally” (CE3).

While the majority of participants in Org.2 responded in similar terms, referring to telephone or personal contacts with the direct manager and/or HR, one participant mentioned a channel not referred to by any of her colleagues:

“We have a program called “Speak Up” in Org.2. We can raise any issue or complaint that worries us on this program. Then, an email will be sent to the management without mentioning the name of the

complainant or the one against whom the complaint is made, and the management will act as required” (CE14).

The “Speak Up” program appears to be fairly typical employee involvement mechanism, which may reflect Org.2’s international nature and origins in a place (the UK) where such individual, direct mechanisms are common (Gomez et al., 2009). A strength of this program, as described by CE14, is the respect for anonymity. The suggestion that management would respond without revealing the name of the complainant is important; it de-personalizes the issue, focusing on the concern itself rather than the personalities and relations between individuals, and it provides the complainant with protection from the repercussions that might ensue if her identity were made public. This, therefore, removes one of the sources of fear that may deter employees from raising their concerns.

Communication was also institutionalized through regular meetings, although the regularity of their occurrence was contested. The topics most frequently said to be discussed at these meetings were objectives (mentioned by 11 women), weaknesses and problems (mentioned by six women). Four simply stated, without elaboration, that the meetings concerned “weekly tasks”. Very few answered in more specific terms. However, an interesting comment by CE16 provided insight into the pressures facing Org.2 and driving its concerns:

“We have to know about every change made by SAMA. Also, the Saudi economy has declined, so we are afraid of losing our customers, because of the lack of cash. We try to keep our customers and serve them very well, as much as we can. We have to make our services beyond excellent, because Org.2 is the most expensive insurance company in Saudi Arabia”.

Although this situation put pressure on the company, management found opportunities to thank and reward employees for their efforts, as indicated by CE9 and CE15:

“Meetings [are held] for [discussion of] performance issues or work pressure and how to achieve goals.... Sometimes the employee returns to his or her desk to find a present, in order to alleviate pressure” (CE9).

“In addition, there will be a meeting to thank the employees for achieving the daily or monthly goals” (CE15).

In addition to the positive perceptions regarding employee involvement and communications with management, female employees in Org1 also expressed favourable views of management responsiveness. Fifteen of the twenty interviewees indicated that management listened and, moreover, usually took action to deal with any issues raised:

“It solves the issue quickly after hearing from all parties” (CE2).

“As for HR, they always listen... I had an issue in the past, which they solved, and I was very happy with the solution” (CE4).

Whilst the majority of these women simply expressed managers’ and HR efforts to respond to women's concerns CE15 elaborated by providing a specific example.

“The company works hard to find a solution to any problem facing an employee in the work environment. For instance, my co-worker was verbally harassed by an employee in the company. After the complaint was submitted to HR, the next morning, the manager met with the employee. Then he met with all the staff in the department individually to ask about the behaviour of this harasser, until it was proved to him. Then he was moved to another section, completely isolated from the female staff”.

In the above case, where the issue was one of employee well-being and comfort in the workplace, management responded swiftly. Employees’ comments in evaluation of managers were also said to bring response; a manager who received many unfavourable comments might not be retained in the same position, so

“Our comments make a difference” (CE10).

However, a few employees suggested that where work related ideas and concerns were raised, the company's interest would be considered:

“Management usually responds to whatever idea or concern might be suggested by an employee, but only if the proposed idea or concern is reviewed to see whether it will benefit the company or not” (CE19).

Despite a few such reservations, however, the overall perception of relations with management in Org2 was very positive.

As observed in the literature, employee involvement is a subjective perception that need not correlate with objective provisions in the workplace (Settles et al.,

2007). Nevertheless, the indications from the interviews in Org2 were that women felt they had opportunities to express ideas, opinions and concerns, and that they were listened to and could make a difference. Such feelings might be expected to encourage them to speak out, especially given the protection of anonymity, which would potentially provide a means to challenge and address any perceived unfairness or a disadvantage. Their awareness that the response would depend on the company's interests illustrates the way employee involvement is embedded in an institutional context that influences whether and how it is used (Barry and Wilkinson, 2016).

Comparison between the Two Organisations

Employees in both Org1 and Org2 expressed favourable opinions regarding the opportunities available to make their voices heard. Women in both organisations indicated that management both department managers and HR managers were accessible and that ideas and concerns could be communicated in a number of ways. They had the opportunity to speak at regular meetings or could communicate with the individual or department concerned in person, by telephone, or by email. In addition, specific mechanisms existed in each organisation- 'Employees' Voice' in Org.1 and 'Speak Up' in Org.2 - to facilitate employees' communication to management.

Responses, however, showed a limited understanding and use of employee involvement. For employees this was mainly concerned with problems and complaints, or with raising day-to-day operational issues, especially in Org.1. The situation in Org.1 was confused by the dual role of the "Employees' voice" website as an evaluation tool, which might deter employees from using it to raise their concerns. A further difficulty in Org.1 was the public nature of the channels available, a further deterrent as women feared the consequences, thereby contributing to create a culture of silence, contrary to the rhetoric of employees' right to express their voice. In this respect, visibility could be said to act as a control mechanism, restricting the range of issues in which women could be involved, since they would not want to be seen as trouble-makers.

Moreover, perceptions differed as to the extent of management responsiveness. Although management in both organisations were said to listen to employees, those in Org.1 appeared to be less able or willing to respond. Whereas only three women in Org.2 suggested the organisation did not respond, or that its response was variable, 12 women voiced such perceptions in Org.1. There were, however,

indications in both organisations (although more particularly in Org1) that the organisation's interest would influence any action taken, raising questions about how much impact or 'muscle' women actually had, in shaping their working environment.

6.3 Treatment Compared to Men

In Theme1 (Chapter 5) some reported disparities in treatment between men and women were noted in areas such as pay and promotion. While that chapter concerned specific HR policies and practices, which can be seen as formal institutional factors, this section is concerned with women's broader perceptions related to equality or inequality, which reflect not only these formal factors but also informal factors in the organisation and national culture.

Org.1

When asked how they felt they were treated, compared to male employees, two interviewees in the bank declined to answer, on the basis that working in a segregated environment, they did not know how men were treated in the organisation. The majority, however, expressed opinions that male and female employees were treated equally. For example, BE7 responded:

“Women are treated equally with men in all aspects, whether in the provided incentives, responsibilities or obligations”.

This may seem surprising, given the perceptions reported in Theme 1 that men have more opportunities than women in terms of the positions available to them, and the pay grades they could reach. It seems that participants may have had different understandings of what might be covered by the idea of “treatment”. Specifically, women who perceived equality (including BE7) were thinking only about daily services and transactions between manager and employee, and not considering the wider issues of salary or opportunity for advancement; it can be seen above that BE7 made no reference to job positions or pay in her comment.

In contrast, other participants gave mixed responses, such as the following:

“When it comes to treatment, men are treated like women. But more positions are available for men than for women” (BE16).

“They are treated equally in terms of procedures but we are not equal when it comes to promotion” (BE19).

Thus, it seemed that most interviewees claimed that equality existed between the sexes in everyday dealings, work expectations and indeed, salaries (for those on the same pay grade). It is important to recognize, however, that with few exceptions, those women did not have direct knowledge or experience of the treatment of male colleagues. In contrast, a few women noted that, in practice, men can surpass women in promotion. It is also worth noting that equality tended to be perceived more by employees than managers, because managers were affected by the difference in the pay grades attainable (see Theme1, section 5.2.4).

There were, moreover, a few women who stated that men were better treated generally. An example is BE11's claim, quoted in section 5.2.2, that men and women were treated differently when it came to response to the 'Client's Voice' customer survey program, on which clients were asked to post comments and complaints about the service received.

This participant based her claims on information from her two brothers, who were employed in the men's section of the same bank. No one else mentioned this point and it was not possible to verify the claim, but the experiences reported by this participant's brothers constitutes a valuable source of secondary evidence, and the comment certainly indicates a perception on this employee's part that women were less valued by the organisation than men, and that their employment was less secure.

Among employees who perceived that men receive favourable treatment, two suggested that the reason lay in cultural restrictions that prevented women from forming useful networks of relationships with senior management (who are all men). For example, BE2 made the following comments:

“There is a domination of men over women in the bank. The administration listens to men more than women. A male employee has many relationships and relations with men in higher departments, while a woman cannot form such relationships because of the laws and community customs that govern her by not allowing association with men”.

Similarly, BE16 claimed:

“Our concerns do not reach the higher administration as we are prevented from forming relations with men in this society”.

These comments suggest that the formal equality expressed in legal provisions could, nevertheless, be undermined by cultural norms that constrain women's involvement and opportunity for agency, through lack of development opportunities networking and access to alternative perspectives and restriction of communications to a specific chain of command. This results in a lack of access to those with power and influence. Neither woman explicitly mentioned *wasta*, but the importance of personal relationships in Saudi society has been mentioned previously, and in such a society, those who do not have such relationships - often women - are at a disadvantage. This is not solely about *wasta* but illustrates how cultural restrictions in the wider society are replicated and reinforced in organisational structures that may contribute to impede women's progress.

Despite such perceptions, there were, nevertheless, two interviewees who expressed the belief that women were actually treated better than men, or at least received special consideration. BE12 agreed that:

“The bank treats women respectfully and really take into consideration their circumstances”.

Her colleague, BE9, cited the following example of what she considered to be favourable treatment:

“The bank often considers women more than men. For example, all women's branches are closed during the official holidays, while some men's branches are open”.

This may be a concession to female employees, allowing them to spend the holiday with their families (as this interviewee appeared to believe) or it may simply be that the demand for service among female clients is low at these times, because women are generally busy at home with domestic responsibilities such as looking after children, cooking and so on. Whatever the rationale, this practice would apply on only a few days in the year, whereas the differences women perceived in promotion opportunities or the disadvantages would be ongoing, with lasting effects. Thus, it seems there are tensions and contradictions inherent in women's experiences in the bank environment. On the one hand, they perceive themselves to be respected but on the other, the consideration given to them seems to be confined within certain boundaries, and in other respects, the bank seems to perpetuate constraints that disadvantage women.

Org.2

When asked about their treatment compared to that of men, none of the women in this mixed organisation expressed a perception that they suffered from discrimination. All answered using the words ‘fairly’ or ‘equal/alike’. Seven simply gave the one-word answer, ‘fairly’, while CE18 expressed the reason for her perception of the organisation’s fairness:

“They deal with you based on your academic position and work quality”.

In other words, any differences in her perception were based on merit irrespective of gender. Since men and women work alongside each other in the same department, women in Org.2 would be able to form their perceptions based on their observation of day to day dealings in the workplace.

Other participants expressed their perceptions of equal treatment:

“Both men and women are treated alike. There is no difference between them. They are the same in everything, and the manager could be a woman, so there is no difference at all” (CE14).

“In Org.2, women are treated exactly like men. There is no distinction between them, and opportunities are given for both” (CE15).

These are expressions of personal opinion and cannot be supported by objective evidence, beyond a common pay- scale and the number of women in managerial positions. Nevertheless, whatever women considered to be encompassed by ‘equal treatment’ (which might include, for instance, workload, expectations for attendance and time-keeping, day-to-day respect and courtesy in speech and behaviour, and many more, although not explicitly mentioned) it is interesting that they all expressed favourable perceptions.

In addition, three women expressed perceptions that women may have the advantage. CE5 suggested that:

“Women are treated equally and maybe better than men because they [the company] take into account personal circumstances”.

Moreover, CE9 claimed that “women have more rights than men”. She did not specify what she meant and may have been referring to the various allowances and concessions available to women (maternity and childcare allowances; the

breastfeeding hour). However, a further insight into special consideration given to women within the company was provided by CM6, who explained:

“There are rules against harassment and surveillance cameras in every corner of the company and no harassment has happened, thank God, but this is to preserve the women’s rights”.

It is notable that CE6, in claiming that there had been no case of harassment, contradicted the report by her employer, CE15, quoted earlier. It is possible that CE6 was thinking of physical assault, rather than the verbal harassment that CE15 described, or it may simply be that she did not want to admit the occurrence of any harassment, to protect the company's image, especially as the matter had been speedily resolved. Her main concern was to demonstrate that the company provided protection for its female employees.

From another perspective, the constant exercise of surveillance could be seen as an invasion of privacy. The use of CCTV (which would affect both men and women, since they work in the same areas) could also be interpreted as a control mechanism and used to verify that employees are working in the manner expected by the institution. Awareness of such monitoring can increase work pressure and be a source of great stress. There is no evidence as to whether the cameras were used in that way in Org.2 -for example, there were no reports of sanctions being imposed on any employee because of camera evidence of deficiencies or omissions in work behaviour.

It may be questioned whether harassment, the stated reason for surveillance, would be a serious problem in a society where behaviour is strongly governed by religious norms. However, in a country where the employment of women in mixed settings is relatively new and still controversial, and the danger of harassment invoked to justify constraints on women’s activities, this surveillance may provide a sense of safety and reassurance, not only to women but to those (such as fathers and husbands) who influence their work options. At the same time, the organisation gains legitimacy as a ‘respectable’ organisation by preserving and enforcing socially accepted norms of behaviour.

Comparison between the Two Organisations

Perceptions of the treatment of women, compared to men, appeared to be somewhat more favourable in Org.2 than in the bank. In Org.2, all interviewed women expressed the view that they were treated fairly or equally with men. Whilst the majority of interviewees in the bank also declared equality with men,

there were a few who perceived disadvantage to women in the areas of position and promotion (which in turn would affect the pay grade attainable).

There were also suggestions that women's involvement and opportunity in the organisation were limited due to the social norms that prevented them from developing useful relationships with (male) senior management. Nevertheless, in Org.1, as in Org.2, a small number of employees perceived that women were treated favourably or given special consideration.

6.4 Personal Control

The "control" category reflects interviewees' perceptions of the extent to which they had control in the workplace, and freedom to make their own decisions, reflecting a complex mixture of formal regulatory pressures and informal social pressures. Control includes perceptions of autonomy (the ability to control behaviour) and impact (the ability to control outcomes) (Brockner et al., 2004), although in practice, interviewees focused on the former.

Org.1

Eight women in Org1 expressed the view that they were in control, while a similar proportion (nine) claimed to be controlled. A further six indicated that they had partial control or autonomy; in other words, they had control and decision-making power in some areas but not in others.

A third of the participants in the bank expressed beliefs that they were totally in control in their work, and free to make their own decisions, as the following examples illustrate:

"I am not restricted in regard to my work. As an employee I've found comfort and freedom in all aspects of the work, and the management always provides assistance to facilitate the work of its staff, although it may state certain procedures or policies to be followed" (BE11).

"I am not restricted at all in my workplace. Personally, I do not consider any laws or regulations imposed on employees as restrictions, but to enforce respect for the workplace" (BE9).

As both the above excerpts show, these women acknowledged the existence of rules and regulations in the workplace, but did not consider these as an infringement on their personal autonomy in relation to their work, but as a natural and necessary part of the job. By "respect for the workplace" for example, BE9 seemed to mean the preservation of standards of professionalism expected in

banking, whether in appearance and manner of interacting with others, or the consistent and accurate completion of work procedures. Nevertheless, a number of participants felt more constrained. Even among managers, there were some who described limits to their autonomy and authority. Among them were BM3 and BM16, who elaborated on the limits to their authority and the situations in which they might have to refer a matter to a higher level of the hierarchy. For example, BM3 commented:

“I am limited to some extent. There are cases where I have to refer to the area manager. I can make any decision with regard to my employees... For example, if a client mistreated an employee [e.g. by subjecting her to verbal abuse] I have to consult the management. I cannot decide on my own. Working in the bank is very sensitive and an individual decision may end your career”.

Another manager, BM16, explained that she could make decisions, but:

“It has to be approved by HR. Because I may make decisions whilst being very angry, and HR will make the right decision”.

Such decisions might include, for example whether or how to sanction an employee whose behaviour or work was unsatisfactory. She also expressed a feeling that she could not always speak her mind for fear of giving offence, and would sometimes let an employee’s words or behaviour pass, because if she sanctioned the employee concerned, she might face “unfair evaluations” from Employees’ Voice, the website referred to earlier, which (contrary to its name, and to the concept of ‘voice’ in the literature) also served as a channel for a type of 360° evaluation. BM16 was concerned that if she criticized or disciplined an employee, the latter could retaliate by using the 6- monthly evaluation to express an unfairly (possibly even false) negative appraisal of her manager.

Since the appraisal would be read by top management, it might have repercussions for the manager’s career. In other words, the system intended to allow employees to voice their concerns might be misused for personal grievances, and the manager's awareness of the importance attached to these online evaluations made her wary of inviting criticism and constrained her ability to deal with issues as she might wish. Thus, whether intentionally or not, the website purportedly provided (and, from the interviews, perceived) as an

employee involvement channel actually induced anxiety and constrained behaviour, suggesting a lack of real support by the organisation.

Whilst these participants expressed a view that, in general, they had control over their work and decisions depending on the nature of the issue, a third of the women interviewed in Org.1 claimed to feel very constrained in work. For example:

“I find that I am very restricted in my work, because it’s pure routine” (BE7).

“I have no freedom at all in making decisions because there are procedures and rules. I consult my manager. Because it is a monetary authority, you cannot make any decisions” (BE15).

Participants also mentioned feeling restricted by policies such as the requirement to wear uniform:

“It’s restricted from the dress side and the general look” (BE12).

“99.99 percent I am not in control and sometimes I feel like a child in school, not in a workplace. The bank policy is strict when it comes to dress, make-up and hairstyle” (BE15).

Comparing the above views with those of BE9 and BE7 quoted earlier, it seems that the participants had diverse views on various aspects of bank policy; some perceived the regulations as necessary and appropriate, while others resented them. In terms of actual decision-making, however, the degree of autonomy seemed to depend on women’s position (employees were more constrained than managers) and the issues they had to deal with.

Org.2

Half the women in Org.2 expressed perceptions that they were fully in control in the workplace, although several gave answers such as “I am not tied at work” (CM6) or “I do not feel restrained in the workplace” (CE17) without elaboration. CE8 explained that she had control in work matters, but was restricted in dress by the requirements of working in a non-segregated environment:

“Only [restricted with regard to] the hijab, as there is no place where we can take it off, since we are in a mixed environment”.

The comment on dress restriction here is somewhat different from those made by BE12 and BE15 in Org.1. Whereas the latter were referring to formal rules imposed by the bank in support of its corporate image, CE8 refers to the normative power of cultural practices in the wider society, which caused women to feel obliged to retain their head-covering in the presence of men. In other words, it was not a “rule” as such, but a reflection of informal institutional pressures, which is discussed from this perspective in Theme 3. This comment reflects the way women’s experiences were affected by the organisation environment and socio-cultural norms, issues discussed more fully under Theme 3 on institutional influences.

As regards decision-making, participants were divided between those who felt completely free to make decisions on work matters, and those who either chose to consult their manager, or felt that they were required to do so or at least to report what they were doing. An example of autonomy and decision-making was provided by CE9:

“Yes. I am free to take decisions, such as renewing a client’s insurance with 10 per cent [discount] as long as my actions are justified and consistent with the objectives of the company”.

In other words, with regard to work tasks, women did not have complete freedom. Instead, ‘autonomy’ meant a degree of discretion exercised within parameters set by the company and accepted (or at least, complied with) by the employee.

A different approach was reported by two employees who indicated that they neither made individual decisions nor had to refer matters to their manager, because decisions were made in a team. As CE18 explained:

“We have to think first about the matter, then discuss it in the group. After that we have to collect opinions and adapt to them”.

Interestingly, no one in Org.2 expressed perceptions of being constrained, even when they said they had to refer certain decisions to their direct manager.

Comparison between the Two Organisations

Similar numbers of participants in the two organisations (8 in Org1 and 10 in Org.2) reported feelings of being in control in the workplace. Others described partial autonomy; they recognised the existence of policies, procedures and regulations that framed the decisions they were able to make, and, depending on their positions and the matter at hand, might have to consult their immediate

manager or (in the bank) senior management. Where a difference appeared, however, was that whereas no woman in Org.2 voiced strong feelings of being constrained, nine women in Org.1 (about a third of the interviewees in that organisation) did so. These feelings were responses not only to constraints related to work, but also the control of employees' appearance by the strict dress code. In contrast, one employee in Org.2 mentioned the lack of opportunity to remove her *hijab* (required by convention for women in the presence of men) but saw this as the "only" constraint. Thus, overall, perceptions of constraint were voiced more in the bank than in Org.2.

