

**Toward an intersectional perspective in
understanding gender inequality in women's
work advancement at higher education in
Saudi Arabia**

Demh Alghamdi



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Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive intersectional examination of the challenges faced by Saudi women and non-Saudi women in higher education (HE), set against the backdrop of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the growing prominence of the public sector. Through qualitative research methods involving semi-structured interviews with 30 participants in HE from various backgrounds, roles, and regions, the research unveils various barriers to career advancement in the sector. These challenges are closely associated with aspects such as position, social capital, nationality, and geographical location. By focusing on five key dimensions, this research explained the experiences of both Saudi and non-Saudi women in HE sector.

The study explains Saudi women's professional journey is influenced by deep-seated societal norms, institutional practices, and the intersection of gender with various social categories. While Saudi women are faced with traditional familial norms, lack of flexibility in work schedules, and limited access to professional development opportunities, non-Saudi women face their own unique set of challenges intertwined with their cultural backgrounds. Despite these challenges, women in the sector demonstrate resilience by adopting strategies such as flexible work arrangements, seeking childcare support, emphasizing in-country professional development, and forming support networks and mentorships.

This research uncovered the remarkable resilience and agency of women as they navigate patriarchal systems. The readiness of women to embrace roles traditionally reserved for men, particularly becoming the primary earners for their families, stands as a compelling affirmation of women's capability to challenge and manoeuvre through established gender norms. This finding illuminates the dynamic ways in which women exert their agency within the constraints of patriarchal frameworks.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The status and role of women in Saudi Arabian society have witnessed an unprecedented evolution over the last few decades, especially within the context of higher education (Alsuwaida, 2016; Alsubaie and Jones, 2017). With the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has signified its ambition to transform itself through increasing the size and diversification of its economy. A cornerstone of the fulfilment of Vision 2030 is the empowerment and advancement of women in both educational and professional environment (Saleh and Malibari, 2021). Within higher education, although opportunities for women have undoubtedly increased, it is equally imperative to scrutinize the challenges that constraint their career progression. While women have made progress academically and now represent a considerable proportion of students in tertiary education, their representation in top-tier positions within academic institutions in Saudi Arabia remains limited, reported at only 3.2% in 2023 (Abdullah Dahlan, 2023). This disparity between academic participation and leadership roles signifies a potential underlying issue which necessitates further investigation.

In an attempt to fully understand the multidimensional nature of these challenges, this research endeavours to adopt an intersectional perspective, examining the interplay of gender norms, cultural beliefs, and nationality, among other factors. Intersectionality was first introduced by the movement Combahee River Collective (Mirza 2013; Collins 2015), whose members argued that the feminist movement was not very representative of all women. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework which helps to understand how aspects of a person's social and political identities (such as ethnicity, race, gender, class, sexuality, marital status and ability) combined create different modes of discrimination and privilege (Cho et al., 2013). The concept, originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, acknowledges that the different parts of peoples' identity do not exist independently of one other and instead, they intersect

and influence the experiences of individuals in complex ways. The choice of an intersectional approach is rooted in its capacity to unveil the layers of societal, cultural, and institutional barriers that intertwine and influence women's experiences in higher education (Alwazzan and Rees, 2016; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2019). Given that Saudi Arabia stands at a unique cultural, religious, and socio-political crossroad, the intersectional perspective is especially relevant in uncovering the intricate challenges faced by women in this milieu.

The higher education landscape in Saudi Arabia has its own unique set of complexities. Historically, the initial steps toward education for women were met with resistance from conservative factions, constraining women predominantly to roles within the domestic realm (Kynsilehto, 2011). While pioneering figures, such as Fatina Shaker, did challenge these confinements, their journeys were replete with societal and governmental hurdles (Hamdan, 2005). Consequently, despite the significant academic achievements of women, the cultural fabric and institutional practices within higher education may still be reflective of the earlier biases, thereby influencing women's career growth and future prospects. Another vital dimension is the comparison between Saudi women and their non-Saudi counterparts. While they both operate within the same institutional setting, the interplay of nationality and cultural background might yield distinct experiences, challenges, and aspirations, further emphasizing the need for a detailed exploration. This research situates itself within a transformative era for Saudi Arabia, aiming to dissect the various challenges faced by women in higher education from an intersectional lens. By doing so, it not only seeks to contribute academically but also aspires to guide institutions and policymakers in crafting an environment that truly fosters gender equity and empowerment.

1.2 Research Problem

While numerous studies have been conducted to explore the cultural challenges faced by Saudi women in the public sector, a significant gap remains in the existing literature. Particularly, the intricacies of Saudi's conservative traditions, interwoven with gender norms and intersected by factors such as nationality and other

demographic factors have been inadequately explored especially in the context of female workers within higher education institutions. These limitations have led to an insufficient understanding of the elements that constrain the career progression of women in Saudi Arabia in general (Jackson and Witenstein, 2021) and particularly within the higher education sector.

A review of prior research reveals that on one hand, many studies have broadly overviewed the range of issues that affect the experiences of women in higher education (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017; Al-Sudairy, 2017), instead of conducting a comprehensive review and analysis of a single aspect that can explain the challenges experienced by women in achieving career advancement within higher education. Such an approach often risks diluting the ability to obtain an in-depth understanding of individual challenges (Constantinidis et al., 2019). On the other hand, the limited studies that have specifically targeted the constraints in women's career advancement within higher education often focus disproportionately on women in leadership roles in major cities, leaving out the experiences of those lower in the career hierarchy and those based in smaller, more conservative cities (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Abdalla, 2014; Abalkhail, 2017; Al Alhareth, et al., 2015b). The ramifications of this oversight are manifold. Larger cities often exhibit more progressive tendencies compared to their smaller, more conservative counterparts, especially in Saudi Arabia where conservative values are still exercised by majority of families (Saleh and Malibari, 2021), which has a direct influence on career prospects and progression of women in higher education. By narrowing the focus to these urban centres, the prior literature did not adequately capture the potential exacerbated struggles that women might face in less progressive environments.

Furthermore, while existing literature offers insights into the challenges confronted by women in the broader public sector (Hamdan, 2005; Abalkhail & Allan, 2015; Abalkhail, 2019), there is a limited literature that has explored the daily processes, and practices experienced by female workers in their immediate work environments. This omission is considerable, especially when taking into account the significance of daily practices in shaping workplace experiences (Syed et al., 2018). Adding another layer of complexity, the intersectional perspective—a prism that simultaneously

considers multiple factors such as gender, race, and class—has been insufficiently employed within the Arab world's context (Keshet, et al., 2015; Barsoum, 2019). The scant literature that has attempted to apply this perspective in Saudi Arabia (Syed, et al., 2018) highlights the pressing need for more such studies. It also illustrates the importance of understanding how intersectionality influences and worsens the experiences of female workers in their workplace.

This research aims to address these gaps in the literature, offering an intersectional perspective to explore and understand the challenges faced by women in higher education in Saudi Arabia, particularly the issues faced by women outside the leadership roles and women based in smaller, more conservative cities. The topic is relevant, given the growth of universities and the number of staff members they employ in Saudi Arabia (World Bank, 2023). In the near future, there will be demand for more data on women in the public sector, as the country aims for major changes in regards the role of women in the sustainable development of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the vision to achieve certain objectives including diversified economy and progressive society by 2030 (Saudi Vision, 2017). As a result, this study will be the first one which looks at the development of Saudi and non-Saudi women's work from an intersectional perspective in Saudi Arabia, and investigate the intersection of traditional practises and customs, gender norms and nationality, in order to improve the women's experience in public universities.

1.3 Research Aim, Objectives and Questions

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the challenges experienced by women in achieving career advancement within higher education in Saudi Arabia, exploring them from an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality is relevant because it allows to explore a wide range of issues faced by women involving the intersection of gender norms, customs and beliefs, as well as nationality to uncover and assess the complex nature of the experiences of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The qualitative study will fulfil this aim by addressing the following research objectives:

- To examine the concept of intersectionality and the ways in which intersectional perspective can assist in understanding various issues experienced by women in advancing their career in higher education in Saudi Arabia
- To understand the key practices in higher education institutions which limit the women in their ability to successfully advance their careers in Saudi Arabia
- To compare the experiences of Saudi women in higher education against those of their non-Saudi counterparts in the context of career advancement to uncover whether if any difference exists
- To understand and assess the techniques used by women in higher education across different levels of seniority to address the issues faced in career progression
- To offer evidence-led recommendations to higher education institutions and policymakers to make the environment more conducive for women working in higher education in Saudi Arabia

The above-mentioned aim and research objectives are addressed by answering the following research questions:

1. In what ways does employing an intersectional lens reveal the challenges that women face in career advancement in higher education in Saudi Arabia?
2. Which specific institutional processes and act as barriers to career progression for women in Saudi Arabian universities, and how do they manifest?
3. In what ways do career advancement experiences differ between Saudi and non-Saudi women within Saudi Arabian higher education, and what factors contribute to these differences?
4. How do women across various seniority levels in Saudi Arabian higher education institutions navigate and counter the obstacles to their career advancement?
5. What are the evidence-based strategies that higher education institutions and policymakers can implement to foster a more supportive environment for the career advancement of women in Saudi Arabia?

1.4 Summary of Key Findings

The key findings can be explained based on each research objective. In response to the first research objective around the ways in which intersectional perspective can assist in understanding various challenges experienced by women in advancing their career in higher education in Saudi Arabia, the study finds that the challenges faced by women in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia go beyond just gender. They are shaped by various factors, including their position within educational institutions, impact of technology used in the workplace, social capital, nationality, and geographic location. Even well-intentioned policies can have unexpected results. The creation of roles for women's empowerment might inadvertently increase bureaucracy and constrain effective communication within higher education institutions. When it comes to the interaction between gender and technology, neutral technological tools such as automated systems can unexpectedly exacerbate the gender biases, especially with decisions mostly taken by a male-dominated senior management. Intersectionality is also explored based on the intersection between gender and networking/ access to social capital. Women's access to crucial networking opportunities is often limited, further complicated by their academic position and influence within institutions. Finally, a significant divide exists between women in urban areas such as Riyadh who experience more liberal environments and those in conservative smaller towns.

Based on the second research objective which was to understand the key practices in higher education institutions which limit the women in their ability to successfully advance their careers in Saudi Arabia, first, a major challenge for Saudi women is the clash between stringent professional demands and societal expectations as primary caregivers. Secondly, due to academic responsibilities and societal expectations, female academics often find limited time for research, hindering their career advancement in academia. Third, Saudi women studying abroad face cultural and emotional challenges that compound their academic pressures. The fourth challenge relates to networking constraints. The traditional norms in Saudi Arabia restrict cross-gender interactions, limiting women's networking opportunities and, by extension, career growth.

In response to the third research objective which was to compare the experiences of Saudi women in higher education against those of their non-Saudi counterparts in the context of career advancement to uncover whether if any differences exist and why, the first noteworthy comparison relates to the access to senior roles. Saudi women's career progression is linked to the societal system of 'Wasta' or influence based on social connections, which can both support and hinder career progression. Influence of cultural norms is also a relevant area of comparison. Both Saudi and non-Saudi women are influenced by similar cultural norms, but non-Saudi women might have more flexibility in terms of adherence to the gender and cultural norms due to their foreign origins. Finally, reforms such as the Vision 2030 create a changing landscape in higher education, leading to tensions, especially in conservative regions.

When it comes to the fourth research objective which was understand and assess the strategies used by women in higher education across different levels of seniority to address the challenges they face in career progression, four techniques are being employed by women to address the challenges they face in career progression. The first is flexible work arrangements whereby the boundary between work and personal life is vital for women to manage emotional well-being and familial roles. The second is around childcare and external support, as a dual strategy, encompassing both institutional (on-site childcare services) and individual (seeking external assistance) has been adopted to tackle the "second shift" of responsibilities at home (Blair-Loy et al., 2015, p. 436). This dual approach helps to not only alleviates the stress but also provides these women with more flexibility in their professional engagements at work. The third strategy relates to in-country professional developments. Acknowledging the constraints related to international travel for professional growth, the emphasis has shifted towards leveraging domestic opportunities. This in-house approach to professional development has several benefits: it circumvents the need for women to negotiate complex socio-cultural barriers associated with traveling abroad, and it aligns with the women's commitment to their families, allowing them to pursue personal growth without negating familial duties. The final strategy is around support networks and mentorships. The power of shared experiences cannot be underestimated, as uncovered in this study. Establishing mentorship programs and supportive ecosystems offers women a platform to navigate their professional journey

with guidance, solidarity, and emotional resilience. These networks not only validate individual struggles but also illuminate paths to overcome them.

Overall, a key argument which emerges from the findings of this study is that the career advancement of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia is significantly influenced by a complex interplay of factors beyond just gender. This study illustrated the critical impact of intersectionality, revealing how the amalgamation of societal norms, technological influences, location-specific differences and networking opportunities shapes the professional landscape for Saudi women. It highlights that challenges such as the traditional caregiver role, networking restrictions due to cultural norms, and limited access to senior roles are exacerbated by systemic issues like the 'Wasta' system and the male-dominated decision-making process in higher education. The study also points out that while Vision 2030 aims to transform the societal and professional roles of women, there remains a stark contrast in experiences and opportunities between women in urban and more conservative areas. This comprehensive analysis sheds light on the complex nature of barriers faced by Saudi women in academia, emphasising the need for targeted policies and institutional changes that address these specific challenges to foster true gender equity in Saudi Arabia's higher education sector. This understanding challenges the existing discourse which often oversimplifies the barriers faced by women in academia, calling for a more holistic and inclusive policy-making. It also shows the need for solutions that are not just gender-sensitive but also culturally and contextually aware, thereby enriching the ongoing discourse on gender equality and women's empowerment in the Saudi Arabian academic sector.

1.5 Thesis Structure

The first chapter detailed the background and context of this study, explained the research problem to be explored, clarified the aim, research objectives and questions this thesis attempts to answer, and provided the summary of key findings. The structure of remainder of this thesis is as follows.

The second chapter provides the background to the thesis, detailing the role of women in the Saudi Arabian society, the evolution of higher education in Saudi Arabia and the achievements of Saudi females within academia. Chapter 2 examines the history

and current state of women's education and career in Saudi Arabia. It begins by highlighting the societal issues and the significance of understanding the broader cultural and historical contexts when analysing the difficulties experienced by women in achieving career advancement within higher education in Saudi Arabia. The role of family is highlighted in the chapter as vital in a woman's educational and career decisions, as family approval is typically required for both. The chapter further explores the evolution of higher education, noting that while the initial institutions were male-centric, opportunities for women have since expanded. The chapter concludes by explaining the goals of Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to further enhance women's roles in the workforce and education.

The third chapter details the review of existing literature on the topic. It begins by explaining the concept of intersectionality, the way it has been defined and covered in the prior studies focused on gender inequality including the role of race and other differences such as ethnicity, age, sexuality, religion and disability. The literature also focuses on discussion of intersectionality in the context of Arab region, exploring and critically evaluating the prior studies. The literature review chapter then explores the specific findings around the challenges experienced by women in progressing and advancing their careers within higher education, structuring the challenges into four distinct categories. These include: (1) guardianship and how it limits the ability of women to improve their intellectual capabilities through reduced options and mobility, (2) patriarchy and tribal values, (3) family and work conflict, and (4) gendered organisations. The literature review chapter argues that each of these challenges are interconnected and have a combined effect of exacerbating the challenges faced by women in higher education which are unique to women and not experienced by their male colleagues, as highlighted through intersectionality.

Chapter four explains the research methodology employed as part of investigation of the experiences of women with regard to work advancement in higher education institutions. The chapter starts by providing an overview of the research design, which is followed by explanation of philosophical assumptions including ontological and epistemological perspectives. Then, qualitative research method and the suitability of semi-structured interviews as the type of interviews is detailed. The sampling strategy

used to access the interviewees and ways in which access is secured to the research participants is discussed next, including the demographic background of the participants. The methodology chapter then explains the interview process and the relevance of intersectionality to social research method. By drawing on intersectionality as applied to qualitative social research, the chapter acknowledges how women working in higher education institutions as marginalised group are placed at the heart of this research and the way in which conscious effort is undertaken throughout the process of data collection and analysis to recognise that the experiences of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia are not monolithic. The methodology chapter also discusses data analysis, trustworthiness in data collection and analysis, ethical considerations and ways in which potential ethical issues are overcome. Finally, the limitations of research methodology are discussed.

Chapter five presents the findings and explains the professional support available to female staff in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, discussing the professional career opportunities among female academics and professional staff depending on the participant's positions and academic ranking. The demographic aspects of the interviewees such as their nationalities, age, marital and parental status also form the basis of discussion and analysis conducted in this chapter. In addition, the emergent themes from interviews are discussed in further detail. These include the freedom of movement of female faculty in Saudi Arabia, women's mobility as the opportunity to travel abroad/within Saudi, engage in international travel as a career opportunity and the lack of communication with top management in Saudi universities.

Chapter six explains the professional mobility and career opportunities available to women in higher education institutions. The findings of interviews are used to develop and elaborate on key themes. The discussion is structured such that women's international mobility is examined in a separate section by focusing on the comments of interviewees, critically analysing and comparing between the responses of interviewees. Apart from international mobility, day-to-day work-related mobility is analysed in a separate section to uncover and examine a complex range of factors influencing women's professional advancement within Saudi Arabian academia.

Gender biases, marital status, familial support, social networks, and perceptions of women's mobility are interconnected elements that significantly influence opportunities for international study and career progression. Marital status emerges as a crucial determinant in women's pursuit of higher education abroad, shedding light on the gendered societal norms within Saudi society.

The seventh chapter focuses on analysis of the role of families in career advancement of women. It involves emphasis on key themes emerging from the interviews in the context of career advancement of women in higher education institutions such as dual responsibility of women, amplification of stress experienced by women, traditional gender roles and expectations and the burden associated with societal expectations. The differences between married and single or separated women, as well as women from Saudi Arabia versus other countries are also explained. The chapter then analyses the challenges faced by working women in higher education, followed by the explanation of family's influence on career of women. Finally, the findings of primary research and wide literature are used to explain the strategies for improved work life balance for women in higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Chapter eight presents a discussion of the findings. It involves comparison of the interview findings with the prior literature, including the theoretical discussion, critical analysis of how the findings of this study based on primary research corroborate the past studies to help contribute to development of original insights. The chapter is structured such that it focuses on each research objective and research question separately. It begins by analysing the intersectional perspective to explain the challenges faced by women when it comes to career advancement. Then, it analyses the practices and processes which hinder women from achieving career progression in higher education. The following section provides a comparison of the experiences of Saudi and non-Saudi women in higher education. The chapter finally explains the techniques used by women across different ranks (levels of seniority) to tackle the challenges faced.

Finally, the ninth chapter provides the research contribution of this thesis and an overall conclusion to the thesis. It concludes by providing the conclusion to each research objective and explains how each research question was answered. The

findings across the thesis are used to provide recommendations in this chapter to the higher education institutions and policymakers to make the environment more conducive for women working in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The conclusion chapter also acknowledges the limitations of this research and provides suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Background

Women's education and career in Saudi Arabia is one of the most controversial topics that is debated and discussed among both conservatives and progressives in the country over the past two decades (Hamdan, 2005; Alsuwaida, 2016). In addition, the role of women in the development of the Saudi society and the issues regarding their rights and responsibilities have been equally subject to public disagreements among different parties in the country. Therefore, it is important first to review women in broader cultural contexts with a focus on the historical development and social taboos that contributed to the current position of Saudi women in the society.

2.1 Women in the Saudi society

In the past 50 years, the Middle Eastern region has experienced several challenges that have both direct and indirect consequences on the entire region and the Gulf countries in particular (Hamdan, 2005). Saudi Arabia has witnessed major social changes after the discovery and production of oil in 1930s. For example, the education for girls and improved healthcare for women are two such initiatives. The healthcare focus explains the reduction in maternal mortality, which has reduced over time due to improved healthcare practices (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Also, another significant change is the initial permission granted to women to pursue higher education in King Saud University in Riyadh in 1961 (Al-Sudairy, 2017, p.36). However, the conservative religious scholars rejected the idea of women attending classes since all universities in Saudi Arabia were entirely male institutions, with a view to avoiding the issue of the mixed gender workplaces (Al-Sudairy, 2017). Therefore, the idea of home-schooling for women was suggested as an alternative for the female students and conservatives at that time.

Al-Rasheed and Azzam (2012) argue that the revenue generated from oil production has helped the exclusion of Saudi women in their society and made separating them from the public sphere very affordable. Al-Rasheed and Azzam (2012) added the wealth from the proceeds of oil made the creation of two separate buildings and facilities in the public sphere for men and women possible. This was the case in higher education institutions, where two separate campuses for men and women were built,

in addition to the investment in modern technology for female students to be lectured by men. In addition, Saudi families were able to hire male drivers to drive their women to and from universities (Al-Rasheed and Azzam, 2012). Therefore, oil contributed to the liberalisation in the Saudi Arabian society, as it became possible for women to gain higher education.

However, it posed an issue that highly educated women were not allowed in the workforce and were only limited to study and consequently teaching of areas such as Humanities. This marginalisation meant the women were discouraged from studying certain disciplines such as engineering, geology, archaeology, political science and law due to their inability to secure jobs in the related industries, including military and oil industry. The reason being that societal values, along with the policy driven by cultural and political leadership dictated that these jobs should only be performed by men, contributing to gender inequality in employment and in the wider society in Saudi Arabia (Mills, 2009).

Women and men were treated differently based on the gender-based expectations of Saudi society (AlMunajjed, 1997). In fact, education system in Saudi Arabia reflects these expectations directing boys and girls into specific courses and activities are believed to best suit their social and biological function in a traditional society (AlMunajjed, 1997). For instance, females were encouraged to develop in their future role as mothers and housewives. The females' curricula such as Religious studies, Arabic literature, and Mathematics stressed the importance of women's role in home management, childcare sewing and cooking. Even in universities, Saudi women were directed to certain majors that would not conflict with their traditional role in the Saudi society and "prepare them for the homes not for work" (AlMunajjed, 1997, p.67). Thus, it is clear that the prevailing education system in Saudi Arabia was such that the focus remained on future role of women as mothers and housewives, which influenced the choice of subjects and knowledge taught to women.

However, after the introduction of higher education for women, many women attempted to abandon the traditional role assigned to them by patriarchal society that believed that women's place is home where they need to be looked after and protected (Al-Rasheed, 2013). In the 1940s, a young Saudi women called Fatina Shaker attempted to continue her studies after college with the support of her father by submitting an application to the Ministry of Education to study abroad in the time

when only male students were allowed to study abroad. The Ministry of Education rejected her request saying that it is immoral to send a single female to study abroad (Hamdan, 2005).

The importance of the role of the family in Arab societies could be illustrated in their support for women's career. Women are required to gain the approval of their families regarding the higher education and employment opportunities. In Saudi Arabia, as in the neighbouring Arab Gulf Countries, which comprise the Gulf Cooperation Council GCC (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates), women have continued to struggle in accessing education and employment (Rutledge et al., 2011). Although, women would have the support of their families in completing education, but do not necessarily mean that they would gain their families' support to pursue a career.

Female employment opportunities are limited to certain industries and certain job functions within these industries, that are considered compatible with the patriarchal tradition of the Arab family. Jobs, for example, should not conflict with family's obligations for women due to the emphasis on traditional roles of females in the context of the norms such as femininity, motherhood, and wifehood in the Arab societies (Fernea, 1985). Moreover, in conservative societies in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, women have to seek families' permission before applying for and securing work, which has made it more difficult for women to secure work because many families continue to be reluctant in allowing female family members to work (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

These patriarchal oppositions against women made Saudi Arabia a very complex society shaped by customary laws and traditions that have negatively affected women's educational and professional development. In addition, the oil revenue facilitated the exclusion practises devised by the conservative religious scholars and significantly shaped women's movement over many decades. Hamdan (2005, p. 45) stresses that "women's inequality is traditionally structured in the society" and the improved status of women's education over the past two decades did not change the fact the women in all fields are subordinate to men in Saudi Arabia. The denial of women's rights is deeply rooted in the traditional customs of Saudi society and translated in conservative social practises such as strict gender roles and gender relations, gender segregation and guardianship which will be discussed further in the

literature review chapter. To gain more understanding of the challenges of women's work advancement, a review of women's higher education in Saudi Arabia is provided in the next section.

2.2 The context of Higher education in Saudi Arabia

The first college in Saudi Arabia was established in 1949 in the Western province particularly in Makkah (Ministry of Education, 2019). The beginning of higher education in Saudi Arabia was exclusively for male students, who were offered to study in Saudi institutions and the opportunity to pursue higher education abroad (Hamdan, 2005). In 1962, females had the right to complete their higher education in specially designed programmes for women called "ENTSAB" which is education off-campus (Al Alhareth et al, 2015, p.10). These programmes were an early form of spatial segregation, designed for women to suit self-learning purposes, where women could study at home and attend universities only for exams (AlMunajjed, 1997; Al Alhareth et al, 2015).

Afterwards, many colleges were founded in Saudi Arabia until the establishment of King Saud University, which was the first public university in Riyadh. Saudi public universities are classified as to whether they are established universities or emerging universities. The established universities comprise of seven universities, beginning with Kind Saud University and followed by six other public universities in different cities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At present there are 22 universities in total, which began with the establishment of King Khalid University in 1998 (Ministry of Education, 2019). The first private University for females is Dar Alhekma University which was established in Jeddah in 1999.

The Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia was founded based on Islamic law and one of its major responsibilities is implementing the government policies in higher education (Ministry of Education, 2019). Classical hierarchy of the government exists within the ministry of education, as do all other public organisations in Saudi Arabia. Similar to other ministries, higher education system derives its authority from the King and the Council of Ministers to serve the best interests of the population of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government has the right to run the Ministry of Education, which includes funding, strategic planning, and undertaking decisions regarding its future policy and strategic direction. One of the government's policies is to segregate men

and women in the area of higher education. This policy is derived from the cultural tradition of gender-specific higher education (all male, all female places) (AlMunajjed, 1997).

Despite the fact that gender segregation is applied in higher education institutions, various educational opportunities are available for women today. The percentage of female students, who enrol in universities after high school is higher than male students (Ministry of Education, 2016). At present, both genders have equal opportunities to access higher education including full scholarships to enable them to gain relevant education to maximise their learning and development and prepare them for the future career. This indicates significant progress in alleviating gender inequality in Saudi Arabia, when it comes to the ability of male and female population to access higher education.

The expansion of higher education witnessed remarkable changes in terms of offering more opportunities for pursuing education and improving the quality of education for women. At the early stages of the scholarship program offered by the government in 1940s, women were excluded but were incorporated into the program eventually (Lacey, 1981 cited in Hamdan, 2005). The official start date of sponsoring females to study abroad is disputed amongst historians, however, statistics records published by the Saudi Higher Education show that in 1980, the total number of students who had government scholarship is 11,921 and 8% of these students were female (Ministry of Education, 2019). In 2017/2018, the number of female students with a scholarship increased to 43% of total 11,589 Saudi Students (Ministry of Education, 2019).

Today, Saudi students have considerably more opportunities to access universities, despite the socio-economic differences, although the opportunities may not be entirely equal. According to the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education statistics, female students comprise 53% of the total graduates in Saudi public universities at the end of 2017 (Ministry of Education, 2019), indicating that women in education are now in majority compared to their male counterparts. However, female graduation as a proportion of total graduates is only one statistic which primarily reflects quantitative progress in female education rather than qualitative. It does not necessarily translate into equal opportunities in terms of quality of education, fields of study, or subsequent career advancement (Tlaiss and AlWaqfi, 2022). Women continue to face barriers in accessing certain fields, especially those traditionally dominated by men, or in

securing high-level positions in the workforce after graduation (Alsahli et al., 2021). Therefore, the statistic on female graduation, while impressive, does not fully represent the depth and breadth of educational and professional opportunities available to these women graduates.

Despite the progress in access to education for women over the past decade, the prospect of career progression within the higher education institutions for women continue to remain limited in Saudi Arabia. As a result, several academic accomplishments of Saudi women are achieved abroad in the western countries, where some women choose to pursue higher education and advance their career and return to Saudi Arabia looking for better job opportunities in higher education, whereas others emigrate to foreign countries to achieve success professionally in different sectors.

Studies have shown that the number of female lecturers has increased gradually from only 4,700 in 2004 to 19,600 in 2009, while the number of male lecturers has increased from about 7,200 to 48,800 in the same time period (Al Alhareth et al, 2015b). However, this may not reflect an actual improvement of female employment since the number of female graduates exceeds the number of male graduates in this period (Al Alhareth et al, 2015b). It seems that the difficulties women face in higher education are not in joining the workforce but rather in work advancement. Current statistics from the Ministry of Education Statistics Centre (2017) indicate the percentage of females holding Master's degree is 43% in total, whereas females holding PhD degree in Saudi Arabia is about 23% of total PhD students. This figure equates to 41.91% of Saudi students who study for a PhD in a western country. It is now widely agreed that many Saudi women have made phenomenal advancements in education, as witnessed in the exponential rise in the number of women accessing higher education to gain graduate and postgraduate degree rights (Alsubaie, and Jones, 2017). Despite the figures and studies presented regarding the female participation and success in higher education, the statistics still favour males over females in higher education.

2.2.1 Saudi Females' achievements in academia

The official entry of women in education was in 1967, when women were allowed to attend universities for the first time in King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah (Al-Sudairy, 2017). Since then, many other universities have established new branches, some of them 'female-only' for women to be able to attend their classes in person. At first, women were not encouraged to be present in such initiations and preferred to pursue their education at home due to cultural traditions. However, this changed over time, as by the end of 1990s, the number of Saudi female graduates from the female branches at Saudi HE institutions has increased to reach 54.8% of the total 51,198 graduates from all HE levels (Ministry of Education, 2019).

A significant progress on female empowerment occurred during the reign of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz from 2005 to 2015. He supported women across different fields, especially in pursuing higher education. King Abdullah facilitated the investment of \$11.5 billion to establish Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University, the largest female exclusive campus in the world (Mills, 2009). Moreover, he enabled female students to apply for the scholarship program as the same rate of male students as part of King Abdullah Sponsorship Program (KASP) for Saudi student to study in the US (Taylor, and Albasri, 2014).

During this time period, the number of scholarships awarded to female students increased significantly from 3,879 in 2005 to about 35,700 in 2012, representing an increase of 37% compounded annual growth rate (Ministry of Education, 2019). Besides promoting female education, another important change was the support and encouragement by the government to enable female participation in the workforce. In 2011, a historic decision was made by enabling Saudi Women to enter and have full membership in the Shura Council, which is the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia. Saudi women had the right to vote and be elected to the formal government advising body (Denman and Hilal, 2011). This was viewed as an indication of continued development regarding women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

The rising involvement of women in education and workplace indicates that women have showed their role and presence within a short period of time. Saudi women have indicated their ability to overcome conservative cultural limitations, develop their learning skills and excel in the field of education. Saudi women's research contributions have attracted international attention in various fields, particularly in the field of science and scientific research (Ministry of Education, 2019). For instance, a

Saudi female Ghada Al-Mutairi registered three patents in nanotechnology and solar cell technology at IBM in the USA (Abdullah, 2019).

Similarly, in the field of medicine, the Saudi medical scientist Hayat Cindy “is the first Arab woman to receive a doctorate in biotechnology from the University of Cambridge” (Women2030.com., 2019). Human and sustainable development has progressed because of the work of Saudi female named Mashael Ashemimry, who was appointed as a regional researcher in the scientific team in NASA. Another remarkable achievement for a female researcher, having a grant worth \$3 million to her contribution in the international scientific community in addition to receiving multiple awards (McNamara, 2017). It is important to highlight that these women received their education and qualifications from foreign universities and advanced their professional skills in the US and other European countries, illustrating the significance of international mobility for women’s social and professional development. Saudi women have proved the importance of their research contribution globally, a fact evident through their recent achievements. However, Saudi women's accomplishments in the international and scientific communities do not translate into their ability to secure appropriate positions of sufficient responsibility within higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Women globally have a history of experiencing gender stereotypes, and women in Saudi Arabia as a highly traditional society are no exception (Alotaibi, 2020; Lari, 2023). Saudi Arabia has made considerable progress in 21st century when it comes to female empowerment and female labour force participation rate. The participation of female workers in the workforce increased from 16% in 2000 to 28% by 2022 (World Bank, 2022), as illustrated in figure 2.1. The growth in female participation rate in the country is attributed to Vision 2030 which has aimed to encourage the involvement of women in the workforce through provision of greater opportunities (Alshammari, 2022).

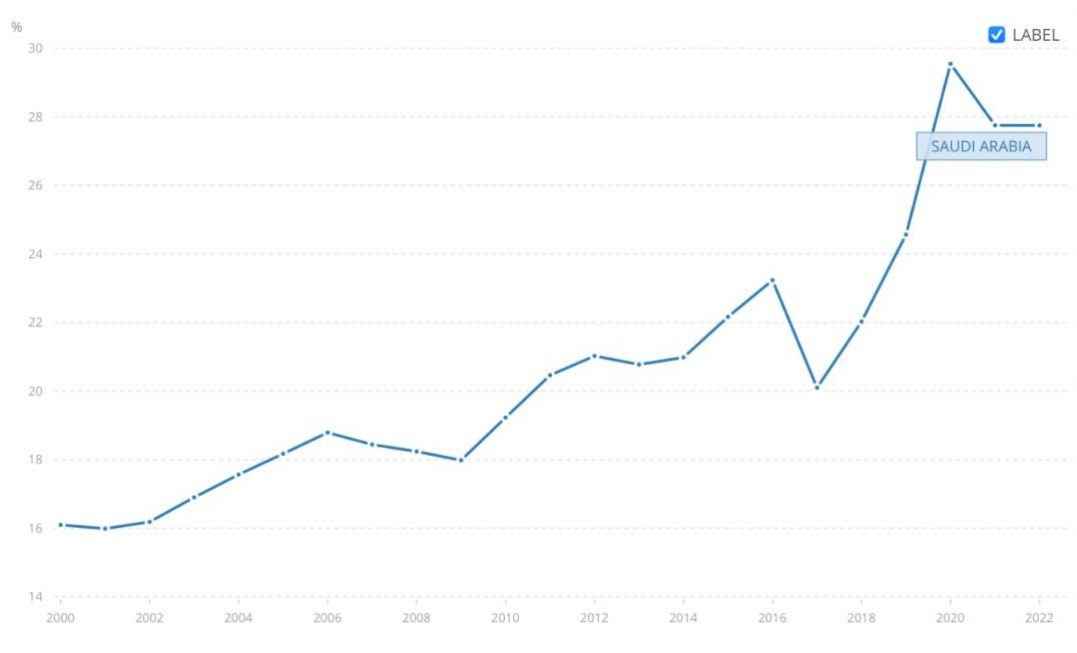


Figure 1: Labour force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) Source: World Bank (2022)

Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has initiated a number of transformative changes as part of its Vision 2030 to reducing the country's dependency on oil, diversifying its economy, and developing public service sectors. Women empowerment has been a significant component of these reforms. Female empowerment has improved between 2016 and 2023, as witnessed by the introduction of several initiatives. Lifting the driving ban on women is one such change. In 2018, the long-standing ban on women driving was lifted, allowing Saudi women to drive cars without needing a male guardian's permission. This has significantly increased mobility and independence for women (Macias-Alonso et al., 2023). Easing of rules on guardian-related restrictions is another initiative. The male guardianship system, which previously required women to obtain the consent of a male relative for many key life decisions, was relaxed. As of 2019, Saudi women can travel abroad, obtain passports, register births, marriages, or divorces, and get family identity cards without needing the consent of a male guardian (Al-Qahtani et al., 2020). The third initiative is specific objective on female participation in the workforce. Vision 2030 aims to increase the participation of women in the workforce from 22% to 30%. The government has been proactive in creating job opportunities for women, especially in sectors previously reserved for men such as manufacturing and construction. For instance, 6,662 women entered manufacturing and 7,782 entered construction in 2020, an increase of 50% from 2013

(World Bank, 2022), although the figures start from a low base, implying that growth rate is expected to remain high.

The fourth initiative is promotion of women in security and military. In 2018, women were allowed to apply for positions in the military for the first time. Subsequent reforms have allowed women to take up various roles in the security sector (Varshney, 2019). Another initiative is within entertainment and sports. Women's access to sports and entertainment was increased, with them now allowed to attend football matches in stadiums. Additionally, physical education for girls was introduced in public schools, and women's sports competitions have been increasing (Ahmed, 2020).

Even though Saudi Arabia has one of the fastest growing female labour force participation rate amongst the G-20 countries (the world's major and systematically important 19 countries plus European Union) (Alghofaily, 2019; Mulligan, 2019), women continue to remain underrepresented in advanced positions in the higher education institutions. There are two women in a position of authority in the higher education sector. One of those is Professor Dalal Nemenqani, the first female Dean of Taif Public University, College of Medicine, where she supervises both male and female faculty members (Arab News, 2017). The second female leader is the President of Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, which is a public female exclusive university. These two women were assigned the highest positions ever held by women in Saudi higher education public institutions. It is appropriate based on social norms and local customs for women to have the position of full authority to make decisions of an all-female university (Ahmed, 2020), given the acceptable social norms for women to manage and lead women-only workplace. Nonetheless, at other public higher education institutions in the female sections, women in high-level positions do not have the highest decision-making capacity as their male counterparts. Regardless of women's ongoing and recent accomplishments, they continue to lack representation in higher education and in higher-level positions in particular (Abalkhail, 2017), which signifies that increased education undertaken by women has not translated into their career progression within the higher education industry.

The reality is that none of these women, who achieved professional success internationally and through working abroad, are serving, nor have they yet served, in senior-level positions whether as professors or managers in all public universities in

Saudi Arabia, except for the two examples mentioned earlier. Furthermore, gender segregation of education does not mean that women could lead their own branches. If women leaders do not have the power to make work-related decisions, which are managed by men from the men's branch of these universities, without strong input from women, then women would not have the empowerment that the government envisioned for them in King Abdullah region. Furthermore, this conflicts with the new policy objectives of Saudi Arabian Government, as illustrated in Saudi vision of the country by 2030 regarding women right to be involved in both the workforce and the field of higher education (Saudi Vision, 2017).

The lack of women's empowerment surrounding the public universities in Saudi Arabia is clearly observed, thus one of new Saudi vision 2030 major plans is to enhance the role of women in both workforce and education. There are positive expectations regarding women's status, with the implementation of the Vision 2030 strategies that emphasize the importance of women's role as an important part of the society (Saudi Vision, 2017). Especially with the support of the government, that is going to facilitate women's empowerment in the society, in which might help to change the societies' attitude regarding women's career advancement.

Even when women have held high-level positions in the female branches of universities, they are not the decision-makers due to the costumes and traditions of the country that restrict women freedom in terms of mobility and the choice of education paths and careers (Denman and Hilal, 2011). Although, women remain in separate campus from men, their section-related decisions have to be reported to the male sections in order to be approved by the male counterparts first. Therefore, it is essential to understand the reasons behind the subordination of women working in higher education. In addition, it is relevant to explore the challenges faced by women at the societal, institutional and individual levels, other barriers related to gendered stereotypes and roles that continue to constrain the ability of women to progress and advance their careers.

In the next chapter, the theoretical debates and evidence about Saudi traditional customs and norms, and gendered practice in the workplace will be reviewed. After exploring the existing literature about women career advancement in HE institution in Saudi Arabia, it will explain the need for an in-depth analysis that covers the

intertwined and complex relationship between traditional custom and gendered organisations that hinder women's career development.

Chapter 3: Literature review

This chapter review the literature and different theoretical perspectives relevant to this thesis as part of the investigation of the experience of women with regard to work advancement in higher education institutions. The structure of this chapter is as follows: It begins by explaining the concept of intersectionality, the way it has been defined and covered in the prior studies focused on gender inequality including the role of race and other differences such as ethnicity, age, sexuality, religion and disability. The literature also focuses on discussion of intersectionality in the context of Arab region, exploring and critically evaluating the prior studies. The literature review chapter then explores the specific findings around the challenges experienced by women in progressing and advancing their careers within higher education, structuring the challenges into four distinct categories. These include: (1) guardianship and how it limits the ability of women to improve their intellectual capabilities through reduced options and mobility, (2) patriarchy and tribal values, (3) family and work conflict, and (4) gendered organisations.

3.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality was first introduced by movement Combahee River Collective (Mirza 2013; Collins 2015), whose members argued that the feminist movement was not very representative of all women. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework which helps to understand how aspects of a person's social and political identities (such as ethnicity, race, gender, class, sexuality, marital status and ability) combined create different modes of discrimination and privilege (Cho et al., 2013). The concept, originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, acknowledges that the different parts of peoples' identity do not exist independently of one other and instead, they intersect and influence the experiences of individuals in complex ways. In the context of this study, intersectionality theory is relevant for a number of reasons. Firstly, intersectionality allows to obtain an in-depth understanding of how being a woman in the Saudi Arabian higher education sector is influenced not only by gender but also by how gender intersects with other factors such as nationality, socio-economic background and cultural norms (Al-Faham et al., 2019). This is vital in understanding the diverse experiences of Saudi and non-Saudi women, and women from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in HE. Secondly, by using an intersectional approach, the research is able to contribute to development of more inclusive and effective policies and practices in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The intersectional

approach ensures that these policies do not just address the needs of a homogenous group of women, but are tailored to the distinct challenges faced by women from various intersecting identities.

The concept of intersectionality is based on the argument that feminist movement has been dominated by white women and that it disregarded the racial differences between white women and other coloured women (Collins, 2015). In other words, the women of colour questioned the global homogenous nature of women as a category proposed by the dominant white feminist view of the time. Therefore, they proposed that the oppression that women can be exposed to may differ based on the racial differences among them. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) investigated how black women were marginalized in antidiscrimination law. She argued that black women may encounter higher levels of inequality, because black women were subordinated by more dominant groups in which black women are categorized under, she contended that black women being categorized under a single category, whether black or women, could underestimate the possible discrimination caused by the intersection between both categories. In other words, if there is any oppression against black women that does not coincide with oppression against white women or black men, it could not be interpreted as an act of inequality or discrimination. Crenshaw (1989) argued that black women were trapped between two movements that were dominated by others who represent the claimed homogeneity of the group. This homogeneity subordinated black women. Additionally, Crenshaw (1990) also argued that intersectionality could uphold any possible inequality against any subordinated groups. This in-depth understanding of inequality construction is the premise for how intersectionality has been introduced as a possible approach towards studying the interlocking power systems of oppression in the field of work and organisation (Rodriguez et al, 2016).

Acker's (2006) work on gender, class and race in organisations is relevant in providing a context on intersectionality because it served as the foundation for subsequent arguments on intersectionality by others such as Hancock (2007), McBride et al. (2015) and Rodriguez et al (2016). Acker (2005) argued that work is a critical place where practices of inequality are produced and mentioned through the daily interaction and the way in which modern organisations are structured. Acker (2006)

suggested that the concept of inequality regimes would help to understand categories of differences as intersecting processes and the barriers to equality at work organisations. The term "Inequality regimes" is related "to inequality in the surrounding environment, its politics, history, and culture" that produce patterns of complex inequalities (Acker, 2006, p 443). Inequality regimes are various and are dynamic due to high competition and global pressure on organisations. However, according to Acker (2006), the bases of inequality in organizations are represented in class, gender, race and other differences such as ethnicity, age, sexuality, religion and disability. Therefore, work process such as recruitment and hiring, monetary setting and supervisory, as well as organizing work into hierarchies would be affected by gendered and racialized practices and beliefs that vary in visibility, legitimacy and degree across organisations and subunits. According to Acker (2006), the daily work processes and practices are organised based on the model of a man who has no family-related responsibilities, such as children or domestic work. Therefore, work-related expectations such as long hours at work and being fully committed to the organisation are associated with the image of a good and dedicated worker. Acker (2006) stated that this concept does not appreciate the expectations and obligations on women outside the workplace, especially with regards to raising children and family. Since women in the US have more obligations outside work than their male counterparts, these work expectations negatively affected the ability of women to successfully progress at work.

Acker's (2006) discussion of inequality regimes encompasses how different bases of inequality, like class, gender, race, and others, intersect within organizational structures and practices. This aligns with intersectionality's focus on how various social identities intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. Acker's (2006) analysis of how work processes are influenced by these intersecting identities helps to illuminate the complex, often hidden, dynamics of inequality in the workplace. Moreover, Acker's (2006) observation of workplace expectations being modelled on a man with no family-related responsibilities directly addresses the intersection of gender with other social roles, such as family and caregiver responsibilities. This ties into intersectionality by demonstrating the way gender intersects with societal and cultural expectations, impacting women's experiences and opportunities in the workplace, especially in terms of career progression and work-

life balance (Reilly et al., 2016). This aspect is crucial in understanding the different barriers women face, especially in contexts such as higher education where traditional gender roles and expectations might still be prevalent.

The concept of inequality regimes is important for this study because it focuses not only on organisational processes and practices that disadvantage women but also, on the intersection of gender, Saudi traditional customs and norms, and nationality which is important to this study. Acker's (1990; 2006) work would also help to examine female academic staff's perceptions of gender relations within the workplace. Therefore, the work of Acker is a suitable approach that would help understand the complex inequalities faced by women working in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the work of Acker (2006) would facilitate in understanding the experience of female employment in higher education by examining the literature on intersectionality in the Arab countries and investigating what kind of inequality regime is experienced by women employed in Saudi Higher education.

The term intersectionality has been used widely amongst researchers from various disciplines including interdisciplinary fields such as women studies, gender studies, history and marketing (Collins 2015; Dy et al., 2017). Moreover, intersectionality has been interpreted differently since Crenshaw (1989) first coined the term. The various conceptualizations of intersectionality are due to its usage by many scholars and practitioners as a concept that would develop a better understanding of the experience of individual and social inequality. However, Patricia Collins (Collins 2015; Collins and Bilge, 2016) has provided a general definition of intersectionality as 'the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities' (Collins 2015 p. 2). Collins argued intersectionality as a "broad-based knowledge project" would enhance the production of new knowledge in many areas directly and indirectly related to the field of intersectionality. Moreover, using intersectionality as an analytical strategy would provide researchers with new perspectives on the vision of investigating a social phenomenon.

In the literature on intersectionality, in work fields in particular, there are many debates and ways of conceptualizing intersectionality. As work contains many aspects such as labour market organization and occupational segregation which uphold complex forms of inequality. For example, in the analysis of the US labour market, Browne and Mirza (2003) analysed large databases of the workers in the US looking for evidence of the intersection of gender and race. They argued that intersections appear in the labour market under certain conditions. Therefore, it is vital to identify under which conditions gender and race intersections would appear to avoid the claims that gender and race intersections are ubiquitous. This indicates that specificity makes the analysis of inequality more effective and accurate in using intersectionality as an approach for comparison across different social groups. The type of questions posed, the methodological approach and the processes of the market under investigation shape the specific use of intersectional approaches to analyse social inequality.

The treatment of categories in the application of intersectionality to understand social inequality is one of the most debated aspects in such a theory. Race, gender and other categories of difference are viewed as interrelated to one another in a non-additive way (Choo and Ferree, 2010). This means that different social categories are intertwined in a certain way to shape the experience of women and minorities in a unique way. Hence, the experience of women in a specific context cannot be used to describe the experience of all women in different contexts. The relationship between social categories in intersectionality requires consideration regarding the way these categories intersect, since intersectionality has been used frequently in studies of inequality, identities and power relations among various disciplines (Hancock, 2007; Rodriguez et al, 2016). Therefore, a large body of work has emerged to address the issues in the application of intersectionality and develop several methodological approaches that could be applied to studies of inequality (Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005; Choo and Ferree, 2010; Walby et al, 2012).

The discussion on intersectionality has also focused on its methodological application and shows the relationship between subordinating categories. Intersectionality has introduced new methodological issues that limited the approaches to studying

intersectionality. McCall (2005) in the analysis of complexity of intersectionality asserted that intersectionality as a methodology should be used in social research. She emphasised that intersectionality is not just a theoretical concept but also a practical approach to understand and critically assess the complexities of social identities and inequalities. McCall (2005) suggests there are three methodological approaches namely anti-categorical, intra-categorical, and inter-categorical, which facilitate the study of multiple, intersecting, complex and social relations. Each of these complexities conceptualises the categories of differences in a different way than the other, hence "the purpose of the intersectional method is to show the interrelationship of subordinating categories, thereby exposing the operation of power in everyday life" (MacDowell, 2013).

Anti-categorical complexity rejects the categorization of social differences claiming that the reality is too complex to be viewed this way. Intra-categorical complexity focuses on a single social group at the intersection of multiple categories, which examines experiences at the point of intersection. In this study, anti-categorical complexity approach would question the rigid use of categories such as gender, nationality, customs and beliefs altogether. Instead, it would focus on the fluid, dynamic, and often overlapping experiences of individual women, suggesting that their experiences of inequality and advancement cannot be fully understood by breaking them down into discrete categories. For example, it would look at how the unique, personal narratives of women—encompassing their aspirations, challenges, and interactions with institutional structures—challenge the simplistic classification and resist being neatly categorised, emphasising the distinct nature of their professional lives.

In contrast, inter-categorical complexity, which considered a comparative and contextual approach, examines inequality between existing social groups. Applying an inter-categorical complexity approach to this study would involve comparing the experiences of different groups of women, classified by categories such as nationality (Saudi vs. non-Saudi), academic rank (junior vs. senior faculty), or marital status (married vs. unmarried). For instance, this approach could examine how career progression barriers differ for Saudi women compared to their non-Saudi counterparts

or explore variations in experiences between married and unmarried women within the academic setting. It aims to highlight inequalities and differential access to opportunities or resources between these distinct, predefined groups, thereby offering a comparative and contextual analysis of their experiences. This approach is recommended by McCall (2005) for its efficiency in capturing the advantage and disadvantage within and between social groups in specific social systems. McCall (2005) also explained that not all the literature on intersectionality could be classified as representative to one of the proposed approaches and instead, there could be an overlap between them.

McCall (2005) critiqued single-axis analysis in social research, which is an integral component of her work on intersectionality. Traditional single-axis analysis examines social categories such as gender, race or class in isolation, treating them as separate and independent variables which influence individuals' experiences and opportunities. For instance, studies may focus only on gender, analysing the disparities and experiences based solely on the binary of male and female, or they might examine racial inequality without considering how gender or class further impact these experiences (Clarke and McCall, 2013). While this approach has been instrumental in highlighting specific forms of inequality, McCall (2005) asserted that such a methodology has a shortcoming that it is inherently limited in its ability to fully capture the complexities of real-life experiences.

The limitation of single-axis analysis is reflected in its oversimplification of social identities and their impact. Human experiences are not uni-dimensional; they are shaped by a confluence of multiple factors and social identities that intersect and interact with each other (Carastathis, 2014). For instance, a woman's experience in the Saudi higher education institution is not influenced by her gender alone but also by her race, class, age, and other factors. These intersections create unique experiences of privilege and discrimination which cannot be understood when each category is examined without appreciation of its interaction with the other categories. By focusing on just one aspect of identity, single-axis analyses can obscure the ways in which different forms of discrimination and privilege overlap and reinforce each other (Gressgård, 2008). This can lead to a partial or even misleading understanding of social inequalities, as it fails to acknowledge how different axes of identity compound

and complicate individual experiences. Furthermore, McCall's (2005) critique highlights the dynamic and contextual nature of the social categories. The significance and impact of gender, race, or class are not universal but differ across various contexts and cultures. What it means to be a woman, for instance, can vary greatly depending on one's racial, cultural, or socioeconomic background (Mercer et al., 2015). These differences affect how different forms of inequality are experienced and understood.