6.5 Work-Life Balance

The concept, work-life balance, encompasses women's perceptions about the extent to which they felt able to achieve a comfortable balance between work and home life, their experiences of trying to do so, and how, if at all, the employing organisation helped them to achieve such a balance, for example by the provision of facilities and flexibility. Whilst any provisions of this kind might be seen as reflections of formal regulatory factors, as will be seen women's work-life balance was also affected by informal institutional pressures arising from social constructions of gender roles and the resulting norms and expectations for women's behaviour.

Org.1

Among the women interviewed in Org.1, twelve (half the sample) asserted that they were struggling and unable to achieve a satisfactory balance between their work and other areas of their lives. In practice, 'other areas', for most women, meant home and domestic duties, since most were married and their assigned social role made this their priority. BE2 described the difficulty, saying:

"A woman is like an octopus, doing more than one job at a time, but the balance between work and home is very difficult".

Her comment reflects the impact of stereotypical constructions of woman's role; they need to be "like an octopus" because, as well as their work outside the home, they are expected to take sole responsibility for a host of domestic matters, as discussed further, later in this section.

Another woman who felt unable to achieve balance between different areas of her life expressed the temptation to give up:

“There is no balance between work and life and sometimes I feel I want to leave and resign. [The day] is very long” (BE18).

Among those women who admitted struggling with work-life balance, several specifically highlighted their constant tiredness, as a result of working a full day, then having other duties to attend to at home. The following excerpts reflect their difficulty:

“It is difficult to balance between home-life and work, due to the workload that has to be done every day... this will affect home life negatively, as I go back home tired and do nothing except resting, to start the new day with good energy. [For me] personally, work life takes much effort that makes me unable to do enough at home” (BE11).

“I go back home too exhausted to take care of my children, who are waiting for me to give them their rights” (BE24).

For these and other women (nine in total), the problem was related to time; not only the number of hours spent at work, but the specific starting and leaving times, which did not always match well with the time schedules of other family members:

“This is quite impossible. Eight hours at work, one hour to get to work and one hour to return. This means 10 hours outside the house, and six hours sleep. This means there is no time left for social life” (BE5).

“Well, my working day starts at 9, way later than my daughters; it is 7.30 for my husband and kids. They finish at 2.30, while I finish at 5. I find it incredibly hard. I have no idea why we would not have similar timing to Dubai. They finish at 3 for women, and some men’s branches finish at 5. If I finished at 3, I could have time to sit with my family and balance between work and home. The working hours are suggested by SAMA” (BE3).

BE12 similarly commented on difference between the bank’s working hours and those observed in schools and government-sector organisations, and suggested that if hours were standardized, it would be easier to manage work-life balance.

Adding to the difficulty for some women was the distance between their place of work and their home. This meant that they would arrive home late, reducing the time available to spend with their family. It seemed that this was not within the

woman's control, and that the bank was unable or unwilling to accommodate women's needs in this respect:

“The bank cannot move an employee to a branch near to her home”
(BE9).

Despite such difficulties, nevertheless, about a third of the Org.1 participants declared themselves able to achieve a satisfactory balance, as this example from BE9 shows:

“To be honest, there are many work pressures and problems that we face every day as employees, but we can control them and carry them as much as we can. For me, I am able to balance between my work and home needs”.

Expanding on this point, she raised an issue that appeared to be the key for those women who succeeded in balancing the different aspects of their lives: separation between them. Women who were satisfied with their work-life balance made a point of creating temporal and psychological boundaries between work and home and refused to let either domain impinge on the other. For example, BE9, quoted above, explained:

“What I usually do is, I devote my best for my work during the required working hours and then I give the rest to my family. At weekends I devote myself completely to my children and try as much as possible to meet all their needs”.

Similarly, BE20 explained:

“When I finished work at 5pm, I do not work and answer the phone, and the same when I go to work – I forget home stuff”.

It is noticeable, however, that women who perceived themselves as successful in achieving work-life balance attributed the success to their own effort, and not to any support from the bank. As BE24 expressed,

“I do not think the bank cares much about these matters.”

It was noticeable, moreover, that marital status was an important factor in women's ability to achieve work-life balance. Women who were married, especially if they had children, faced greater difficulty in this respect, and indeed, three single women commented on the relative lack of pressure resulting from their unmarried status:

“Despite long working hours, I can balance between my life and work, because I am not married and I have no social obligations” (BE6).

“I can easily balance between my work and social life. I think that’s because I’m still single” (BE7).

In contrast, married women described the dual burden of working in the bank, then returning home to take on the responsibility for cooking, cleaning, supervising homework and so on, all of which are traditionally seen as women’s role. BE20 commented on how this traditional role made work-life balance more difficult for women than for men:

“After work [a woman] comes back home and cares about the kids and their homework and preparing dinner, while a man comes back home and finds everything is ready, such as an organised and comfortable house and ready dinner, and then he takes a rest, unlike a woman. She cannot rest, due to her responsibilities”.

Only one married woman, BE8, reported that she was helped in achieving work-life balance by a supportive husband, who looked after the children while she was working.

When asked whether the bank offered any facilities to women (for example, a crèche), participants gave a variety of answers, which seemed to depend, to some degree, on how they understood the term, facilities. On the one hand, there were women (nine of the 24 interviewed) who declared that the bank provided no facilities to women. On the other hand, participants referred to what they termed facilities, but some of these were perquisites available to men and women, such as financial deals, others were concessions such as flexibility in time off, and the rest were statutory provisions under the labour law. Among the interviewees who perceived that the bank did not care about work-life balance and provided no facilities, two attributed this to the nature of the organisation; for example, BE6 claimed:

“There are no such things [facilities for women] as it is a private sector [organisation] with profit goals”.

The implication seemed to be that concern with profit made the bank unwilling to spend resources on provisions that might make working life easier for women.

A similar number of participants listed a variety of perquisites available on equal terms to all employees, and which might benefit women but were not designed specifically for them or related to work-life balance, for example:

“Facilities provided are loans, discounts and medical insurance” (BM10).

“The bank offers real estate loans with less interest compared to clients. For an employee, it is 1% and for a client, 3%. And [it offers] interest-free loans and discounts in malls and restaurants” (BM16).

“An employee can go with two family members to hajj (pilgrimage) on a campaign for free” (BE18).

It is interesting that women defined facilities in term of benefits and rewards, and there could be a number of reasons for this. It may be that, in the absence of other facilities, they did not expect or consider them and the interpretation of ‘facilities’ was limited by their experience. Since economic benefits is one of the rationales for greater acceptability of women’s careers in Saudi Arabia, such rewards brought appreciation of their contribution to their families, and made their departure from the traditional, solely domestic role, more acceptable and comfortable to themselves and their families.

The example given by BE18 specifically reflects the Islamic orientation of the bank. She refers to the fact that a Muslim is expected, if physically and financially able, to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and the surrounding sacred sites, at least once in his/her lifetime, and during the annual pilgrimage season, group trips are organised for this purpose. For the bank to pay the expenses of such a trip, not only for an employee, but for two family members, would be both financially helpful and psychologically valuable, but would be a ‘one time’ event and would do nothing to help women in their day- to -day balancing of roles.

Other than these examples, the ‘facilities’ reported by participants were the mandatory maternity and childcare provisions mentioned earlier, in the discussion of HRM practices. In other words, they were provisions under the labour law that benefitted only married women with children; there were no special facilities for single women.

Org.2

As in Org.1, women in Org.2 expressed varied perceptions of their ability to achieve work-life balance, depending on their circumstances, and they were

almost equally divided between those reporting difficulties, and those experiencing a more comfortable balance between home and work. Among the former, CM6 declared:

“Balancing is very hard. I am actually unable to balance them. When I go back home, I just sit on the sofa and watch TV, and sometimes I say I am truly getting tired of the work.

Several interviewees expressed the fatigue they felt at the end of the working day, and how this affected their home life. CE9, in particular, elaborated on this point, noting also the role played by time pressure, although she was the only interviewee in Org.2 who raised this explicitly. She explained:

“Let’s be honest; people like us working in banks and insurance companies like Org.2 find it hard to balance between work and social life. You leave work at 5.30 and arrive [home] at 6 or 6.30 and sit with your kids for two hours, then the day is over. Most of the employees are tired when they leave work so they have no time for friends or family (parents)... we are so exhausted after work and the mental work we do here affects our bodies, so I barely have time to take a shower and sit with my kids for two hours, then sleep. At the weekends, I try to compensate for what happened during the week”.

In contrast, to the above experiences, nine women, about half those interviewed in Org.2, expressed satisfaction with the balance they achieved. For example, CE14 described her routine as follows:

“I devote the hours from 8am to 5pm for work only, and when I go home, from 6pm to 11pm, I devote the time and care to home, without friends and without work. I sit with my kids and teach them, I cook and sit with my husband. Then I can balance”.

However, it seems from the above excerpt that this balance was not achieved without sacrifice; although CE14 balanced work and family life, her phrase, ‘without friends’ suggests she nevertheless was unable to have everything; she had to forego some aspects of non-work life, such as social visits. CE14’s narrative illustrates, also, the important principle of separation of roles, frequently mentioned by women who felt they achieved work-life balance. Similarly, CE13 described:

“Ever since I started my job, I arranged my time and made work time for work only and home time for my family only”.

She went on to explain another factor in her achieving work-life balance: her ability to negotiate, at the discretion of her manager, some flexibility in her working hours, to meet family needs:

“Also, I discuss with my manager coming early to work and leaving early, without neglecting my work duties” (CE13).

Such concessions were especially needed by married women: single women indicated that once they left work, they were relatively free and their time was their own. For example, CE18 admitted:

“When I’m about to enter my house, all I think about is social relationships, because I am single. Therefore, I do not have any responsibility toward husband or kids”.

CE2 similarly declared the benefits of being single; she recognized that work-life balance was much harder to achieve for her married colleagues, saying,

“The best thing is that I’m not married and I don’t have responsibilities at home. May God be with married women!”

Such comments imply an assumption that, for women, certain responsibilities and pressures come automatically with marriage, rather than being open to negotiation. It is noticeable that both married and single women seemed to accept the prevailing construction of gender roles, reflecting the normative power of culture, as an informal institution, to shape both thinking and behaviour, which would be a factor affecting women’s progress. However, women construed their roles, company policies and practices could potentially contribute to facilitate or constrain their options by the facilities and flexibility provided.

A few employees perceived that the company was concerned about work-life balance and did its best to facilitate it, generally through flexibility in work hours and leave arrangements. For example, CE9 described HR as “very cooperative and understanding” regarding leave for events such as a wedding or bereavement, or the illness of a relative. Perceptions of understanding and flexibility on the employer’s part were also expressed by CE16 and CE17:

“The company takes care of the employee’s balancing between work and home. For example, I can take time off if my daughter has a

medical appointment; the company understands women's situation" (CE16).

"The company contributes to women's balancing between home and work. For example, if I ask to leave [early] or be late for work, my manager accepts it" (CE17).

Nevertheless, when asked about facilities for women, six participants perceived there were none; as CE20 claimed, "Currently, up to now, I don't see any facilities from the company". Others, like their counterparts in Org.1, described general facilities and perquisites available to all employees, men and women alike: discounts and insurance. CE16 mentioned these, but also drew attention to another practice which acquired its significance from the contrast with other workplaces; freedom of movement during breaks.

"We have a discount in a lot of restaurants and [private] schools, and premium medical insurance. Also, we can go out at break time. It is the only company that allows its employees to go out at break time".

This provision would potentially be helpful to women's work-life balance by allowing them to attend to certain errands or social obligations before the end of the working day, especially now that the repeal of the driving ban will make transportation easier. Other women, however, perceived 'facilities for women' solely in terms of the maternity leave and provisions such as the breastfeeding hour (which women could take at the end of the day, if they wished, leaving at 4 pm rather than 5 pm). However, from this perspective, as CE19 asserted:

"Single women do not have much facilities compared to married ones".

This quotation reflects the point made in Chapter Three, that women's lives are structured around marriage and motherhood. HRM policies and practices reflected laws and social norms that privilege married status.

Comparison between the Two Organisations

On the subject of work-life balance, the pattern of responses was generally similar between the two organisations. In both Org.1 and Org.2, around half the women had difficulty balancing work and home life. They complained of tiredness, and of long working hours that did not align with school hours, making it difficult for women to find sufficient time for family. This was especially difficult for married women with children, because of the double burden of responsibilities imposed

by traditional constructions of their roles as wives and mothers. Very few indicated that their husbands supported them in these areas.

The limited perspectives on work-life balance expressed by women in both organisations can be interpreted as a reflection of their internalization of socially-assigned roles. They perceived work-life balance as a binary between work and domestic duties, with apparently no thought that workplace practices might give them the flexibility to do anything else. The data suggested, however, that work life balance might be given more consideration by Org. 2 than Org. 1, based on the frequency with which interviewees in the company reported flexibility and concessionary arrangements with regard to working hours and leave. Nevertheless, when the subject of ‘facilities for women’ was raised, participants in both organisations yielded similar patterns of responses: some perceiving no facilities, some listing financial or material perquisites such as discounts and insurance available to both sexes (which might provide some justification or perceived acceptability to women’s work, as contributing to the material welfare of their families), and the majority focusing on the statutory maternity provisions, pointing out that these offered nothing to single women.

The table below (Table 6.1) illustrates the similarities and differences between the two organisations based on Theme 2.

Table 6.1: Comparison between the Two Organisations – Theme 2

Categories	Org. 1	Org. 2
Relations with Management	Formal and informal means of communicating with management and HR. Daily meetings with immediate manager.	Formal and informal means of communicating with management and HR. Meetings every 2 weeks.
Responsiveness	Management listen to employees’ ideas and concerns but are sometimes unable/unwilling to respond Organisation’s interest takes priority	Management listen to employees’ ideas and concerns and respond quickly Organisation’s interest considered
Equality with Men	Equality in general treatment. Not equal in positions and promotions. Some evidence of consideration for women	Equal in all aspects Some evidence of special consideration for women
Personal control	Decisions subject to policy and regulations. Referral to manager usually mandatory One third felt very constrained	Decisions subject to policy and regulations Manager informed of decisions but employee has control No-one felt very constrained

Categories	Org. 1	Org. 2
Work-Life Balance	Similar numbers report balance and imbalance. Balance achieved by separation of 2 domains Balance harder for married women due to double burden Organisation seen as not concerned about WLB	Similar numbers report balance and imbalance. Balance achieved by separation of 2 domains. Balance harder for married women due to double burden Organisation seen as concerned about WLB
Facilities for Women	Financial perks for men and women. Some flexibility in work hours /time off. Statutory provisions under labour law. Nothing specific for single women.	Financial and material perks for men and women Frequent flexibility in work hours /time off Statutory provision under Labour Law Nothing specific for single women.

Table 6.1 (continued)

6.6 Summary

The second theme dealt with the employment relations climate, beginning with perceptions of employee involvement and management responsiveness. In both organisations, employees reported the availability of formal and informal involvement mechanisms, including meetings and websites, although in Org.1, the public nature of these forums seemed likely to deter involvement compared to Org.2, where issues were handled confidentially. In both organisations, the organisation's interest was a factor in management response, but this seemed to be weighted more heavily, and employees' interests less protected in Org.1 than Org.2. In terms of equality with men, in Org.1, as noted previously, women were not equal in positions and promotions, whereas Org,2 employees considered themselves to be treated equally in all aspects.

In both organisations, personal control over tasks was subject to the formal institutional factor of SAMA policy and regulations. In Org.1, women were also constrained by rules on their appearance (including a requirement to wear uniform) which did not apply in Org.2, where employees interacted with clients by telephone, rather than face-to-face. Women in both organisations reported difficulties with work- life balance, due to their double burden of domestic as well as work responsibilities, arising from informal social pressures, but they differed in the extent to which they perceived the organisation as concerned about employees' work-life balance; such concern was perceived in Org.2, but thought to be absent in Org.1, In both organisations, however, women showed confusion about the availability of facilities for women, which they interpreted as financial and material perquisites available to all employees, flexibility in work hours, and statutory provisions that applied only to married women.

Chapter Seven: Interview Findings III

Theme 3: Institutional Environment

7.1 Introduction

This theme represents the role of institutions, both formal and informal, in influencing women's experiences of work, through their aspirations and opportunities, as well as HRM policies and practices. It consists of four categories: education, regulatory authorities, organisation environment and sociocultural norms. The first two represent formal institutional factors, the third is a mixture of formal and informal elements, while the fourth constitute an informal institutional influence.

7.2 Education

The education system in Saudi Arabia, as a formal institution, arguably shapes women's career opportunities and experiences in a number of ways. Women's access to education, the level of qualification attained, and the subjects of study open to them, all contribute to give or deny women access to various career fields. It was suggested in chapters 1 and 2 that in recent years, women in Saudi Arabia have benefitted from better educational opportunities than in the past (Afiouni and Karam, 2014, Al Rawaf and Simmons, 1991). The women who participated in this study were well educated, with the majority having university degrees and many of them reflected on the role played by education in influencing their career choices and opportunities.

Org.1

In Org.1, when participants discussed the reasons for their attraction to and employment in the finance sector, and the bank in particular, the most frequently cited reason mentioned by seven women was that the work was in line with their academic specialisation. For example, BM1 said,

“My specialisation and studies qualified me to work in the bank, especially after getting experience from more than one place”.

One employee, BE4, made it clear that work in the banking sector was an aspiration, which she had pursued strategically through her studies:

“My dream was to work at a bank, so when I went to university, I asked about a job that brought me to work in the bank”.

Another colleague, BE7, gave more specific details about the nature of her specialisation and how she had deliberately chosen it in preparation for a career,

“One of the most fundamental reasons why I chose to apply to the bank in particular is my administration specialty in investment and finance.

The above statements suggest that the participants were educated, ambitious women, with an interest and ability to pursue the career of their choice, deliberately seeking out opportunities and making strategic decisions. They also reflect the broadening of opportunities for women as a result of the gradual expansion of the education system since the 1970s (Al Rawaf and Simmons, 1991, Alyami, 2016), and the wider range of specialisms available to women, who at one time were concentrated in faculties preparing them for careers in education or health care, traditionally the only socially acceptable options for women. For example Hamdan (2005) refers to the greater willingness to accept women into various disciplines and professions in Saudi Arabia from around 2000, while deliberate efforts by the Ministry of Labour to increase opportunities for women are reflected in the “Saudization and Feminisation of Industrial Jobs” legislation of 2011 (Ministry of Labour, 2015b) and the “National Transformation Plan 2020” (Alghofaily, 2019).

Interestingly, however, several women were employed outside their specialisation, such as BM13 whose degree was in Arabic, and BM19 who was a mathematics graduate. These older employees (both were in their late 30s, whereas most of their colleagues were in their mid-20s and early 30s) had been recruited 10 or more years ago, at a time when banking was a less popular career option for women and there was a shortage of applicants with relevant specialisations, so banks were obliged to accept any specialisation in order to meet their staffing requirements. As noted in Chapter Three, Saudi women have often not had access to the quality and type of education that would equip them for the labour market (Al-Dehailan, 2007) and often lack the skills needed by employers (Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014, Fakeeh, 2009), posing a difficulty for organisations that have been under pressure to employ Saudis under the Saudization policy from the mid- 1990s (Alotaibi, 2014).

The unpopularity of banking as a career option for women stemmed from the 1950s when some banks had mixed working environments along with concerns that conventional banking operated on the basis of interest, which is rejected by

Islam as "Riba" (usury). Banks are required to meet the needs of female customers by making separate provision for them, so they need not mix with men. They do so in various ways, according to the size and the facilities available: by having separate 'windows' for women specific days or hours of opening dedicated solely for women, or by having completely segregated branches, (as Org.1 has done since its establishment in 1953). However, Al-Nemer (1988) observed that, even after some 30 years of banking, and despite segregated branches, banking was still an unpopular career choice for Saudi women. Some conservative families still see banking as too 'liberal', because even where branches are segregated, women might occasionally have contact with men, such as HR managers. For many Saudis, such contact is still socially unacceptable. Shariah compliant practices (see the organisation profile in Chapter 4) help Org.1 overcome the problems associated with usury.

A slightly different situation, however, was represented by two employees, BM16 and BM18, who had consciously rejected their original specialisations or the career expectations associated with them, in order to enter a field, they found more appealing:

“Honestly, I have a degree in Biology, and I am supposed to work as a schoolteacher, but I like banks” (BM16)

“Although I majored in Media, which is very far from bank work, I remember when I was a college student, I got interested in working in the bank and wished I could work there one day, although my major is unrelated” (BE18)

In these cases, the women had not deliberately prepared for a banking career, but appeared to have found in the bank an opportunity to move away from an early choice that did not satisfy them. Perhaps, also in the latter case, this individual had found difficulty obtaining a job in her specialisation, as Media was a new discipline, and media industries were still at a relatively early stage of development in KSA.

In fact, at the time BM16 joined the workforce, more than ten years previously, few occupations were open to women. The limited availability of professional opportunities for women was due not so much to law excluding them, but to the absence of laws providing for their inclusion, along with religious and social conservatism. Al Rawaf and Simmons (1991) for example, note how an interpretation of a narrative in the Hadith (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad)

had led to an inference that if women were employed outside the home, their work should be related to their domestic and nurturing roles, and these roles were reinforced by early socialization, such as the depiction of women in school textbooks. Social restrictions on women's opportunities are similarly mentioned by several authors (Alyami, 2016, Issan, 2013) and becoming a teacher would probably have been this respondent's only other alternative. In contrast, BE18, who was several years younger (in her mid-20s) had entered the bank less than five years previously, after a few months experience in another organisation. More options would arguably have been available to her than to BM16, especially with a university degree, but the fact that she chose banking, in which she had developed an interest during her college days, may perhaps reflect the 'pioneering' status of banking as one of the new fields opening up opportunities for women. Access to higher education made such fields accessible to women and allowed them to form a career aspiration that would at one time have been unthinkable. All the participants in Org.1 had, at least, a bachelor's degree.

At the same time, however, there were indications in the data that, while education had opened up new opportunities for women, banks were becoming more demanding in their selection criteria, requiring not simply a degree in a relevant specialisation, but preferably one from an overseas university and, often, specific skills such as English language proficiency. See, for example, the assertion by participant BM3, quoted in section 5.2 .1 (p 69)

This may be attributable both to Saudi Arabia's aspiration to join 'developed' countries and to the global nature of the banking business. Thus, more recently, women have needed qualifications in the right subject areas to meet the demands of employers, as already discussed in Theme 1.

Org.2

Education appeared to play a lesser role in the employment of women in Org.2 than in Org.1. Few participants, only three, declared that they were drawn to Org.2 by relevance to their academic specialisations or related experience. One of these recounted how she had previously worked for another company and became aware of Org.2 through inter-company transactions:

“In the past I was working for _____. Foundation and I was responsible for the medical insurance for the staff. So, I was responsible for communication with Org.2” (CE16).

The fact that specialisation accounted for so few responses in Org.2 may be a reflection of the company's flexible recruitment policy. This is indicated, for example, by CE14's admission that

“There were few jobs available for me due to my [only having a] secondary school certificate”.

In other words, she had been employed with a level of qualification below what seemed to be the norm for the sector and, indeed, lower than the majority of her colleagues in Org.2, most of whom had a university degree. Of 21 women interviewed in Org.2, only four had a secondary school certificate; two had diplomas and the rest had, at least, a bachelor's degree. The women who were not university graduates were of different ages and had various periods of work experience, so it was not necessarily the case that they had been employed under less stringent criteria. It may be that the organisation had been prepared to relax the normal requirements for a bachelor degree under pressure (because of Saudization, together with the limited number of Saudi applicants coming forward) to fill vacancies, or that the woman concerned had other skills and qualities valued by the organisation. CE14, for example, recalled that the company was impressed by her enthusiasm and commitment, while CM6 recalled demonstrating her salesmanship during an interview. Org.2 may also have looked at women's practical skills and past experience because of a mismatch between education output and the qualifications and skills needed by employers (such criticisms of the education system were highlighted in Chapter Three).

Nevertheless, there were also suggestions that the company was; increasingly, looking for other competencies such ICT competence in which the education system could potentially play a major role, although authors suggest that so far, it has not equipped women with such skills (Fakeeh, 2009, Alyami, 2016, Varshney, 2019).

Comparison between the two organisations

Both Org.1 and Org.2 reflected, to different degrees, the role of education in shaping women's career opportunities. It was noted in Chapter One that Saudi Arabia has made concerted efforts to expand education, and that women, in particular, have benefited from the available opportunities, to the extent that they now outnumber men in higher education (Ministry of Planning,1990, Doumato,1999, Welsh et al., 2014, EL-swais,2016) . The women interviewed in Org.1 and Org.2 were all educated; all the women in Org.1 were university

graduates, as were all but four in Org.2. Access to education had given these women career opportunities that would not otherwise have been available to them. Even so, there were women in both organisations who had been employed, despite not having qualifications directly relevant to the field, possibly reflecting the early difficulty of attracting suitable applicants, whether due to the unpopularity of the field (in Org.1) or the failure of education to equip women with the particular qualifications and skills preferred (in Org.2).

However, qualification and subject specialisation seem to play a stronger role in the employment of women in Org.1, compared to Org.2, which had accepted women with lower academic qualifications (a secondary school certificate) if they had relevant skills, attributes and experience. It may be that Org.2 had to be more flexible because the combination of low pay (see Theme 1, section 5.5 for comparison of pay between Org.2 and Org.1) and the non-segregated environment (still unacceptable to many Saudis) made vacancies hard to fill.

Nevertheless, there were indications in both organisations – more so in Org.1 – that organisations were becoming more demanding in the level and types of qualification they demanded, and the specific skills (for example English language proficiency and computer skills) they required. Thus, while the expansion of access to education has arguably benefited Saudi women (Abalkhail, 2017), whether this advantage is sustained may depend on the ability of the local education system to equip women with the specific skills some employers are beginning to demand.

7.3 Regulatory Authorities

One of the formal institutional influences on women's opportunities, experiences and behaviour was the regulatory system. Policies and practices in relation to recruitment and the terms and conditions of employment were said to be influenced by two main regulatory bodies: the Ministry of Labour, which set labour law and policy for the country as a whole, and the Saudi Arabia Monetary Authority (SAMA), the authority with specific responsibility for the finance sector. It must be acknowledged, however, that very few employees in either organisation explicitly made those connections, even if they discussed policies and practices that originated with these bodies.

Org.1

The main regulatory institution with the power to influence policy and practice in the bank was perceived to be the Saudi Ministry of Labour, although only seven

employees mentioned it explicitly. The main influence of the Ministry was in promulgating the laws entitling women to maternity leave, and enabling those with babies to take an hour each day for breastfeeding.

Most interviewees in the organisation mentioned these entitlements, although only four pointed out that they came from the Ministry. Among them was BE1, who commented:

“If we are talking about maternity leave and the breastfeeding hour, this is from the Labour Ministry and labour office, and not from the bank”.

BE15 made the same point, emphasizing not only that these provisions came from the ministry, but that the HR department in the bank had a predominantly executive role, applying ministerial regulations. She explained:

“HR is a small department in the bank and applies rules and procedures set by the Ministry of Labour. So, HR only does its job in order for the bank not to be fined [for non-compliance] or to avoid an employee getting something more than she deserves. For example, leaves, the breastfeeding hour as set by the Ministry of Labour... and the uniform allowance was set by the Ministry of Labour in 2013”.

The same employee, at another point in the interview, suggested that the Ministry constituted a source of pressure for HR and that any response to employees’ concerns shown by HR was motivated by the fear that problems might be brought to the attention of the Ministry.

“If they [HR] listen [to women's concerns], maybe it’s because they do not want the problem to reach the Labour Office at the Ministry of Labour. HR worries about the Ministry of Labour”. (BE15)

It is possible that, since HR operates under the umbrella of the Ministry of Labour, and in is bound by laws and regulation, if a problem reached the MOL, sanctions might be applied against it. For this reason, every company wants to maintain a clean file in front of the MOL.

BE15 was perhaps more politically aware than most of her colleagues, as she was the main source of evidence regarding Ministry influence on the bank’s HRM practices. She was, for example, the only employee in Org.1 who suggested that

the commitment to recruit women was partly an effect of government policy under the National Transformation plan, commonly referred to as Vision 2030, which was designed and launched in 2016 across 24 government bodies to enhance the country's socio-economic development. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 lays out targets for diversification and improved competitiveness (see AlFarran, et al 2018).

Interestingly, however, while BE15's comments all suggested the role of the Ministry in conferring and protecting women's rights in the workplace, another interviewee in the bank, BE4, referred to a provision that might reduce the job security of women (and men): the enactment of a new law allowing redundancies:

“There is the Decision 77 issued by the Ministry of Labour, that any company that does not need employees can dispense with them”.

The above reference is to Article 77 of the Saudi Labour Law, which was issued on 25th March 2015. While the above provisions were applicable across the country and not confined to specific sectors, other policies and rules specific to the finance sector were set by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA), as four interviewees pointed out. SAMA was set up under the banking control law of 1966, as a Central Bank responsible for the effectiveness of the banking system and with legislative and regulatory authority over both public and private organisations in the finance field.

One of the interviewees who highlighted SAMA's role was BE3 who, as indicated in the previous theme, under Work-Life Balance, commented that the bank's working hours were set by SAMA. Another, BE16, highlighted the role of SAMA in setting bank rules and procedures, which were periodically subject to change, increasing the pressure on employees who had to learn and apply the new policies and practices.

“Pressure has increased because the Monetary Authority has changed its policies. For example, limiting the credit limit for a client ... Also, the policy will change next month, which will affect and pressure employees, because they [are expected to] accomplish specific targets amidst [those] changes”.

Despite being a source of restrictions and pressure, however, SAMA was also seen as offering opportunity, specifically in the area of training, as mentioned by two employees. While BE15 highlighted the mandatory preparatory training

provided by SAMA for new recruits to banking (as mentioned under Training in discussion of Theme 1) BE10 mentioned an opportunity for career development within SAMA which influenced her career aspirations.

“My main ambition in future is to be hired at SAMA. In fact, since 2015, SAMA provides employees with the option of gaining the Professional Certificate in the Basics of Banking”.

Although these issues were raised by small numbers of employees, the responses quoted suggest that regulatory institutional pressures were directly and indirectly influencing HR policies and practices affecting women in a number of ways. Such influences might have implications for women’s recruitment, training, job security, rights in the workplace, and aspirations for their future careers.

Org.2

In Org.2, as in Org.1, two regulatory institutions were mentioned: the Ministry of Labour, and SAMA.

Only two participants in Org.2 explicitly mentioned the role of the Ministry although, as stated previously, most of the employment concessions and allowances they mentioned actually came from the Ministry. CE9 mentioned the Ministry of Labour in discussion of the terms and conditions of employment; specifically, the number of days annual leave provided under the contract:

“[I get] 22 days. What is required by the Ministry of Labour is happening here in [Org.2]”.

The other reference to the Ministry was by CE14, when she linked the recruitment of women to the labour policy formulated as part of the country’s Vision 2030.

“The HR policy is encouraging women’s employment... Most of the employees are women because of the new policy and KSA’s Vision 2030”.

The other institutional body mentioned, SAMA (which under the Cooperative Insurance Control Law has had authority over the insurance sector since 2005) was only referred to twice, and by the same person, CE16, each time. Her first reference to SAMA was when she explained the process of her application and selection for her job at Org.2. In her narrative, she drew attention to the role of SAMA in setting employment criteria for the sector as a whole.

“Because insurance companies are a subsidiary of a government agency called the Saudi [Arabian] Monetary Authority (and so are banks), all the employees that work in banks or insurance companies have to do the test in the monetary institution. This test is hard. If the [applicant] achieves more than 60 percent she is eligible for the job... When I got this job in Org.2, HR followed some procedures to obtain a permit from SAMA because it is important to have a licence from the authority to work with [Org.2]”.

The same employee, later in the interview, referred to SAMA as the source of policies and regulations applicable in the company, which were often the subject of meetings:

“We have to know every change that is made by the Saudi Monetary Authority”.

Comparison between the two organisations

In both Org.1 and Org.2, a number of employees (albeit small) drew attention to the impacts of the same institutional bodies in influencing HR policies and their work in the organisation; the Ministry of Labour and SAMA (the regulatory authority for the finance and insurance sector), although the interviewees differed in the specific impacts they highlighted.

With regard to the Ministry of Labour, there were suggestions in both organisations that recruitment of women was, at least in part, a response to the national labour policy promulgated under the umbrella of the government’s Vision 2030 for national development. The Ministry was also mentioned as an influence on the terms and conditions of employment. Surprisingly, however, although the various concessions and allowances mandated by law for employees with babies and young children were frequently referred to in both organisations (see Pay, Theme 1, and Facilities, Theme 2), very few interviewees (and only in Org.1) explicitly acknowledged the role of the Ministry in this regard. This may be because some female employees did not have knowledge of the applicable regulations and laws, or they may simply have taken the Ministry’s role for granted. Nevertheless, the Ministry was the institutional entity most cited as a source of external influence by interviewees in Org.1.

References to SAMA also differed, but given the small number of individuals who mentioned SAMA - four in Org.1 and only one in Org.2 it cannot be claimed that these represent differences between the organisations. Rather, it seems likely that individuals mentioned particular features based on their own personal experiences. Employees in Org.1 mentioned the role of SAMA in influencing the bank's opening hours, providing training and development opportunities, and setting policies and procedures. The latter role was also mentioned by the Org.2 employee. However, her main focus was on the role played by SAMA in setting criteria for employment in the finance and insurance sector, which they enforced through a testing and licensing system.

A point worth noting here is that the role of these regulatory authorities seems to have placed the HR function essentially in the role of organisational "police" (Legge, 2007) focused on legal compliance rather than innovation in HR policies and practices to support women. As noted previously in Org.1 in particular there were suggestions that HR managers were afraid of the consequences of non-compliance or escalation of complaints, suggesting the existence of coercive state pressure and a lack of autonomy for organisations.

This suggests that legislation is likely to be required for any significant improvement in treatment of the female workforce and opportunities for their development.

7.4 Organisation Environment

The employing organisations are themselves complex institutions, involving both formal policies and practices and informal attitudes, norms and standards, and this category reflects ways in which the organisational environment affected women's experiences in the workplace. As indicated previously, the two organisations were different in several ways, despite operating in the same sector and being subject to the same authorities. They offered different products and operated under very different ownership, associated with different cultures that could be reflected in both formal and informal ways. Org.1 maintained separate branches for women, staffed solely by women, whereas Org.2 operated in a mixed environment. In addition to discussing this aspect of their working environment, women also discussed customer relations, the pressures they experienced in their jobs, and (especially in Org.2) the extent to which they felt comfortable in the workplace.

Org.1

As noted above, interviewees in Org.1 were working in a segregated environment. Surprisingly, however, they did not discuss how they felt about segregation, or how it affected the work environment. It may be that they took it for granted, given the prevalence of gender segregation in all aspects of life in Saudi Arabia, where formal rules and policies requiring segregation are the outcome of a long history of institutionalization of separate gender roles for men and women, with accompanying expectations for behaviour that have become entrenched. Just one participant, BE17, indicated that the women-only work environment was one of the factors that had attracted her to work in Org.1.

“I applied to several places, including companies and banks. [Org.1’s] offer was one of the best offers, especially as the bank environment is completely segregated and is not mixed with males...”.

Other than this, when interviewees discussed the bank’s segregation policy, it was to point out that this created a need for female employees and so provided job opportunities for women. As already indicated in Theme 1, they perceived segregation as guaranteeing, even forcing a commitment to the employment of women. The following quotations illustrate this point of view:

“Yes, definitely it is committed to hiring women, since there are women’s branches, which makes it mandatory to hire women” (BE6).

“In accordance with the provisions of Islamic law and to facilitate services for women, the bank separated the men’s section from the women’s, which encouraged the employment of women” (BE7).

It can be argued that segregation restricts the employment of women since they can only obtain work in certain circumstances, i.e. in fields considered ‘suitable’ and opened up to them, and where employers are able and willing to provide separate facilities for them, thereby incurring extra costs (Jadwa, 2016). Moreover, women’s sections are lower than men’s in organisational hierarchies as Tlaiss and Kauser (2010) found in Lebanon. The interviewees, however, focused only on what they saw as the benefit to them, of the creation of a niche for female employees within banking.

Interestingly, one woman referred to proposals to end segregation in the banking sector but expressed the view that it would not work. She was convinced that the conservative norms of Saudi society would continue to make the provision of gender-segregated services and facilities a necessity. She commented:

“Recently, I heard some rumours that banks had decided to make the working environment mixed rather than separate. In my opinion, I think this decision will not be applied because the customs and traditions of our society do not support the mixing of men and women, even in the working environment. Even if we assume the banks have implemented this decision, there will [still] be specified sections for women, or many will not be able to complete their necessary bank transactions” (BE11).

BE11 did not indicate whether or not she would be comfortable working in a mixed environment, although her words seem to suggest that she accepted the “customs and traditions of our society”. At the very least her statement suggested that the change to a mixed environment would be unpopular with many customers, and that traditional norms regarding constraints on women were still sufficiently prevalent that the withdrawal of segregated facilities might actually prevent many women from accessing services. In terms of the day-to-day working environment, however, it seemed to be the pressures of work that had most impact on the women interviewed, and among the codes in the “organisation environment” category, “pressure” was the one that recurred most frequently in Org.1.

The main source of pressure was said to be the demand on employees to meet ambitious sales targets, due to the bank’s profit seeking and striving for position in a competitive market. As BM3 complained:

“The bank works for profits, so if an employee is unable to accomplish the goals, it is very difficult to stay in the job”

Her colleague, BM1, explained further:

“At present [flexibility of work patterns is] very weak due to the pressures we face in the banking sector in general. In order to continue, I must achieve the sales objectives because the bank’s ambition and market position in the country are disproportionate”.

Several participants commented on the pressure they felt as a result of this drive for sales within retail banking, particularly at a time when clients had less disposable income and were less interested in buying new banking products.

“It is psychologically pressuring for employees as they are required to serve clients and sell products. We are required to achieve specific sales targets, yet clients are not into buying as they have no money due to the economic recession” (BE18).

“Employees are under pressure all the time, as the bank assigns employees’ goals that have to be achieved, whatever it takes” (BE7).

“There is huge pressure on employees because we in Client Services are also selling products and every employee has to achieve a target... and there are many difficulties... achieving targets has changed since the past due to the decreases in people’s earnings because of the decreases in the country’s economy and the taxes imposed on citizens. Therefore, the client doesn’t have enough money to buy from the bank” (BE21).

The same pressure to meet sales targets for products such as loans and property applied to male employees. However, it might be perceived as particularly stressful for women, for three reasons. One is that the assertive, even aggressive behaviour needed to push for sales is more difficult for women than men, because it contradicts their socialization, as women are expected to be unassuming and submissive (see section 3.2). A second reason is that selling requires specific skills which women may not have developed through their studies. Most of the interviewees, for example, had graduated in fields far removed from marketing. This again raises the issue of the mismatch between the outputs of women's education and the needs of employers (Al-Dehailan, 2007, Fakeeh, 2009, Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014) noted in Chapter Three and earlier in this chapter.

The other reason is that, as indicated by several women in this study, they could not find relief from the pressure when they went home. Rather than being able to rest, they faced another set of pressures derived from their socially- assigned domestic roles (see Work- life balance in Theme 2, and gender stereotypes, later in this theme). In other words, the pressure women experienced was produced not solely by the organisational environment, but by the interaction or tension

between organisation demands and informal institutional pressures in the family and society.

A further source of pressure, according to the interviewees, was the bank's strong emphasis on customer satisfaction, to the extent that client ratings for the service they received played a major part in employee evaluation. As BE7 explained:

“It [the bank] places customers' satisfaction in the first priority. For example, if the employee provided excellent service to a customer and she [the customer] assesses the service provided with a negative evaluation, this will affect the employee's assessment in the performance card negatively as well”.

Adding to the feeling of pressure was the perception of unfairness because client ratings were given in the form of a simple score, without an opportunity to explain the nature of the problem. In other words, performance was measured very much as in the West, with a dependence on 'satisfaction' data from unpredictable customers, whose ratings of services might be subjective and changeable according to their mood. It was therefore possible that a client might give a low satisfaction rating because of a problem that was not caused by the employee, and was out of her control, yet this employee would still be held responsible, as BM3 explained:

“When a client feels upset, she will give us a low rating, because of waiting or for any other reason, even if the client is well served by the employee. Also, I am not happy about the way that the message is written, since it does not give a comment about what did not go well. For example, if the problem has to do with the system, or waiting too long, then the employee has nothing to do with the issue”.