Additionally, McCall (2005) emphasised the context-dependent, dynamic and evolving nature of the social categories and identities which has become an important component of intersectionality. This perspective acknowledges that categories such as race, gender, class, and others are not universally defined and static. Instead, their meanings and implications differ considerably over time and across different social and cultural contexts. For instance, the societal perception and experiences of womanhood, or what it means to be a woman vary greatly depending on the prevailing cultural norms, historical periods and geographical location/ context (Block and Corona, 2014). Similarly, concepts of race and class are not uniform but are shaped by local history, culture, and socio-economic structure. This fluidity challenges the conventional notion of fixed and easily categorisable social identities (Bose, 2012), encouraging a more flexible and nuanced approach in understanding how these identities are constructed and experienced.

In intersectional analysis, this understanding is crucial because it allows for a more accurate representation of how people navigate their multiple identities in various settings. For instance, the challenges and privileges experienced by a low-income, rural woman of colour are likely to be distinct from those of a high-income, urban woman of colour. It demonstrates that despite sharing two social categories – gender and race, their experiences are likely to be distinct. McCall's (2005) approach advocates for an analysis which is sensitive to these differences, recognising that the intersections of identities are complex which cannot be clearly segregated and compartmentalized. This perspective is especially relevant in research and policymaking, as it ensures that the diverse experiences of individuals within these broad categories are acknowledged and addressed. By considering the specific contexts in which people live, intersectional analysis helps to uncover the unique ways

in which different forms of inequality and privilege manifest, leading to more effective and targeted interventions (Mercer et al., 2015).

Moreover, McCall's (2005) view also highlights the importance of historical and cultural awareness in intersectional analysis. Social categories and identities are not only defined by current contexts but are also shaped by historical events and processes. For instance, the legacy of colonialism and slavery has a profound impact on contemporary understandings of race and class in many societies (Clarke and McCall, 2013). Recognising these historical dimensions is essential in understanding the current dynamics of inequality and privilege. It allows for a deeper analysis that takes into account the historical roots of current social issues, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by individuals at the intersection of various social identities.

Walby et al. (2012) critiqued the terminology in some studies on intersectionality, including McCall's (2005, p. 229) paper, who used the term 'category' to refer to "the structural 'things' that are intersecting". Walby et al. (2012) claim that these terms failed to adequately capture the nature of the social relationships within these categories. Instead, the terms such as 'category' and "the structural 'things' bring focus into the relationships between these categories, especially the relation at the intersecting point of social categories. The issue with these approaches is they tend to neglect the agency of those marginalised (experience various forms of social differentiation).

The inclusion of a powerful group would bring into sight the role of their actions within sets of unequal social relations (Walby et al., 2012). This is in contrast to most work on intersectionality, which is commonly focused on the disadvantaged group. Subsequently, Walby et al. (2012, p. 231) suggested to change the terminology by using terms such as "set of unequal social relations", "inequality", "social system", and "regime" to refer to the complex reality of the analysis, also avoid the term "category" as it might give the impression of a unitary concept. By doing so, it would be easier to bring attention to the significance of the actions of a powerful group as equal to the disadvantaged group in the analysis of intersectionality, thereby aiming

to address the limitation of the earlier work on intersectionality that largely focused on the disadvantaged groups.

In the field of work and employment relations, McBride et al. (2014, p. 331) argue “...the intersectional approach contains an important caution against over-generalization that has been obscured”, and that, for all researchers, who wish to undertake an intersectional approach, it is vital to be aware of its challenges and to be reflexive at all the research stages. Besides, acknowledging the limits of generalizability that intersectionality would introduce due to the diversity within each category of difference. For example, the experience of a single female does not necessarily represent the experience of all women occupying the same categories. McBride et al. (2014) add, for researchers of work and employment relations, it is important to take into account the experience of individuals who occupy one of the categories, as it might be completely different to those occupying overlapping categories in intersectional research. This comes after a dissection of the work of McCall (2005) on methodological approaches, who undertook an intersectional approach.

The review of McCall's (2005) work and that of McBride et al. (2014) on intersectionality reveals important differences. Firstly, McCall (2005) emphasised the importance of social categories such as gender, race, and class, and how they intersect to affect individuals' experiences and opportunities. In contrast, McBride et al. (2014) and Walby et al. (2012) critiqued the terminology used in intersectionality studies, including McCall's. They argue that terms such as 'categories' or 'structural things' fail to adequately capture the nature of social relationships within these categories. They emphasise the need to focus on the relationships at the intersecting points of these social categories, thereby shifting the emphasis from the categories themselves to the dynamics and relations between them. Another area of comparison is around inclusion of agency and power dynamics. McCall's (2005) work largely focuses on how different social identities intersect and shape experiences. While she acknowledged the dynamic nature of these categories, the primary focus remains on the identities themselves and their intersections. In contrast, McBride et al. (2014) proposed a more explicit focus on the agency of marginalised groups and the actions of powerful groups within sets of unequal social relations. This perspective not only considers the

intersections of disadvantaged identities but also how these intersections are influenced by broader power structures and the actions of more dominant groups. Whereas, McBride et al. (2014) seem to take a slightly softer approach than McCall, whereby McBride et al. (2014) encourage researchers to be “intersectionally sensitive” by highlighting the problems of an intersectional enquiry at both stages in designing and interpreting the research.

Mooney (2016) suggested a nimble intersectional approach that all researchers (intersectionality experts or not) could take. She argued that there is a need to ask four methodological questions to allow nimble intersectional researchers (whether they are experienced and expert on the subject or not) to clearly make their assumptions. These are: (1) whether the study is an intersectional study or not? (2) what intersectional framing fits best the context of the study? (3) should the study be premised on organisational and societal processes or an individual identity? and (4) what are the meanings associated with categories of difference? In response to the first question, Mooney (2016) asserted that a study is considered intersectional if it involves an analysis of more than one category of differences with the underlying aim to reveal these differences, consistent with the argument of Hancock (2007). Intersectional studies concentrate on investigating the “silences” (Mooney, 2016, p. 711) of individuals who deviate from the dominant and obvious norms/ practices.

In response to whether the study should be premised on organisational and societal processes or an individual identity, Mooney (2016) refers to the work of McBride et al. (2015) to assess whether the actual motive of a given intersectional research is to understand and evaluate the lived experience of those individuals at the intersection or is it to concentrate on analysing the dynamics of power at work? Mooney (2016) argues there is a need for nimble researchers to agree whether their study will initiate with the review of organisational processes or remain focused on understanding the individual identity. A number of earlier studies on intersectionality which trace their origins to black feminism focused on individual identity (Proudford and Nkomo, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006) whereas the process models using intersectional theory have concentrated more on undertaking comparative analysis at the intersections

which help to uncover “structural processes organising power” (Ferree and Cho, 2010, p. 135) instead of focusing on the identity of individuals.

Mooney (2016) argued that intersectionality theory enables researchers to clearly communicate the distinct and cumulative effects associated with being different across a number of dimensions across various organisational and employment settings. As with Crenshaw (2011), Mooney (2016) also asserted that intersectionality is applicable to some extent to each individual because “no one exists outside the matrix of power” (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 230). A lack of definitive methodology explains why intersectionality as a method remains marginalised. Mooney's approach emphasises the need to consider both individual identities and organizational/societal processes. In the Saudi Arabian context, this means not just examining gender, but also considering other factors such as nationality, age, marital status, local and socio-economic status, the dynamics of power and hierarchy within educational institutions.

Similarly, in the field of work and organisations, Rodriguez et al. (2016) proposed two approaches to the study of intersectionality. The first and the most widely adopted approach undertaken by the researchers focused on work and organisation focuses on the influence of subjectivity of individuals and groups on their experience given their social membership (Rodriguez et al., 2016). The second approach focuses on the level of power systems and inequalities by analysing subjectivities embedded within different dynamics of power in many spheres (Rodriguez et al., 2016).

However, Rodriguez et al. (2016) argue that since the 1990s, the focus has shifted from the identity-subjectivities to the focus on structural powers when Acker first introduced the term ‘gendered organization’ (Acker, 1990). Acker (1990) offered an exploration of the structural dimensions that might produce gender inequalities in the field of gender, work and organization. One of the important aspects of the systematic theory is to identify gender segregation, income and status of men and women in organizations which partly occurs as a result of organizational processes. Thus, to understand gender inequalities in the workplace, it is important to understand how these processes are produced. They are produced as a daily interaction amongst workers in the workplace.

3.1.1 Intersectionality in the Arab context

In exploring intersectionality within the Arab context, especially in Saudi Arabia, Sylvia Walby's conceptual framework of patriarchy is critical. Saudi Arabia presents a distinctive case where traditional patriarchal structures are deeply embedded within both public and private spheres, influencing every aspect of the social life, including the higher education sector. Walby's (1989) definition of patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices where men dominate, oppress, and exploit women provides a critical lens through which to examine the gender dynamics at play in the Saudi Arabian context. Her emphasis on the social construction of these structures, rather than biological determinism, allows for a nuanced analysis of how gendered power imbalances are institutionalized and perpetuated.

Furthermore, Walby's (1989) identification of six structures that constitute the patriarchal system—ranging from state institutions to cultural norms—offers a comprehensive framework for analysing how these dynamics intersect with other forms of identity such as nationality, ethnicity, and class in Saudi Arabia. This approach is vital for understanding the complex interplay between gender and other social categories, thereby enriching the intersectional analysis of women's experiences in Saudi higher education. Walby's work highlights the significance of examining patriarchy to fully grasp the challenges and barriers women face, making it a fundamental component of studying intersectionality in this ethnic Arab context.

It is important to provide a theoretical overview of patriarchy and patriarchal systems, given their relevance to understanding intersectionality in the Arab context. Within studies of gender relations, patriarchy is an important conceptual tool to understand the reality. Walby (1989) aimed to theorise patriarchy in a way that was historically and culturally sensitive. She identified two systems, private and public whereby private system is more historical where women were excluded. In contrast, public system is where the women are visible but marginalised in public life. An important argument of Walby (1989) is that societies at different rates are transitioning from the private to public system of patriarchy.

Walby (1989) argued that including generation within the definition of patriarchy caused increased confusion, defining patriarchy as “a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby, 1989, p. 214). Walby (1989) emphasised use of social structures in her definition, which helps moving away from the biological determinism. She acknowledged that not every man is inherently in a position of power, nor is every woman inherently subjugated. This perspective shifts the focus from individual relationships to the broader, institutionalised structures which perpetuate gender inequality. This definition highlights the importance of societal constructs over innate biological differences in understanding and addressing the dynamics of gender power imbalances.

Patriarchy, as a complex system, operates on various levels. At its most abstract, it is a network of social relationships, intersecting with capitalism and racism yet distinct in its structure (Walby, 1989). This system breaks down into six specific domains: economic production influenced by male control, male-dominated labour markets, state institutions shaped by male perspectives, the prevalence of male violence, male-oriented norms in sexuality, household relations and male-centric biases in cultural institutions like religion, media, and education. Within these areas, patriarchal practices vary in intensity. In real-world scenarios, these patriarchal elements interconnect with capitalist and racist influences, creating a multidimensional landscape of power and inequality (Walby, 1989).

Walby (1989) identified patriarchy as a system comprised of six interconnected structures, each influencing the dynamics of male dominance and female subordination. First, there is the patriarchal mode of production, where women's labour, especially in domestic settings, is unfairly appropriated by men, often their husbands. Second, within waged labour, patriarchal relations manifest in gendered disparities and biases in the workplace. The third structure, the patriarchal state, refers to how government and state institutions perpetuate male dominance through laws and policies. Fourth, male violence, both physical and psychological, acts as a mechanism to reinforce male power over women. Fifth, patriarchal relations in sexuality encompass societal norms and practices that favour male sexual authority and control. Lastly, patriarchal culture is seen in cultural institutions like religion, media, and education, where narratives and values often reflect and reinforce male

dominance. Walby emphasised that these structures are defined by their social relations rather than physical locations.

For instance, 'household' in this context is similar to 'workplace' in Marxist analysis – it serves as a setting for certain relations and practices, not a theoretical concept itself. It has influenced the emphasis on workplace in data analysis in this thesis. Each structure comprises various sub-structures and practices that contribute to the overall system of patriarchy. An example is the differentiation between full-time and part-time work in employment, a practice that perpetuates gender inequality within the labour market. This framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of how patriarchy is embedded and operates across different facets of society.

Other scholars in the Western context highlighted similar structural aspects of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a social system whereby men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property (Fox, 1988). In patriarchal systems, male dominance is maintained through different cultural, political, and economic mechanisms, and this dominance usually extends to a preference for sons over daughters, and an expectation that women are subservient to male family members (Feldman, 2001). Patriarchal systems are characterised by gender roles whereby men are usually viewed as the providers and decision-makers, while women's roles are often confined to child-rearing and household responsibilities (Goldberg, 1989; Bennett, 2006). Leadership positions, whether in government, religious institutions, or family units are predominantly occupied by men (Duncan, 1994). Social and cultural norms in patriarchy reinforce male dominance and female subservience, including practices that constrain women's rights, freedom, and autonomy (Benstead, 2021). Economic control is another relevant aspect of patriarchal system, as economic systems tend to favour men's work and contributions over women's, often resulting in gender pay gaps and women's economic dependency on men (Gilligan and Snider, 2018). It raises a relevant question that “How have these aspects manifested themselves in the Saudi context?”

The patriarchal system in Saudi Arabia is characterized by a strong emphasis on male authority in both public and private spheres. Traditionally, this has manifested in

practices such as male guardianship over women, gender segregation, and women's limited participation in the workforce and public life (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Patriarchal system has relevance in this study because these norms can shape women's choices in higher education as well as the household relations, potentially influencing their preferred fields of study and career trajectories within academia (Alwedini, 2017). In addition, patriarchal values also affect the dynamics within higher education institutions, including decision-making processes, leadership roles, and interactions between male and female colleagues and students (Aldossari and Calvard, 2021). Therefore, understanding the way that patriarchal norms create barriers to gender equality in higher education can provide insights into the specific challenges women face in advancing their careers and achieving leadership positions in Saudi universities.

As cultural practices within patriarchal societies are similar across national contexts to a certain degree in terms of gendered pattern that generate gender roles, stereotypes in social life including workplaces. In workplaces, the power of culture is translated into cultural practices that shape the dynamics of work processes and social relations (Stuart and Donaghue, 2012). Cultural practices such as limited interaction with male colleagues, gender segregation, and gender roles have introduced challenges for women when it comes to advancing their career in Arab societies. However, more conservative collectivist norms that are generated by tribal values in Arabian Gulf countries particular Saudi Arabia have increased the obstacles against women's careers. Therefore, Saudi Arabia as an Arabic and Islamic country is conforming to a patriarchal and collectivist value that affect women career in many levels. It seems that the category of Saudi traditional customs and norms appear as an important category than other categories of difference in shaping women's career in HE due to its power to generate shared behaviours, beliefs and values in such societies and therefore, shaping the gender regimes also in the workplace, In addition, culture has the power in forming gender relations, gender roles, and expectations that set women as homemakers, mothers and wives. Therefore, it is important to also study gender dynamics in the household and how these influence women's working lives, as discussed later in this thesis.

The traditional customs and norms, deeply ingrained in patriarchal and collectivist values, significantly shape the work environment in Saudi higher education institutions. This includes practices like gender segregation and limited interaction with male colleagues, which can create challenges for women in networking, collaboration, and accessing opportunities equivalent to their male counterparts (Alkhaled, 2021). Moreover, the cultural framing of women primarily as homemakers, mothers, and wives affects how their professional roles and aspirations are perceived and supported (Alobaid et al., 2020). This could impact women's career progression in higher education, as societal expectations may influence their career choices, opportunities for advancement, and the balance between work and personal life. It justifies the emphasis on patriarchal systems as a central theoretical framework in this study.

Islam and its cultural values shape the society in Arab countries in which women grew and thrive. A set of social behaviours in which society's members usually act in accordance with it, as guidelines that influence the way they interact in both the wider society and in institutions. The national culture of Arab societies including Saudi Arabia is such that they are characterised as masculine and possessing collectivist values shaped by major tribes that have control over traditional practises and believes in their society (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Gender roles are strictly conformed that impacted women's career from the dissection to join the labour market to the work processes and daily interactions among workers in the workplace. Women are subject to gender stereotypes and face grater challenges in the workplace, especially as they move up the career ladder (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Women in Arab societies face many challenges because of the shared social knowledge that promotes normative powers which emphasise beliefs, values and behaviours.

However, studies on women employment in the Arab context fail to capture the complex structured powers which impact women's career. While there is a large body of research on intersectionality in western countries, non-western context still lacks such research (Hennekam et al, 2017). The absence of intersectionality research in the Arab world is apparent, as also applicable to the discussion of women's employment and gender equality in the labour market (Hennekam et al, 2017). The gap in the

literature which analysed the complexity of women employment is even wider when it comes to Saudi Arabia (Syed et al., 2018). Few studies have researched the challenges that Saudi women face. Therefore, in the following section, several studies in the Arabic context which adopted intersectionality as a research approach are analysed further.

In an intersectional structure-based study of women's participation in the labour market in Egypt, Barsoum (2019) investigated the intersection of gender with other forms of inequality among middle-class educated women in Cairo. The analysis focused on providing "an understanding of the interplay of women's employment decisions, social policies, labour market conditions, and culture" to shift the debates on women's employment from the focus on cultural norms to focus on the nature of power dynamics to deliver better understanding of the interplay of different forms of inequality (Barsoum, 2019, p. 900). The author is critical of the conclusions drawn from the majority of Arab women's employment studies which argued that national culture is the main factor that contributes to challenges to women's career decisions, outcomes and experiences.

Instead, Barsoum (2019) suggested that studies should focus on the dynamics of such powers and the way they constitute obstacles and pose challenges to work decisions. However, the role of conservative traditional customs on shaping the experience of Arab women in work is acknowledged by this author. These cultural norms believe in the "enactment of patriarchal hegemonic culture and the enactment of culturally defined gender roles at the level of the family" (Barsoum, 2019, p. 910). In this multi-dimensional study, it has been shown that Arabic cultural norms shape and influence women. As a result, gendered work relations appear in the Middle-East, with women being subordinated in the workplace, where the majority of women are excluded from decision making and occupying higher-level positions (Barsoum, 2019). The findings of Barsoum (2019) have relevance for this research as Barsoum emphasised shifting the focus from only cultural norms to the dynamics of power in understanding women's employment challenges. This approach is relevant in the context of Saudi Arabia's higher education sector to explore how power dynamics within educational institutions and societal structures contribute to the challenges faced by women in

advancing their careers. Additionally, Barsoum's (2019) acknowledgment of the influence of traditional customs on Arab women's work experiences shows the significance of considering the intersection of professional and familial roles. In Saudi Arabia, investigating how culturally defined gender roles impact women's opportunities and decisions in higher education is crucial to understanding their career progression challenges, especially in a context where patriarchal norms influence institutional practices and decision-making processes (Elhoushy et al., 2023).

Similarly, the limitation of job choices for women as restricted to certain sectors and job functions considered appropriate for women is based on the cultural beliefs. Gender roles are also generated by such traditions, especially amongst married participants in this study. As the findings show that working married women appear to face more challenges than unmarried women (Barsoum, 2019). This could be seen from the unequal distribution of childcare and household chores between men and women. Women in Saudi Arabia as many other women from developed countries being the main carer of their family have limited opportunities in the labour market and are encouraged, particularly when married and with children, to opt out of the labour market to fulfil their traditional role of bringing up the children and looking after the domestic household needs.

The above argument raises an important question around what does intersectionality alongside a gender critical lens add to understanding gender inequality in the Saudi and Arab context? Keshet et al, (2015) argued that the underrepresentation of Arab females in professional careers is due to cultural values and norms in patriarchal societies. By adopting an intersectional approach, Keshet et al. (2015) aimed to identify the intersectional patterns of gender and ethnicity among the Arab minority in Israel to understand the complexity of health care inequality. Keshet et al. (2015) believed using intersectionality as a research paradigm facilitated the understanding of processes of oppression and privilege, policies, and organisational practices in high skill professions. The findings of Keshet et al. (2015) are of direct relevance to this study, as the emphasis in primary research is on skilled women in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The focus of Keshet et al. (2015) on cultural norms within patriarchal societies can be applied to understand how similar norms in Saudi Arabia influence

the professional landscape in higher education. Exploring how these cultural values impact both the opportunities available to women and their career progression is relevant to investigate the challenges experienced by women in achieving career advancement within higher education in Saudi Arabia, exploring them from an intersectional perspective. Moreover, by adopting an intersectional analysis, this study also explores the complexities of oppression and privilege within the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia, which would encapsulate review of policies and organizational practices which exacerbate inequalities or provide privileges based on gender, ethnicity, marital status and other social categories, thus affecting women's career advancement.

Another useful aspect of the study conducted by Keshet et al. (2015) was the use of mixed method research, which included both surveys (quantitative method) and interviews (qualitative method). The use of mixed methods would obtain drivers and complementary data to support the analysis of the study. The findings indicated that the patriarchy system and collectivist values have an impact on women's career, including their ability to continue to work and advance their career. Cultural beliefs give the priority of marriage and care for families over the ability of females to seek and continue in their jobs, so working in medicine might not be preferred in such societies as it requires relatively higher commitment and dedication relative to other professions. On the contrary, jobs such as teaching, nursing and social working are highly preferred for women because they would not conflict with family's responsibilities, given the less demanding nature of such professions. The preference for certain professions due to their compatibility with the fulfilment of familial responsibilities suggests that similar dynamics may influence women's choices to pursue a career and whether to aim for leadership position or not in higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Intersectionality plays a critical role in highlighting the various barriers Muslim women encounter, particularly as entrepreneurs and business owners. Essers and Benschop (2009) argue that Muslim women face numerous barriers when it comes to establishing a private business. Using an intersectional approach, Essers and Benschop (2009) looked at the construction of gender and ethnicity and the role of

Islam as identity in shaping the experience of migrant women in the Netherlands. Muslim businesswomen have interpreted Islamic laws differently in terms of defining gender relations in both private life and the workplace. The study highlighted how Muslim businesswomen of Moroccan and Turkish origins interpret Islamic laws in varied ways regarding gender relations when working in Netherlands. This variation signifies that religious and cultural norms are not monolithic; rather, they are subject to individual interpretation and application, reflecting personal beliefs, experiences, and contexts, a finding reinforced by Berger et al. (2017). The way these women entrepreneurs integrate their understanding of Islam with their business practices indicates a dynamic interaction between religious/cultural norms and professional life. It shows that norms are adaptable and can be reshaped in different contexts, such as in the realm of entrepreneurship (Essers and Benschop, 2009) relevant in the professional work context such as HE, which traditionally might not align with conventional interpretations of gender roles in Islam. For example, maintaining certain distance and interaction with male clients considered as a proposed strategy by Moroccan businesswoman to avoid negative judgment by the Moroccan community (Essers and Benschop, 2009). To comply with such religious and societal expectations has a negative influence on the ability of female entrepreneurs to successfully expand and grow their business. In the context of the example of Moroccan businesswomen as provided by Essers and Benschop (2009), maintenance of distance and limited interaction with male customers constrains the ability of women to successfully develop a long-lasting relationship with these customers and generate repeat business from a major segment of the target customers. Keeping a distance with males in the workplace seems impossible in the case of female physicians, which is potentially different when it comes to segregated workplaces such as universities. It is quite obvious the social power of some ethnic groups on women experience in the workplace in terms of gender relations and the appropriate jobs for females. The conflict between women's lives, careers and cultural traditions is critical in which it could affect their own marriageability and relationships with family.

In the context of the finding of Essers and Benschop (2009), it should be acknowledged that when it comes to the experiences of Muslim/Arab women entrepreneurs, it is essential to recognise the distinction between those who are

immigrants in European countries and those residing in Saudi Arabia. While both groups navigate the interpretation of religious and cultural norms within their entrepreneurial endeavours, immigrant Muslim/Arab women in Europe face the additional complexities of maintaining their cultural traditions amidst the challenges of integration in a foreign context. This juxtaposition reveals a layered understanding of identity, where the physical distance from their countries of origin and the direct encounter with European societal norms further shape their experiences and strategies in business. Thus, the adaptation and interpretation of Islamic laws and cultural practices among these women not only reflect personal beliefs and contexts but also highlight a dynamic engagement with the societal expectations of their host countries. This acknowledgment highlights the importance of considering the distinct socio-cultural landscapes that influence the entrepreneurial journeys of Muslim/Arab women across different settings.