This participant's comment reveals that the unfairness of attaching so much weight to the comments of unpredictable clients with subjective views is compounded by the lack of concern for employees' interest, whereby they cannot explain the situation, correct any untruths, justify their actions or set the events in context.

In addition to the pressure caused by worry about client satisfaction ratings, some employees suggested that stress was caused by disrespect and even abuse from some clients and that they were not supported by the bank's administration. For

example, BE24, who said she had once dreamed of working in a bank, described how, over time, she had become disillusioned with the reality:

“Recently, my point of view has changed completely... after experiencing work in banks, I realised that the branch manager has become a person who has no value and respect, the public relations officer is the one who receives all the blame for mistakes made inside the section, and the service personnel are being reprimanded by other employees, customers and administrators”.

Her co-worker, BE21, gave an example from her own experience:

“The employee should be respected. The employee [should have] rights if the client does not respect her. Two days ago, I had a problem because of a client. She disrespected me and said bad words, and this made a problem. After that, the manager took this client and served her, even though she had been rude to me”.

The comments made by employees on this topic reveal perceptions that, whereas customers (who bring in the bank’s revenue) are valued and their favour is courted, employees - despite providing the service (that creates revenue) are not valued or protected, and their interests are not heeded. Instead, the conformity to expected norms of behaviour is controlled by a culture of blame. The design of the customer satisfaction survey enables customers to criticize and accuse employees- however unfairly- but gives employees no right of reply. In comparison to the clients, female employees lack power and have no voice. The evidence suggests that evaluation plays a different role for male and female workers and the subsequent lack of power and voice among female employees reinforces the impression that women employed by necessity, are not valued and respected on the same terms as men, but are kept in a subordinate position. The same point emerged in Theme One regarding the lower pay grade attainable by women, and the suggestion that women manage ‘offices’, rather than branches.

Thus, although many employees said they liked working in the bank and that banking provided job opportunities for women which had previously been unavailable because of segregation, interviewees frequently reported feeling pressurised by the work environment, with sales targets and customer relations highlighted as particularly difficult.

Org.2

As noted previously, the most visible aspect of the working environment in Org.2 was the mixing of the sexes in the one workplace. This was a relatively recent development in the Saudi context, brought in as part of the culture of the organisation's Western ownership, and marked Org.2 out as one of the few employers with a non-segregated environment, so it was not surprising that several interviewees highlighted their feelings on this matter. For a few, who came to Org.2 having previously worked in segregated environments, the change was initially difficult, as CE12 recalled:

“My last experience was in Aramex company, where the work environment did not mix men and women. When I came here to Org.2 and found that the work environment mixes men and women, at the beginning I was shocked and worried...”

However, having become accustomed to the mixed environment, she came to feel comfortable in it, and even to prefer it, as did many of her colleagues, who described what they perceived as a variety of advantages of working alongside men. For example, CE12, quoted above, and her colleague CE21 both suggested that working in a mixed environment had broadened their experience and enabled them to develop skills in dealing with a wider range of personalities and situations, which in turn had increased their self-confidence:

“This environment has made me more confident and honed my personality. I met different personalities, and this gave me experience on how to deal with men, even in other places than work” (CE12).

“The mixed environment is good. I benefit from it more than a women-only environment because the mixed environment teaches me to deal with both genders and the way they think” (CE21).

Thus, women thought they learned more from being in a mixed environment with access to different points of view. Such learning may, indeed, have been a factor in the advancement of women to occupy many managerial positions (see 5.2.3) and the greater perception of equity between men and women in Org.2 (see 5.3.2).

Above all, interviewees emphasised that the mixed working environment was respectful, which in their view seemed to make working with men acceptable and even comfortable, as these excerpts illustrate:

“A company like [Org.2] has very respectful and professional employees, where everyone respects others, regardless of their gender” (CE1).

“A mixed environment is much better, as men respect women and the atmosphere is serious for work” (CE11).

“A mixed environment, if respect is in the air, and everyone knows his/her limits is in my opinion better than a segregated environment” (CE8).

Moreover, CE2 indicated that the respect characterizing relationships in this environment made her working there acceptable to her family:

“For my family, working in a good, respectful mixed environment is better than working in a female environment”.

This can be seen as a significant development, given that, until recently, “mixing” was “kind of a prohibited thing for most Saudi females” (CE19).

In explaining the acceptance of, and comfort in, a mixed environment, moreover, interviewees drew comparisons with their perceptions of segregation, which some had experienced in previous employment. They described segregated environments as characterized by jealousy and tensions among employees. For example:

“In my previous job, where women were separated, it was not a healthy environment... there was jealousy and envy among colleagues” (CE1).

“[In] my previous experience where there were only females, there was too much arguing and ‘women’s talk’” (CE11).

“When women are in one environment, they are scrutinizing and critical of each other” (CE18).

“When the environment has only women, there will be a lot of tensions and gossip” (CE19).

There was even a suggestion that a female manager working in a mixed environment would treat her subordinates differently than would a manager in an all-female environment:

“The manager is different when she is managing only females because she would be very harsh and arrogant, while in a mixed environment she would be very co-operative and humble to prove herself among men” (CE1).

Even though “mixing” in the work environment marks to some extent a departure from pre-existing social norms (Le Renard, 2011), the working relationships described in both environments still reflect the informal institutional impact of stereotyped constructions of gender roles and relationships (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Both sexes had to maintain a certain distance, to “know their limits”, and CE1’s comment about manager behaviour suggests the perpetuation (despite competitiveness among women) of the norm that women should not be assertive and should defer to men. In this respect, the organisational environment can be seen as reflecting and interacting with the informal institution and culture (discussed later). For both men and women, working in a non-segregated environment was a new experience and, outside work, segregation remained the norm. It is, therefore, not surprising that, at this early stage, they retained traditional views of gender roles and relationships. It could arguably take time for the sexes to become habituated to working together and perhaps adopt less traditional views.

This impression of the continuing impact of prevailing cultural views of gender relations was supported by the fact that even women who declared themselves comfortable in a mixed environment noted drawbacks related to cultural sensitivities. CE21, for example, drew attention to the risk of casual friendly contact between male and female colleagues being misinterpreted by more conservatively minded colleagues.

“For example, if a female employee meets and says “hi” to a male employee and they talk to each other, other employees misunderstand and say there is a relationship between them - especially employees who are reserved”.

Even without the fear of being accused of an illicit romantic relationship some woman felt obliged in a mixed environment to guard their words and behaviour in the proximity of men.

“The disadvantage of mixed environments is that you can’t take your comfort [i.e. relax] in sitting, as you have to be careful of what you’re doing and saying. For example, if I talk about girls’ things, I feel embarrassed if there is a man beside us” (CE12).

“I don’t feel comfortable at work, maybe because the offices are too open and exposed to men. Behind my office there are men’s offices, so I don’t feel I have freedom in moving, and I think women should have their privacy at work” (CE20).

It seems that consciousness of the significance of working in a mixed environment and the issues positive and negative raised played a key part in many of the women’s experiences of working in Org.2, making this one of the core themes in the working environment. By contrast, only one woman commented (and then only briefly) on the company’s profit orientation:

“All companies are profit orientated, including [Org.2]” (CE9).

Similarly, only two interviewees mentioned customer relations. One of these simply observed that one of the criteria taken into account when deciding on promotion was “the way [the employee] deals with the clients” (CE19).

The other, CE10, suggested that because customer services were conducted by telephone, they involved less stress than would be the case with face to face interactions:

“Honestly, I have worked in banks, where you deal with customers [face to face]; it was very tiring and hard. Here, even though we work in customer services, we deal with the system and people only on the phone”.

In this situation, although a few employees mentioned pressures, their responses suggested that they generally perceived these as temporary or at least manageable and alleviated by the general quality of conditions within the company. For example:

“Yes, there are times when we work under pressure, especially after breaks (Ramadan and Eid), and that is because of the short working hours. It is only a matter of time, then things get back to normal, as we work as one team” (CE9).

“As an employee, it is usual to be under pressure and get an overload of work. However, the company is trying as much as it can to relieve some of the workload by hiring [temporary] employees with two- or six-months contract” (CE15).

“We have a lot of work, which leads to work pressure, but because our working environment is comfortable and has all the facilities we need, I can cope with the pressure” (CE17).

It is interesting to note that CE17, in the above extract, uses the word “comfortable”. The same point regarding the comfortable environment was made by fourteen interviewees in Org.2, making this the most frequently occurring code in the Org.2 responses related to the organisational environment. For example:

“The working environment is very comfortable here and colleagues are very cooperative” (CE11).

“... You feel HR is part of your family, the way they try to help you to feel comfortable” (CE9).

“The work environment is comfortable and makes you feel [as if you are] at home with your family” (CE17).

In many cases, the word ‘comfortable’ was used in conjunction with “supportive” and/or “cooperative”, which sheds light on the aspects of the organisational environment that these women perceived as conducive to their comfort. The following extracts illustrate these views.

“[I like it] because of the teamwork and the supportive environment. Colleagues are very supportive and willing to share knowledge... Most of the managers are very supportive” (CE2).

“My boss and workmates are very cooperative, and the work time is long but enjoyable” (CE11).

“The team that I work with is very cooperative and we all care about each other and work like sisters in the company” (CE13).

Thus, although women in Org.2 admitted feeling under pressure, they seemed to find the pressures compensated by other aspects of the work environment: the respect and cooperation among colleagues, and a sense of being supported by HR and managers, so they found the pressures tolerable.

Comparison between the Two Organisations

Comparing responses from interviewees in Org.1 and Org.2 there were similarities to the extent that in both organisations gender orientation (segregated versus mixed) and work pressures were the key topics raised. However, they were perceived differently, and differed in their seeming importance in the two settings.

In Org.1, segregation was practised, and perhaps this was taken for granted as a common situation, even the norm in Saudi Arabia. Interviewees did not voice any advantages or disadvantages of a segregated environment, but merely pointed out that the decision to maintain a segregated environment obliged the bank to recruit women. In contrast, women in the non-segregated work environment of Org.2 expounded the various advantages and drawbacks they perceived in such a setting and, moreover, made comparisons with the segregated environments some of them had experienced previously. Most of the women had adapted comfortably to the mixed environment and perceived it to bring practical and psychological benefits. Nevertheless, there were signs of the persistence of social and cultural norms in somewhat stereotypical constructions of male and female behaviour and relations and in some women's perception of a need to guard their talk and behaviour in the presence of men. Women in Org.2 also differed from those in Org.1 in voicing perceptions about both kinds of environments.

Work pressures were also seen differently in the two organisations and were emphasised much more strongly in Org.1 than Org.2. Although both organisations belonged to the same competitive, profit-seeking finance sector, these factors seemed to have greater impact in Org.1, in terms of sales targets and the strain of maintaining satisfactory relations with customers, knowing that client ratings would affect their evaluations. These issues were, in contrast, barely mentioned in Org.2, and although employees there acknowledged the existence of workload pressures, they believed there were compensating factors. It was noticeable how frequently women in Org.2 described cooperative and supportive relations with colleagues, managers and HR, leading three-quarters of them to describe the working environment as comfortable.

7.5 Socio-Cultural Norms

In sharing their perceptions of HRM practices and work experiences, women in both organisations highlighted a number of cultural attitudes, values and practices that constituted an informal "institution", influencing both HRM and the way

women experienced it. Within this category, four codes were common to both organisations: *wasta*, *hijab*, gender constructions and transport. In addition, two further codes, social attitudes towards women's work, and comparison with the West, emerged in Org.1.

Org.1

The code, social norms, represents attitudes prevailing in women's communities and families, regarding the acceptability of woman having careers outside the home. Such attitudes, as part of woman's socializing environment, would influence their expectations and aspirations, in turn influencing the likelihood of their pursuing careers. None of the interviewees mentioned this explicitly, but two employees made comments that are worthy of note because they seem, indirectly, to reflect a change in the way women's work is seen.

A factor mentioned by only one participant among the bank employees was the desire to use her time constructively:

“I grew up in a family where all of its members are working, and I was sitting at home without any work. All I wanted was to fill my time.”
(BE24).

The significant point here is that, in the past, caring for the home and family would have been considered both a sufficient way for a woman to “fill [her] time”, and the appropriate way to do so. The fact that all of this woman's family (including other female members) were working suggests that there has been a shift in attitudes and expectations regarding women's work. BE24, whose family members provided models of women with roles beyond the domestic, had formed the belief that “sitting at home” was not sufficient to satisfy her and she had formed the expectation and aspirations for a career outside the home.

One factor in influencing such a change in women's expectations may be economic pressure, making women's potential financial contribution desirable in many households (Doumato, 2000). In this respect, a factor mentioned by just one bank employee was financial necessity, related to the current cost of living:

“In general, I was looking for a job for my own needs, due to the high living-cost we are currently suffering” (BE9).

The employee concerned was married and would traditionally have expected to be fully supported by her husband. However, the current economic pressures on

households have led to a recognition in many families that to maintain the desired standard of living, it may be necessary for both partners in a marriage to contribute earnings to the family budget. Recognition of the benefits brought by women, through their work outside the home, makes such work acceptable and, in turn, influences the way women are valued.

While the above comments reflect changes in the acceptability and likelihood of women looking for jobs, the next code, *wasta*, reflects the practices involved in obtaining work, and illustrates the limited extent of the cultural changes taking place. *Wasta* has already been mentioned under Theme One; it is the custom of intermediation, whereby people obtain resources, services or positions, solely or partly through the influence of relatives or other “connections” in their social networks. It includes the Western concepts of nepotism and cronyism, although it is wider than these. It has already been explained that *wasta* has deep roots in Arab history, when it was a survival strategy and mechanism for distribution of resources before the advent of modern social organisation. Even now, however, it remains prevalent, and around half the interviewees in Org.1 indicated that *wasta* played a part in their recruitment and selection, despite the official move towards more formal procedures. Women learned about job vacancies, had application procedures expedited, or were given favourable consideration through the mediating influences of various connections, as revealed in section 5.2.1.

“I got my job through one of my relatives” (BE2).

Not only did several women admit to using family or social connections in this way, but some believed the practice continued, despite the introduction of strict qualification criteria and a system of tests and interviews, as these examples illustrate.

“*Wasta* plays an influential role” (BM3).

“In the past, employment was dependent on *wasta*, and did not require that the employee had a related specialisation” (BE7).

“The recruitment policy is based on *wasta*; I don’t think it’s based on a well thought out mechanism or procedures, and is also not based on whether the employee is qualified for the job or not” (BE12).

On the whole, women who admitted securing a job through *wasta* tended to be older employees with longer periods of service in the bank; for example, BM2, quoted earlier, was in her forties and had worked in the bank for more than 15 years. In other words, they were recruited before the official changes in recruitment and selection criteria and methods. Nevertheless, there were also some younger women, with employment history of less than five years, who also admitted that connections had played a role in their recruitment: BE11, who said, “My cousins [who] were working in the same bank, supported me by meditating” and BE18 who reported, “I applied through my relatives” were in this category. Such examples suggest that, despite the introduction of more formal application and selection procedures, for some women at least, *wasta* enabled them, if not to circumvent these, then at least to increase the possibility of a favourable outcome. The implication therefore is that, conversely, women who lacked “connections” might, even if they were well – qualified, have more difficulty in obtaining a job.

The high level of *wasta* claimed in Org.1 may reflect the strong continuation of traditional social values in this Saudi-owned organisation, which may not apply equally in all banks. The possibility that Org.1 is more traditional in various ways was raised by BM8 in relation to another cultural factor: the wearing of the *hijab*. This, too, is a deeply rooted tradition in Saudi culture, and is seen by many as an Islamic requirement. However, BM8 reported an instance where, in application to another bank (she did not reveal which one), her insistence on retaining her *hijab* had counted against her.

“Well, through my experience in a previous bank, they rejected me due to wearing *hijab*, despite successfully passing the interview. The manager asked me, in a degrading tone, “Do you want to get a job with this *hijab*?” Some think development and civilization are [achieved] by abandoning religion. This is untrue, because I got a job here, at a higher salary, and I am committed to wearing *hijab*”.

The interviewee narrated this incident in the context of a question about the bank’s commitment to employing women. It seems, however, that rather than reflecting commitment to employing women per se, it concerns acceptance of her religious and cultural identity, symbolized by *hijab*. In Org.1, women working in a women-only branch, serving only female customers, would not need to wear their *hijab*, but in interviews or meetings with (male) HRM personnel, it was accepted and expected that they would do so, in line with traditional cultural norms. In her perception, the bank where she had been rejected was, in its pursuit

of a modern image, rejecting not just her way of dressing, but the norms and values it represented. In contrast, Org.1, with its conscious Islamic ethos, can be seen as offering a safe and comfortable environment, where women like BM8 could benefit from the new job opportunities in Saudi society, without compromising their traditional values.

Another way in which culture appeared to influence HRM policies and practices and women's experiences of them, was with regard to gender constructions. On the one hand, women referred critically to stereotypical social constructions of gender when seeking to explain their perceptions of inequities in such areas as pay and promotion. On the other, they showed their own internalization of such constructions, as well as their practical impact, when they discussed matters such as work-life balance. The most frequently mentioned gender stereotype was the prevailing social assumption that men have more financial obligations than women, since they provide for women and are responsible for family and household expenses. Several interviewees referred to this assumption as an explanation of men's greater promotion opportunities and eligibility for higher pay grades.

“Sometimes we may notice that a male employee's salary is higher than a female's salary due to a collective cultural reason that stipulates that men are responsible for providing money to women” (BM10).

“It is a male-dominant society and they think men are the breadwinners” (BM13).

“It is possible that society finds that the obligations of men are more than those of women (providing for the needs of the family), and therefore the man gets a higher salary than the woman's salary” (BE13).

The women who raised this point challenged the reasoning, arguing that, today, women too contribute to family expenses, but as BE5 argued, men inevitably had the best opportunities because, in her perception, “society is masculine”.

Another gender stereotype perceived to influence women's work experiences was the norm that women need special protection and consideration. Although women did not explicitly state this rationale, it can be suggested that it underpins two of the behaviours reported. One was the belief that women should not have to queue

or be kept waiting, which led to female customers being very demanding and impatient, and placed pressure on the understaffed women's branch.

“It makes clients feel annoyed that there are not enough employees here... female clients get really upset ... Eastern men do not like women to wait, so they get served quickly, before male clients in the male branch” (BM3).

There is clearly an anomaly here, in that male staff could serve women, yet female staff could not serve men. Any women who did not mind being served by a man, therefore, had a choice of two branches in which to conduct their transactions. Moreover, they could, in the “male branch”, expect priority service – perhaps to avoid their prolonged exposure to the gaze of male customers.

The other impact of the social convention of protection of women was a policy mentioned by just one employee, BE22, who observed:

“Men can go out of the bank [during breaks] but women can't”

The fact that no one else mentioned this suggests that it was perhaps taken for granted, but it seems to reflect the way cultural norms and attitudes constrained women's behaviour at a basic, everyday level, despite their opportunity to join the workforce.

Another way in which women's experiences, as reported in interview, reflected stereotypical constructions of gender roles and relations, was with regard to their reports of the dual burden of work and home, which made work-life balance difficult for so many. A good example is BE20, who argued:

“Women's responsibilities are more than men's. A woman is responsible for the home and work, while a man is just responsible at work and [he has] a marginal responsibility at home, because he comes home and everything is ready for him; clothes, food etc”

This can be seen as an example of how women internalized the role into which they had been socialised from an early age (Abalkhail, 2017), and illustrates why, in Theme 2, marital status emerged as a factor in work-life balance, causing several women to suggest their ability to manage a satisfactory balance was due to the fact that they were not yet married.

The fifth code in the “culture” category was transport. At the time the interviews were conducted, the ban on women’s driving had just been lifted, after an active campaign in the media for repeal of the prohibition. In this situation, women depended on being driven to and from work by a husband or a male relative or had to employ a private driver. In the first case, their places and hours of work would be constrained by the times and distances the relative was able or willing to drive them. In the second case, the expense of employing a driver would take a substantial proportion of women’s salaries, eroding the financial benefit of their work. Nevertheless, when asked, several declared that they did not wish to drive, either because they lacked confidence, or because they were happy to leave the associated stress to someone else. Some examples of their comments are as follows:

“I prefer to get to work by my driver because the workplace is far away from my home, and that would definitely get me tired” (BM10).

“I am not a proponent of women driving. Personally, I do not expect that I will have the courage to do so. As well, I cannot bear the endless traffic on the streets, and I’m afraid of having an accident” (BE11).

“I do not think I will drive, since I am used to comfort. It is better to have a driver, since he will do the difficult part of finding parking places” (BM10).

Such responses can be interpreted as a reflection of the impact of institutional factors, both practically and emotionally. Practically, they reveal a perception that the transport infrastructure was dangerous, difficult to negotiate and not designed to accommodate an influx of new (female) drivers. Emotionally, they reflect the erosion of women’s confidence by social norms that portray them as at risk, in need of protection, so that activities perceived as difficult or uncomfortable are best left to men.

Other women, however, expressed an intention to drive, either to relieve the burden on a husband or father out of personal interest. It seems likely that, in the future, the possibility of driving will increase women’s work opportunities.

The last code in the ‘culture’ category is comparison with the West. Although this was raised by only one interviewee, BM3, she invoked such a comparison on

more than one occasion, when elaborating on her criticisms of client behaviour and its effect on employees. With regard to the assumption, in local culture, that women should be given priority service, for example. she commented,

“I think if they were in the West, they would have to wait like everybody else”.

She also perceived that employees’ rights were better protected in the West, so that abusive behaviour by clients towards employees would not be tolerated.

“In Western countries, there are laws and regulations that protect the employees’ rights, unlike us in Arab countries, where a client is always right”.

Further, she commented on the way “top personalities” expected special treatment, at the expense of other customers:

“So, when a wife of a minister visits the branch, she wants to be treated in a special way. This makes other clients who are waiting for the service get upset, and of course they comment negatively on that... In the European countries, clients are the same regardless of their class, because there are laws and regulations” (BM3).

It is not clear how she had formed those perceptions, apart from a story about a client who was prosecuted for spitting in an employee’s face in a European hospital, and she did not identify any specific country. However, she clearly saw certain local cultural attitudes and behaviours as creating difficulties for bank employees and perceived the West as preserving fairness through “laws and regulations” that were applied to all.

Org.2

In Org.2, participants’ discussions of cultural factors in their experience of HRM and work yielded four codes: *wasta*, *hijab*, gender stereotypes and transport.

Wasta was rarely mentioned in Org.2. A few women indicated that they had just learned of job vacancies through friends, and two had submitted applications through friends, but it is not clear what part, if any, friends had played in their acceptance; the women concerned had all attended formal interviews.

Regarding first hearing about the job, for example, CE21 recalled:

“I knew about the job from my friend, because she is a manager in marketing, and she told me the company needed trainees”.

CE14, who knew about the company from her father, a customer, nevertheless made conventional online applications:

“It started when my father was dealing with the company and I liked the speedy dealing, so I applied many times to it and in the end I got accepted... all my attempts to apply were online” (CE14).

CE9, who had applied through a friend, was still required to attend an interview;

“As I said, [I found out about the job] through a friend. I sat for the interview, which lasted two hours, instead of half an hour. The head of HR was there in the interview and they insisted that I sign the offer straight away, but I did not as I was employed and I needed time to think. I signed the offer after a while” (CE9).

Similarly, CE20 and CE21 also had interviews following the submission of applications through friends.

“I applied for the job through my friend and not online. After that, HR called and told me I was accepted... and they gave me the details and set a time for an interview with the manager, then I did the interview and I was accepted” (CE20).

“I sent my papers and my CV via my friend. She sent my official papers to the HR department and I was accepted immediately, then I did an interview with the HR manager” (CE21).

It is interesting that CE20 and CE21 both indicated that they were accepted before the interview, but the fact that they nevertheless were required to attend an interview suggests that the initial acceptance was only provisional. Both these employees, moreover, were "trainees", hired on temporary contracts to relieve staff shortages during busy periods, so it is possible that the selection process may not have been so stringent as for permanent employees; CE20 described her interview as “general and easy”.

Whilst “connections”, in the above cases, played a part in women learning of job opportunities and perhaps facilitated the application process, only one participant,

CE11, indicated that *wasta* had played a direct role in her recruitment. She recalled:

“My husband has connections in HR, so he made some calls and I received a call from HR...”.

This woman’s recruitment had been more than five years previously, at a time when, reportedly, recruitment was easier and less selective than at the time this study was conducted. In this case, too, however, the woman had still sat for a formal interview before acceptance.

Thus, the general impression in Org.2 was that, while “connections” may have played a part in women learning of job opportunities, *wasta* did not replace formal selection procedures.

A more frequently mentioned cultural factor whose impact was experienced by women working in Org.2 was *hijab*. This had particular salience because of the company’s non-segregated work environment. While Org.2 employees had, to varying degrees, accepted and come to terms with “mixing”, they did so subject to the cultural norm that they should not be seen without their head covering by men who were not close relatives. Thus, whereas in an all-female environment, they might have felt free to remove their headscarves, in Org.2, the proximity of men made this a cultural impossibility. Several women mentioned this as a source of stress; the *hijab* might at times be hot and uncomfortable, but in the absence of any women-only spaces, they could not relieve themselves of it, even temporarily during break times. The following excerpts illustrate the feelings expressed.

“There are negatives in the mixed environment, like wearing the *hijab* all the time and there is no woman's area where I can take it off, even for an hour” (CE1).

“There is no special place for us in the break, so we cannot take off our *hijab* at work. So, we wear *hijab* all day at work, and it's really exhausting for us” (CE12).

“Unfortunately, there is no particular place for break for women wearing *hijab* so they can take off their *hijab*. All break places are mixed, and there is no privacy for women” (CE21).

“I feel a lack of privacy in [Org.2] and it’s hard for me to take off my *hijab* because of the mixed environment, so I don’t feel

comfortable in this open environment, even at break time. We don't have a special place for women and all places are open. There is no place... that we can go to, to take off our hijab and take a rest... If there were a special break place for women, it might be acceptable, even though it is mixed work” (CE20).

Although women were working in a mixed environment, they still felt bound by social conventions, so that the mixed environment, far from being freer than a segregated environment, was in some ways perceived as constraining. They were accustomed to a tradition of privacy for women, and would have liked to retain it, to some degree; to have times and places where they could be relaxed, without the pressure imposed by the need to uphold convention in the presence of men.

Social and cultural conventions also came to the fore in women's reference to gender stereotypes in explaining differences between men and women in the workplace, with regard to both the remuneration and duties. For example, a few women who perceived that men received higher salaries or faster promotion than women explained this in terms of the social expectation that men have the main responsibility for household expenses, whereas women are 'kept' by men, as discussed under Theme 1 (see section 5.2.4). For example:

“Men get promoted faster and I think they [management] are trying to support men's financial needs, as they have more financial commitments” (CE1).

“Of course, the male employee receives a higher salary... I think the reason is from the society. They think that since you are a woman, you will have a man to cover your expenses, housing and living expenses, while a man has a home [and has] to cover its expenses and monetary commitments” (CE5).

“Men's wages are higher than women's... I think because men have family responsibilities... in the Saudi culture a man is the one who looks after his wife and he is the one who pays the costs after marriage, for his wife and family... however, women have no responsibilities like men” (CE16).

Given the absence of detailed salary information, it is not clear whether such differentials did, in fact, exist; the majority of women in Org.2 perceived equality in these areas and, as noted previously, Org.2's cost of living allowances and the

like were paid to male and female employees on equal terms. Nevertheless, the existence of these perceptions, among a number of employees, suggests both the persistence of this gender stereotype in society and, perhaps, these women's acceptance of the prevailing view.

Gender stereotypes are also seen in claims that there were differences in what was expected of men and women in the workplace, although there were only isolated examples of these. One was CE12's claim that:

“They (management) don't let women do some duties like men, such as carrying heavy things”.

The other was CE14's comment on the advantages of a mixed environment, since:

“A man can do tasks that women can't do, for instance going out and completing work with the Commerce Ministry”.

Both these examples appear to reflect the conventional view of women as weaker than men, and in need of protection; women, for instance, are 'unable' to visit the Ministry on business because of the difficulties and demands of travel (see section 5.5). It is interesting to see that CE14 seemed to accept that such a task was not possible or appropriate for a woman.

Indeed, given the difficulties of transport for women, prevailing at the time of the study, such a view was, perhaps, not without foundation. With the exception of three women who were driven to and from work by their husbands, the women interviewed in Org.2 relied on private drivers. They were divided in their intentions as to whether they would drive themselves, following the announcement of the new law. Whilst several said they hoped to drive in the future, others were reluctant to do so, and gave a variety of reasons:

“I'm not planning to drive in the future, because I feel scared. The traffic rules are not clear in this country. Maybe I would drive if I were in a European country” (CE1).

“For me, it's hard to drive in the future because there is always a parking issue. I think the country hasn't specified anything for women's driving until now. In addition, they [women] have got used to the comfort [of being driven]” (CM6).

“I can’t drive now, because there are not enough parking spaces and the streets are crowded” (CE14).

While women who did not plan to drive voiced confidence issues, it can be seen that they also referred to infrastructural and institutional issues - weak traffic laws, overcrowding and lack of parking - that would often affect men too. Perhaps women thought that their driving would, by increasing the number of drivers on the road, add to the problems, or they may have felt unable or unwilling to face the pressures and difficulties of the Saudi driving environment. Such views suggest that institutional action to improve these conditions might encourage more women to take advantage of the new law allowing them to drive, which might make a difference to their working opportunities and experiences.

Comparison between the two organisations

For the most part, the cultural factors mentioned in Org.1 and Org.2 were the same, albeit with some differences in emphasis and in the reported impacts. They included *wasta*, *hijab*, gender stereotypes and transport, although in Org.1, two other factors were raised: social norms and comparison with the West.

With regard to social norms, two employees made comments that reflected changes in the way society is beginning to see women’s work outside the home, and in women’s own expectations. One of these referred to being brought up in a family where it was the norm for all members to work, so that she was not satisfied to "sit at home" or fill her time solely with domestic duties. The other referred to the economic pressures that make it no longer feasible or desirable for women to be supported by their husbands; instead, it is coming to be recognised that women can make a valuable contribution to the household and that, by taking such a role, they can improve their standard of living.

At the same time, there were indications that in both organisations, women experienced the continued force of more traditional socio-cultural influences, which existed in tension with the modernizing trend.

Whilst *wasta* was mentioned in both organisations as a source of information on opportunities, it seems from the data to have played a stronger role in the recruitment process in Org.1, especially among older women who had worked in the company for longer. In Org.2, fewer women reported receiving help from “connections”, at least in submitting their applications; they had nevertheless

been appointed on the basis of formal interviews, although it appears that these may have been less stringent for “trainees”.

Hijab was an issue that was perceived quite differently in the two organisations. In Org.1 it was mentioned by only one woman, who was committed to retaining a *hijab* for religious reasons, and found in Org.1 an environment where this was understood and accepted, contrary to her previous experience with another bank. In Org.2, however, the issue was different; the need to wear *hijab* at all times, even during breaks, symbolised the constraints (possibly self-imposed) experienced by women as a result of working in a mixed environment. The absence of “privacy” (interpreted as access to designated women-only spaces) meant that they perceived a need to guard their behaviour in the presence of men (*hijab* representing decency and modesty that made the mixed environment acceptable), even at the expense of their physical comfort.

In both organisations, some women perceived the existence of differences in pay and promotion opportunities between men and women, based on gender stereotypes prevailing in society. They rationalised such differentials on the basis that men were seen as breadwinners, responsible for family and household expenses, in a way that women were not. In addition, in Org.1 (where employees interacted with customers face-to-face), social norms of privacy and protection for women were said to result in female clients’ unreasonable expectations, such that, rather than be kept waiting, they would go to the “men’s branch” where they could be assured of priority in service. The same norm of protection was said to constrain women’s movements; more so in Org.1, where women were not allowed to leave the bank, even during breaks. In Org.2, women had freedom at break times (as reported in another theme) but apparently ‘could not’ or were not expected to perform work tasks that involved visiting other organisations.

Also common to both organisations were restrictions as a result of transport, since at the time of the study, arrangements to enable women to drive had not yet been completed, so women relied for transportation to and from work on relatives or private drivers. In both settings, some women looked forward to the possibility of driving. Others, however, lacked confidence, or drew attention to institutional and infrastructural deficiencies, which they thought made driving a challenge.

In Org.1 only, a sixth code emerged, comparison with the West, reflecting a perception that laws and regulations protecting employee rights were available there, but not in Saudi Arabia. This was, however, an isolated perception, and no

clear reason was given for the individual concerned forming this impression, so it is not possible to suggest that there were systematic differences between organisations in this respect.

The table below (Table 7.1) illustrates the similarities and differences between the two organisations based on Theme 3.

Table 7.1: Comparison between the Two Organisations – Theme 3

Category	Code	Org.1	Org.2
Education	Specialisation	<p>Qualifications play an important role in employment in Org.1.</p> <p>Specialisation is becoming more important in employment of women.</p> <p>The bank requires high skills, including English proficiency.</p>	<p>Qualification and specialisation play a lesser role in the employment of women.</p> <p>Saudization prompted Org.2 to employ women regardless of their specialities.</p>
	Experience	-	Org.2 is keen to employ experienced women with basic skills
Regulatory Authorities	Ministry of Labour	<p>Recruitment of women was, at least in part, a response to the national labour policy promulgated under the umbrella of the government’s Vision 2030 for national development.</p> <p>The Ministry was also mentioned as an influence the terms and conditions of employment.</p>	<p>Recruitment of women was, at least in part, a response to the national labour policy promulgated under the umbrella of the government’s Vision 2030 for national development.</p> <p>Most of the employment concessions and allowances mentioned came from the Ministry</p>
	SAMA	<p>SAMA was the source of policies and regulations</p> <p>Test</p> <p>Licence</p> <p>Training</p>	<p>SAMA was the source of policies and regulations applicable in the company.</p> <p>Test</p> <p>Licence</p> <p>Training</p>
	Segregation/ Mixing	<p>Separate branches for women, operating by women to serve women.</p>	<p>Operated in a mixed environment.</p> <p>There are advantages and disadvantages of a mixed environment.</p>
	Profit-Seeking	Profit-seeking	Profit-seeking
	Customer Satisfaction	Customers’ satisfaction is the first priority	-----

	Pressure	It has a lot of pressure	Employees can manage the pressure.
	Comfortable Social norms	Not comfortable	Work environment is comfortable.
	<i>Wasta</i>	<i>Wasta</i> plays crucial role	Few women mentioned <i>Wasta</i>
	hijab	They wear the hijab when they meet men in the HRM. Women work in a separate branch from men, so they don't have to wear hijab.	Although women were working in a mixed environment, they still felt bound by social conventions, because Org.2 is not equipped with private spaces for women to relax without hijab.
	Gender construction (Stereotypes)	Women experienced the continued force of more traditional socio-cultural influences, which existed in tension with the modernizing trend. Inequities in pay and promotion between women and men. Male staff could serve women, whereas female staff could not serve men. Men can go out of the bank, whereas women can't. Women have more responsibilities than men, they have responsibilities in work and at home as well, while men just at work.	Women experienced the continued force of more traditional socio-cultural influences, which existed in tension with the modernizing trend. = Women can go out of Org.2 in break time. =
	Transport	All women are driven to work by a driver or their husbands.	All women are driven to work by a driver or their husbands.
	Comparison with West	In Arab countries, clients have the priority.	

Table 7.1 (continued)

7.6 Summary

The third theme was concerned with the way formal and informal institutions influence women's experiences of work shaping their aspirations and opportunities, as well as influencing the policies, practices and conditions they encounter in the workplace. The four institutions considered were education, regulating regulatory authorities, the organisation environment and social cultural norms.

It was suggested that women's career opportunities and experiences had arguably been influenced by their access to education. The majority of participants had a university degree and were ambitious to pursue careers. Qualifications and specialisation played a greater role in employee selection in Org.1 than Org.2. However, both organisations were increasingly said to be demanding advanced skills such as ICT competence and (in Org.1 particularly), English language proficiency. However, concerns have been expressed that so far, the education system is not sufficiently equipping women with the qualifications and skills that employers increasingly require.

Two regulatory authorities, the Ministry of Labour and SAMA, had a dominant influence over women's work experiences in both organisations. The Ministry of Labour sets labour law and policy for the country as a whole, and in particular was responsible for the laws entitling women to maternity leave and allowing those with babies an hour per day for breastfeeding. Other aspects of the Ministry's role mentioned by interviewees were setting terms and conditions of employment, such as annual leave entitlement and (under Vision 2030) encouraging recruitment of women. The other regulatory influence was SAMA, which oversees the finance sector. In addition to setting financial rules that employees had to learn and apply, SAMA had a role in testing and licensing job applicants, and in providing CPD. In addition, it was suggested that both these authorities placed the HR function in the role of regulatory "police" (Legge,2007) focused on legal compliance.

As regards the organisational environment, the main issue was segregation versus "mixing". Org.1 followed a traditional policy of segregated employment. On the one hand, this guaranteed jobs for women, to meet the service needs of more conservative customers. On the other, it was suggested that segregation restricts women to certain occupations considered "suitable" and to employers who are able and willing to bear the cost of separate facilities. In contrast, Org.2 operated a non-traditional mixed environment, which employees of that organisation found

respectful and supportive. However, due to the impact of traditional social norms, they felt under self-imposed pressure to guard their behaviour around men (for example, wearing *hijab*) and feared that even everyday interactions might be interpreted as evidence of an immoral relationship. Thus, the ostensibly freer mixed environment was seen as constraining. Other aspects of the organisation environment affecting women in both organisations were the pressure arising from work in a profit-seeking sector and the consequent need to meet sales targets and keep customers satisfied. Such pressures, however seemed to be felt more strongly in Org.1, where employees had to interact face-to-face with customers who were sometimes disrespectful or even abusive.

The impact of social -cultural norms was felt in two main ways: in social attitudes influencing the likelihood of women applying for jobs, and in the practices experienced in the workplace. Regarding the former, it was suggested that the availability of female role models within the family and economic pressures might increase the acceptability of women working and encourage their career aspirations. At work, the influence of culture, as an informal institution, was felt in such areas as the use of *wasta* to gain employment, attitudes towards wearing *hijab*, and gender constructions that were invoked to explain not only disparities in pay and promotion, but also the expectations of behaviour in the workplace – for example, women in Org.1 not being allowed to leave the premises, even during breaks, and women in Org.2 not being expected to meet clients in other business premises or public places. Women were also constrained by the difficulty and cost of transport, under the ban on women’s driving. At the time of the study, the ban had just been revoked and work had begun to make the necessary institutional arrangements. Arguably, this change in the law may eventually contribute to open up further opportunities for women, in terms of access to work.

Overall, the findings reported in this chapter suggest that in both organisations, women’s aspirations and experiences in relation to work were influenced directly and indirectly by institutional factors. Some of these, such as education and the legal and regulatory provisions increased the opportunities available to some (though not all) women. Such influences, however, were in tension with constraining informal influences from socio-cultural norms, which were in some ways reproduced and reinforced in the organisation environment. The implications of these findings, and those from Chapters 5 and 6 will be discussed in the light of international literature in the next chapter.

Chapter Eight: Discussion and Implications

8.1 Introduction

The last three chapters have presented, thematically, the findings derived from interviews with female employees and managers in two Saudi organisations, one Saudi-owned and one international. In this chapter, the findings are revisited in the light of previous research, contextual information, and the theoretical perspectives of institution theory and critical realism, in order to address the three research questions posed earlier, namely,

1. To what extent, and what way, are Saudi organisations responding to Saudi labour legislation via their use of HRM practices?
2. To what extent do women in the case study organisations perceive the workplace/ employee relations climate as supportive of them?
3. To what extent and in what ways do formal and informal institutions shape the work experiences of women in Org.1 and Org.2?

Following discussion of the three research questions, the implications of the findings and the contributions of the study will be highlighted. The research limitations will be acknowledged, and suggestions made for future research.

8.2 Research Question 1

RQ1: To what extent, and what way, are the organisations responding to Saudi labour legislation via their use of HRM practices?