The diverse interpretations of Islamic laws by Muslim businesswomen demonstrate their agency. Agency here refers to the ability of women to interpret and apply cultural and religious norms in a way that suits their individual beliefs and professional contexts. This shows that women are not just passive recipients of cultural norms but active agents in shaping and negotiating these norms. The findings of Essers and Benschop, (2009) exemplify intersectionality by exploring how the identities of being a woman, a Muslim, and a migrant intersect and influence the experiences of these entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. This intersectionality framework helps to understand the complexity of their experiences, which are not just about gender or religion alone, but about how these identities interplay and impact their business practices and professional lives. The sample of Essers and Benschop, (2009) is relevant in the context of this study, as women, Muslims and migrants were all used in recruiting the research participants, explained further in the methodology chapter. Just as the Muslim businesswomen in the study demonstrate agency in interpreting and applying Islamic laws to suit their professional contexts, women in Saudi academia may similarly navigate cultural and religious norms. They may develop strategies to balance societal expectations with professional aspirations, thus actively shaping their roles within the higher education system. The intersectional approach used in the study, examining how being a woman, a Muslim, and a migrant shapes experiences, can be used to draw parallels for higher education sector/ academic

profession in Saudi Arabia. Here, the intersectionality may involve examining how being a woman, possibly of different socio-economic status, tribal affiliation, or even international background (non-Saudi), single or married, impacts experiences in academia, influencing opportunities, challenges, and career progression in the higher education sector.

One of the aspects considered above was the relative distance maintained with male colleagues in the workplace. A recent study by Salem and Yount (2019) reveals that women prefer gender-segregated workplaces in Qatar – a finding which has significant relevance for this research because of existence of gender segregated spaces in Saudi universities. Young Qatari females stated that families' acceptability of working in a mixed-gender environment depends on the characteristics of the female, who is a candidate for the job, the characteristics of male colleagues in the workplace, and the characteristics of the spatial organisation of the potential firm (Salem and Yount, 2019). In such countries, women might be judged on the way of interaction with male colleagues in mixed workplaces, as from a conservative point of view women should seek modesty in their behaviours by limiting interaction with males who are not relatives. Thus, the interplay of these factors is considered as a key motivation for women who prefer gender-segregated work environments in return for protection from male guardian conflict. The power given to the family in GCC, in particular, has shaped the experience of women in the labour market (Salem and Yount, 2019). Many women accept the subordination in the workplace to avoid conflict with tradition and customs that give power to the male guardian to control women's behaviours and choices. The important role of social and religious values including their influence in the workplace is seen to generate gender inequality in social life including the labour market.

The findings of Salem and Yount (2019) indicates a strong role that societal and family expectations play in shaping women's professional choices. In Saudi Arabia, similar societal and familial norms may influence women's career paths and preferences within higher education. Understanding how these norms impact women's choices, such as their willingness to pursue certain academic roles can help to explain the broader dynamics affecting their career advancement in academia. Moreover, the preference for gender-segregated environments as a strategy to avoid conflict with

traditional customs suggests that similar dynamics possibly exist in Saudi universities. The existence of gender-segregated spaces in Saudi higher education institutions could be understood not only as a reflection of religious and cultural values but also as a strategic response by women to navigate these norms while pursuing their professional and academic goals. This aspect is critical in understanding the complexities of women's experiences in the Saudi academic sector and the institutional structures that may both support and limit their career progression.

Syed et al. (2018) investigated gender equality in employment in Saudi Arabia from a multi-relational perspective. Their analysis involved the use of Syed and Özbilgin's (2009) relational framework that aims to explain factors that influence gender equality in three levels: macro-societal, meso-organisational, and micro-individual level. Syed et al. (2018) argued that applying multi-level analysis would help to capture the complexity of the interplay of factors from different levels that interact to affect gender equality among workers in paid employment. Syed et al. (2018) conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with 21 Saudi female workers to enable explanation of challenges and key issues of equal opportunities in the Saudi labour market. Their findings indicate that local cultural traditions have a major impact on women's equal opportunities. For example, at the macro level, nepotism "Wasta" is considered the main barrier toward equal opportunities in the workplace (Abalkhail, and Allan, 2016), where 9 out of 10 male workers are recommended for a job regardless of their qualifications (Syed et al., 2018). The relevance of Syed et al.'s (2018) study to this research on gender equality in Saudi Arabian higher education is based on its multi-level analysis of workplace dynamics. Specifically, the concept of "Wasta" is crucial to understand the gender inequalities in professional environments, including in HE. In Saudi Arabia, where Wasta plays a significant role in employment practices, its inclusion in this this research will provide insights into how systemic and cultural practices impact women's career advancement in academia. By exploring how Wasta influences hiring and promotion within universities, this study will gain a better understanding into the barriers to gender equality and identify strategies to foster a more equitable academic environment.

At the micro-level, the findings illustrate the intersection of gender and social class as gender equality has varied according to the individual's circumstances. Since women's mobility is restricted by their male guardian, women from lower financial status struggle more than women from wealthier families, the latter were able to provide a private car and driver for commuting. It seems that most of these factors are strongly linked to the traditions and customs of conservative culture, not religion. However, it is quite difficult to distinguish between cultural norms and religious practices, the misconception has led to "gender discriminatory interpretation of Islamic sharia" that used against women in Saudi Arabia and Islamic societies (Syed et al., 2018, p. 169). In addition, the term "social acceptance" is the most suitable to describe the conservative traditional factors that privilege men over women in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the power of what is considered socially acceptable influences different factors in the societal, organisational and individual level hinder gender equality at the workplace.

From the analysis of the literature of intersectionality in the Arabic context, we can say that studies tend to use intersectionality as a broad approach to facilitate the understanding of complex reality, including gender inequalities. Also, in most studies, the intersectional analysis did not apply as the centre of an enquiry but rather intersectionality inspired the study of the interplay of powers and factors that create inequality in the workplace against women. Patriarchal systems theory remains relevant alongside intersectionality in analysing gender dynamics within the Arabic context, particularly due to its focus on systemic structures that perpetuate gender inequalities. Its relevance lies in providing a foundational understanding of the societal and familial hierarchies which shape women's experiences, serving as a critical lens through which the intersecting factors of gender, ethnicity, and class can be further understood within highly patriarchal and collectivist societies. Although intersectionality has been used differently in terms of theory among different studies, the practical application of intersectionality is considered ambiguous. The uncertainty of the use of intersectional studies in the Arabic context might be due to the lack of contribution from Arab scholars in applying intersectionality in highly patriarchal and collectivist societies and therefore demands more empirical application. Applying intersectionality to the study of women in Saudi HE is the purpose of this study. Moreover, traditional customs in Saudi Arabia limit women's aspirations

regarding their career and hinder working women from progression in their careers. The patriarchal beliefs in Arabic societies are conforming to the traditional customs in Saudi Arabia but in a more complicated way. The concept of guardianship “Wali” and lack of mobility and professional relationship are all the factors that challenge women in terms of job choice and career advancement and promote gender inequality at the workplace will be discussed next.

3.2 Challenges preventing women from work advancement in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

Issues of working women in the developed countries differ from the issues of working women in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, especially in Saudi Arabia. For example, in Saudi Arabia, there is a large difference between males and females when it comes to specialisation in higher education and access to leadership positions. Also, the challenges to work advancement for women in the public sector are significant.

Despite the increasing research on women in the workplace, the study of women in higher education remains an under-researched area. This has resulted in a gap in the literature of women employment in higher education that take into consideration the complex social, cultural, religious and institutional challenges encountered by women despite their progression in higher education (Al-Asfour et al,2017; Alsubaie, and Jones, 2017). Therefore, this research would focus generally on women in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia. The factors that hinder women from work advancement in public universities will be discussed in details next.

3.2.1 Guardianship

Despite the social, political, economic improvements of women status in Saudi Arabia, international criticisms raised by the media and activists remain fierce, as the international media continues to highlight gender inequality and lack of women’s rights in Saudi Arabia as a key factor which constrains the ability of women to achieve career progression (Alsubaie, and Jones, 2017). One of the main criticisms is the policy of guardianship (Wali) according to which every woman has to obtain male guardian’s permission (mainly her father or husband but sometimes even her brother

and son) for traveling, working, receiving medical treatment and permits (Alsubaie, and Jones, 2017; Salem and Yount, 2019). This would create challenges for women who aspire to pursue a career, as they need to gain a male guardian's permission for accessing education and seeking a job. In the workplace too, women are faced with a range of laws, regulations and social practices in the daily work practices, which require them to move with freedom (Acker, 2006), posing a challenge for women to work.

Guardianship would probably pose many challenges against women working in public universities in Saudi Arabia. The struggle starts with obtaining permission to study a postgraduate degree as part of career advancement. Also, lack of mobility, for example, going in fieldwork and attending conferences in other universities in the country would require male guardian's permission. However, travelling abroad for working purposes would require women to obtain written permission from a male's guardian as approval to be presented at the airport upon travelling (Al Alhareth et al., 2015a). This limited geographical mobility due to societal values has a negative impact on the ability of women to secure jobs and achieve progression in their career. Moreover, lack of mobility would restrict women in certain positions and would limit opportunities of learning and career development (Al Alhareth et al, 2015b).

As gaining promotion would increase work-related responsibilities and therefore, the demand for more freedom of mobility, which might not be favourable in such a patriarchal society. Moreover, mobility and travel restrictions conflict with the requirements of working in higher education institutions, as academics have to show their contribution to the relevant field and gain postgraduate degrees. As globalisation has resulted in the increased flow of goods, services, knowledge and information across borders, universities worldwide have also aimed to exploit the opportunities presented by globalisation and greater connectedness of the global economy (Mok et al., 2020). This includes the emphasis on encouraging greater flow of students from their university to other universities and vice versa (promoting exchange programmes), as well as encouraging their own faculty members to pursue opportunities in other countries – whether in universities, private sector or research organisations (Goodwin, 2020). It helps to improve the credentials and reputation of universities. Such a trend means if women in higher education in Saudi Arabia are to make the most of the opportunities presented in their industry to maximise their

professional, personal and intellectual development, they must be able to travel nationally and internationally.

However, opportunities to study for a postgraduate degree in Saudi Arabia are rare, therefore the Saudi government have offered many places for researchers (both male and female) to study abroad. Here, the need for travel has emerged again to pursue a successful career in higher education. Since women did not have the chance to study for postgraduate degrees in many majors in Saudi universities until “the door was opened for the first woman to gain a Master’s degree in archaeology in 2009”, few female researchers had to study abroad with the permission and company of a male guardian (Al-Sudairy 2017 cited in Alsubaie, and Jones, 2017). This makes the development of women’s employment in higher education highly challenging at all levels.

The finding is reinforced by Abalkhail (2017) who conducted interviews with females employed in managerial roles in two Saudi universities. Abalkhail (2017) reported that although women in managerial and leadership roles are encouraged by their seniors and the government to take the opportunities and travel abroad to attend training courses and conferences or even pursue an advanced degree, this is entirely premised on their ability to secure permission from the male guardian in their family. If the guardian does not grant permission to their daughter or wife, it is not possible for the woman to travel. It demonstrates the critical role of guardianship and how lack of conducive environment for women due to guardian norms creates significant barriers for women, constraining their ability to make the most of the opportunities available to further their career. The authority of male guardians remains an important factor in influencing the female career advancement, as permission of the male guardian is needed as part of the organisational policy, if women are to benefit from career mobility.

The role of guardianship in serving as a barrier when it comes to career advancement of women can also be explained with reference to the notion of power within organisations. Religion has an important role in influencing how power is perceived within public and private sector organisations in Saudi Arabia and indeed across the other Muslim countries (Ahmad, 2001). Abalkhail (2017) in the study on women in the leadership roles in highest education sector in Saudi Arabia conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 females in managerial and leadership roles across two

universities in Saudi Arabia. Abalkhail (2017) observed through the interview findings the evidence that power relations within higher education sector in Saudi Arabia was connected to the notion of 'Qiwama' – a concept mentioned in Quran as guiding the relationship between women and men. Although Qiwama is interpreted differently by various religious scholars (Mashhour, 2005), it is widely acknowledged to imply that God has put a male in a privileged position by granting them superior physical and intellectual capabilities compared to their female counterparts. Therefore, it is only reasonable that a male should act as a guardian of females in their family, taking the guardianship and custody rights over the female family members including daughters, wives, mothers and sisters.

Abalkhail (2017) found through the interviews that women in leadership roles across the two universities in Saudi Arabia felt the existence of Qiwama in their households and in the workplace. Male colleagues in university consider that they have a natural right to act as guardians and “controllers of women” (Abalkhail, 2017, p. 173). When male colleagues possess such an attitude and considering that majority of faculty in higher education in Saudi Arabia continue to be male, it becomes challenging for women (either already in managerial roles or those women aspiring to seek career progression) to deal with their male colleagues, if men consider themselves as superior, particularly in their intellectual capabilities. Abalkhail (2017) reported that females in managerial positions view their male colleagues as possessing an incorrect understanding of Qiwama. One interviewee as reported in Abalkhail (2017) highlighted the misconception among her male colleagues due to their misunderstanding of what Qiwama implies in Quran. The interviewee highlighted that according to Quran, men are responsible for women if they spend on them. In a work environment, as men do not spend on women, therefore they should not consider themselves as male guardians and superior.

Guardianship rules also manifest themselves and translate into a challenge for women in HE through restrictions on their mobility. Historically, women needed the permission of their male guardian to travel outside the country. This has served as a direct constraint for female students and scholars wishing to pursue studies abroad, attend international conferences, or engage in academic collaborations (Alasmari and Zhang, 2019). This limitation hinders their career growth and ability to gain greater exposure, especially when compared to their male counterparts. Mobility-related restrictions also led to a challenge in that women in HE found it difficult to secure job

opportunities and roles outside their own city/ region. David et al. (2017) noted that women in HE in Saudi Arabia looking to supplement their education with internships or job opportunities have faced restrictions, as they historically required guardian approval to accept a job. This restricted their practical experience and networking opportunities, crucial for academic and career growth. In addition, apart from the formal restrictions, the guardianship system by its very nature promoted an environment where women might feel obligated to self-censor or limit their ambitions due to societal or familial pressure (Alasmari and Zhang, 2019). The presence of the system could make women less likely to pursue certain opportunities or voice their opinions in academic settings.

3.2.2 Tribal values that hinder women from work advancement

In the social structure of families in Gulf countries, tribal values are one of the fundamental aspects of society (Maisel, 2018). Saudi Arabia is no exception, where social life is organised around the tribe as an extended family that have particular traditional customs and practices which influence the lifestyle and even the occupation of its members (Maisel, 2018). Tribalism refers to the hierarchical structure comprising of a large group which is mainly identified through the name of their tribe, along with the tendency of strong traditions, customs and patriarchal agreements to hold meaning (Maisel, 2014).

Tribal values can be likened to the caste or class system with implications for social relations of women. The distinction between tribal and non-tribal men and women is premised upon their extent of tribal affiliation. Tribal men and women often have strong ties to their tribal heritage, which influences their social status, family connections, and sometimes their political influence. Tribes have traditional codes of honour and may have more conservative views, particularly regarding gender roles and family honour. In contrast, non-tribal men and women do not have such strong associations with their tribes (Abalkhail and Allan, 2015). The implications of tribal values for social relations are reflected in the example that a tribal woman is not permitted to marry a non-tribal man, although a tribal man can marry a non-tribal woman (Aldossari and Calvard, 2021). As with the societal expectations based on tribal values on who a tribal woman can marry, tribal values also hold sway when it comes to the choice of career and what are the suitable or unsuitable occupations for

men and women (Koburtay et al., 2022). It is within such an intricate hierarchical structure that patriarchal attitude towards women in Saudi Arabia is ingrained within social norms and values. This viewpoint is supported by De Boer and Kranov (2017), who stated that a firm or an organisation (such as a university or college) is a microcosm of the broader society in which such an organisation functions. Therefore, the social structure and values prevalent in the society are widely held and ingrained in the practices as well as policies of each organisation.

The gender roles and privileged position held by the family in Saudi Arabian culture is impacted by the religious values as well as patriarchal ideologies (Abalkhail and Allan, 2015). Based on Hofstede's dimensions of national culture, Saudi Arabian culture is considered highly collectivist (low on individualism), possessing high power distance (it is generally accepted and expected in society that power will be distributed unequally) and low from the standpoint of gender equality (Obeidat et al., 2012). The traditional values and social structures in Saudi Arabia have a strong impact on creation of the perception regarding what is deemed a suitable gender division within the public sphere (Aldossari and Calvard, 2021).

Bourdieu's viewpoint on symbolism is relevant in this context, as Bourdieu asserted that symbolic actions are taken against a particular group of people in society (e.g. women) through the prevalent thoughts and perception, which influence the action (Bebbington, 2007). The symbolic action also involves consideration of what the members of society perceive to be legitimate and natural actions. Bourdieu also opined that patriarchal order is based on achieving an objective agreement and consensus on the sense of gender relations and societal practices (Allard, 2005).

Syed et al. (2018) state that traditional customs have created informal practices and laws supported by the Bedouin culture and tribal values. Tribal values such as protecting the reputation of the family that would isolate working women from participating in male-dominated fields in particular higher education (Al Alhareth et al, 2015b). Females are considered as the honour of the family, thus the fear of sexual harassment in the workplace is one of the fundamental challenges that brings the issue of reputational concerns for families (Barsoum, 2004). As Joseph (1996) argues in the Arab societies, the social patriarchal values give the priority for men over women in terms of education, paid employment and economic independence. That resulted in a male-demented society that complicated women participation in political, economic

and social spheres by subjecting women to several coded social traditional norms (Omair, 2008). It seems that the power of tribal values has greater power over women than men in patriarchal societies and the workplace in particular.

The perfect image of women in Saudi tribal societies involves caring for the family, including domestic work instead of focusing on the career and self-development (Al Alhareth et al, 2015a). Once in the workplace, women should represent the family's name and seek modesty in behaviours and interaction with male colleagues by maintaining certain distance and limited communication that would probably result in limited professional networking. The lack of professional relationships is one factor that negatively affects the work advancement of women including their ability to start and successfully run their own businesses, as formal networking is considered a source of support and information, as well as important to expand one's professional network (Abalkhail, and Allan, 2015). Maisel (2018) argues that despite the changing socio-economic environment including the viewpoint on working women in the Arab world, the majority of lower- and medium-class families in the Gulf Countries are highly engaged with tribal values regarding family and interaction. Thereby, the majority of women are placed in low and medium managerial positions in higher education and therefore, possess limited learning resources, authority, and decision-making. This is the case of female workers in Saudi public universities: they work under the management of male colleagues who receive detailed reports from female co-workers of work-related tasks to be approved and issued (Denman and Hilal, 2011).

The patriarchal structure of traditional tribal values has created accepted code of behaviours that place women in passive roles and facilitate the subordination of females at public universities in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it is the invisible power of tribal values that constrain women's development but "... not Islam as such that places women in these roles, but rather the way that patriarchal societies interpret Islam to support their positions regarding what is and what is not an acceptable behaviour for women". (Al-Ahmadi, 2011).

Despite the clear impact of patriarchal structure and traditional values on career advancement prospects of Saudi women, non-Saudi women (noncitizen) may not be subjected to the Saudi conservative values and tribal beliefs of the accepted behaviours of females at the workplace, even if they come from other Arabic and

Muslim societies. Statistic from the Saudi Higher Education (2019) statistics centre shows that the percentage of Saudi female faculty members was higher at the position of lecturers (97.5%) and in the rank of Assistant Lecturer (62%) in comparison to non-citizens. In contrast, the percentage of non-Saudi female members was higher than Saudi females in each of the rank of assistant professor and associate professor, and professor with percentages of 66.8%, 61.3%, and 54.5%, respectively. This illustrates that the higher the rank, the lower the number of Saudi female in Saudi universities. This evidence supports the argument presented in this study that women face a number of challenges in successfully developing and advancing their career in higher education in Saudi Arabia and that understanding these challenges requires an intersectional sensitivity whereby not only gender but also the nationality needs to be taken into consideration.

Hakim (2022) in a recent study on advancement and subordination of women academics in higher education in Saudi Arabia conducted interviews with women employed in higher education. A noteworthy finding was that for women who chose to seek a career as an academic in the university in Saudi Arabia, they were already challenging the social norms and tribal values because the university sector is perceived to have a more liberal and open environment compared to working in alternative roles such as in a training college or as a teacher trainer which were considered more socially acceptable. It suggests that for women who choose to pursue a career as academics or hold other positions of responsibility (e.g. managerial or leadership roles) within universities in Saudi Arabia, it is reflective of a degree of non-conformance to the prevailing patriarchal values and norms.

Hakim (2022) also found through the interviews that the experiences of women in the higher education were such that the job roles they could pursue were influenced by the tribal position of their family. The patriarchal perception in society that women must be subservient and subordinate to their male counterparts along with the persistence of tribal values presents a significant challenge. This is because it makes it difficult for a vast majority of women to pursue qualifications (such as undergraduate and postgraduate qualification) in the first place, if they are to seek a position as a lecturer or another managerial role in higher education sector. If the family tribal values are such that the family is not permissive of the role and career in a university environment, it means there are fewer proportion of women in Saudi Arabia who would consider to pursue career in higher education in the first place. This

is not only problematic for the women who are unable to realise their potential and aspiration to work in a position of responsibility in academia because they cannot realise their potential; it also entails that Saudi Arabia is not making the most of its available human resources and human capital to fulfil the ambitions outlined in Vision 2030 regarding economic diversification, social and environmental progress.

Patriarchal tribal values also mean that women are less likely to aspire to hold positions of greater responsibility within higher education. As holding a leadership role and achieving career advancement means a woman is expected to be more visible, engaging with various stakeholders (both internal stakeholders such as the male and female colleagues, students and external stakeholders such as policymakers/government), the additional responsibility and the nature of the duties involved are incompatible with the patriarchal values (Aldossari and Calvard, 2021). Higher education sector in Saudi Arabia is deeply immersed in a patriarchal viewpoint, which partly explains why women are not included when it comes to making any important decisions.

Hakim (2022) commented on the increase in women in higher education as a trend which does not necessarily mean that tribal and patriarchal values have become less influential within the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia over time or that there is progress towards gender equity. Instead, the rise in number of female members of the academic faculty across universities in Saudi Arabia is actually attributed to the limited opportunities for these highly qualified and educated women within other industry sectors outside education.

The analysis in this section has clearly indicated by referring to the recent literature that existence of tribal values means most women find it challenging to gain sufficient qualifications and secure a career in higher education in the workplace due to incompatibility of such a career with the patriarchal values, especially when it comes to working in a university environment due to its perception as an open culture and environment.

However, for the Saudi women who do seek to work in higher education, the challenge associated with tribal values persists in terms of barrier to career progression: working in a position of responsibility involves interaction with various stakeholders on a regular basis. This is incompatible with the patriarchal values prevalent among most tribes in Saudi Arabia (Adham, 2022). In the words of Bourdieu, patriarchal order is

premised upon achieving an objective agreement and consensus on the sense of gender relations and societal practices. The existing consensus within most tribes remains that women should not hold a position in higher education (or any other industry) where they would be put in a position to frequently engage with male counterparts and would be required to travel.

3.3 Family and work conflict

Saudi women attitudes toward educational and professional development have changed. Women became ambitious in achieving positive employment experience (Abdalla, 2014). Whilst many other women tend to position themselves within the family, as care for the family has the priority. Although women who prefer to dedicate their time to the family might be aware of the importance of educational and occupational opportunities, they might not be prepared to sacrifice the security of their home life and social beliefs. Social beliefs that support the importance of the role of women within the home environment as the main carer of housework and children (Abdalla, 2014). Moreover, the social values include a belief that home is the best place for women to be protected from the conflicts of work and family responsibilities. These beliefs resulted in male-dominated originations and gendered hierarchies and practise at the workplace (Al-Asfour et al, 2017).

For example, there are fewer training and development opportunities for women in management in public spheres that include Saudi universities. Discriminatory policies and processes exist in organisations, offering minimum support for workers with children, signifying a lack of regard to the needs of women. In addition, there are doubts of women's capability of managing, ability to make appropriate decisions and compete with their male counterparts (Al-Asfour et al, 2017). These doubts lead to women questioning their abilities in managing work-life balance and management of responsibilities at home and the workplace because even if women choose to work, it should not come at the expense of family life.

Patriarchal values and social norms also mean that women feel obliged to put their family (husband and children) first (Havril, 2018). It means their career becomes secondary to their family needs. When women in higher education industry are required to commit greater hours and the need for work-related travel, the potential detrimental impact of work responsibilities on the ability of women to fulfil their

family responsibilities means many women are reluctant to accept the additional workload which comes with the career promotion (Myers and Griffin, 2019). It demonstrates that the conflict between family and work roles and the need for women to prioritise their family over work has and will continue to remain an important challenge which eventually serves as a barrier to their career advancement.

On the other hand, the belief that males hold financial responsibility toward their families has facilitated segregated workplaces and gendered stereotypes that hinder women's career and advancement in higher education universities as part of the official buildings owned by the Government in Saudi Arabia (Al-Asfour et al, 2017). However, there is a significant shift in the policy and attitudes towards the importance of women education and participation in higher positions in the country supported by the royal government (Alyami, 2016; Elamin and Omair, 2010).

The challenges which prevent women from achieving career growth in HE are particularly pronounced in case of divorced women, illustrating the significance of marital status as part of intersectional analysis in this study. Divorced women in Saudi Arabia face a unique set of challenges stemming from a combination of societal norms, cultural expectations, and professional demand associated with a demanding profession such as HE. One distinct challenge experienced by divorced women is the sole responsibility for fulfilment of household and childcare responsibilities. Divorced women typically shoulder the primary responsibility for taking care of their children and managing household tasks (Alsharif, 2018). In a society where familial responsibilities are traditionally assigned to women, divorced women may find themselves stretched thin between their roles as mothers and professionals (Hamdan, 2017). Without the support of a spouse or partner, they usually have to manage both their professional duties and the demands of raising children, which can be especially challenging when there are emergencies or overlapping responsibilities (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). A related challenge experienced by divorced women is around social stigma and resultant professional bias. Saudi Arabia's conservative society places a high value on family and marital stability. Consequently, divorced women might face social scrutiny, which can manifest in the workplace as biases or assumptions about their capabilities and commitment. The stigma attached to divorce might lead to questions about their character, reliability, or even suitability for leadership roles within HE institutions. This can hinder career advancement or result in unequal treatment.