As indicated in chapters one and two, as part of its socio-economic development plan, Vision 2030 (and even before that, efforts to tackle Saudi unemployment) the Saudi government has declared an interest in improving women's contribution to the country's economy. Various measures with potential implications for women's employment were announced, including Saudization (measures to encourage the localisation of labour), the opening of new employment fields considered "suitable" for women, and the introduction of various schemes such as *Hafiz* (a job-seeker's allowance) and the announcement of new employment mechanisms, such as tele-working. In addressing the first research question, therefore, the aim was to explore to what extent HRM policies and practices in the participating organisations reflected or responded to these initiatives. To answer this question, the research explored legislation and organisational HRM policies and practices in relation to recruitment, promotion, training, pay and working conditions.

With regard to recruitment, both organisations extensively recruited women; Org.1 did so to staff all-female branches to serve female customers, while in Org.2, women constituted a substantial proportion of the mixed workforce. In neither organisation did the hiring of women, per se, appear to be a response to labour law, and only one participant (BE15) suggested a possible connection with the Vision 2030: “I think the bank policy comes hand in hand with the country’s policy, the 2030 Vision which aims to recruit women...”. The employment of women in banking and insurance predated these measures (some women had been employed for 10 - 15 years, whereas *Nitaqat* dates from 2011 and Vision 2030 from 2016), so there was no evidence to suggest that the recruitment of women was influenced by the gender quota system that was, according to Rutledge et al. (2011), instituted with the *Nitaqat* policy. Instead, women’s employment seemed to be more due to other factors, including globalisation (bringing the presence of international organisations such as Org.2) and, in particular education. With regard to the latter, most of the participants had, at least, a bachelor’s degree, and in Org.1 in particular, qualification in a relevant specialisation emerged as one of the factors in recruitment. The availability of women with a good education and high qualifications was seen to contrast with an earlier situation where fewer women with the requisite skills were available and organisations might be forced to accept staff with only secondary education, or a less relevant specialisation.

Al Rawaf and Simmons (1991) report that in the early years of female education in Saudi Arabia, education was not to conflict with their traditional domestic role. Consequently, women tended to cluster in traditionally female areas of education, such as arts and humanities (Tlaiss and Elamin, 2016, Al-Asfour et al., 2017). As recently as 2008, the majority of female university degrees were in education, human sciences or Islamic and Arabic studies (SAMA, 2015) rather than professional or vocational fields (Alfarran et al., 2018). Thus, authors have pointed out that the belief that education should be an extension of women’s domestic responsibilities has led to a mismatch between their qualifications and job requirements (Ramady, 2013, Alfarran et al., 2018).

In this respect, the findings support Abalkhail’s (2017) assertions regarding the increased job opportunities opened to women by improved education. At the same time, however, the increasing availability of educated women led to an increasing formalization of recruitment practices and a demand for ‘new’ skills,

such as English language proficiency and competence with computer technology. This constrained opportunities for women who lacked these specific skills.

An interesting observation was that, despite improvements in women's education, and the formalization of recruitment practices, there was still evidence of extensive use of *wasta*, particularly in Org.1 (e.g. BE11, who admitted, "my cousins ...supported me by mediating"). One reason for this may be that, due to a lack of strategic affirmative programmes to facilitate women's careers, women rely on their families for career support and opportunity (Abalkhail and Allan, 2015). Another factor may be the tendency, noted by Alhejji et al. (2018) for HRM managers in organisations to adhere to local practices. They point out the importance of personal relationships rather than formal processes and procedures, which they see as a major obstacle to professionalism across the Middle East. The findings in the present study, were, nevertheless, only partly consistent with such views; *wasta* certainly played a prominent part in recruitment in Org.1, but far less so in Org.2, where, even if individuals learned of a position or submitted applications via relatives, their selection was still subject to a formal interview. Such findings suggest in the absence of national law, organisations used their discretion and policies and practices were aligned to their own organisational cultures. In Org.1, a Saudi-owned organisation, local customs seemed to be more deeply entrenched, whereas Org.2 seemed to operate more in accordance with its international origin. It seems possible that as the presence of such organisations in Saudi Arabia grows, the role of cultural practices like *wasta* may decline and, if so, women will have to show that they have the required technical and social skills in order to gain employment. The fact that most of the participants in this study (even if they had also used *wasta*) had gained employment based on their knowledge and skills, challenges claims by Ramady (2013) and Alfarran et al. (2018) that Saudi education does not equip women with the knowledge and skills they need for the workplace. However, the evidence that some employers are becoming more demanding in their requirements (as claimed by BE9, BE11, and BM3) suggests that deficiencies in women's education may again become apparent and limit their opportunities.

Another point emerging from the findings on recruitment is that, in both organisations, the extensive recruitment of women was perceived as reflecting a commitment to women's employment. In Org.1, however, it was not so much a commitment to women's opportunity and empowerment as a necessity, driven by the cultural practice of segregation. As BE11 explained: "Saudi society is

conservative... many women prefer to be served in women's sections". In practice, their status was lower than that of men, consistent with Varshney (2019) claim of gender inequality in both public and private sector organisations. The organisation structure in Org.1, and the accompanying status differentials, corresponded to the situation described by Abalkhail (2017) as typical in Saudi segregated organisations: men and women work in different branches, but women are controlled from a distance by men. Thus, horizontal segregation on gender lines is accompanied by a vertical segregation, whereby women support men. The preservation of gender -segregated spaces as an example of 'events' in the 'actual' level of reality as explained by Delbridge and Edwards (2013) reinforces the patriarchal system and the idea that men are in charge. This, in Delbridge and Edwards' (2013) terms can be seen as the real level of causal structures and mechanisms that, in critical realism, are said to underlie events and the way they are perceived and experienced. As a result, women, even managers, are marginalised (Abalkhail, 2017).

This difference in status between men and women in Org.1 was illustrated by the findings related to promotion and pay. In terms of promotion, for example, fewer positions were available for women than for men, and there was a 'ceiling' for women who, even as managers, could not exceed grade 6. In contrast, male managers were employed on grade 7. These constraints, in turn, had implications for pay. Although most women thought pay was the same for men and women in the same position (and Saudi law calls for men and women to be paid equally for equal work) in practice, more of the higher salaried positions were available to men. Moreover, at manager level, the idea that women were in charge of "offices" rather than branches provided a way of circumventing the equal pay rule. Again, these findings are consistent with the claims of previous studies (Varshney, 2019, Alhejji et al., 2018, Alghofaily, 2019, Abalkhail, 2017). The latter, based on interviews with female managers in higher education, found that women, despite their qualifications, were not promoted to positions of power. With regard to pay, she pointed to the stereotypical assumption in Saudi society (mentioned also by several women in this study) that men are primary income providers, whereas women work to subsidize the family income, or for self-satisfaction, and so are less in need of higher -salaried positions. In fact, although there is law on pay equality, Saudi labour law contains no control or enforcement mechanisms regarding gender equality (Tlaiss,2014b; Alhejji et al., 2018). As a result, although formal institutions and policies encourage gender equality, in practice

their effect is limited by social norms that give inferior status to women (Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2018).

In contrast, in Org.2, women's responses suggested that the majority perceived equality in pay and promotion opportunities between men and women. They asserted that position depended on qualifications and experience, rather than gender, and pointed to the high proportion of female managers. Pay was, however, considerably lower in Org.2 than in Org.1. One reason for this may be that the work (dealing with queries and selling insurance products by telephone) was less technical and demanding than in the bank, where employees handled a variety of transactions with clients, face-to-face. Another factor was the relatively new phenomenon of employing so-called "trainees" on short-term contracts. The lower pay was, however, perhaps partly compensated by the provision of other benefits, such as a creche and a gym for employees' use, and the generally comfortable physical environment, in contrast to that described in Org.1.

With regard to working conditions, the organisations were similar in reporting standard working hours (8 or 9 per day, with various breaks, particularly at prayer times) and holidays (22 days per year, with fewer days, pro rata, for employees on short-term contracts). Moreover, they both offered concessions for pregnant employees and mothers of babies and young children: maternity allowances and leave, an hour's allowance for breastfeeding, and childcare allowances for children up to six years old, i.e. the school starting age. In these respects, organisations were complying with the labour law. They illustrate, however, that the Saudi government, while facilitating women's careers, still upholds and reinforces prevailing social constructions of femininity which prioritize and privilege women's roles as wives and mothers (Rashad et al., 2005, Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2018). This conservatism recalls the approach the government took when introducing girls' education. To overcome conservative opposition, it asserted that nothing in the new system would change Saudi women's traditional role and identity (Al Rawaf and Simmons, 1991, Ramady, 2013).

Such constructions constitute part of the 'real' level of structures and mechanisms underpinning the 'empirical' and 'actual' levels of social reality. In terms of Fleetwood and Ackroyd's (2004) typology they reflect the interaction of the culture, as part of the social dimension, with beliefs and values, which constitute the 'ideal' dimension. These dimensions, in turn, influence or are manifested in the artefactual dimension, through the enactment of specific HRM policies and

practices that benefit working mothers but do nothing to support the careers of single or childless women.

To summarize this section, women's employment in the participating organisations is not necessarily a response to labour law but perhaps more a reflection of better education for women, and the influence of globalisation. Indeed, legislation seemed to have relatively little role in impacting HRM policies. Where specific provisions existed, such as on working hours, holidays, and the provisions for mothers, organisations generally complied, although in Org.1 there were suggestions that terminology was manipulated to circumvent the equal pay rule. It seems, however, that there are gaps in the employment law; there are no rules to prohibit *wasta*, for example, and no explicit mechanisms to enforce equality. These gaps apply to men as well as women, but have a more detrimental impact on women, who lack social networks and face the impacts of entrenched social attitudes, especially in the Saudi-owned Org.1. Thus, the two organisations reflected quite different situations. Org.2, the international organisation, in some ways seemed to go beyond the requirements of the law, in terms of the promotion opportunities available and in the provision of a better physical environment with more facilities. In contrast, in Org.1, while segregation provided specific opportunities for women, at the same time, complex interlocking practices and processes including *wasta*, subordinate status of women's branches, limited positions available, and the accompanying pay structure, created what Acker (2009 p:199) called an "inequality regime" disadvantaging female employees. In this sense, it can be suggested that in Org.1, at least, despite the existence of similar formal HR provisions for men and women, in practice there existed a dual system based on gender, consistent with the suggestion raised in Chapter 3. The difference in the two systems lies not so much in the policies themselves, as in the way deeply-rooted cultural norms influence their interpretation and the ability of women to benefit from the provisions available.

8.3 Research Question 2

RQ2: To what extent do women perceive the workplace/ employee relations climate as supportive to them?

Whereas the first RQ focused on specific HRM policies and practices, this question looks at women's experiences in the workplace from a wider perspective. It includes their relations with management, management responsiveness to their interests and concerns, perceptions of how women are treated by the organisation in comparison to men, the extent to which participants perceived themselves to have personal control over their work tasks and environments, and the extent to which organisations were seen as caring about or supportive to women's work-life balance.

Women in both organisations expressed diverse and sometimes conflicting views on these issues. On the one hand, the majority saw the organisational climate as supportive, in terms of opportunities for communication with management and equality of treatment with men. On the other, these perceptions were seen to be shaped by their low expectations and limited understanding of issues such as EI and work-life balance and a variety of constraints and inequalities were uncovered, which contradicted women's assertions of a favourable climate, especially in Org.1, as the following paragraphs will demonstrate.

As regards relations with management, as noted in Chapter Three, in Saudi Arabia, Industrial Democracy (legally mandated or sanctioned opportunities for employee participation, including representation through mechanisms such as trade unions or works councils) does not exist, so any opportunities for participation will be of the management-driven, Employee Involvement (EI) kind.

In Chapter Six, women in both organisations reported the existence of a variety of EI opportunities, including scheduled meetings, the possibility for individuals to take problems and concerns to their line manager, or to the HR department, and websites, such as "Employees' Voice" in Org.1, and "Speak up" in Org.2. Such provisions, it could be argued, reflect a predominantly managerialist agenda, presuming an alignment of interests between managers and employees, concerned to encourage employee motivation, commitment and contribution (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004, Wilkinson et al., 2013). This can be seen, for example, in the issues reportedly discussed in meetings and other communication forums such as WhatsApp: day-to-day operational issues, SAMA regulations,

new procedures, sales targets and the like. Such communications can be seen as corresponding to the lower end of the EI continuum, whereby employees receive information, and may sometimes have the opportunity of a greater degree of EI through communication of their own ideas and concerns (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004, Wilkinson et al., 2013).

The nature and purpose of EI was particularly ambiguous in Org.1, where “Employees’ Voice”, although purportedly a means of EI on a variety of issues, was in practice also used as a mechanism for employees to criticize their managers, who apparently had no right of reply, and so felt constrained in their decision making for fear of attracting negative comments (as indicated by BM16 in section 6.4). Moreover, the public nature of this forum (in contrast to the confidentiality provided in Org.2) would be likely to act as a deterrent to EI, as women would not wish to be seen as troublemakers, or have their problems made public knowledge. In this sense, the “Employees’ Voice” can be seen as illustrating the danger highlighted by Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) that EI can be constrained by managerial control systems and serve only managers’ interests. In Org.1, it appeared to be used, at least in part, for the identification of employees’ or managers’ errors, and to be a source of peer pressure, consistent with Wilkinson et al. (1997).

The limited effectiveness of EI can be seen in the findings regarding organisation responsiveness, reflecting the extent to which employees feel their views are considered and make a difference (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, Kaufman and Taras, 2010). In both organisations, participants acknowledged that the response to their ideas, suggestions and concerns would depend, at least to some degree, on alignment with organisational interests, consistent with Barry et al. (2018). In this respect, Org.1 was perceived as less responsive than Org.2. However even in Org.2 when the transfer of a male employee said to be sexually harassing a female colleague was given as an example of management responsiveness it can be argued that the response was to the organisation’s interest as much as the interest of female employees. As an organisation operating with a ‘mixed’ environment (relatively new and still controversial in Saudi Arabia) Org.2, in order to secure legitimacy in the society and to retain female employees, needed to maintain a reputation as a ‘respectable’ organisation and to uphold Saudi norms and expectations regarding interactions between the sexes.

The second aspect of the workplace climate investigated was women’s perceptions of the extent to which they received equal treatment compared to

men. Interestingly, when asked specifically about equality, the majority of women in both organisations declared that they were treated equally with men although, as shown in the discussion of RQ1, in Org.1 in particular, when asked about pay and promotion, women pointed to inequalities. This apparent contradiction may, perhaps, arise due to the distinction made in critical realism between the ‘empirical’ and ‘actual’ levels of social reality. The actual level represents events as they occur; in this case, for example, the availability of positions in men’s branches that are not available in women’s, the employment of female management on Grade 6 and male managers on Grade 7, and the implications for pay. The empirical level, however, concerns the way observed events are mediated by human interpretations. It may be that the inequalities mentioned were perceived by some participants as natural or inevitable, or not included in their conception of what was meant by ‘equal treatment’ (where they focused on responsibilities and day-to-day interactions). The inequality of the positions attainable, in practice, by women in Org.1 is similar to the situation reported by Alghofaily (2019) based on interviews with Saudi women working in higher education. There, as in the bank in this study, it seemed that women could rise to the top positions in their own segregated sections, but overall leadership tended to rest with men. The rationale perceived by women in Org.1 to account for such differences, namely, the way gender roles are constructed in Saudi society, is also consistent with other research. The idea that men, because of their assigned role as breadwinners, are given priority to progress in their careers (a view referred to by several women in this study) was similarly reported by Sidani (2016) and Abalkhail (2017).

In the present study, moreover, an additional manifestation of inequality was reported in the apparent difference in use of the Employees’ Voice system between women and men. For women, co-workers’ evaluations, posted on that forum, were used as input to a kind of 360° evaluation, and could have negative implications for women’s career, whereas anecdotal evidence from a woman whose brothers worked in the same bank suggested that male employees were not subjected to the same normative pressure. Such a difference in practice suggests different expectations of men and women. Similarly, Alghofaily (2019) reported the application of different and biased criteria for evaluating women compared to men so that, in practice, it was harder for women to demonstrate their competence and eligibility for advancement.

Inequality was, moreover, also inherent in the structure of Org.1 as a segregated organisation, which impeded women's opportunities for networking. BE2 and BM16, for example, pointed out the cultural restrictions on women's interactions with men, which prevented them from forming or participating in the sort of networks that men could employ, to gain access to knowledge or decision-making power. As BE2 commented: "The administration listens to men more than women. A male employee has many relationships with men in higher departments, while a woman cannot form such relationships because of the laws and community customs..."

Again, participants' experience resonates with reports in previous studies (Al-Asfour et al., 2017, Abalkhail and Allan, 2015, Alghofaily, 2019). Under segregation, women are positioned as outsiders, marginalized and excluded from professional networks and access to information (Abalkhail, 2017). In this respect, the organisation structure in Org.1 both reflected and perpetuated cultural restrictions in society, illustrating how cultural values and expectations regarding what women should or should not do hinder their advancement (Tlaiss, 2013).

Whilst the examples discussed so far suggested that gender inequalities were more deeply entrenched in Org.1, as a Saudi -owned organisation rooted in local cultural norms, than in the international -based Org.2, the latter was not entirely free of cultural constraints on women. The same cultural norm regarding the need for protection of women, whose virtue is a source of family and society honour (Metcalf, 2007, Tlaiss and Elamin, 2016) and its potential operation as a social control mechanism appeared, for example, in the restriction of women's involvement in field activities, which may in turn have explained some perceived pay differentials between the sexes. In this way, the 'ideal' context of values and beliefs (Fleetwood and Ackroyd, 2004) was seen to influence behaviour - interestingly, in a manner that showed tension with the relatively more liberal environment in Org.2.

A similar tension can be observed in the findings related to personal control and autonomy. In both organisations, women had task-related control (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004), albeit subject to the policies and regulations of SAMA, and without any real transfer of power. However, in both organisations, women faced some constraints on their behaviour and self -presentation, arising from social pressures, and this was manifested particularly with regard to dress codes. In Org.1, for example, participants remarked on the requirement to wear uniform as part of the organisation's corporate image, and some participants (e.g. BE12,

BE15) suggested that control over their appearance extended to such matters as hair-style and make-up. One woman (BE15) complained, “Sometimes I feel like a child in school, not in a workplace”. These controls call to mind Le Renard’s (2011) observations that in Saudi Arabia, professional women’s dress is subject to restrictions, and explicit rules in this regard reflect the expectations of male seniors, since women’s dress code is central to the image of the organisation, or even the sector.

In Org.2, constraints on women’s dress took a different form; uniform was not required, since women were not engaged in face-to-face interaction with the public, but there was a socially- imposed code of conduct, accepted by female employees that, because they worked in a mixed environment, they needed to wear the *hijab* at all times :“there is no place where we can take it off, since we are in a mixed environment”. This is similar to a finding by Alhejji et al. (2018) where one of the complaints raised by female interviewees was that working in a mixed environment required them to wear restrictive clothing, such as the *hijab*. As Le Renard (2012) points out, women working in mixed environments are a minority in Saudi Arabia; most still work in segregated organisations. The relatively liberal environment of these new, non-traditional mixed workplaces exists in tension with a discourse of femininity that expects veiling and limited interactions with men as a form of symbolic segregation. Veiling is thus a means of being considered ‘respectable’. The practice of wearing *hijab*, as a manifestation of the interaction between the twin institutions of culture and organisational environment, will be discussed further in the next section.

The last issue raised, related to women’s perceptions of the supportiveness or otherwise of the workplace environment, was the extent to which they saw that environment as conducive to a comfortable work-life balance. Specifically, women discussed their perceptions of their dual roles in the workplace and in the home, and the extent to which their negotiation of these roles was supported (if at all) by their employers, for example through provision of facilities for women, or flexibility in working arrangements to accommodate women’s needs. The availability of facilities such as a creche, and rules, regulations and policies, all reflect constructions of women’s roles, as well as the social dimension of women’s interactions and relationships with others, such as managers, family members, and the wider society.

In both organisations, women reported similar problems in achieving work-life balance, related to the double burden of employment outside the home and sole

responsibility for housework and childcare at home. In this respect, they seemed to have internalised the prevailing social construction of women's role and identity as primarily that of wife and mother, consistent with the claims of AlAlhareth et al. (2015) and Tlaiss and Dirani (2015). Accordingly, married women, in particular, prioritised family and seemed to take for granted the demands made on them, not expecting their husbands to help with the home and children (compare Fakhro, 2005). As a result of these competing time demands and social pressures, they experienced role conflict, such as has previously been reported by Nasseef (2015), Al-Asfour et al. (2017) and Alghofaily (2019).

Previous research in Saudi Arabia has suggested that women's difficulty in fulfilling both family obligations and professional demands is compounded by lack of structural support within organisations (Kattan et al., 2016). In the present study, women's perceptions of such support differed between the two organisations. While women in both organisations showed a confused and limited understanding of 'facilities', pointing, for example to perquisites available equally to men and women, and statutory provisions such as maternity allowances, women in Org.2 reported better facilities than those in Org.1, such as a creche. They also seemed to fare better with regard to a more informal and intangible form of support including a flexibility in working hours. In both organisations, however, such flexibility was at managerial discretion, rather than part of any statutory entitlement or formalized policy.

To summarise, women in Org.2 perceived their working environment as more supportive than did women in Org.1. They perceived greater involvement and better access to (and response from) management, and more equality with men in pay and positions. They expressed fewer feelings of being constrained, and perceived better support for work-life balance, in terms of facilities and flexible work arrangements. Nevertheless, like women in Org.1, they faced constraints and tensions relating to social constructions of femininity, for example, the need to wear the hijab in a mixed environment, and the role conflict arising from tension between their professional and domestic roles, which was only partly alleviated by structural support in the organisation. In this respect, Org.2, despite operating, in some ways, more liberal policies, as an international organisation, was not entirely free of the pressures emanating from national institutional forces such as cultural norms and traditions. Such pressures are discussed further in the next section, on institutional influences.

8.4 Research Question 3

RQ3: To what extent and in what ways do formal and informal institutions shape the work experiences of women in Org.1 and Org.2?

Although insights from institutional theory were applied throughout the analysis of the research findings, RQ3 sought more explicitly to explore how formal and informal institutions in Saudi society contribute to influence women's career aspirations, the opportunities available to them, and the way they experienced the work environment. Four institutions were identified in Chapter Seven: the education system, the legal and regulatory environment (represented by the government and SAMA), the organisation environment and socio-cultural norms. According to North (1990, p:3), institutions are the "rules of the game" in society, or, more formally are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. The four institutions referred to above, as will be seen, interact in complex ways, reflecting Scott's (2008) three pillars of institutionalism: the regulative pillar of rules, laws and sanctions, the normative pillar, comprising values and norms around how things should be done, and the culture-cognitive pillar of shared, culturally-supported understandings.

Education was the first of the institutions explored in Chapter Seven. Changes in the law from the 1960s onwards made free education available to women and gradually widened the fields of study available to them, and this was reflected in the experience of participants in this study. They were well educated, most having at least a Bachelor degree, and in several cases cited their academic specialisation as a factor in their work opportunities. Such findings may seem to contradict the claims of authors such as Alfarran et al. (2018) regarding the lack of vocational and professional qualifications among Saudi women. To some degree, it seems that government decisions on women's education, representing the regulative pillar of institutionalism, have indeed increased opportunities for women, as indicated by Abalkhail (2017). At the same time, however, other findings in this research suggest that, despite the formal opening of educational opportunity to women, in practice, the impact has been weakened by deeply-rooted cultural forces. It was seen, for example, that organisations had in the past been forced to be more flexible in their recruitment requirements. It was suggested that this has been due to a shortage of women with the appropriate type and quality of education (Al-Dehailan, 2007), and the unpopularity, among women, of careers in the non-traditional field of banking. Similarly, Le Renard (2011: p36) reports being told by an interviewee that her family would not allow her to apply for a

job in banking because the environment was considered “too liberal”. This is an example of how, despite the facilitating factor of education, in practice, occupations for women could be limited by social conservatism. In a collectivist society that values group uniformity, individuals are expected to adjust their personal and career aspirations for the sake of social order (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). In this way the cultural-cognitive pillar of institutionalism, with its strict values and expectations around women’s behaviour, had created a tension with the regulative pillar of government-sanctioned opportunity, and in turn influenced the normative pillar, reflected in the qualification’s organisations could require of job applicants.

There were, nevertheless, signs that these social forces were changing. Not only had the women in this study benefited from higher education, many of them in non-traditional specialisations, but also, they indicated that the two organisations were becoming more demanding in their requirements. Participants reported a growing demand for Master’s level and Western qualifications, as well as specific technical skills and English language proficiency. In this respect, it seems, the increased availability of qualified Saudi women, and perhaps the demands created by the globalised business environment, had made recruitment more competitive. As yet, it is not clear whether, or to what extent, the education system is responding to these new demands.

The second institution highlighted in Chapter Seven, as an influence on women’s opportunities and experiences in the workplace, was the regulatory authorities in the kingdom, specifically the Ministry of Labour, which set employment conditions, and SAMA, the Central Bank, which provided training, licensed individuals to work in the banking and insurance fields, and offered career development opportunities.

The role of the Ministry of Labour, reflecting the regulative pillar of institutionalism, demonstrates the tendency, noted by Budhwar and Mellahi (2007) for the government to intervene more directly to influence the model of HRM in the private sector, as it had previously done only in the public sector. Not only does the Ministry set regulations on such matters as equal pay and leave entitlements, but it has also taken specific measures intended to facilitate the employment of women, by introducing rules on maternity leave and allowances, and the like. These measures, like the overarching socio-economic development policy, Vision 2030, can be interpreted in terms of historical institutionalism as an attempt to change the existing development path. The reported enormous

increase in the number of working women in the last few years (Saudi Gazette, 2019) suggest a degree of success in enabling and ‘normalizing’ female employment.

At the same time, the Ministry provisions support and reinforce the prevailing cultural-cognitive construction of femininity, which views women primarily as wives and mothers. Participants in both organisations frequently mentioned the allowances and concessions available to mothers, from which many of them benefited. However, they pointed out that the Ministry provided no incentives or support to single women. This is consistent with Rodriguez and Ridgway’s (2018) assertion that the cultural privileging of marriage and motherhood leaves single women with a more ambiguous status in society.

The other regulatory authority influencing women’s work experience was SAMA, which not only played a regulative role in setting out the rules governing financial transactions, but also played a normative role through the provision of training and licensing, as ways of internalizing within organisations the values and norms of the banking and insurance profession. A small number of women referred to these rules; for example, BM16 commented on the pressure imposed by the need to keep pace with changes in SAMA’s regulations, BE10 expressed her hope of benefiting from the opportunity for professional development through training leading to the award of a certificate in banking and others (in Theme 1, Chapter 5) mentioned the mandatory training provided for new recruits, while CE16 spoke of the licensing system giving applicants authorization to work for Org.2. Thus, SAMA represented both coercive pressures (in the form of procedural rules with which organisations were obliged to comply), and normative encouragement for the development of skills deemed appropriate to the profession, which affected recruitment and training opportunities.

It was interesting to observe that both these authorities, whilst in some ways supporting women’s careers, ultimately placed the HR function in the role of organisational police (Legge, 2007), focused on legal compliance, as indicated by BE15, for example, when she indicated that an organisation could be fined for non-compliance with regulations and that HR’s main concern, when addressing women’s problems, was to avoid falling foul of the authorities: “HR worries about the Ministry of Labour”.

Nevertheless, the regulatory authorities can be said to play a limited role, in the sense that there are currently gaps in the law, as pointed out in section 8.2; for

example there is no real provision for enforcing equality (Tlaiss, 2014a, Alhejji et al., 2018) In this situation, women's work experience is shaped by legislation only in specific, limited areas. In practice, a stronger impact, it could be suggested, emanates from the normative role of the organisation environment, and from social cultural factors in the wider society.

Organisations can be seen as institutions, in the sense that they create structures, cultures, and norms of behaviour - personal as well as professional – that shape members' interactions, relationships and development opportunities (Yehuda Baruch et al., 2014, Evans, 2014). From a critical realist perspective, they embody both the social dimension of reality (for example, the relationships between managers and employees, or among co-workers) and the ideal, the latter being reflected in beliefs and values, e.g. about gender roles. They are the location of 'events' in the 'actual' domain, experienced and interpreted by participants in the empirical domain and reflecting underlying values and structures in society, which constitute the 'real' domain (Delbridge and Edwards, 2013), and in terms of Institutional Theory, constitute an informal institution that has, over time, embedded and served patriarchal interests.

In this study, the most obvious observable feature of the participating organisations, and a major focus of women's narratives, particularly in Org.2, was their gender composition. Org.1, a Saudi-owned organisation, operated under the traditional Saudi practice of gender segregation; thus, all the participants worked in designated women's branches, serving only female clients. In contrast, Org.2, an international organisation, was non-segregated, reflecting the relatively recent introduction into Saudi Arabia of an organisation structure and culture previously associated with the West.

Interestingly, women in Org.1, who had no experience of mixed environments, seemed to take segregation as the norm, to the extent that they had little to say about how they perceived or experienced it. There were, however, suggestions that rumoured changes in the sector, away from segregation, would not work, because Saudi women from conservative homes would feel unable to use services where they were exposed to male gaze - for example if they had to unveil in order to have their identity confirmed. This can be seen in historical institutional terms as an example of the way conditions prevailing in a particular context and at a particular time (in the 'trodden trail' explanation) or at a critical juncture (in the 'road juncture' explanation) give rise to practices that become reinforced and entrenched over time, making alternatives appear difficult or undesirable

(Ebbinghaus, 2005). As AlMunajjed (2011) points out, current constraints on Saudi women, including segregation, can be traced to urbanisation, which brought families into closer proximity and raised concerns about social stability. The constraints on women, adopted as a ‘protective’ strategy, were reinforced through social processes, including ‘coordination effects’ and ‘distributional effects’ (Thelen, 1999). The former come via formal laws and regulations requiring gender segregation and the latter via institutional arrangements that actively facilitate and empower the segregation option (e.g. the establishment of women’s branches in banks). Alongside these formal processes, informal institutions represented by shared cultural norms, values and beliefs exert normative pressure (by stating what organisations should or should not do) and cognitive influences (through interpretations of what can or cannot be done) (Alhejji et al., 2018). Thus, practices and attitudes in Org.1 reflected the “lock-in” (Ebbinghaus, 2005) of gender segregation. The existence of these segregated branches, and participants’ perceptions of the need for them, reflect cultural demands at the societal level (Nasseef, 2015). Segregation is still widely seen as desirable, even necessary (Abalkhail, 2017) and many women entering the workforce expect and prefer it, or their families prefer it for them. Many available jobs in the private sector are rejected by Saudi women, who demand compliance with cultural norms (Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014), supporting Ramady’s (2013) assertion that to some degree, Saudi women are active agents in supporting and reproducing cultural beliefs and practices, thereby reproducing institutional barriers that limit their employment opportunities. In this way, path dependence shapes both structural opportunities and women’s preferences, impeding progressive change.

According to Elamin and Omair (2010), segregation is not actually an Islamic requirement, but an attempt to prevent the influence of Western lifestyles. Abalkhail (2017) explains it as an example of the influence of the informal institution, ‘urf’ (custom), predicated on the purported need to protect women from harassment or prevent them being a source of temptation, leading to immorality and, thereby, social instability. This has resulted in the ‘trodden trail’ (Ebbinghaus, 2005) of constraints on women’s activities and interactions, becoming entrenched to create a deterministic pattern whereby alternatives were seen as particularly difficult and socially undesirable, even by the women affected. As Alfarran et al. (2018) suggest, by continuing to demand segregation, women themselves play a role in reproducing gendered institutions, along with the constraints they impose on women’s careers. Such constraints were observed

in this study in the lower status of women's 'offices' compared to men's 'branches', and consequently, women's lesser access to positions of responsibility and authority. Thus, even though female employees in Org.1 perceived the existence of segregated branches as in some ways guaranteeing the availability of career opportunities for women, at the same time, segregation also limited those opportunities, as observed by Abalkhail (2017). Thus, the structure and patriarchal culture of the organisation served to institutionalise gender inequalities based on gender stereotypes, limiting women's professional development (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

In contrast, Org.2, an international organisation, operated in a mixed environment, where men and women worked alongside each other in the same department. Perhaps because such an environment was still new and distinctive (and initially uncomfortable for some women) and perhaps because several employees had previously worked in segregated environments and could compare the two settings, participants in Org.2 had much to say about their experience of 'mixing'. For example, some pointed out how their knowledge, skills and confidence had increased as a result of exposure to a wider range of interactions and viewpoints. It was interesting, however, to observe the extent to which social conventions and stereotypes still influenced their explanations of their experiences.

This was shown, for example, in CE1's claim that, compared to managers in an all-female environment, female managers in a mixed environment are more "cooperative and humble" to "prove themselves" or gain acceptance among men. Such behaviour reflects Saudi Arabia's male dominated culture and expectation that women will be meek and submissive in relations with men (Alhejji et al., 2018, Abalkhail, 2017). This finding supports the assertion by Rodriguez (2013) albeit in a Caribbean context, that men expect women at work to be like wives at home, and so resent female authority. Women also showed consciousness of, and concern to observe, social conventions regarding the need to keep a certain distance from men in personal and even work-related interactions. They were concerned to emphasise that the environment was 'serious' and 'respectful' (and therefore respectable) and were conscious of the risk of gossip and misinterpretation of relationships if they were too free in their greetings and conversation with male colleagues.

Although Org.2 appeared in many respects to maintain its international culture, reflected in the opportunities given to women to attain management positions,

female employees voluntarily maintained their own constraints— for example, maintaining a distance from men that would restrict their ability to reap the full potential benefits of networking opportunities. Women sought to maintain their ‘respectable’ reputation. This concern for social respectability was made manifest in the wearing of the *hijab*. Similarly, Le Renard (2011) in a study of dress codes in the workplace, found that in gender-mixed workplaces, where women risked gossip and rumours portraying them as ‘accessible’ for illicit relationships, veiling was a means of preserving a symbolic segregation, and being considered ‘respectable’. Rumour and gossip-mongering can be seen as a means of social punishment of women, used to enforce expected norms of behaviour (Rodriguez, 2013). The one instance of sexual harassment reported in Org.2 may similarly have been a form of punishment and assertion of gender hierarchy by the man concerned, against a woman who (by working in a mixed environment) was contravening established norms (Rodriguez and Scurry, 2019). Women’s perceived need to be careful and cautious in their behaviour despite (or because of) their acceptance of a non-traditional mixed environment, illustrates the continuing power of normative and cognitive institutions to reinforce and “lock in” established patterns of behaviour.

The impact of socio-cultural norms as an informal institution was also seen in the prevalence of traditional constructions of gender. These had been internalized by women and were to varying degrees and in different ways institutionalised by the organisations. A number of women, in both organisations (even Org.2, where opportunity and treatment of employees seemed to be more gender-equal) referred to the common understanding that men are the family breadwinners and so are given better opportunities for promotion and higher pay, discussed previously. The traditional discourse also portrays women as fragile and in need of protection, resulting in constraints on their behaviour. In Org.1, for example, women could not go out during breaks, while in Org.2, their involvement in field activities was limited. Above all, social pressures were reflected in women’s acceptance of the double burden of work and home, resulting in overwork and role conflict (Nasseef, 2015, Tlaiss and Dirani, 2015, Afiouni and Karam, 2014, Fakhro, 2005).

This strength of entrenched cultural norms and rules and the extent to which they are internalised in organisation structures and cultures highlighted the difficulty faced by the Saudi government in its attempts to harness the economic potential of women. On the one hand the government, through laws and regulations, has

improved women's access to education, given men and women equal right to work (Article 3 of the Labour Law), mandated equal pay for equal work, provided financial and other means of support for married women in the workplace, and embarked on the incremental process of "feminising" (Ministry of Labour, n.d.) various occupations previously held only by men. In particular, the policies around Saudization and Vision 2030 can be seen as 'reactive' sequences, actions that change previous events (Mahoney, 2000) and have a declared intention to empower women, as do recent changes in the law to rescind the driving ban and the guardianship laws. On the other hand, the government has had to proceed slowly and carefully, in the face of opposition from the more conservative elements in society-illustrated by the legal challenge that resulted in the overturning of the more liberal provisions in the law 'feminising' retail opportunities (see Chapter 3, section 3.4). Moreover, the strength of informal institutions like culture and custom perpetuates practices that limit women's opportunity. Thus, the findings support Rodriguez and Ridgway's (2018) observation that even where formal institutions and policies exist to encourage gender equality, their impact is limited by informal traditions and cultural norms.

At the same time, the tension between the modernising and conservative discourses highlights the dilemmas faced by Saudi female employees as they attempt to negotiate gender norms in the professional world. This section has shown the influence of multiple macro level institutional factors, and the way that effects trickle down to organisational policies and practices, thereby affecting opportunities for women. This phenomenon has been observed in previous research. For example, Afiouni and Karam (2014) and Abalkhail (2017) show the trickle-down effects of socio-economic structure, legal frameworks, patriarchy, *Urf* (custom) and Islam on such matters as organisation structures, occupational segregation, and the terms and conditions under which women work. What they fail to point out, however, is the existence of different pathways through which such influences take place, and the extent to which influences interact in conflicting as well as mutually reinforcing ways.

From the perspective of historical institutionalism/ path dependency, as suggested in Chapter 2, a path can be suggested from the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia and consequent initiation of socio-economic development projects, through urbanisation, leading to changes in family life and the nature of employment, resulting in the imposition of constraints on women (AlMunajjed, 2011). Religion is another factor that shapes attitudes and practices, although there is debate on

whether some practices are actually required by religion. Shariah was invoked in the opposition to the ‘feminisation of shops’ law referred to above, and the guardianship system is viewed by many as an Islamic directive, even though legally, the requirements of guardian approval for women’s work has been removed (Abalkhail, 2017). At the same time, a different path can be traced from the same starting point, this time taking in the over-reliance on foreign workers, Saudi unemployment and the economic burden on government, leading to development of the Saudization policy and government initiatives to widen the opportunities available for women. In this respect, the Vision 2030 can be seen as a reactive decision changing the existing path, with the potential for changes in HRM and opportunities for women, reinforced by recent legislative changes such as the repeal of the driving ban and changes in the guardianship law, enabling woman to travel and work without requiring the consent of a male guardian.

The experience of women in this study was, in some ways, consistent with this perspective. For example, the majority of participants had benefited from higher education, and there were instances of recruitment under the *Hafiz* programme. However, their experiences also demonstrated constraining effects of culture and custom, highlighted by the sociological view of institutions. From this perspective, it can be seen how the institutionalisation of gender roles, in the interests of social stability predicated on an ideology of family centrality, imposed numerous constraints. Women are still seen primarily as wives and mothers whose role is in the home, and are thus subject to a double burden reinforced by social expectations, making work-life balance difficult for them. They are constrained in dress, for example, the need for women in the mixed environment of Org.2 to retain their *hijab* as a symbol of respectability. They are constrained in movement (the freedom to go out during breaks, in Org.2, was highlighted as a rarity) and interaction with men. In Org.1 they were confined to women’s branches where positions and promotion opportunities are fewer, and in Org.2, they were constrained in their ability to take on field roles. The prevailing social conception of men as breadwinners who, therefore, need higher positions and salaries was invoked by women in both organisations as an explanation for differentials in pay and promotion. These constraints were less evident in Org.2, as an international organisation, but it was still subject to Saudi law and female employees were still - voluntarily– constrained by social norms.

Not only do these cultural pressures conflict with the institutional impact of the government aim to increase women's contribution, declared explicitly in Vision 2030 and reflected in a series of changes (albeit slow and gradual) in the labour law, but they also seem to be imposed on or accepted by government, so that law and custom became mutually reinforcing. This was reflected in the caution that was shown to girls' education. In order to avoid conflict with more conservative factions in society, assurances were made that girls would be taught nothing that would threaten traditional values, and textbooks emphasised women's domestic role (Al Rawaf and Simmons, 1991). More recently, the government has proceeded cautiously in opening to women fields considered "suitable to their nature" (Ministry of Labour, The Labour Code, Article 149) and continues to reflect cultural constructions of femininity that focus on women's roles as wives and mothers, and thereby on statutory provisions on maternity, breastfeeding and childcare. In turn these provisions, privileging motherhood, reinforce the social stereotypes.

8.5 Contributions of the Research

This research has responded to gaps identified in the existing scholarship, with regard to the experiences of women in the workplace. Calls have been made for research to address the contextual realities and unique characteristics in different countries within the Arab world, especially as women's agency and the constraints they face differ across the region. By shedding light on the dynamics in the highly patriarchal and conservative context of Saudi Arabia, this research has contributed to meet this need.