Another challenge which is more pronounced for divorced women is around the need to balance career growth with societal expectations. Divorced women face additional hurdles when it comes to seeking continued professional development opportunities. The cultural norm of women traveling with a male guardian can become even more complex for divorced women, potentially limiting their ability to attend conferences, seminars, or further studies abroad (Hodges, 2017). This constraint adversely impacts their professional growth, networking opportunities, and their overall contributions to the academic community.

3.4 Universities as gendered organisations

All the traditional norms and customs discussed in the previous sections that pose challenges against women career and advancement have led to gender inequality by creating spatial segregation and generating gendered stereotypes and practices in the workplace.

Saudi Arabia is considered one of the most gender-segregated countries in the world, where most of the public buildings including higher education institutions have made a gender-segregated work environment available for their employees (Baki, 2004; Alsubaie, and Jones, 2017). Therefore, in a region where there is occupational segregation and senior management positions are occupied mostly by men, women are likely to continue to face challenges in achieving higher-level positions.

For example, in Saudi universities, the management in the females' section work under the management of the male's section in separated campuses (Denman and Hilal, 2011). As a result, women working for these universities would probably struggle from lack of direct communication with the top management that is located in the men's branch and manages both male and female sections. Although women are separated in places in the female branches of universities, they are not the decision-makers due to the costumes and traditions of the country (Denman and Hilal, 2011). In addition, women's sections decisions have to be reported to the male sections to be issued. Both, the lack of direct communication with the top management and lack of authority would obscure the crucial role and significant input of women working in higher education. Being separated from the senior management would also exclude women from establishing a formal network in Saudi universities. The importance of

formal relationship with key works at Saudi universities would help females to achieve greater managerial advancement by enhancing women's skills, knowledge, credibility (Abalkhail, and Allan, 2015).

Omair (2008) states that the lack of representation of women in senior positions is due to political and social powers in conservative societies, where women are subjected to strict and unwritten cultural norms. In such a patriarchal environment, women accept the status to be subordinated in return for physical protection, financial stability and society's respectability (Kandiyoti, 1988). One of the limitations that hinder women's progress in Saudi universities is the persistence of gender stereotypes, biases in training and promotion opportunities, and the lack of existing female role models (Metcalf, 2008). Despite the equal number of women registered in Saudi universities, the education system still sustains gender stereotypes directing women into 'appropriate' professional. Gendered organisation studies have shown that some practices and process in institutions produce gender and class inequalities. In gender-segregated institutions in Saudi Arabia, there are limited funds for skills development for women since training budgets were allocated to men, especially in career development training (Metcalf, 2006), which is directly associated with acquisition of skills required to advance one's career.

Acker (2006; 1990) argues that gendered occupational structures could cause inequalities in organisations hierarchies and limit women's opportunities. Some evidence has shown that occupational structures are strongly gendered in the Middle East, where the majority of women concentrated in health (normally nurses), education and social care. The experience of female employment in higher education in Saudi Arabia is complicated by many structural powers that would result in hindering women's work advancement or having equal career advancement opportunities.

Gender segregation remains a norm in higher education institutions such as universities in Saudi Arabia whereby the workplace is segregated physically: women have separate offices compared to their male colleagues. The segregation is based on religious customs and cultural/ tribal values which focus on preservation of women's morality and modesty (Alsubaie, and Jones, 2017). Women employed in Saudi universities as interviewed by Abalkhail (2017) reported that although female staff work in separate offices/ branches, they still do not have independence and are not

empowered to take decisions. Women continue to be under the authority of male supervisors and are not put in a position of responsibility where they are required to make a decision. In an environment where female staff at universities know they would not be given an opportunity to take responsibility, it limits their ambitions (Alasmari, 2020). Eventually, women are not able to develop important skills such as communication and interpersonal skills, ability to work effectively, lead and deliver under pressure, problem-solving and resource management (Alsubhi et al., 2018). It shows that by virtue of their gender, women experience a challenge in that their career advancement prospects are restricted because they are not given sufficient opportunities to take further responsibility.

A related challenge associated with the gendered organisations is the need for women in higher education to pay specific attention to the way they interact and communicate with male staff. Varshney (2019) found that female staff at universities have to be particularly mindful of the way they talk to and communicate with their male counterparts. The reason being that if they are misinterpreted, it results in creation of rumours and gossiping, which can have a detrimental impact on the reputation of the female involved, their career and family name. In such an environment where women have to pay excessive attention to how they would be perceived and their style of communication, it entails that women will not be comfortable in expressing themselves openly and aiming to realise their true potential.

The above-mentioned arguments also make emotional labour a relevant concept in the context of the discussion of challenges experienced by women in HE in Saudi Arabia. Emotional labour is the process of managing the expectations and feelings to fulfil the given emotional requirements (Harris, 2002). Apart from fulfilling the professional requirements of HE, women are also expected to fulfil the societal expectations (Bin Bakr and Ahmed, 2018). Women in Saudi Arabia's HE sector operate within a unique intersection of cultural, societal, and professional norms. They are often expected to navigate their roles not just as educators or researchers, but also as representatives of their gender in a traditionally male-dominated setting. This involves managing and sometimes suppressing personal emotions to present a demeanour that aligns with these diverse expectations, leading to significant emotional labour (Alzaanin, 2021). The requirement to balance the multiple roles translates into emotional labour experienced by women in HE in Saudi Arabia.

Many women in HE in Saudi Arabia are also mothers, daughters, and perhaps caregivers. The need to continuously switch between these roles, ensuring they meet the emotional and practical expectations of each, demands intense emotional labour. For instance, a professor might need to maintain a stern and authoritative manner in a lecture, only to switch to a nurturing and empathetic role at home with her children (Hakiem, 2022). In addition, seeking professional advancement, such as attending international conferences or further studies, might involve confronting societal expectations, particularly if travel or mixed-gender interactions are involved. The emotional labour is illustrated through the need to manage one's aspirations and potential societal or familial disapproval, and in some cases, even seeking necessary permissions or accommodations.

Gender segregation witnessed in the higher education industry in Saudi Arabia (and indeed in almost every other industry) has a detrimental impact for women. This segregation of genders in the workplace is undertaken so as to minimise the likelihood of sexual harassment in the workplace (Alkhatnai, 2021). Nevertheless, it limits the opportunities for women, including the access to training and development programmes. The lack of training designed to increase the empowerment, participation and promotion of women in leadership and management roles is confirmed by Alwedinani (2017). They reported that although universities in Saudi Arabia have embraced formally structured training programmes to improve the technical and non-technical (including soft) skills of their staff/ faculty and that training focuses on team-building and management responsibilities, these training programmes are not designed from the perspective of women and the challenges experienced by women staff. Therefore, training remains ineffective as a tool in supporting the female staff at universities to overcome the personal and professional challenges they face. It also highlights the shortcoming of the training programmes in their ability to assist women to advance their careers.

Gender inequality in the workplace has been widely examined within the context of developed countries; however, few have investigated women employment in the Middle East. There is a need for further research on women employment in the specific context of Saudi Arabia because the structural barriers that limit women's career development are embedded in cultural practices to define gender roles in very particular ways. The significance of patriarchy and intersectional theories in the study of women's career advancement in Saudi Arabian higher education is clear. These

theories provided a lens to examine how various forms of identity and social categorisations, such as gender, ethnicity, class, tribal affiliation, marital status and location intersect to shape individual experiences of women in Saudi Arabia. These intersecting identities can significantly influence the experiences and challenges faced by women in academia. For example, tribal women may encounter different societal expectations and barriers compared to their non-tribal counterparts, affecting their academic and career progression. Women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds or regions within Saudi Arabia may also face unique challenges or have distinct opportunities. Acknowledging and understanding these varied intersectional identities is essential for a comprehensive analysis of women's experiences in Saudi Arabian higher education. By employing intersectionality, the study can therefore uncover the multidimensional and previously under-explored dynamics which influence women's opportunities, challenges, and experiences within academia. This approach ensures a more inclusive understanding of the barriers and facilitators to career progression, enabling the development of targeted strategies to promote gender equity and empowerment in Saudi higher education.

3.5 Summary of the challenges preventing women from work advancement

The findings of the literature illustrate that there are four key challenges faced by women in higher education when it comes to their ability to advance and progress their career. These included: (1) guardianship and how it limits the ability of women to improve their intellectual capabilities through reduced options and mobility, (2) patriarchy and tribal values, (3) family and work conflict resulting in the tendency of women to prioritise family needs over their work commitments, and (4) gendered organisations such as universities. Each of these challenges are interconnected and have a combined effect of presenting the challenges to women in higher education which are unique to women and not experienced by their male colleagues. As a result, even where women have superior qualifications and intellectual capabilities, they are not able to progress and advance their career to the same extent as their male colleagues.

The comprehensive review of the literature on barriers to women's development in Saudi Arabian higher education reinforced the significance of intersectional analysis, especially focusing on gender, occupational position, nationality, and marital status. Intersectionality based on gender and occupational position is crucial. Studies highlighted systemic gender biases and stereotypes which limit women into certain 'appropriate' roles and constrain their advancement to senior positions. This is exacerbated by the patriarchal nature of Saudi society, where traditional norms and customs often position women in subordinate roles. An intersectional analysis revealed how these gender biases intersect with professional hierarchies, restricting women's access to leadership roles and influencing their career trajectories within academia. Secondly, the intersection of nationality and marital status helped to uncover the experiences of Saudi women, especially those who are divorced, whose experiences are quite distinct relative to their expatriate counterparts. Divorced Saudi women face additional societal scrutiny and challenges in balancing professional and familial responsibilities, which can significantly impact their career progression. These complex layers of identity illustrate the need for an intersectional approach to fully understand and address the multifaceted barriers women face in Saudi higher education, ensuring strategies are inclusive and tailored to their diverse needs.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter explains the research methodology used in this thesis as part of investigation of the experiences of women with regard to work advancement in higher education institutions. The structure of this chapter is as follows: it begins by providing a brief overview of the research design followed by discussion of philosophical assumptions underlying the thesis. The research philosophy behind this inquiry is constructionism, which would provide more understanding of social and behavioural phenomenon and provide justifications for the use of qualitative research methods (Schwandt, 2003).

The methods section details the research context, qualitative research and semi structured interviews undertaken in this study. The choice of semi-structured interviews will help the researcher to analyse the lived experience of women in the workplace through intersection of traditional customs, gender norms and nationality, in order to understand the inequity and inaccessibility encountered by women at Saudi universities (Alghamdi, 2015). Around 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with Saudi and non-Saudi female workers in different administrative and academic grades across ten public universities to ensure a diverse sample. Next, the sampling technique and access to interviewees is explained followed by the discussion of interview process and ethical considerations taken into account before and during the process of data collection. Analytical approach, techniques and procedure are then explained, use of thematic analysis technique justified and trustworthiness in data collection and analysis is considered. Finally, the limitations of the methodology chapter are detailed and critical reflection on the chapter is provided.

4.1 Overview of research design

The findings of this research are based on data collected from 30 qualitative semi-structured interviews undertaken with the members of higher education institutions in the public universities in Saudi Arabia. The breakdown of research participants by nationality is provided in the table below. A total of 22 out of thirty interviewees were

Saudi participants, and remaining eight participants were non-Saudi from different backgrounds as Egyptians, Filipino, Indian, Jordanian, Jordanian/American, Sudanese, and Yemeni. The findings are corroborated with reference to the literature on intersectional perspective, processes and practices which constrain women from achieving career development. Snowball sampling was used to gain access to and collect data from those employed in Saudi higher education institutions. Snowball sampling was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to use her judgment and experience to select the most relevant research participants already known to her that would help investigate the experiences of women with regard to work advancement in higher education institutions. In addition, access to these participants already known to the researcher made it possible to access their colleagues to increase the sample size, highlighting the usefulness of snowball sampling when it comes to collecting data from the research population which is difficult to access (Hay, 2007).

Nationality	Number
Saudi	22
Egyptian	2
Filipino	1
Indian	1
Jordanian/American	1
Jordanian	1
Sudanese	1
Yemeni	1
Total number of participants	30

Table 1: Research sample demographics

The emphasis of this thesis is on understanding and critically analysing the lived experienced of women in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia when it comes to career progression from an intersectional perspective. To fulfil this, the research

employed social constructivism and qualitative research as explained in the following sections.

4.2 Philosophical assumptions

A critical component of research is to provide a theoretical perspective which serves as a foundation for the entire project, including the process used to collect and analyse the data (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012). Ontological and epistemological perspectives are key components of this and are important aspects of the research philosophy because they are a source of understanding the nature of knowledge and the nature of reality respectively (Vogl et al., 2019). Epistemology is concerned with the scope and nature of knowledge, answering the specific questions such as what is knowledge? How is it acquired? And to what extent can a particular subject or entity be known? (Bates and Jenkins, 2007). Epistemology in the context of social constructivism is grounded in the viewpoint that human beings construct knowledge through their interactions with one another and the wider society in which they live. Knowledge is not seen as something discovered but is constructed through social interactions and processes (Guyon et al., 2018). It suggests that the knowledge is subjective and contingent on individual contexts as well as experiences of the individual in question. Ontology is concerned with the with questions around what entities exist and can be said to exist, and how such entities can be related within a social hierarchy, focusing on the nature of reality (Lucas, 2014). Ontology in social constructivism suggests that there is no single objective reality. Instead, there are numerous realities constructed by individuals based on their lived experiences, interactions and beliefs (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012).

Social constructivism, which usually relies on interpreting, is one of the paradigms in qualitative research (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Constructivism or “social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2014, p.8). Individuals develop different subjective meanings of their personal experience in the world including the workplace. These subjective meanings, which are attached to certain objects and behaviours, are highly diverse and influenced by the historical and social norms of the environment in which

the participants live and work (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Also, these subjective meanings “are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through the interaction with others” leading a researcher to look at complex set of individual’s interpretations of a reality (Creswell and Poth, 2017, p24). Therefore, constructivism would help researchers to capture the complexity of several views in a phenomenon rather than narrowing meanings into limited categories or ideas (Creswell, 2014). The goal of constructivist research tends to lean toward the participants’ views of the phenomenon under research. The constructivist research is consistent with the aim of this study to understand the experience of working women in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia and develop in-depth analysis of the several challenges they might when it comes to career advancement.

The epistemological perspective from a social constructivist viewpoint indicates that this research views the knowledge and experiences of women in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia as being constructed through their cultural contexts, influenced by the social interactions and personal experiences. The truths uncovered through the primary research are not universal objective truths and instead, they are shaped by the contexts and interactions of the research participants being studied. The ontological perspective means that the research acknowledges the reality of women's experiences in the Saudi HE sector as multi-dimensional, diverse, and influenced by their social interactions and cultural contexts. There is no single "reality" of a woman's experience in this sector; each woman might have her own constructed "reality" based on her distinct interactions and experiences. Ontological and epistemological perspectives highlight that my role as a researcher is not to find an objective truth because there is no single reality or truth. Instead, my focus as a researcher should be to understand and interpret the multiple constructed realities.

Schwandt (2003) states that “constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it” (p.305). This means humans create concept, schemes and models to make sense of their own experience, these constructions are subjected to ongoing tests and changes in the light of new experiences. In contrast Burr (2015) believes there is no single definition that could be given to determine what is meant by using the term social constructionism.

However, constructionist approach has shared characteristics such as the importance of historical and cultural elements of the phenomenon and think critically about the prior knowledge taken from the world and the society in particular (ibid). Therefore, in this study what it means to be either a female or male has specific beliefs, roles, and behaviours in the Saudi society. The definitions and features of being a female or a male are determined by the people who live in the Saudi society and are influenced by the traditional values. Therefore, gender roles and traditional customs and practices are socially constructed because such practices and behaviours are linked to specific meanings, which are given by people in the Saudi society.

In terms of practice, social constructivist researchers ask open-ended and broad questions so that the participants have their own space to construct meanings of a situation or interaction with other individuals (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Thus, researchers would gain information about the daily processes of how individuals in the sample might interact in their life settings (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Moreover, in constructivist research, a social phenomenon is examined in specific contexts in which people under investigation live and work to enable the researcher to understand the historical and social settings of those participants (Creswell and Poth, 2017). These features apply to this study in which the researcher would investigate the daily process and practises at several Saudi universities that might hinder women from work advancement. Based on the discussion of the literature, this would be achieved by looking at the intersection of gender, traditional customs, and nationality and the way they would shape the experience of women in different parts of Saudi Arabia.

As the focus of this study is on the influence of conservative traditional practices on women's work development, thus, by comparing two groups of women (Saudi and non-Saudi), it would reveal how the experience of those women might differ. It would help to provide reasons for why they might differ too (Al Alhareth et al., 2015). Moreover, how non-Saudi women might or might not be influenced by such practises is another interesting insight that can be uncovered, as the majority of such beliefs are practised on Saudi females only. Therefore, the way in which culture of such public organisations might affect female workers, irrespective of their nationality is a relevant consideration. The data from this subordinated group will allow the

researcher to conduct an in-depth analysis of the situation beyond the general picture of the proposed phenomenon. The researcher who researches and analyses the struggle of a certain group, as one of the social constructionist features, will make peoples' behaviours, beliefs and experience more understandable because it focuses on individuals and their lives within the society, while taking into account the wider organizational context (Choudry, 2009).

This study focuses on the traditional norms and customs, challenges and gendered practices and processes, faced by women in higher education in Saudi Arabia. Gender barriers such as strict gender roles and stereotypes and traditional norms and costumes are culturally, historically and politically constructed. Therefore, the philosophical stance undertaken in this study is constructivism, as in this project an attempt is made to understand women's perceptions of social and gender inequality in Saudi Academic environment. However, it might be problematic in this stance to generate generalisation (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba, 2011). At the same time, this study aims to further the understanding of the complex reality of female workers in higher education in Saudi Arabia in a given context and time frame, not necessarily to make generalisations. This is consistent with the legitimacy of intersectionality approach as researchers should be too cautious when it comes to generalization, which will be discussed in greater details in the literature review section (McBride et al, 2014).

Social constructivism approach is highly associated with qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). The knowledge gained from qualitative approach would help the researcher to investigate the traditional customs and norms and gender related challenges women encounter in HE by interpreting those women's meanings attached to their experience at the workplace (Mason, 2018). Additionally, the knowledge gained using qualitative approach would help the researcher to address the research questions proposed to investigate women's work advancement in higher education and develop an in-depth analysis of the challenges faced by individuals in this project. Therefore, a qualitative approach seemed to appropriately fit with the current researched project, which is further explained in the next section.

4.3 Qualitative research method

Qualitative research is one of the paradigms used by researchers in social sciences, in order to understand social phenomena. A qualitative methodology takes an in-depth view of the world, providing valuable and meaningful interpretations to understand a phenomenon from different perspectives (King and Horrocks, 2010). “Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). In other words, qualitative researchers seek knowledge about all kind of phenomena using different qualitative methods such as field notes, interviews, photographs, records and several other methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). In such research, researchers examine social phenomenon closely, in an attempt to ascertain the meanings behind people’s experiences (ibid). Qualitative methods provide the researcher with an interpretive tool that helps to understand and test the researched phenomenon in a specific context, trying to gain a deep insight into the phenomenon in its natural settings where it takes place. In other words, qualitative research methods position researchers close within the social structure in order to provide them with explanations for the meanings that people make from their own perspectives (Bernard and Bernard, 2012).

For this research project, a qualitative approach would provide an understanding of women’s motives, desires and believes in facing several challenges as workers in academia, in addition to the ways that the daily processes and practices at the workplace might shape women’s career advancement (Schwandt, 2003). In qualitative research, knowledge is created through the interaction between the researcher and participants (Bernard and Bernard, 2012). The data collected from qualitative methods would “entails accessing and understanding the actual meanings and interpretations actors subjectively ascribe to phenomena in order to describe and explain their behaviour through investigating how they experience, sustain, articulate and share with others these socially constructed everyday realities” (Symon and Cassell, 2012, p. 21). This means that the knowledge we gain from the world already exists in the society, it is socially constructed. The knowledge comes as a result of the different elements that actively participate in the research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Those elements are the interactions between the human beings in the sample, the evaluator’s

observations, the experience and knowledge of all parties and both the time and place of this specific context. In addition, these elements contribute to the process of social constructionism too.

The study aims to uncover the intricate interplay of traditional customs, gender norms, nationality, and their influence on the work advancement of women in academia in Saudi Arabia. This complexity cannot be fully captured using quantitative measures. Qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of these intricate dynamics by exploring the lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives of the participants (Gentles et al., 2015). Research questions understanding to be answered in this thesis such as the way cultural and structural powers influence women's experiences, or how non-Saudi women's experiences differ from those of Saudi women, necessitate in-depth conversations and exploration which qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, are suitable at capturing. This further justifies the use of qualitative research.

Qualitative research is also relevant when it comes to gaining a contextual understanding of the subjective experiences. Qualitative research prioritises the context in which experiences occur (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). As the thesis is centred on experiences of women in Saudi universities, understanding the specific cultural, societal, and institutional contexts is important. Qualitative methods enable the researcher to gather rich, descriptive data that illuminate the context in which phenomena occur (Boddy, 2016). Research questions such as the societal challenges influencing work advancement or the work processes that constraint advancement are deeply ingrained in the socio-cultural fabric of Saudi Arabia (Aldossari and Calvard, 2021). By using qualitative research, the study can capture the nuances, emotions, and intricacies of these challenges, going beyond mere surface-level observations (Gentles et al., 2015), which reinforces the appropriateness of qualitative research in this paper.

4.4 Interview type: Semi structured interviews

Interviews are one of the most used methods in the qualitative approach, which can be used either as a primary method or as a pilot method to gather information for a field study (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Semi structured interviews are “based on a list of questions that can be addressed in a more flexible manner”, in which a researcher prepare a topic guide to selected issues that must be covered during the interview to address the research questions (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018, p. 184). Using semi-structured interview structure, the main themes that would be covered are the traditional norms and behaviours in relation to women’s career development, which might give more power to men over women in relation to authority, promotions, decision-making processes, training opportunity and formal networking in the higher education sector. These guidelines for the interviews to ensure that the sort of data being collected is relevant to the topic under investigation (Brady et al., 2017).

Semi-structured interviews would also reveal the individual’s experience of female workers in higher education (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Individual experience of Saudi and non-Saudi workers would reveal how their experience in work advancement might differ, in terms of training opportunities, promotions, decision-making and delegation of authority. In addition, how non-Saudi women might be influenced by the power of traditional norms and customs that promote strict gender roles and serotypes. Interviews also provide data about how women overcome these challenges from outside and within the organisations also how they gain professional support from the organisation and the support of their families to develop their career.

Furthermore, a benefit of semi-structured interviews is that on one hand, it allows the researcher/ interviewer to be prepared with an interview guide to be followed whilst on the other hand, flexibility is provided to the interviewees so that they could cover the other relevant experiences in their responses (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). As a result, new data might also emerge: some issues could arise during the interviews, resulting in additional questions, and hence, more in-depth data analysis. Thereby, the researcher would assess a phenomenon under investigation from different perspectives and provide important insights from those women working in public universities in Saudi Arabia.

Investigating the experience of working women would further the understanding of women's employment in places where, the power of traditional norms and tribal behaviours might influence the daily experience of women in the workplace. Semi-structured interviews also assist the validity of the research, hence improving the researcher's ability to deliver informative and relevant conclusions from different perspectives, which could facilitate the understanding of female employment and ways that gender customs and traditional norms would impact women experience in the Saudi universities (Barriball and While, 1994 cited in Kallio et al. 2016).

In this project, a different perspective based on the views of Saudi and non-Saudi women working in different academic and managerial positions in HE universities would be investigated (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). This would assist in uncovering the complexity of working women's experiences in academia in Saudi Arabia, and allow unheard stories to be shared. Therefore, in-depth semi-structured interviews would be a suitable method to understand the struggle of women in the workplace in higher education institutions, and how they handle the doubts have been raised by the society about their ability to compete in high skill professions considering their families' responsibilities assigned mostly to them.

Semi-structured interviews are widely used to gather information about peoples' experiences and motivations regarding a specific issue (Knight, 2002). Kallio et al. (2016) also argued that semi structured interviews are suitable for studying people's views and perceptions on a complex or sensitive topic. They allow the researcher to seek explanations from the participants which provide more detailed answers. Therefore, semi-structured interviews would offer a higher level of flexibility in asking questions to cover the main aspects of female workers at higher education institutions (Knight, 2002). This would allow for new themes to emerge and probably new perspectives to be investigated more in following interviews with other participants.

Semi-structured interviews encourage participants to express themselves openly and in detail (Nowak and Haynes, 2018). Unlike structured interviews which can limit responses to specific choices based on nature of the interview structure, the semi-

structured format allows for more flexibility in responses including the ability of interviewees to incorporate the personal narratives, capturing the depth and complexity of individual experiences (Brown and Danaher, 2019). This is important because understanding the varied challenges of work advancement for women in Saudi higher education institutions requires capturing personal stories, perceptions, feelings and interpretations. Semi-structured interviews provide participants the opportunity to narrate their experiences, revealing the underlying emotions, motivations, and perceptions. For example, when exploring how societal and individual challenges influence work advancement, a respondent might share personal experience, feelings of frustration, or moments of success. This will be a source of invaluable insights into the lived reality of women in the Saudi academic landscape that can be evaluated from an intersectional perspective.

Another usefulness of semi-structured interviews is their consistency while capturing diversity. While semi-structured interviews are adaptable, they still operate within a predetermined framework of questions/ topics to be investigated by the interviewer (Nowak and Haynes, 2018). This ensures that certain core themes or areas of interest are consistently addressed with each participant, enabling comparability across interviews. Due to the diversity of experiences between Saudi women and non-Saudi women in universities, it is important to maintain consistency in interviews, if the researcher is to benefit from a meaningful comparison of data. For instance, asking all participants about specific work processes or societal norms that influence their career progression ensures a level of consistency. At the same time, the flexible nature of the interview allows each participant to bring in their unique perspective, capturing the diversity of experiences of women in higher education institutions based on nationality, rank, and individual circumstances (Adams, 2015).

However, as with the benefits of semi-structured interviews, they have their shortcomings too. The flexibility provided to the interviewees in such semi structured interviews might lead to poor quality of data collected, if the researcher fails to keep the participants on track during and on topic the interviews. The collection of poor quality data would negatively influence the reliability and validity of the findings (Easterby-Smith et al, 2018). Mason (2018) also argued that interviews would reveal

rich data more than other qualitative methods if it is considered realistic and feasible to answer the research questions, which is the case with female workers in higher education, taking into account the high security in accessing Female' sections in public universities, where buildings are gated and security guards do not allow entry except for female students and staff members.

The quality of data collection could be enhanced if the researcher establishes a good contact with the participants in interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). This could be achieved by introducing the researcher herself as one that is familiar with HE environment in Saudi Arabia. The reason being that research participants would be more engaging and willing to share their experience and feelings (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Also, to create a bond with the interviewees as “through closeness and depth, we can find the authentic and true expressed in talk” (Symon and Cassell, 2012, p. 242). Thus, semi-structured interviews would the flexibility and gaining confidence of the research participants would enable them to engage freely in the interview, improving the quality of data collected, translating into higher quality findings that are considered reliable.

However, this might raise the risk that the interviewees might be anticipating the answers that the researcher is looking for, which might influence their responses (Symon and Cassell, 2012). Therefore, the researcher should pay more attention to the form of questions that would be asked during the interviews and avoid showing agreement or\and disagreement of whatever would be shared by the interviewees. This closeness also could be achieved by conducting the interviews in Arabic, because the main spoken language in universities is Arabic and the participants may not necessarily speak English. This is to ensure that participants are fully comfortable and able to share what might be considered as sensitive topics in their society. However, it would be challenging to translate these interviews after transcribing from Arabic to English without losing their meanings (Resch and Enzenhofer, 2018). Therefore, the researcher would analyse data in Arabic then it would be translated in English with the help of authorised third party for verification reasons to ensure that meaning of the conversations is not lost in translation from Arabic to English. Thus, it is important for the researcher to be aware of retaining the meanings of the data being collected

when conducting interviews and subsequent use of the interview data in findings and analysis.

Semi-structured interviews represent a social interaction between the interviewer and interviewees that has many limitations. One of the limitations of such interviews could be the amount and quality of data collection that may not be guaranteed. Interviewees might differ in their views, interaction and responses to the topic of traditional norms and tribal values. Especially that gender related norms and customs and nationality are considered sensitive topics to be investigated (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Mulinari, 2015). In particular, when it comes to interviewing women from other nationalities, who work for Saudi Universities. Additionally, according to the cultural norms in Saudi Arabia, gender equality is considered to be a sensitive issue, especially in a gender-segregated society (Baki, 2004). Therefore, the researcher should pay attention to concepts and terms that are normally used in analysing and interpreting the data but might cause some sensitivity when used during the interviews such as women might be marginalized or subordinating to men.

Another limitation is that, the interviewees could have different motivations to be involved in such a study, and as a result, they would have different responses to specific questions: "Informants differ widely in their responses to specific individuals, whether because of [race], class, gender, age, or other characteristics or perhaps just because of timing" (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012). Time is one of the main limitations in small-scale research for PhD students, thus researchers should be realistic in determining the size of the sample (Denscombe, 2014).

Qualitative method researchers have a direct link with society, and their interpretations of data are derived from their mindset, which are constructed by society. Essentially, in semi-structured interviews, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee must be built on honesty and trust (Kvale, 2006), to help improve the integrity and quality of data. In this process, both the interviewer and the interviewees are engaged in the creation of meaning. Hence, the researcher as an interviewer must have the skill to direct the conversation to be relevant to the research question during the allocated time for the interview. In other words, the researcher must make effective use of time and avoid any topics that are not connected

to the research questions, which might be common in semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2006).

The social interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees will generate knowledge if the researcher is an effective listener and communicator. Also, in such research, reflexivity considered essential to produce rich data as active reflexive practise will remind the researcher of their role in the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees (King, Horrocks, and Brooks, 2019. p. 19). In fact, according to Mason (2018, p. 18), in order to “learn to do better research” it is essential for the qualitative researcher to do active reflexive practices through all stages of social research starting from the process of planning and conducting the research. The concept of reflexivity could be used in varies ways, “the most common one emphasizes that the researcher is part of the social world that is studied, and this calls for exploration and self-examination” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 24). This means that the researcher would work with multiple interoperations and remain the awareness of the idea that there are several ways of understanding something in order to produce varied and rich findings.

Data from the interviews was analysed as it was gathered to build into the next interview, with varying interpretations after few interviews. This was done after transcribing the interviews, which resulted in more focused questions for the subsequent interviews, whilst also improving the ability to compare the findings of primary research. This prepared the researcher for the final analysis stage and managing the data became easier at the end of data collection stage (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Then, the data was coded as one way of analysing qualitative data. Saldana (2015) offers a manual guide for coding that include a variation of coding. Sinkovics et al. (2008) argue that using software to analyse textual data could enhance the credibility of qualitative data, thus making the data easier to analyse especially in the case of collaborations. Therefore, the researcher ensured to be familiar with a qualitative analysis software, and asked for the support offered by the University of Leeds for postgraduate researchers.

4.5 Sampling and access

One of the aims of the study was to review the literature on intersectionality to understand the experience of working women in public universities in Saudi Arabia based on the intersection of gender and traditional norms and practises and nationality. Public universities were selected as they apply a strict gender segregation as with other public organisations in the country. In contrast, the private sector which includes private universities is considered relaxed regarding traditional customs and gender relations (Al-Sudairy, 2017). As a scholarship holder sponsored by the Ministry of Education, this would facilitate the researcher position when applying for organisational agreement to access these public universities for generating data as they work under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education. In addition, the researcher's position as a PhD candidate in a prestigious foreign university would assist in gaining access in these institutions and participants.

Furthermore, the researcher gained more understanding of the status of female workers in higher education by comparing two groups of women (Saudi and non-Saudi) in the context of public universities in Saudi Arabia. In addition, interviewing both Saudi and non-Saudi women would allow the researcher to investigate the problem of the research from different perspectives and obtain detailed data, which results in a more accurate interpretation, while enhancing the quality of discussion (King and Horrocks, 2010).

Formal research interviews took place from July 2020 to February 2021. The number of potential participants was initially planned to be around 40 to 50 to conduct interviews. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a national lockdown in Saudi Arabia for most of 2020, which led to the workers in higher education institutions adopting remote working practices. It proved challenging during this time to approach the targeted number of participants. Nevertheless, through persistence and proactive approach, 30 interviews were conducted in total, with women in higher education institutions and belonging to different backgrounds. The composition of nationality of the interviewees was not intentional, as the number of Saudi female staff

outnumber the female staff from various backgrounds. The sample size is suitable to the main focus of this study which focuses on female workers (Saudi and non-Saudi) in different grades within academic and administrative roles in approximately ten public universities in Saudi Arabia to ensure the variety of the sample. The researcher employed snowball sampling in order to reach the most suitable participants for the study. The initial participants will be selected from universities official websites for all participants that occupy different positions levels within the academia.

Other participants were recruited with the help of The Center for Promising Research for Social Research and Women Studies at Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University in Riyadh (Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, 2019). The Centre organised the first conference for women studies in Saudi Arabia drew on the light of the new vision 2030 that concerns women empowerment and the role of women's participation in sustainable development of country (Arab news, 2018). Also, it hosted more than 70 researchers from inside and outside the country to present 48 scientific paper in the field of women studies (Arab news, 2018). The centre facilitated the recruitment of more participants as it is part of one of the largest public universities in the country. The potential participants were contacted via phone and email to inform them about the topic of the research, and to obtain their agreement to participate in the study. Then, the researcher asked the current participant for any potential informants who meet the criteria of the study to ensure that they would have the motivation to share their stories too, consistent with the snowball sampling technique. All participants were contacted before the meeting to ensure that they have been informed about the research objectives, and to ensure that the meeting time and place are accessible and free from distractions (Flick et al., 2004). It was ensured that all participants held teaching or administrative roles, or both while occupying differing positions in terms of the level of seniority and responsibility. The variety of positions/ranks held by the interviewees was planned, so as to explore a range of different stories across with multiple perspectives, and to better understand the challenges of women's work advancement in higher education in Saudi Arabia from an intersectional perspective. The following table outlines the position held by each of the 30 interviewees.

Position	Number of participants
Dean	1
Deputy Dean	4
Head of schools, professors	8
Deputy head	2
Academic coordinator	4
Lecturer (teaching staff with Masters degree)	5
Demonstrators (teaching assistants with Bachelor's degree)	3
Laboratory technician	3
Total	30

Table 2: Study population by position

4.6 Fieldwork and interview process

As explained above, the interviews in this thesis followed a semi-structured approach. An interview guide was prepared in advance, guided by the findings of the literature. However, the interview guide was not always strictly followed in each interview, as participants' responses were used to guide the interviews to some extent, consistent with the semi-structured interview process. I exercised adaptability and flexibility during each interview, referring to the interview guide where necessary while allowing interviewees to slightly diverge from the interview guide, with a view to uncovering authentic insights from their experiences of working in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. A set of probing questions I wanted to enquire about in interviews as part of the topics of interest are detailed in Appendix 1.

In this project, the meetings were carried in familiar settings. It was not possible to have face-to-face interviews because of the national lockdown and the requirement to maintain social distance during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was especially the case in the second and third quarter of 2020 when people were not comfortable to be in close proximity of an outsider, given the limited information about the effects of Covid-19. This is why online and phone interviews were conducted, aiding the interviewees to effectively engage with the topic of this research, as they are being interviewed in a more familiar environment (Flick et al., 2004). Moreover, it was not comfortable for some participants to discuss traditional and gender related customs, therefore, remote meeting were much suitable in this case. In order to facilitate a conversation about the challenges faced by the potential participants in everyday work-related processes, topics such as work decisions, promotion opportunities and control of authority were covered during the interviews. Also, the number of interviewees was limited to 30 participants instead of 40 participants, as planned before the pandemic. Access to the participants was made it harder by Covid-19 also given their profile and the additional hurdles that the lockdowns brought to the childcare responsibilities of the working women interviewed. Due to commitment, care and effort demonstrated in building trust with the respondents, the researcher succeeded at interviewing 30 participants in this project during a global pandemic.

Prior to the interviews, the researcher sent the participant information sheet and interview schedule to participants to ensure that each topic was discussed sufficiently, and the participants were prepared. During the interview the researcher looked for traditional norms, customs and gendered practices, roles and stereotypes that might pose challenges for women regarding having equal opportunities in work advancement. The advanced preparation of interview questions improves the level of competence exhibited by the interviewer (Denscombe, 2014), whilst also allowing the interviewer to make the most of the time available with the various academic faculty members at Saudi universities, which improves their ability to address the research objectives and question. The questions varied depending on how the dialogue is conducted. Questions such as “why”, “how” and “what” were asked to gain more understanding of the topics being discussed. These types of questions provided more explanations, and hence promoted clearer discussion about the experience of female workers in higher education (Kvale, 2006).

The interviews were conducted in Arabic, which is the mother tongue for most employees in public Saudi universities, to encourage them to engage in the discussion (Flick et al., 2004). There are two distinct benefits of this. The first is improved comfort level and expression. Language is deeply ingrained into one's identity, cognitive processing and emotions (Karatsareas, 2022). When individuals are able to communicate in their native language, they often feel more at ease and are able to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences more effectively and authentically. Given that the research explores deeply personal and potentially sensitive topics surrounding gender norms, societal challenges, and workplace dynamics in a specific cultural context, it was essential that participants felt as comfortable as possible. By conducting the interviews in Arabic, it allowed participants to express their feelings, experiences, and perceptions with greater precision and comfort. They were able to use idiomatic expressions, cultural references, as well as specific terminologies that might not have direct translations or may lose their subtleties in another language (Hobbs et al., 2010).

The second benefit is authenticity and ability to appreciate cultural intricacies. Language is deeply interconnected with culture. Certain concepts, beliefs, or sentiments might be culturally specific and best expressed in the native language. Using the mother tongue ensures that these cultural intricacies, which might be lost or misinterpreted in translation, are captured in their most authentic form (Blandisi et al., 2015). The challenges faced by women in Saudi universities are rooted in a complex interplay of cultural, societal, and individual factors. Conducting interviews in Arabic ensures that you capture the full range of these cultural nuances. For instance, participants discussed societal norms, traditions, or beliefs specific to Saudi Arabian culture that profoundly impact their experiences in academia. Using Arabic helped in retaining the depth and cultural specificity of these insights, ensuring that the data collected is as rich and authentic as possible.

Interviewees were informed prior to the interviews that the interview was expected to take between 60 and 90 minutes. Average interview length was 58.5 minutes and the interviews ranged from 42 minutes to 105 minutes. The variation in length of

interviews is attributed to the extent of detail provided by interviewees, including their willingness to share a wide range of their lived experiences in response to the questions asked.

4.7 Application of intersectionality to social research

The first three chapters explained that a key component of this research is the concept of intersectionality – the intersection of ethnicity and gender which has implications for the challenges experienced by women in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia when it comes to career progression. Intersectionality theory considers gender and race to be interconnected rather than isolated (Dy et al., 2017). The result being that various social categories (such as gender, nationality, ethnicity, race and class) are considered as inter-related and co-constituting. Even though intersectionality theory has gained in popularity over time (Kele et al., 2022), intersectionality from a research paradigm standpoint is yet to be widely accepted within social research and political sciences (Hancock, 2007; Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina, 2018). It explains the debate and growing interest among social scientists around how intersectionality can be applied to further understand the challenges experienced by women when it comes to progressing their careers within higher education (Winker and Degele, 2011; Bhopal, 2020). This section aims to briefly consider different approaches to the application of intersectionality in this study from a methodological standpoint, acknowledging the way in which intersectionality can inform the methods used in this research.

The treatment of various categories in research has been the area of focus among social scientists when it comes to the discussion of methodological applications of intersectionality. McCall (2005) in the discussion of complexities of intersectionality referred to anti-categorical complexity, inter-categorical and intra-categorical complexity. In referring to anti-categorical complexity, McCall (2005) argued that fixed categories should not be used to understand the social life because of intricacies and complexity of social life to be categorised in such a way. Anti-categorical complexity leans towards deconstruction and a refusal to acknowledge specific categories. Inter-categorical complexity as an approach uses existing categories to

understand inequalities among different social groups, focusing on comparison of experiences of different groups. Finally, intra-categorical complexity concentrates on understanding those who exist at the intersecting points of categories, focusing into the experiences of individuals within these intersections.

McCall (2005) preferred inter-categorical complexity because of the recognition that although these categories can be problematic, they also hold considerable value in empirical research, particularly when analysing issues of inequality. Existing categories have significance from a historical and empirical standpoint, since a number of social inequalities have been built and exacerbated on the basis of these categories. Therefore, by using these categories as reference points, researchers can gain a better understanding of and track these inequalities. Another reason McCall (2005) had a preference for inter-categorical complexity is because although she acknowledged the overlap between categories, she also viewed the strategic significance of using these categories to highlight and challenge the systemic inequalities. Inter-categorical complexity serves as a middle ground, acknowledging the potential problems with strict categorisation while still leveraging their analytical strength and relevance, a viewpoint reinforced by Carastathis (2013). Moreover, the inter-categorical approach enables the comparison of experiences across different groups. This is important for understanding how different forms of inequality might intersect or how one form of discrimination might differ from another.

Choo and Ferree (2010) explained three routes through which intersectionality could be applied to social research. These are group centred approach, process centred and system centred approach. Group centred approach places marginalised groups at the heart of research topic, encouraging an active attempt to prioritise the experiences of these groups when investigating the research topic. Process centred approach concentrates on the intersections of categories with a view to uncover the structural mechanisms that influence the power dynamics. Finally, the system centred approach concentrates on the interactions between different groups and aims to understand the interaction between these groups, instead of concentrating solely on their primary effects (Choo and Ferree, 2010). As with the arguments of McCall (2005), Choo and Ferree (2010) also asserted that each approach (group centred approach, process

centred and system centred approach) to intersectionality in social sciences has specific implications for the way in which the research is undertaken.

By concentrating on the experiences of those within a specific category, this research is best described as using inter-categorical approach (McCall, 2005) or group centred approach (Choo and Ferree, 2010). Women working in higher education institutions as marginalised group are placed at the heart of the research. A conscious effort was undertaken throughout the process of data collection and analysis to recognise that the experiences of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia are not monolithic. Their experiences are likely to differ based on intersecting identities such as socio-economic status, nationality, age, marital status, or regional origins. This understanding was reflected in methodology: when selecting participants for semi-structured interviews, an effort was made to arrive at a varied representation across different intersectional categories, ensuring the selection of participants from diverse economic backgrounds, different regions of Saudi Arabia, different marital statuses and of different ages.

It was also acknowledged during data collection and analysis that challenges in the higher education institutions can be influenced by various overlapping factors, other than gender. It influenced the framing of semi-structured interview questions to uncover multi-dimensional challenges faced by women in achieving career progression. For example, instead of only asking about gender-based challenges, I consciously probed them about how nationality or socio-economic status interacts with their gender in shaping their experiences. I also acknowledged that the challenges experienced by women in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia can originate from multiple sources, often simultaneously. This has relevance when employing thematic analysis, whereby I looked for themes that indicated intersectional challenges.

4.8 Analytical procedure

The analytical procedure used to analyse the interview data involved a number of steps, including an active consideration of the association between interview text and

societal context. Before conducting a formal analysis, I wanted to familiarise myself with all the primary data collected, which led me to the process of qualitative coding. In qualitative research, codes are labels assigned to units of data (such as phrase, word, sentence, or paragraph) to aid in categorisation or annotation of qualitative information (Clarke et al., 2015). The codes are helpful because they allow researchers to organise and group the data in meaningful ways, making the data more manageable.

I engaged in heuristic coding whereby I identified the phrases or words to thematically organise a large volume of interview text. This was effective because it is a practical way in which a large number of interview responses could be thematically organised. The underlying intention I had when using heuristic coding was to increase my level of familiarity with the speech patterns inherent in the interview responses, so as to develop a more intuitive grasp of the data. This approach allowed for the identification of key themes, patterns, and sentiments which may not be immediately apparent through a more structured or detailed analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). It helped in building a foundational understanding of the data, which was essential for guiding subsequent, more focused analytical processes. Initially, I coded by hand whereby I printed all the interview transcripts and highlighted different potential codes, differentiating them by colour.

The manual colour coding was particularly useful in the early stages of qualitative analysis for several reasons. First, engaging with physical transcripts allowed me to connect more closely with the interview data. Physically highlighting and using different colours can improve memory recall (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) and promote a deeper understanding of the content mentioned in the text (Clarke et al., 2015). This tactile method provided an increased engagement relative to digital methods, thereby allowing me to develop a closer relationship with the raw data. Second, different colours help to immediately signal various patterns or themes emerging in the data, which provided a clear visual roadmap of emerging codes. This simplified the process of identifying overlapping themes or patterns, allowing me to see where certain codes or themes are concentrated. The visual distinction helped in quicker recognition and sorting, which improved the efficiency of the overall qualitative data analysis procedure. Third, I also found manual colour coding useful

because since qualitative analysis is often an iterative process, color-coding aided in progressive refinement of codes. For instance, during initial coding, I uncovered broad themes and identified them with one colour. As analysis progressed and themes become clearer, additional colours were used to represent sub-themes and refined codes. This layering of colours was useful in tracing the evolution of codes throughout the analysis, ensuring that the coding process remained dynamic and responsive to the data collected.

In the second cycle of coding, I used Atlas software, continuing with the process of development and adaptation of code headings. As I had completed the literature review, it helped me to be aware of various challenges faced by women in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia which prevent them from achieving work and career advancement, such as the role of values and norms (including tribal values), familial expectations in contributing to the time dedicated to work and ability of women to travel nationally and internationally. I coded each set of text a number of times, using iteration process and returning to the interview transcripts after every iteration. I also coded the transcripts on the basis of differences and similarities between interview responses, as well as using unique findings and idiosyncrasies as the basis of coding.

Revisiting the transcripts multiple times allowed for a more thorough examination of the data. With each iteration, I was able to identify finer details some of which may otherwise have been overlooked in the previous rounds. This iterative process ensured that the analysis captured not only the most dominant or recurring themes but also the subtle and less frequent ones. Moreover, by coding based on differences, similarities, and unique findings, I ensured that the analysis is comprehensive. It prevented premature conclusions to be drawn based solely on initial impressions (Chung et al., 2020), employing intersectionality perspective thoroughly and providing representation to the outlier experiences that might otherwise have been overlooked by more common themes. Multiple coding iterations also contributed to an improvement in internal validity. By repeatedly engaging with the data and cross-checking it for both common and unique themes, the risk of misinterpretation or oversight was reduced (Clarke et al., 2015). The process ensured that themes and

codes were not assigned arbitrarily, Instead, they were grounded in consistent patterns noted within the interview data.

Once the initial codes had been generated and refined, these formed the basis of identification and refinement of themes. The relevant themes included career development opportunities, promotions and decision-making, women's international mobility, women's daily work-related mobility, women's role in the family, challenges faced by working women, family's influence on career of women and strategies employed by women for achieving work-life balance as part of career management. As the themes were refined, further sub-themes were also identified and incorporated, which helped to improve the quality and comprehensiveness of the analysis of interview data. For instance, career development opportunities, promotions and decision-making as a theme was used to develop sub-themes namely female staff in senior administrative roles and female staff in lower positions, analysing the responses of interviews based on their level of seniority and responsibility they hold in their position within higher education institution. Two sub-theme emerged from family's influence on career of women namely the influence of family traditions on women's professional development and women's employment and family name (tribalism) in Saudi Arabia. Intersectionality perspective was an important component of thematic analysis, incorporating the unique challenges faced by younger and less experienced Saudi women in higher education institutions as well as the review of distinct challenges faced by non-Saudi women.

The process of refining initial codes into broader themes and then further breaking down those themes into sub-themes allowed for a detailed understanding of the data. For instance, by differentiating between female staff in senior administrative roles and those in lower positions, the study captures the diverse experiences and challenges faced by women at different hierarchical levels within higher education institutions. Moreover, by incorporating an intersectionality perspective, the analysis went beyond viewing challenges in isolation and examined how various identity markers (such as age, nationality, or experience) intersect and overlap. This approach acknowledged that challenges faced by younger and less experienced Saudi women from majority of Saudi women in higher education and institutions and that these experiences differ

from those faced by non-Saudi women. Recognising these layered identities and challenges provides a more comprehensive picture of these experiences. Segregating data into themes and sub-themes, the process of revisiting and refining them on the basis of interview data also ensured that the analysis was grounded in data (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Additionally, by identifying and addressing multiple themes such as career development, family influences, and challenges faced by working women, the study offers a comprehensive overview of the multidimensional experiences of women in the context of Saudi Arabian higher education institutions.

4.8.1 Coding

The codes were generated through an iterative process of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Saldaña, (2015) defines “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (p. 3).” This involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and keywords in the responses of the interviewees. As the data was examined, certain themes such as career development opportunities, gendered division of labour, guardianship/wasta, and others began to emerge consistently. The codes generated and their rationale are further explained in Appendix 4. These themes were shaped by the experiences, perceptions, and challenges shared by the women in the higher education sector. The process of generating these codes was dynamic, involving both deductive and inductive reasoning. While some codes were anticipated based on existing literature and theoretical frameworks (deductive), others emerged organically from the data (inductive). Once the codes were identified, the next step involved condensing them to ensure they accurately represented the underlying data. This meant refining the codes, merging similar themes, and ensuring each code captured the essence of the participants' experiences. The condensing process was important in reducing the complexity of the data, making it more manageable and interpretable. It involved constantly comparing the codes against the data to ensure consistency and reliability.

The codes played a critical role in structuring the analysis and helping draw meaningful conclusions. They provided a framework through which the data could be systematically examined and interpreted. For example, the code 'Career Development

Opportunities' enabled the identification of patterns regarding access to and perception of professional growth initiatives. Similarly, 'Gendered Division of Labour' highlighted the unequal distribution of tasks within the academic setting. These codes facilitated a focused analysis of specific aspects of the participants' experiences, leading to nuanced findings about the challenges, dynamics, and opportunities for women in academia.

4.10 Trustworthiness in data collection and analysis

Trustworthiness is increasingly used as a way through which the value and advantages of qualitative research can be described, without having to refer to the criteria used to explain the quantitative research (Alexander, 2019). Schwandt et al. (2007) referred to credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability as four criteria associated with trustworthiness within qualitative research. Each of these four elements were carefully taken into account when undertaking research choices when undertaking data collection and analysis. Credibility as part of trustworthiness in data collection and analysis refers to the confidence of researcher that the findings are true and can be deemed credible. Transferability of as part of trustworthiness in data collection and analysis is about demonstrating that the findings are transferable and applicable in other contexts. Confirmability is about minimisation of researcher bias, interest and motivation such that the findings are neutral and influenced by the respondents (research participants) (Schwandt et al., 2007). Finally, dependability as part of trustworthiness in data collection and analysis refers to consistency in the findings such that they can be replicated and repeatable over time.