In particular, the study is distinctive in being conducted at a time of transition in Saudi Arabia, specifically the situation post-Vision 2030, during a period of new legislation that potentially frees women from some of the constraints they have historically faced (for example, the driving ban, the impact of the guardianship law). From a historical institutionalist perspective, this can be seen as a move by the government to change the development path. However, this raises the question of whether, or to what extent such efforts are actually able to reverse the entrenched impact of informal, normative pressures -to which the government itself to a large extent adheres, as shown previously in its cautious approach to female education and watering down of some of its "feminization" plans. There has been a shortage of research on women's employment in the private sector, especially since *Nitaqat*, and a shortage of research incorporating Saudi women's perspectives on the Saudi labour market. By exploring female employees'

experiences in the two contrasting organisations, one Saudi-owned and segregated, the other international and mixed, the research has found confirmatory evidence of the challenges and constraints asserted by previous authors, but also suggestions that in some ways and some organisations, at least, women's position is changing.

A key contribution of the study is the way it integrates gender into the institutional perspective, enabling insights into the interplay between women's experiences, policies and practices, and social processes. Previous research has suggested that macro-level institutional factors such as law and culture have impacts on policies and practices at organisation level and, in turn, on the experiences of female employees. This study, however, has added to the literature with a more nuanced understanding of the roles played by different institutions including formal (legislation, organisation policy) and informal (culture, family and religion), and how they may reinforce or conflict with each other.

The study is distinctive in using a combination of institutional theory and a critical realist perspective in order to interpret the data. Use of these approaches is relatively new and rare in the Saudi context, and has not often been applied specifically to the experiences of women. Critical realism helped to shed light on the different levels of the social reality of women's experiences in the workplace, including the role played by different dimensions of the context: material, artefactual, ideal and social. In so doing, it helps to point to institutional forces underlying the objects and events observed, thereby complementing the role played by institutional theory. Analysis of the findings demonstrated the applicability in the Saudi context of the historical approach, focusing on the events and forces leading to the Saudi government's attempt to change the development path, including legislation that provides new (although so far limited) scope for the contribution of women. At the same time, it showed the salience of the sociological approach, focusing on the role of cultural norms and values in governing women's behaviour and in conferring legitimacy on organisational policies and practices, even where these are in tension with government policies and legislation, such as the rule on equal pay. As a result, government provisions for women have been constrained within the confines of the cultural and religious norms prevailing among the more conservative elements in society and attempts, however modest, to move beyond these have faced opposition.

The study also contributes insight into the similarities and differences between organisations with different ownership – one Saudi, one international -in the conditions, environments and opportunities they offer Saudi women. This is of interest because different ownership is a potential source of cultural differences which could produce different impacts on women, both through formal policies and informal norms. In particular, in this study, the international organisation (Org.2) was a locus of tension between conflicting cultural norms, where the freedoms and opportunities brought by the organisation's Western origin were modified by contact with Saudi constructions of gender and informal but entrenched behavioural norms.

In terms of HRM policies and practices on recruitment, promotion, training, pay and working conditions, the organisations were similar only in the specific areas subject to legislation or regulation; for example, they complied with statutory provisions on working hours holiday entitlements, maternity leave and allowances, and they both sent women for external certificated training under SAMA, as a requirement for employees to operate in the financial and insurance sector. Other similarities were that both organisations were responding to a more competitive labour market with increasing formalisation of recruitment practices, and both were facing economic pressures resulting in a reduction in availability of non-mandatory training. There were, however, differences in areas where HRM practices were at management discretion, where the Saudi-owned Org.1 had a more restrictive environment reflecting traditional cultural norms and attitudes. *Wasta* was far more prevalent in the org.1 than in Org.2, and positions and promotion in Org.1 were limited by the small size of women -only branches which, moreover, were designated “offices”, resulting in their managers being paid less than managers in men's branches. In contrast, women in Org.2 perceived good opportunities for advancement, reflected in the high proportion of managerial positions held by women. Such opportunities, together with greater flexibility in working hours and breaks, and a more comfortable physical environment, perhaps explain why women in Org.2 seemed more satisfied than those in Org.1, even though salaries in Org.2 were considerably lower.

In terms of the workplace/ employee relations climate, represented in this study by relations with management, perceptions of equality or inequality with men, opportunities for employee involvement, work-place autonomy and work-life balance, both organisations provided formal and informal mechanisms for employee involvement. However, management was perceived as more accessible

and responsive in Org.2 than in Org.1, where (male) senior managers and HR were in the men's brunches. Moreover, women in Org.1 were more inclined to see themselves as lacking in personal control and autonomy, and to perceive that their organisation did not care about their work-life balance. Work-life balance was an issue for female employees, especially married ones, in both organisations, due to the double burden imposed on them by traditional gender roles. However, the greater freedom offered in Org.2 (for example, to leave the premises during breaks) and the provision of a creche and leisure facilities, seemed to go some way towards alleviating these pressures.

Although Org.2 seemed, in some ways, to offer women more comfortable working conditions and more scope for advancement than Org.1, it was nevertheless subject to the same informal institutional pressures. In particular, it was interesting to see how, even among women working in this non-traditional mixed environment, deeply-rooted cultural norms and values still prevailed. These were visibly manifested in the wearing of hijab, but also in women's limited field roles, the concern for reputation and respectability, the wish for women's "privacy", the perceived need to guard one's behaviour in the presence of men, and the fear of rumour and gossip, used by women as social sanctions against those perceived to flout accepted norms. Such attitudes and behaviours highlight the difficult balance facing international organisations operating in Saudi Arabia. They may contribute to providing increased opportunities for Saudi women by offering not only employment but also a relatively freer and more flexible workplace environment and parity with men in pay and promotions, but must also be alert and sensitive to local beliefs and practices around gender, which are slow to change. Such organisations constitute a nexus where not only does the tension between formal and informal institutional factors take visible form but also two sets of informal pressures (from the organisation's home culture and that of the host country) interact in complex ways.

8.6 Implications

The findings of this study have provided insight into the work experiences of Saudi women in two contrasting organisations, and the challenges that confront them. These insights have a number of potential implications for policy-makers and employers.

The experiences of participants demonstrate the key role played by education in equipping women for the work force, and also suggest that employers are becoming more demanding in the skills and qualifications they require. It is

important, therefore, that in the current climate of reform opened up by Vision 2030, the government takes steps to ensure that the education system equips women with the changing demands of workplaces in the 21st century, particularly technical and computer skills, and communicative competence in English, as the language of global business. In addition, while segregation is still the norm in Saudi organisations, it is important to equip women with the social skills needed to work in the growing number of mixed environments.

Whilst the majority of women participating in this study believed they were treated equally to men, there were suggestions, particularly in the segregated organisation, that women are still in practice disadvantaged in terms of the career development and promotion opportunities available to them. To overcome these challenges, there is a need for robust legislation on gender equality. Recruitment quotas are not enough to ensure equality. There is a need for legislation to address equality in pay, access to training and promotion opportunities, and for this to be supported by effective enforcement mechanisms.

Women's career development and contribution to organisations was seen to be hindered by their lack of networking opportunities, given the constraints on women's interactions with men. This is especially problematic in segregated organisations, where knowledge and decision-making authority are predominantly located in men's sections. To address this, organisations need to initiate clear policies and practices for including women in discussions and decision-making, for example by using technology where there are cultural or locational barriers to face-to-face meetings. At the same time, efforts are also needed to build women's networks to provide role models, exchange ideas and experiences, and generate a joint voice that may be more influential than the isolated efforts of individuals.

Women also need strategic support from employing organisations to facilitate their work-life balance, in view of the heavy domestic burden most of them carry. The government has already opened the way for part time work and teleworking. By taking up these options, organisations might provide more flexibility to accommodate female employees' needs, which might in turn benefit morale and productivity. The potential for other flexible arrangements such as flexitime, a compressed working week, or job-sharing might also be explored.

8.7 Limitations of the Study

Like any research, this study was subject to certain limitations, which should be borne in mind when considering its implications. The following limitations can be identified.

Only two organisations participated in the study, and both belong to the tightly regulated finance and insurance sector, which is closely monitored by SAMA. As the responses of some participants in this study indicated, in other, less tightly regulated sectors, organisations' compliance with labour law and policy may be lower, and so women's experiences may be different. In particular, in smaller private organisations, employees' ability and willingness to provide for female employees and give them the concessions to which they are entitled may be less than in the organisations participating in the present research.

A purposive sampling approach was adopted in this study, relying on established contacts, and a snowballing technique. Participants therefore self-selected and may over-represent women with a particular interest or perspective in relation to the research topic, although every effort was made to capture different views.

Another limitation of the sample is that it consisted only of female employees and managers in customer services departments. The findings do not, therefore, capture the perspectives of men and other women in the organisation, such as HR managers or top management. Inclusion of those groups may have captured insights into the rationale for employing women, any challenges faced in accommodating the needs of female employees, and their perception of the way formal and informal institutional pressures influence the organisation's policies and practices.

With regard to data collection, the use of interviews depends on participants' ability of recall and their willingness to articulate their views and experiences. Every effort was made to encourage women's full and frank disclosure. Nevertheless, further insights might have been generated by the complementary use of other techniques, such as the analysis of government and/or organisation documents, or observation of women's day-to-day interactions in the workplace.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study has provided important, detailed insights into the under-researched topic of women's workplace experiences in a patriarchal society, at a time of social and economic change. Suggestions for building on the contributions of this work are offered in the next section.

8.8 Suggestions for Further Research

The present research opens opportunities for further research. Studies could build on the present work and contribute to overcoming the shortage of research in the Saudi banking sector, by including a broader range of organisations and comparing HR policies and practices, and their impact on women, in the three different types of bank operating in Saudi Arabia: domestic commercial banks, foreign-owned commercial banks, and Islamic banks, as this may shed further light on the role of cultural factors in these issues.

It would also be of interest to compare women's experiences in public and private organisations, both in the other main sectors employing women (Education and Health) and in the new fields more recently opened to women under the Vision 2030 programme.

Further research should seek to compare the perspectives of female employees with those of the top managers and HR managers who set and implement organisational policies and practices on women's employment. It would also be valuable to explore perceptions in the wider society, e.g. religious scholars, clerics, the media, women's organisations and their experiences and views regarding women in work and the structure of their careers in order to understand more deeply the socio-cultural pressures affecting women, and the extent to which those may be changing.

A number of issues that emerged in the present research could be topics for further study. For example, since the findings suggested that some organisations are becoming more demanding in their selection criteria, it would be interesting to explore to what extent the Saudi education system is equipping women with relevant competencies or constraining their opportunities –for example in curricula, and in the specialisations open to women at high school and in the University.

The findings suggested that the experiences of single and married women may differ, since married women are given more consideration and concessions by the law but are subject to the cultural pressures of their dual roles. It would therefore be of interest to study in more depth the different opportunities of single and married women, in order to understand more fully the complexities of the tensions involved.

Since specific government programmes such as *Nitaqat* and *Hafiz* had declared objectives of encouraging and facilitating women's contribution to society through employment, it would be interesting to investigate women's experiences of these programmes, and the extent to which these initiatives are achieving their aim.

Lastly, an issue that emerged in this study concerned women's opportunities for employee involvement, including the channels and mechanisms available, the ways in which they are used, and the extent to which women feel able to engage with and benefit from them. In a society where no legislation for enforcing participation exists and EI is at employers' discretion, it would be valuable to explore the availability of EI mechanisms, factors influencing their provision, the extent to which they empower or constrain and control women, and the influence, if any, of such mechanisms on HRM policies and practices.

Section II: HR Policies and Practices

General

- 1 Do you like working here? why? why not?
- 2 What sort of HR practices support you in the workplace?
- 3 Which do you find most useful and why?

Recruitment:

1. Why did you apply to the bank?
2. How did you find out about your job?
3. Tell me about your experience of getting a job at Org.1/ Org.2?
4. What factors influenced you to enter this field of work/ apply for this job?
5. How do you get to your work?
6. What kind of contract do you have?
7. What do you think about the bank's recruitment policy?
8. Does your bank have any specific HR policies and practices related to encouraging female employment? Can you tell me what these are and how they work in practice?
9. How committed do you think the bank really is to employing Saudi women?

Promotion:

1. On what basis is promotion awarded in the bank?
2. What promotion opportunities are available for women?
3. How do you think promotion opportunities (or speed of promotion) for women compare with those for men?
4. How do you perceive the bank's commitment to the promotion of women?
5. What hopes or ambitions do you have for your future career?

Training:

1. What training does your bank offer for women?
2. Tell me about your experiences of training at the bank, for example how often do you
3. How satisfied are you with the training opportunities available?
4. If you felt dissatisfied, did you complain about this to anyone? Why? Why not?

Pay:

- 1.How much is your monthly salary (Thousand riyals)
- 2.How do you think wages of women compare with those for men? Is there any difference of wages between them? Why is this?

Work conditions:

1. Does the bank offer flexible working patterns to women? How do you feel about this?
2. How many hours do you work a day?
3. What breaks do you get during the working day? Are they the same as for men?
4. Does your contract entitle you to holiday leave?
5. How many days holiday do you get per year?
6. Can you choose when you take your holiday?

7. How satisfied are you with the bank's work environment (work pressure/office quality)?
8. How likely is it that you will continue in this job?
9. What factors affected/ would affect your decision?

Section III: Perception of working environment

1. Relations with management

1. Can employees raise their concerns or issues? If so, how?
2. How does management respond to your ideas and concerns?
3. How are women treated compared to men in the organisation?
4. To what extent are you in control in the workplace?
5. Are you free to make your own decisions?
6. How often do you have staff meetings?
7. What are the purposes of meeting?
8. Do management listen to you and if they listen, do they act on what you are saying?

2. Work-life balance

1. How do you balance between your work and your home life? How does the organisation help you in this regard?
2. To what extent are work-life balance issues seen as important at the bank, particularly for women?
3. Can you tell me about the facilities in the bank for female employees? What do you think of them?

Overall Perception

1. Do you think HR practices support or encourage you?
2. To what extent do HR practices enable you to see a future in the organisations?
3. How satisfied are you with HRM practices in your bank generally? Recruitment? Training? Promotion? Pay? Can you explain why you feel this way?
4. How do HRM practices affect your experience in the bank?
5. What role do you think the HR department should play in your bank? Why?

Is there anything you would like to add?

Thank you, those are all the questions I have for you, but if there is anything else you would like to share in relation to your own experience of entering the Saudi employment market, I would be very happy to include this information.

Majedah Alharthi

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Appendix B: Profiles of the Participants

Interviewee	Experience in the same organisation	Experience in the same job	Education Level	Age	Marital status	Previous employment	How long previous experience
CE2	5 years to less than 10 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	30-34	Married	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
CE5	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	Diploma	35-39	Married	Yes	5 years or more
CE12	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	University degree	25-29	Married	Yes	Less than 1 year
CE17	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	25-29	Married	Yes	Less than 1 year
CM6	10 years to less than 15 years	1 year to less than 5 years	High school and below	35-39	Single	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
CE18	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	University degree	18-24	Single	Yes	Less than 1 year
CE4	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	30-34	Single	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
CE7	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	30-34	Single	No	Not Applicable
CE15	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	25-29	Married	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
CE8	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	25-29	Single	No	Not Applicable
CE1	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	High school and below	35-39	Single	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
CE20	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	University degree	30-34	Single	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
CE9	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	Master's degree	35-39	Married	Yes	5 years or more
CE16	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	30-34	Married	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
CE14	1 year to less than 5 years	Less than 1 year	High school and below	25-29	Married	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
CE10	1 year to less than 5 years	Less than 1 year	University degree	30-34	Single	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years

Interviewee	Experience in the same organisation	Experience in the same job	Education Level	Age	Marital status	Previous employment	How long previous experience
CE21	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	University degree	18-24	Single	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
CE19	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	Diploma	18-24	Single	Yes	Less than 1 year
CE13	5 years to less than 10 years	1 year to less than 5 years	High school and below	25-29	Married	No	Not Applicable
CE11	5 years to less than 10 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	30-34	Married	No	Not Applicable
CE3	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	25-29	Single	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
BM13	10 years to less than 15 years	5 years and more	University degree	35-39	Divorced	No	Not Applicable
BM16	10 years to less than 15 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	30-34	Married	No	Not Applicable
BE7	5 years to less than 10 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	25-29	Single	Yes	Less than 1 year
BE11	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	25-29	Married	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
BE18	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	25-29	Married	Yes	Less than 1 year
BE12	5 years to less than 10 years	5 years and more	University degree	35-39	Married	No	Not Applicable
BE9	1 year to less than 5 years	5 years and more	University degree	30-34	Married	No	Not Applicable
BM8	10 years to less than 15 years	5 years and more	University degree	35-39	Married	No	Not Applicable
BM23	5 years to less than 10 years	5 years and more	University degree	30-34	Single	No	Not Applicable
BE17	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	25-29	Single	No	Not Applicable
BM3	10 years to less than 15 years	5 years and more	University degree	40-44	Married	No	Not Applicable

Interviewee	Experience in the same organisation	Experience in the same job	Education Level	Age	Marital status	Previous employment	How long previous experience
BE15	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	30-34	Married	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
BM19	5 years to less than 10 years	5 years and more	University degree	35-39	Married	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
BE24	1 year to less than 5 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	30-34	Married	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
BM2	15 years to less than 20 years	5 years and more	University degree	40-44	Married	No	Not Applicable
BE20	5 years to less than 10 years	5 years and more	University degree	30-34	Divorced	Yes	Less than 1 year
BE21	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	University degree	18-24	Single	Yes	Less than 1 year
BM13	10 years to less than 15 years	5 years and more	University degree	35-39	Married	No	Not Applicable
BE14	5 years to less than 10 years	5 years and more	University degree	25-29	Married	No	Not Applicable
BE6	5 years to less than 10 years	5 years and more	University degree	30-34	Single	No	Not Applicable
BE5	5 years to less than 10 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	25-29	Married	No	Not Applicable
BE4	5 years to less than 10 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	30-34	Married	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
BM10	10 years to less than 15 years	5 years and more	Master's degree	35-39	Married	No	Not Applicable
BE22	5 years to less than 10 years	5 years and more	University degree	25-29	Married	Yes	1 year to less than 5 years
BM1	5 years to less than 10 years	1 year to less than 5 years	University degree	30-34	Married	No	Not Applicable

Appendix C: Coding and Category - Theme Identification

Code	Sub-Category	Category	Theme
Job Security	Attraction		Theme 1 HR Policies and Practices
Online Connections(<i>Wasta</i>) Other(e.g. career day, work experience)	Method	Recruitment	
Tests Interview Qualification/ Competence Experience Selectivity Trainees Gender neutrality	Criteria		
Maternity Allowance Breastfeeding Hour Other	Incentives		
Reasons Effects	Staffing levels		
Necessity Policy Female Majority Singles preferred	Commitment		

Code	Sub-Category	Category	Theme
Performance Customer Feedback Cronyism (<i>Wasta</i>)	Criteria	Promotion	
Speed Positions Pay Grade Family	Constraints		
Priorities Numbers Allocation Reduction	Availability	Training	
Certificated External Cascade Online Job Rotation On the job	Method		
Yes No Mixed	Satisfaction		

Code	Sub-Category	Category	Theme
Amount earned Rationales Gender Disparity Allowances		Pay	Theme 1 HR Policies and Practices (Continued)
Contract Hours Breaks Motherhood Flexibility	Statutory provision	Working Conditions	
Pressure Physical environment	Environment		
Stay Leave	Retention		

Code	Category	Theme
Communication Responsiveness	Relations with Management	Theme 2 Support
Fairness Equality Priority Relationships Women treated better	Treatment Compared to Men	
(limits to) Autonomy Control Constraints	Personal control	
Imbalance Balance Time Tiredness Separation Marital Status Facilities Children	Work-Life Balance	

Code	Category	Theme
Specialisation experience	Education	Theme 3 Institutional Factors
Ministry of Labour SAMA	Regulatory authorities	
Segregation Mixing Profit-Seeking Customer Satisfaction Pressures Comfortable	Organisational Environment	
<i>Social norms</i> <i>Wasta</i> hijab Stereotypes Transport Comparison with West	Socio-Cultural Norms	

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