I used two techniques to enhance credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability throughout the data collection and analysis, eventually improving trustworthiness in methodology. These were reflective learning (through reflexive journal) and thick description. Reflexive journaling involves the maintenance of a journal or a personal diary by the researcher throughout the research process. In this journal, the researcher records their personal reflections, experiences, any biases experienced and emotions which may influence or have implications for the research process and findings (Xerri, 2018). It is a tool for critical self-reflection, enabling the

researcher to become aware of and address their emotions, preconceptions, or potential biases that may arise during the research (Lahman et al., 2010). I kept a personal journal which was used to note down my comments and thoughts during and after the interviews were conducted. Reflective journal was an opportunity for me to reflect on the experience (before and after the interview), considering the way in which my personal opinions and views may influence data interpretation and analysis, attempting to minimise the bias associated with my pre-conceived notions around the challenges of women's work advancement in higher education in Saudi Arabia from an intersectional perspective.

Reflexive journal was helpful in maintaining and improving credibility of the research in data collection and analysis. By actively documenting the emotions I felt, any biases, and experiences, I was able to monitor and counteract my own preconceptions. It helped to ensure that findings I documented were truly reflective of the experiences of women in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. The ongoing self-reflection ensured that the research was conducted in good faith, promoting its credibility while keeping the research process transparent and honest. When it comes to the use of reflexive journal to improve transferability, even though reflexive journaling is largely reflective in nature, the documented reflections offer insights into the context and specific situations experienced in the study. It allows future studies and researchers undertaking the research on a similar topic to ascertain if the findings are transferable to other settings by comparing the context described in the journal to their own contexts (Goldblatt and Band-Winterstein, 2016), thereby improving transferability and trustworthiness of data collection and analysis.

Reflexive journal also helped to improve confirmability. The journal serves as an audit trail, enabling external reviews of the research process to be conducted. As I documented the interpretations, key decisions and potential biases, my journal can serve as a basis for others to corroborate and confirm or contradict their own findings, ensuring that conclusions arise from the data and not from the inherent biases (Alexander, 2019). It shows the role of reflective journal in promoting confirmability and trustworthiness during data collection and analysis. Finally, reflexive journal also helped to enhance dependability.

As the reflexive journal involves documentation of the research process, it helps to track changes in the research approach and researcher's own understanding over time. This way, the journal was useful to demonstrate that the research process was consistent and dependable, despite its changing nature (Rallis and Rossman, 2010), improving dependability and trustworthiness. For example, early in the research process of data collection, the journal entries reflected an initial understanding of the challenges experienced by women in HE in Saudi Arabia, largely concentrating on societal and cultural barriers. As the research (primary and secondary data) progressed, more interviews were conducted and a deeper engagement with the literature occurred, it led to an improved and refined understanding which went beyond the broad societal challenges and took into account the institutional dynamics such as organisational policies at higher education institutions, women's international mobility, cultural shock, and the impact of familiar expectations with implications for women's career progression.

Reflexive journal was also useful in promoting credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability throughout the data collection and analysis, eventually improving trustworthiness in methodology. It improved credibility through providing a detailed account of the research context, participants, and findings which offered a holistic understanding of the topic being studied. By detailing not just the events but also the thoughts, emotions of women in higher education institutions and the context, reflexive journal improved credibility and robustness of the findings. Reflexive journal was also influential in improving transferability of my findings. A key benefit of reflexive journal is that it offers a comprehensive and in-depth account of the research context (Denham and Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Such detail enables the readers and subsequent researchers to ascertain the extent to which the findings and conclusions can be applicable to other contexts or settings (Shufutinsky, 2020), thereby enhancing the transferability of data collection and analysis.

Similarly, reflexive journal also helped to improve confirmability. The in-depth and comprehensive nature of description meant that each claim and subsequent conclusion reached in this study based on primary research findings was based on the specific

and detailed data. This confirmability provides other researchers an opportunity to trace the researcher's interpretations and understand the basis for each conclusion, thereby corroborating and confirming that the findings are grounded in the research context (Humphreys et al., 2021). Finally, dependability as part of trustworthiness was also improved through reflexive journal. By providing a detailed account of the research context, methods, and findings, it detailed the consistency and comprehensiveness of the research approach. This makes it clear that if this study on the challenges of women's work advancement in higher education in Saudi Arabia from an intersectional perspective were to be replicated in a similar context, there is a high likelihood of uncovering comparable findings, illustrating the dependability of this study.

4.11 Ethical considerations

It is the researcher's duty to abide by the ethical guidelines provided by the University of Leeds during the course of the research. This involved gaining ethical approval prior to conducting the interviews and obtaining written and/or oral consent from the research participants. The participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the interview at any point before or during the data collection without providing reason for withdrawal. Also, as cultural and gender-related studies tend to be perceived as sensitive topics, the participants were advised not to share sensitive or personal information to ensure confidentiality (Denscombe, 2014). This helped to protect participants' identities while maintaining anonymity, as the interviews were conducted with female workers who hold various positions level in public HE institution. Maintaining confidentiality is critical, especially for female participants in higher level positions, as they are low in number in public universities in Saudi Arabia (Abalkhail and Abalkhail, 2017).

It should be noted that confidentiality was more about the identity and position of interviewees, rather than around the content of their interviews. The emphasis was on anonymising the data, so it would not be possible to associate an excerpt from an interview to a particular individual. The participant information sheet and consent form were provided to each interviewee, which are detailed in Appendices 2 and 3 respectively. Ethical challenge of such research during the global pandemic should

also be appreciated: when approaching the potential interviewees and obtaining their consent, the researcher was mindful of the challenges associated with requesting the time of women, knowing they were already struggling in managing their professional and personal family needs. To address this challenge, the interviewee offered maximum flexibility around the timing of the interviews, taking into account ethical practices to meet the needs of participants and factoring in their profile as women working during the pandemic and lockdowns.

The interviews were recorded using professional recording device. It helped to transcribe the interview responses following the interviews and all the names removed immediately, as the participants were given numbers. The data was password protected and stored anonymously in the researcher's university drive to ensure confidentiality, and the data used only for the purposes of this study. The data will not be shared with third parties to avoid potential risk of revealing participants' identities. Also, the data will be kept until the completion of the PhD when it will be destroyed confidentially immediately. Only the PhD supervisors will have access to the anonymous data after being coded for improving analysis purposes.

4.12 Methodological limitations

Despite the methodological rigour associated with the qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis as adopted in this study to investigate the challenges experienced by women when it comes to career progression in higher education in Saudi Arabia, the above-mentioned methodology also has its limitations. Four limitations are acknowledged and explained in this section. Although these limitations pose a potential challenge, they do not necessarily reduce the value and significance of the findings of this study. Instead, acknowledging and understanding the limitations of this study can be a source of guidance for readers, helping them to contextualize the findings and can help inform future research endeavours.

The first limitation is subjectivity and interpretation in social constructivism. Social constructivism, as an epistemological stance, asserts that individuals create subjective constructions of reality, and the truth is a co-creation of these individual interpretations (Diez, 2014). This approach is particularly relevant when researching social phenomena such as the difficulties experienced by women in Saudi Arabia when it comes to career progression in higher education institutions, as it allows for a detailed understanding of the complex interplay of cultural, societal, and individual experiences. However, this strength of social constructivism is also a source of its primary limitation. Social constructivism is significantly reliant on personal narratives and interpretations (Kiraly, 2014). When applied to the challenges of women's work advancement in Saudi, this potentially translates into a wide variability in the perceptions and experiences shared by participants. Two women, with seemingly similar professional backgrounds, may interpret and describe their experiences considerably differently based on their personal beliefs, familial backgrounds, or prior experiences (Rata, 2012).

Given the reliance on experiences of each individual, it creates a risk of overemphasising the subjective realities which come at the expense of structural and objectivity related challenges (Alemu et al., 2012). For instance, while many participants may emphasise personal or societal issues associated with traditional customs and beliefs, there could be structural constraints (such as policies, institutional biases) that are not as clearly communicated elucidated because they are not felt as immediately or are not as easily articulated by the interviewees. Furthermore, even though the comprehensive and subjective accounts offered through social constructivism are a source of detailed analysis, they compromise generalisability of the findings (Reynolds, 2016). The experiences of women in one public university department or region of Saudi Arabia might be quite different from those in another, given the complex interplay of local customs, institutional cultures, and individual backgrounds. Relying predominantly on subjective accounts could make it challenging to draw broader conclusions about women's work advancement across all the Saudi higher education institutions.

The second limitation of the methodology used in this thesis is related to the shortcomings of qualitative research. These findings are highly context-dependent. The cultural, societal, and professional environmental conditions of Saudi Arabia, especially in the context of higher education, plays a vital role in influencing the experiences of the women interviewed. Their narratives are interconnected with the societal norms, traditions, and gender expectations which are distinct to Saudi Arabia. While this context is a source of depth in this study, it also means that the findings might not be directly applicable or relatable to similar issues faced by women in different cultural or national settings, thereby limiting generalisability of the findings. The qualitative research is also temporal i.e. qualitative nature of the study captures a snapshot of the participants' experiences at a specific point in time (Thunberg and Arnell, 2022). Based on the rapid socio-cultural changes and reforms, especially in a country such as Saudi Arabia undergoing the changes driven by Vision 2030, the experiences and challenges faced by women are likely to evolve (Aldossari and Calvard, 2021). The insights from the study may not fully encapsulate the evolving nature of women's experiences in higher education in the long run.

The third limitation of the methodology used in this thesis is related to the challenges associated with semi-structured interviews. In a socio-cultural setting such as Saudi Arabia, where topics around women's roles, challenges, and experiences in the professional context can be sensitive, participants might be hesitant to openly share their findings. This is particularly relevant when investigating the issues faced by women in higher education institutions within public universities, as there are relatively few women who may fear for repercussions of this on their career, given that their anonymity may not be maintained. In addition, discussing issues that revolve around gender norms, traditional beliefs, and professional challenges can be deeply personal and potentially controversial. The resultant reserved behaviour of interviewees may originate from the fear of societal backlash, professional implications and personal insecurities (Daniel, 2018).

The fourth methodological limitation is around sampling. The sample size and composition of interviewees in the study present several considerations when it comes to assessing the potential limitations of research methodology. The majority of

participants hold leadership or senior academic positions, such as Dean, Deputy Dean, and Head of Schools/Professors. While these roles are a source of valuable insights into the challenges and dynamics at the senior level of academic hierarchy, they might not fully reflect the experiences of those at the entry or mid-levels of the profession. Perspectives from those in leadership roles can be crucial in understanding systemic and institutional challenges. However, it is also essential to acknowledge that their experiences, having navigated and risen through the ranks, might be different from those just starting out or those who have faced barriers that have prevented their career progression. The experiences of Lecturers or Demonstrators might be significantly different in terms of daily challenges, aspirations, and perceptions of barriers. Moreover, the perspectives of 30 individuals may not entirely capture the complete range of experiences and challenges faced by women across the entire spectrum of higher education in Saudi Arabia. Factors such as specific academic disciplines, regional variations in practices and norms, and individual backgrounds can significantly influence experiences, and these might not be fully captured in the sample.

4.13 Conclusion

The methodology chapter explained the research methodology employed in this thesis, involving qualitative research based on semi structured interviews. A total of 30 interviews were undertaken with the staff at higher education institutions within the public universities in Saudi Arabia. The qualitative research, through employing intersectional analysis, allowed for a detailed discussion to be undertaken with interviewees to explore the challenges of experienced by women in higher education in Saudi Arabia when it comes to their career progression. A specific emphasis throughout the process of data collection and analysis was on improving trustworthiness of data, made possible through the focus on credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability of data collection and analysis. The chapter also acknowledged the limitations of methodology used. Even though these methodological shortcomings pose a challenge, they do not reduce the value of study. Instead, acknowledging and understanding the limitations of this study is arguably a source of guidance for readers, helping them to contextualize the findings.

Chapter 5: Professional support for female staff in Higher education institutions

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, professional career opportunities among female academics and professional staff will be presented depending on the participant's positions and academic ranking. In addition, other relevant demographic aspects such as participants' nationalities, their age, marital and parental status will form the basis of discussion and analysis, drawing on intersectional analysis. The relevant emergent themes discussed include the freedom of movement of female faculty in Saudi Arabia, women's mobility as the opportunity to travel abroad/within Saudi, engage in international travel as a career opportunity and the lack of communication with top management in Saudi universities.

To understand the work-related opportunities available to women within higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, this chapter explores the dynamics that underpin intellectual growth and professional development. It focuses on development opportunities, promotion, and decision-making, differentiating between the experiences of senior and junior staff based on interview findings. Moreover, women's professional mobility and career opportunities are also examined through the analysis of interview data, focusing on international mobility as well as day-to-day work-related mobility of women.

5.2. Career development opportunities, promotions, and decision-making

As explained above, the analysis of career development opportunities including promotions and decision-making are discussed separately for female staff in senior administrative roles (section 5.2.1.1) and their counterparts in lower/ junior roles (section 5.2.2.2). Structuring the chapter in this way helps to better understand the career development opportunities available to female staff in higher education institutions, compared by the level of seniority and responsibility they have in the workplace. This thesis focuses on the advancement of female academic in Saudi Universities, and thus the following table is designed to provide clearer insights into

the roles and regulations for the appointment and promotions of academic staff in Saudi Universities.

Table 3: Rules for the appointment and promotions of faculty members in Saudi Arabia. Source: Jouf University (2020).

Rank	Requirements
Demonstrators known as teaching assistant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have a university degree from a Saudi university or another recognized university. - General assessment (grade) in the undergraduate level should be at least "very good"
Lecturer and language teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have a master's degree or its equivalent from a Saudi university or another recognized university. - General assessment (grade) in the Master's degree should be at least "very good" (if obtained from a university that grants it with a grade).
Assistant professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have obtained a doctorate degree or its equivalent from a Saudi university or other recognized university.
Associate professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have doctorate degree from a Saudi university or other recognized university. - Have experience in the faculty membership of the university not less than four years after appointment as an assistant professor. - Must be promoted academically to the rank of an associate professor from a Saudi university or other recognized university.
Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - doctorate degree from a Saudi university or other recognized university. - Have experience in the faculty membership of the university, not less than eight years, including at least four years as an associate professor. - Must be promoted academically to the rank of a professor from a Saudi university or other recognized university.
<p>Note: The provisions of this regulation shall apply to the following categories: language teachers and technician at the sixth rank and above and whose work directly relates to teaching.</p>	

5.2.1 Female staff in senior administrative roles

Most female academics in upper-level positions in nine out of the twenty-nine public universities examined in this study confirmed that they received work-related training

opportunities during their service years. However, the number of training opportunities differed depending on many factors such as the academics' position, administration role, and the individual management of each division. In interviews with 10 female academics who hold senior managerial positions in addition to teaching roles, all confirmed that they are receiving ongoing support and frequent training opportunities from the top management. These training opportunities are offered by the Deanship of university development to assist academics and administrators (both female and male), mainly in developing managerial and leadership skills. This is a noteworthy finding that 10 female academics received continued support and training opportunities from the senior management. The ongoing support and frequent training opportunities offered to them highlights the commitment of the higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia towards nurturing the career development of women in senior roles within academia. This support not only arguably facilitates women's entry into senior positions but also ensures their continuous growth and progression within these roles through providing them access to the skillset they need to undertake their jobs effectively, which is critical in overcoming gender disparities in higher education. Additionally, the fact that these training opportunities aim to develop managerial and leadership skills highlights an encouraging shift in the perception of women's roles within these institutions. By equipping women with leadership skills, the universities are explicitly acknowledging and endorsing their potential to take on top managerial roles, thereby challenging the traditional patriarchal norms that have long excluded women from leadership positions as argued by Aldossari and Calvard (2021).

The establishment of professional development programs within Saudi Arabian higher education institutions may reflect a deliberate, structured approach towards promoting gender equality. This interpretation is supported by the consistent feedback from senior female academics, who report receiving comprehensive training. However, an in-depth analysis is required to understand the true impact of these programs on dismantling the entrenched structural and societal barriers impeding women's career progression. Critical questions arise regarding the efficacy of these programs: Are they substantially aiding women in senior leadership roles, or do they function primarily as symbolic gestures? The extent to which these training initiatives translate into tangible advancements for women's careers remains an area requiring

further exploration. This examination is pivotal in assessing the progress made towards gender equality in the context of Saudi Arabian higher education and contributes to the overarching aim of this study, which is to explore the challenges facing women's career advancement within this sector from an intersectional lens.

In addition, interviews also uncovered there were external training courses organised by third parties in collaboration with the Ministry of Higher Education. These are external training opportunities, such as national and international conferences, workshops, and training courses. The access to external training opportunities is subjected to terms and conditions established by the universities' administration in coordination with the ministry of higher education. However, the 10 participants who hold senior administrative positions in addition to their teaching roles, appear to have a better chance of securing places in professional development opportunities. Dina, who holds the position of the Director of Special Needs Department in both females' and males' sections in a public university, shared her experience in this area:

Administrative staff are given the opportunity to develop their skills through training courses offered by the Deanship of University Development and the Agency for Professional Development. Administrative and academic staff are also given the opportunity to be nominated for national level training courses organized by the Institute of Public Administration. Nomination for external training opportunities is carried out by the Professional Development Agency in each university, which will compare candidates from both the females' and males' divisions according to the criteria and conditions required by the provider party. (Participant 1, Director of department at A university, 18 years' experience)

Dina, who has worked within administrative capacity for the past 18 years (thus possessing significant experience) noted that the nomination for professional development opportunities is carried out by a specific agency, where they equally recommend male and female candidates depending on the participation's criteria. Therefore, the access to these career development opportunities is a competitive process. Dina, added that the candidates are selected through an automated process

via use of a specific software that compares candidates' profiles, eliminates, and approves the most eligible candidates across female and male candidates from each the administrative and the academic staff. Then, the final nominations are discussed and approved by senior members from relevant parties before announcing the names. However, this is not the case in all public universities in Saudi Arabia, as only two out of nine universities in this study, whom their members confirmed applying such systematic selection process for distribution of professional development opportunities. Maya another participant have confirmed the use of an automated system, but the higher-level management could examine the final candidates assigned by the development agency and might have an influence their decision in terms of who could be more entitled for these development opportunities. Maya shared the following:

Researcher: How does the nomination process for training opportunities work?

Participant: Since two years ago most career development opportunities for HE staff have been managed by an independent agency using specially designed system to compare the candidates' profiles. However, the Deanship Director can influence the final decision on candidates made by the team at the Agency for Quality and Development. (Participant 10, Director of department at B university, 8 years' experience)

Implementing such system without human intervention will make women aware of career development opportunities that are managed by top management in the male section in spatial segregated workplace (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2010). The use of software and automatic processes for career development opportunities in higher education institutions carries both benefits and limitations. Understanding these can aid in assessing the effectiveness of such methods in promoting gender equality and inclusivity. In terms of benefits, automated systems are designed to make decisions based on pre-determined criteria, which reduces the likelihood of personal biases influencing the selection process thus, theoretically promoting objectivity and fairness in decision-making while eliminating subjectivity associated with decisions made by humans (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2010). Software can also quickly compare and evaluate

a large number of candidate profiles, speeding up the selection process and saving valuable time (Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022). Additionally, a systematic approach, where the criteria are clearly defined and communicated, can increase transparency in the selection process. This can contribute to building trust among staff members because those selected for career development opportunities are based on an automatic and transparent process (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2010). Although the process is in use in only two out of the nine universities, the automated process also has a benefit that it could be easily scaled up or down depending on the number of opportunities and candidates, making it adaptable to different scenarios (Vrontis et al., 2022).

As with the merits of the use of software and automatic processes for career development opportunities in higher education institutions, it also has its limitations. Automated systems usually struggle to account for qualitative factors such as personal circumstances, potential, or dedication, which might be crucial in certain cases as shown by the responses from Participants Yasmin, Dalia, Dunya, and Ahlam on the following page. It explains the significance of subjective assessment undertaken by humans when making such a decision, as also argued by Parasuraman and Manzey (2010). Maya, a Director of Department at B university with 8 years' experience noted this, as she stated: "automated systems despite all their benefits do not appreciate the unique situation experienced by each person. Human aspect should be appreciated and the decision should not be made purely on the basis of objective criteria". This interview quote demonstrates that lack of consideration of individual circumstances and excessive focus on objectivity is viewed as a limitation of automated systems presently in use as part of performance appraisal.

Additionally, while automation is meant to eliminate human bias, if the system is designed or programmed with inherent biases (whether conscious or unconscious), this could exacerbate discrimination (Wickens et al., 2015). For instance, if the criteria disproportionately favour characteristics or experiences more commonly found among male candidates, women could be unintentionally disadvantaged. The automated systems often rely heavily on quantifiable data, potentially neglecting critical but less quantifiable factors such as the leadership potential or interpersonal skills.

The phrase “brick wall” is suitable to describe the very visible wall that prevents women from seeing what is happening in the male section. Brick wall is defined as the “ideological and structural barriers preventing the horizontal and divisional mobility of women in the workplace” (Zafarullah, 2000). The organisational structure in most Saudi universities, which do not use well designed automated selection process software, might make female staff less aware of hidden and lost professional development opportunities. Interviews revealed that lack of transparency meant that female staff found it more challenging to become aware of certain professional development opportunities because information tended to circulate through informal networks. By developing more inclusive and non-biased software, which take into consideration other aspects of differences such as nationality and gender, would probably increase the level of transparency in the workplace in all universities, where there are not clear methods of candidates’ selection for development opportunities. As a result, men and women would have equal opportunities in terms of career development training and promotions. However, from interviews with female academic staff across nine public universities, only two participants from two different universities have mentioned using specific software in order to compare applicants for professional training opportunities.

For all participants who work for the other seven public universities in this research sample, the process of access or being nominated for such opportunities is quite opaque. Various participants from seven different universities have stated or indirectly suggested that the best professional growth and development programmes might be secured for specific employees who have strong network relationship. Hence even the application of automated system may not solve the ongoing issues of equality of opportunities across gender/grades, as the final decision is made exclusively in the male section by high profile employees in spatial segregated workplace. The following are examples of female staff from different HE institutions, who approve that the nominations are made by their direct management team and are not necessarily selected by an automated system.

The teaching staff receive annual emails suggesting a variety of training opportunities to register and attend training courses and workshop. ...Top management set and oversee these training

opportunities which could influence the selection of applicants, as happened in few occasions before. (Yasmin, Participant 22, Lecturer at G university, 7 years' experience)

Teaching members are specifically contacted to join training workshops, both in person and remotely, which are organised by our university, mostly at the start of each semester. At national level training programs, few names are most likely to reserve places at such events, the criteria of selection process remains unclear. (Dalia, Participant 17, Assistant professor at D university, 13 years' experience).

As teaching staff, we are compulsorily required to enrol for training course and travel abroad to obtain postgraduate degree. However, the final decision about international universities and modes of study (full-time, part time, remote, in-person courses), we should apply for is mainly approved by our university president in the male section. a group of female fellows including myself spent 2 years trying to communicate with our university's president to suggest different universities where we would benefit the most in our field. (Dunya, Participant 28, Assistant professor at I university, 12 years' experience).

Administrative hierarchy is crucial in Saudi public universities, as all nominations and final candidates for training opportunities are approved by the head of the department and higher-level administrators. It happened on few occasions, when we were not informed about few training opportunities, then we were surprised when certain training places were already secured for specific names (fellow workers), probably because they have the support of the head of the department. (Ahlam, Participant 30, Deputy head of deanship at H university, 12 years' experience as an administrator)

The findings reveal a significant disparity in career development opportunities and highlight the influence of "brick wall" phenomena within the academic landscape of Saudi Arabia. The fact that the selection process for professional development opportunities remains unclear in most universities with whose staff the interviews were conducted points to a lack of transparency and inclusivity. This lack of clarity can contribute to perceptions of unfairness and can discourage staff from participating or investing in their career growth. Disparity is also witnessed in use of technology. Only a minority of universities are employing automated systems to compare applicants for professional training opportunities. This technological disparity might inadvertently create a divide in access to opportunities, further exacerbating the inequality (Alsubaie, and Jones, 2017).

Analysis of the interview quotes above reveals key insights into the disparities and challenges in accessing career development opportunities within Saudi Arabian higher education institutions. Firstly, Yasmin's response highlights a systemic issue in the dissemination of information about training opportunities. The lack of clarity and transparency in how these opportunities are communicated and allocated contributes to perceptions of unfairness. This lack of inclusivity is a barrier to staff investment in their own career growth, indicative of a 'brick wall' that hinders equal opportunity. Similarly, Dalia's experience points to the ambiguity surrounding the selection process for national level training programs. The mention of specific names being likely to reserve places suggests the existence of a bias, possibly influenced by networking or personal connections ('wasta'). This bias undermines the principles of meritocracy and equity, especially impacting those who may not have strong professional networks due to gender segregation or other factors. Dunya provides further insight into the hierarchical nature of decision-making processes within these institutions. The need for approval from higher-level management, even for study destinations, illustrates a centralisation of power that may not always consider individual preferences or professional development needs. This central control further entrenches the 'brick wall', creating invisible barriers to career advancement.

Ahlam's account of being uninformed about training opportunities resonates with a lack of transparency and potential favouritism in the selection process. The surprise

upon discovering that training places were secured for specific individuals, possibly due to their connections within the department, highlights the role of internal politics in professional development opportunities. Collectively, the above-mentioned experiences reflect a broader issue of unequal access to career advancement opportunities within Saudi Arabian higher education. The reliance on personal networks, hierarchical decision-making, and a lack of clear, equitable processes contribute to the perpetuation of gender disparities and obstruct the path to equitable professional growth.

Saudi universities might have created barriers for female academic in terms of equal development opportunities because of the organisational structure of these organisations. Therefore, the structural power in the Saudi university, where mostly male professors/managers maintain most of the decision-making power, might be considered as one of the factors that contributed to the disadvantage of female academics in the workplace. Moreover, there are other factors that exist at the HE workplace that might affect some groups of women among other female staff at the workplace such as the academic rank or the job grade at which they are already in, in the occupational structure. From the data, it appears that due to the requirements of higher-level positions, the employee's development agency tends to focus more on the category of higher-ranking employees by promoting many training opportunities for this group but not many for others. Sahar, who is an academic member and also works as Vice dean of supportive studies, stated:

My position requires me to learn additional skills, so I was able to join a number of leadership courses and gain some training on how to deal with employees and social communication skills. Because there are certain skills that cannot be learnt or developed simply by reading the job responsibilities list nor by the help of someone else at the work, it is essential for me to register in such opportunities to develop additional professional skills. (Participant 5, Assistant professor and Vice dean of deanship, 4 years' experience).

The above quote from Sahar suggests a positive experience of training provided by her employer. The availability and accessibility of these development opportunities

are crucial for female academics in advancing their careers, particularly those in senior positions because of the increased expectation from various stakeholders that those in leadership roles will continue to perform well and improve their performance. The fact that Sahar has been able to participate in multiple leadership courses and gain relevant training indicates that her institution provides professional development opportunities and that they value and encourage their staff to enhance their skills. Furthermore, the above quote also reflects positively on her institution's recognition of the importance of continuous learning, development and capacity building in the workplace. However, this positive experience must be viewed in context. While Sahar, had access to these training opportunities due to her higher-position role, it is important to note from earlier findings that such opportunities might not be equally available to women in all universities or to women in lower-level positions – a finding analysed further in the next section of this chapter. Participants who have managerial roles are usually receiving more extensive training opportunities and instant connection and direct communication with the senior management in comparison to more junior level employees.

The viewpoint of Hannah, a Vice Dean of the female section of the Business college, is consistent with that of Sahar, a vice dean of deanship, that being in a high-level position requires obtaining developmental roles that give the opportunity to improve their skills while in the job. Hannah, clarified:

When I became the Vice Dean of the College of Business, I admit that I didn't know much about administrative work as I spent 9 years researching and teaching only. It was a very useful experience as I joined many training opportunities to develop my skills such as problem solving and decision making. I also had many problems that my fellow vice dean may not have had in other colleges they run because I was running one of the largest colleges with the highest number of students and staff. Large size of the college did not necessarily come with higher human resource (staff), which meant I had to spend more time at work, negatively affecting my work-life balance. (Participant 14, VD of college, 12 years' experience)

Another one named Amal said:

I held a position of head of department before being promoted to my current position, when my former manager suggested I must sign to a 4 months intensive course in leadership skills. For her to be able to raise my CV to the university's president as potential for the vacant position of Vice Dean of the college. Thanks to my manager and her reference, I'm now happily holding the position which I have always aspired to. (Participant 19, VD of college, 5 years' experience)

From all three participants above (Sahar, Hannah, and Amal), it appears that they receive a number of professional development opportunities from the top management as the new positions requires higher skills in terms of managing colleges with high staff members and students. Hannah, interview comment demonstrates how the distinct challenges and responsibilities of higher-level positions, in this case as the Vice Dean of a large college, can provide accelerated learning opportunities and professional growth for women in academia. This experience reflects a situation in which on-the-job learning is accelerated due to the necessity of their role. Hannah was required to learn and adapt quickly due to the underlying demands of her role, which she acknowledges was quite different from her previous experiences within research and teaching. Hannah's role required problem-solving and decision-making skills, which were developed through her participation in training opportunities.

The unique challenges she faced in leading a large educational institution with a high number of students and staff also would have contributed significantly to her learning experience. This finding highlights that when women are given opportunities to occupy higher-level positions, they not only gain access to formal training and skill development programs, but also benefit from the practical learning that arises from tackling the complexities and challenges inherent in these roles. This experiential learning can be incredibly valuable in promoting resilience, adaptability, and leadership skills (Alwedinani, 2017). However, it should be noted that while these experiences offer invaluable learning opportunities, they can also impose additional pressures and demands on the individuals in these roles. For instance, Amal, a VD

with 5 years of experience, highlighted that she had to pay considerable attention to ensure she managed her work-life balance effectively and gave sufficient time to her family. As a result, the institutional support structures need to be robust enough to provide assistance and resources that can help these women succeed in their roles without undue stress. The challenge around work-life balance is also witnessed in Sahar's quote above, who is a VD of Deanship with 5 years' experience: "Large size of the college did not necessarily come with higher human resource (staff), which meant I had to spend more time at work, negatively affecting my work-life balance." Further analysis of work-life balance are analysed and discussed further later in (7.5.1).

The act of focusing on female employees in higher-level positions might be because of the recent decision of the Saudi government to concentrate on empowering highly skilled women especially in the field of higher education (Ministry of education, 2022), as confirmed by one of the interviewees that Ministry of Education has provided specific instructions to the educational institutions to focus on empowering female leaders. The interview finding highlights that members of senior management in public universities in Saudi Arabia might tend to focus more on the professional development of female candidates that are already in positions of leadership maybe at the expense of academic members who might not hold major administrative roles. In the below quote Rania was explicit indicating that senior management members focus more on the advancement of higher-level female staff:

The Agency of Quality and Development offers many training programs for university staff, and of course the priority in nomination for these programs is always given to deans, vice-deans and heads of departments. (Participant 13, Assistant professor and VD of a college, 4 years' experience).

The above-mentioned finding regarding the excessive focus on professional development of female candidates already in leadership roles at the expense of their counterparts in middle-management or junior roles (in academic or administrative positions) is not unique to the educational institutions in Saudi Arabia. For instance, Caffrey et al. (2016) in the study of gender equity programmes in academic medicine

in the UK higher education institutions studied the effectiveness of Athena SWAN programme. The Athena SWAN programme has evolved from the work undertaken by SWAN (Scientific Women's Academic Network) and Athena Project with an emphasis on advancing the career of women in academic institutions in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine (STEMM). By conducting 25 hours of ethnographic observations of the gender equality committee meetings and undertaking 16 in-depth interviews with the Heads of Departments, Caffrey et al. (2016) noted that several factors reduced the effectiveness of Athena SWAN programme in promoting gender equity in academia. Gender inequity was exacerbated through the fact that the excessive focus of Athena SWAN programme was on women in higher education institutions who already hold a leadership role. In addition, as those women in middle-management level spent disproportionately more time related to Athena SWAN programme work, it negatively impacted their career progression because of limited available time to fulfil their job responsibilities.

Interestingly, Caffrey et al. (2016) noted through the ethnography and interviews that researchers and academics early in their career experienced challenges in accessing the initiatives of Athena SWAN programme, which highlights the limited effectiveness of Athena SWAN programme in truly promoting gender equity at all levels of higher education institutions. A similar finding regarding the limited training, development and mentorship opportunities available for mid-management level women and those in junior roles is confirmed in the United States (Derks et al., 2016). The findings highlight the existence of broader patterns in educational institutions not only in Saudi Arabia but also the West. The comparison between Saudi Arabia and Western educational institutions, as observed in studies by Caffrey et al. (2016) and Derks et al. (2016), reveals a shared failure in adequately addressing gender equity across all levels of academic hierarchy. Both regions exhibit a pattern where significant support and development opportunities are concentrated at the upper echelons, primarily benefiting women in leadership roles. This approach creates a dichotomy within institutions, leading to a training and development gap whereby women in senior positions receive considerable support, while those in mid-management or junior roles face limited access to training, mentorship, and development programs. It potentially creates succession issues if middle and junior managers' career development is overlooked. This discrepancy also signifies a

fundamental issue in gender equality initiatives: the focus is often skewed towards visible leadership positions, neglecting the nuanced needs of women at different career stages and in varied roles. Such an approach undermines the broader goal of gender equity by perpetuating existing disparities within the academic workforce.

The finding of Derks et al. (2016) is supported by Tatli et al. (2017) whose case study on gender equality in China uncovered that organisations often avoid taking responsibility for gender equality, attributing issues instead to broader market forces and individual actions. This avoidance is facilitated by making gender inequality less visible, framing it as legitimate within the current system, and enforcing norms that discourage questioning the status quo. Essentially, market-driven and individual-focused explanations allow organizations to sidestep accountability for gender disparities. For genuine gender equality, it is imperative that interventions are holistic and intersectional, recognizing and addressing the diverse challenges faced by women across all levels of academia. This means considering factors beyond gender, such as rank, career stage, and nationality, to create a more inclusive and equitable academic environment. This alignment with intersectional feminist approaches is essential for truly dismantling systemic barriers and ensuring equitable opportunities for all women in academia.

Although the emphasis on empowering women in leadership positions is undoubtedly a positive step, it may also inadvertently create a division between women in senior and other managerial positions in higher education institutions: those in leadership roles who are provided with extensive development opportunities, and those in lower-level positions who are left to navigate their career advancement with limited institutional and professional support. It is therefore critical to consider the potential ramifications of such patterns and to ensure that gender equality interventions are inclusive and considerate of women at all career stages. This would also align with intersectional feminist approaches which consider not just gender, but also factors such as rank, career stage, nationality, and other categories of difference in understanding and addressing gender inequality in the workplace (Collins 2015; Dy et al., 2017). Later in this chapter, the professional support for staff members in lower ranks and positions will be discussed in further detail.

The support received by those workers in the position of increased responsibility is not limited to the training opportunities, as confirmed in the interviews. Instead, it also continues to allow and facilitate direct communication with employees from senior management in the male campus with regards to the work-related tasks, issues and enquiries. In contrast, the same opportunities may not necessarily be available to the employees in junior positions. Abrar, an assistant professor, was assigned the position of Deputy Head of a department for around two years before moving on to another managerial role in the same university. Abrar reported:

My direct manager is the Dean of employees' affairs (her formal mentor), who provides me with continuous support, whether academic or administrative. He also supports my opinions and ideas and encourages me. Even when I have a specific objection in a work-related matter, he will contact the university's Vice President to facilitate booking an appointment for me to discuss any work-related issue. (Participant 16, Head of unit in male and female section, 3 years' experience).

Abrar, had an unpleasant experience as Deputy Head of her department and moved due to her dissatisfaction with the way her work affairs were being managed by the male Head of Department. she explained that members of the senior management, who were all in the male section, responded to her appeals and after few months she was assigned as a head of the University Development Centre of both the male and female sections. Abrar expressed her satisfaction with how the leadership team dealt with the situation when she disagreed with the attitude of her direct manager in her previous position.

Abrar's experience is interesting in several important key ways. Her response highlights the vital role that supportive mentors or senior colleagues can play in an individual's career progression. Her Dean, serving as a formal mentor, did not only provide support in terms of tasks and responsibilities, but also acted as a champion for her ideas and ensured her concerns were heard by higher authorities. This form of mentorship can be pivotal in enabling women's career advancement, particularly in patriarchal structures where women often face additional barriers (Havril, 2018). It also showcases gender dynamics in play in senior positions. Abrar's narrative

underscores some of the complex gender dynamics at play in higher education institutions. Her dissatisfaction with her male superior and the subsequent action taken by senior management illustrates the potential tensions that can arise from the gendered power dynamics within these institutions. However, the positive resolution also shows that these structures can be challenged. The manner in which Abrar's situation was handled by the senior management also speaks to the potential for institutional support and intervention in facilitating women's mobility and job satisfaction within the university. This kind of responsive, supportive leadership could be a key factor in promoting gender equity in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. Finally, Abrar moved to a position where she oversees both male and female sections of the University Development Centre signal a shift in traditional gendered hierarchies. It suggests that while these patriarchal structures are still prevalent, there are also ongoing shifts and negotiations taking place.

The type of communication that senior employees have with higher management occurs interactively and continuously. Some situations need immediate response from top management and that is what Raghad, a Deputy Head of Curricula and Education Technologies Department and teaching member, confirmed:

I communicate directly with the senior management of the college in which I work easily via e-mail or WhatsApp. Sometimes I go through difficult circumstances that do not allow me to meet my deadlines. sometimes urgent department meeting occurred during my teaching classes that prevents me from attending, so fellow workers reach out to me to reschedule meetings and deadlines or delegate some tasks. (Participant 15, Assistant professor with 12 years' experience in teaching and 5 years as Deputy head of department).

Another quote by Aseel, a Director a College of Administration, which highlights disparity in interaction and communication opportunities between senior and junior staff in higher education institutions is:

From my experience I have instant interaction and effective communication with line manager. I also have positive relationships with my colleagues at

work in general, which may make few colleagues reach out to me to facilitate communication with our college's leaders.(Participant 26, administrative, 7 years as Director of a College Administration).

A key point emerging from these observations is the significant disparity in communication and interaction opportunities between senior and junior staff within higher education institutions. Looking at Raghad's experience and the other ten participants in senior managerial roles confirm having direct and prioritised access to senior management, underscoring a clear advantage in their professional environment. This direct line of communication facilitates more immediate responses to challenges, flexible rescheduling of commitments, and a smoother delegation of tasks, greatly enhancing their ability to navigate work responsibilities effectively. In contrast, such consistent support and accessible communication channels with higher management appear to be less prevalent or even absent for those in lower positions. This discrepancy not only highlights a hierarchical divide in organisational communication but also potentially impacts the career progression and professional development opportunities for junior staff. Those in senior roles benefit from a more robust support system, stronger professional networks, and greater visibility within the institution, all of which are crucial for career advancement. Meanwhile, employees in lower ranks may find themselves navigating their roles with limited guidance and support, potentially impeding their growth and development within the academic sphere.

The support from senior management for women in higher positions is not limited to specific nationalities. Women from different backgrounds, who hold advanced qualifications, are promoted to hold various senior positions while working in Saudi universities. Other participants came to Saudi Arabia searching for senior roles, due to the very high level of competition in this sector in their home country. Egypt, for example, has many prestigious universities in the Arab region and Saudi students used to travel to Egypt to pursue their education. Taking into account the intense competition among employees in universities in Egypt, some employees moved to Saudi Arabia where there are more opportunities to advance their position. Suzanne, a professor from Egypt, obtained her qualifications in Egypt, where she taught for six years in Egypt before moving to Saudi Arabia. She worked for another 15 years in Saudi higher education and shared the following:

When I came to Saudi I was the first female employee who holds professor degree in the female campus in A university which allows me to occupy the most senior positions in the female campus. I worked as the director of the academic affairs in the female section, I worked as a senior coordinator at the education school in addition to many managerial roles over the past 15 years. (Participant 7, Egyptian, professor and head of a language centre, 15 years' experience in Saudi HE)

Also Latifah, an assistant professor from Sudan, added:

I mainly teach in the female campus, and I work as an advisor to the management of our college in the male section. I have positive professional contacts with the senior team, which gave me excellent opportunities to collaborate with more advanced colleagues and soon will be promoted as associate professor. (Participant 21, Sudanese, Assistant professor, 4 years' experience in Saudi HE)

A finding emerging from the two interview quotes, consistent with the earlier evidence is the significant role that seniority and professional connections play in career advancement within Saudi higher education, particularly for women. Suzanne, an Egyptian professor, highlights the unique opportunities and senior managerial roles she accessed due to being the first female professor on her campus. Her senior position allowed her to occupy prominent roles and exert considerable influence within the university. This suggests that being in a position of responsibility can open doors to significant career advancement and leadership opportunities in academia. Latifah's experience, an assistant professor from Sudan, further illustrates the importance of professional relationships in career progression. As Latifah, a Sudanese assistant professor, her active advisory role and positive professional contacts with the senior management team have not only facilitated collaborations with more experienced colleagues but are also paving the way for her promotion. These experiences collectively illustrate how establishing strong professional networks and being in influential positions can critically impact the career trajectories of women in Saudi Arabian higher education, providing them with enhanced opportunities for

professional growth and advancement. The experiences of interviewees in junior positions will be discussed in the next section.

In recently established universities in small cities in Saudi Arabia there are multiple prospects for work advancements, confirmed by 25% of the interviewees. Suzanne is working in recently established university, where the competition is lower to work in senior positions, as a candidate with professor ranking. Being an academic with advanced qualification has helped Suzanne to hold multiple senior positions in the university she works for, as she remains in continuous communication with the top management. The advantage of having a close relationship with top management in the male campus, which has full authority of decision making, might have empowered women in senior position more than academics from other employment categories. The data show that female staff in higher administrative positions tend to have better experience than women in lower positions in terms of formal support and promotions. The above-mentioned excerpt provides several insightful perspectives on how seniority, communication with higher management and the type of institution can influence the experiences and advancement of women in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. First is the ease of communication. The importance of direct and rapid communication with senior management, improved by the role of technology is highlighted in Raghad's experience, the assistant professor and deputy head of department. Her ability to swiftly address and resolve potential conflicts between administrative duties and teaching responsibilities through email or WhatsApp illustrates the support given to higher-position employees and the flexibility of management. This type of accessibility to decision-makers could significantly ease the burden associated with balancing the multiple roles and responsibilities for women in academia.

The second is the career opportunities available to the foreign academics in Saudi Arabia. The case of Suzanne , an Egyptian professor, highlights the benefits foreign academics may find in Saudi universities, especially in the context of intense competition in their home countries. The case of Suzanne the Egyptian professor and Latifah the Sudanese assistant professor, experiences suggest that foreign women academics with advanced qualifications can also find significant opportunities for

career advancement in Saudi Arabia. It also illustrates how factors such as the age of the university and its location can impact career advancement opportunities. In Suzanne, the Egyptian professor, and Latifah, the Sudanese assistant professor, being at a recently established university in a small city, where competition for senior positions is relatively low, has allowed her to hold multiple senior positions. This is an interesting finding which suggests newer or smaller universities may present unique opportunities for women's career advancement, especially if the women hold relevant qualifications and experience. The findings also suggest that women in higher administrative positions may receive more formal support and better opportunities for promotion. This disparity reflects broader patterns of inequality within academia and underlines the need for more targeted efforts to support career advancement for women in less senior roles.

5.2.2 Female staff in early career academic roles

The chapter now focuses on analysis of the viewpoint of female staff in lower level positions within universities. The type of direct communication with top management members and support seems to be limited to female academics in senior administrative roles, as uncovered in the previous section. Academics with the same rank as assistant professors, or lower ranks such as lecturers who have no administrative roles, do not have the same route of direct communication and support from the top management. In this chapter, the term 'support' is used to refer not only to the formal support in the form of training and development for promotional opportunities but also support offered to staff members to help them deal with any issues that occur in the workplace.

Women academic in this study appear to report a lack of direct communication with the senior management, and the formal support seems to be narrowed to training courses and workshops. For example, female academics should report any issues, requests, and complaints to the Deputy Head of the department, who might raise the enquiry to the Head of the Department depending on the issue, and whether it is within their remit to make decisions or if they need the Head of Department to make it for them. Raya, is Saudi teaching assistant at a public university, who has been researching and teaching in higher education for 13 years. Over the past 13 years,

Raya has held roles in a group of committees in the college, and pointed out the following:

Financial support is available from senior management to fund scientific research. However, there is an apparent bias toward specific names in the university. Certainly, there are those who receive this funding on the basis of merit and eligibility, and they are few. If you want to contest certain decisions, you must be aware of the laws and regulations and have solid evidence for your argument when you speak with the Deputy Head of the department. I've always objected to the presence of female deputies in departments, as there was no such thing in the female section before the decision to empower women. The presence of a female Deputy Head of department adds an unnecessary administrative level and thus any request will take a longer time to process and require an additional step before having direct communication with the Head of Department or the top management of the college. (participant 17, Assistant professor with 13 years' experience in teaching).

The above excerpt provides an interesting perspective on how organisational structure and perceived biases can have implications for the experiences of academic staff in higher education institutions. Raya, comments about financial support for scientific research indicate a perception of favouritism towards certain individuals. It potentially undermines a sense of fairness and meritocracy within the educational institution based on Raya's comments, highlighting that she perceives favouritism as unfair, which raises doubts regarding meritocracy of the institution. It signifies the importance of transparency and equity in the allocation of research funding and other resources. Raya also expresses dissatisfaction with the addition of a new administrative level (the female Deputy Head of department) within the organisation's structure. This issue is not so much about gender, but more about the bureaucracy and delays in communication and decision-making associated with the introduction of an extra administrative layer, as emphasised by the above Participant. Despite the apparent goal of this change - to empower women - Raya perceives it as adding unnecessary complexity to the administrative process, thus highlighting the potential unintended consequences of organisational change within higher education institution.

Furthermore, Raya comment also reveals a discrepancy in the communication channels available to different staff members based on their position. Unlike their colleagues in senior administrative roles, academic staff members like Raya have to go through several levels of administration before their concerns can be addressed by senior management. This can lead to delays and a sense of disconnection from the decision-making process. Overall, while the institution may be taking steps to increase gender representation in its administrative structure, the way these changes are implemented can have unexpected effects on staff experiences. In this case, the creation of a new administrative level, while well-intentioned, has led to perceived inefficiencies and communication barriers, as confirmed by Raya during the interview. This highlights the importance of considering the practical implications of such changes, and of involving staff at all levels in the decision-making process to ensure that changes are beneficial for all.

Raya explained how the established process of decision-making works in that university and the steps that must be followed when submitting a request or enquiry to the administration in the college in which she works. Prior to the emphasis on female empowerment from the Government of Saudi Arabia witnessed through initiatives such as Qiyadyat Platform, it was easier to communicate with higher management due to limited layers of management. After the announcement of the female empowerment plan, every managerial position in the female campus should be occupied by female academics, which was not the case before. Nevertheless, there is still poor representation of women in senior positions and the majority of women are occupying deputy positions to male managers, even on the female campus. Adding another administrative level to the university's hierarchy will widen the gap between employees and management, as the final decision in many cases should be made by top management, meaning the male colleagues. In contrast, female deputies seem to be individuals that pass female employees' demands on to the senior management in male sections.

The above analysis is an interesting example of how a well-intentioned policy designed to empower women can have unintended negative consequences. The decision by the Saudi government to mandate that every managerial position in the

female campus be occupied by female academics was clearly aimed at promoting gender equality and representation. However, the practical implementation of this policy appears to have led to some unintended consequences. The first unintended consequence is the creation of bureaucratic layers. By mandating that every managerial position in the female campus be occupied by a woman, an additional layer of management has been introduced, specifically the female deputies. This has resulted in increased bureaucracy, making the decision-making process more complex and potentially slowing down decision-making within the organisation. The second unintended consequence is limited decision-making authority/ power. Despite holding managerial positions, the female deputies do not appear to have significant decision-making power. According to Raya's, the assistant professor with 13 years' experience in academia, comments in the interview, they primarily act as intermediaries, passing on requests from female employees to male senior management. This creates a perception that the female deputies are simply conduits for communication rather than empowered decision-makers in their own right.

The third unintended consequence or a lack of timely progress on policy implementation is continued poor representation of women in the senior roles. Although the intention of the policy was to increase female representation in management, the outcome has been that women are mostly occupying deputy positions, while men continue to hold senior positions. This could lead to development of a perception that women are being appointed to managerial roles in the name only, without receiving actual decision-making authority. Finally, another noteworthy unintended consequence uncovered through the interviews is the addition of this extra layer of management has resulted in a larger gap between regular employees and top management. Employees are now further removed from decision-making processes, which can lead to feelings of disconnection and decreased morale. The findings illustrate the importance of considering the practical implications of policy decisions. While a policy introduced by the Saudi policymakers (such as Qiyadyat Platform and Tamheer Program) may be intended to promote empowerment and equality, the way it is implemented can significantly influence its impact. It underscores the need for careful planning and consultation in the development of such policies, to ensure they effectively promote gender equality and do not inadvertently create new barriers or inefficiencies.

Eleven female academic members interviewed reported that they could benefit from further assistance and support regarding work tasks they are asked to do. Specifically, teaching assistants, who are also known as demonstrators in the Saudi education system, must have a bachelor's degree; usually, they graduated top of their class and are employed directly after their graduation as part of the Saudi universities' program of attracting distinguished competences in education and scientific research (World Education, 2020). Amira, who is 28 years old, has worked as a demonstrator in a recently established university for three years; stated:

There is no formal support and no clear guidance on university policies for newly hired employees. Also, there is no training program directed at this category of employees because development opportunities are either very rare; if they exist, they are heavily promoted at the same time without a consideration of our teaching hours and teaching requirement. Additionally, my teaching schedule is so full that it is difficult to take advantage of these opportunities without sacrificing some classroom time.
(Participant 9, Saudi, 28 years old, demonstrator, 4 years' experience)

Next participant, Ahlam, shared their experience in the past as newly employed in lower positions staff before promoted to higher position:

I was an employee on contract for five years before I become permanently employed to current position, and we were almost treated as an insignificant group of employees. We were given administrative paperwork that was not within our job description, also tasks that no fellow staff would rather do for example opening mail envelopes.
(Participant 30 Saudi, 37 years old, Deputy Head of deanship, bachelor's degree, 5 years as junior employee in the past).

Other Saudi and non-Saudi participants in junior positions, who have no major administrative roles, confirmed the lack of formal guidance, irrelevant training, and random tasks at work, witnessed through the following:

At first when I got my job, our head of department used to ask me to print forms, exam papers, and do other administrator responsibilities for her, on top of my schedule which is a total of 18 hours of teaching. (Layla, Participant 18, Saudi, 30 years, Demonstrator, bachelor's degree, 2 years' experience).

Technicians mostly do not receive relevant training opportunities such as new laboratory technology, the few training courses we join are whether outdated or repeated. The problem is I'm not certain if our demands of advanced training opportunities and better pays are delivered to the higher management in the male section. (Noura, Participant 25, Saudi, 35 years old, Laboratory technician, bachelor's degree, 9 years' experience).

... My husband works at the male's section and because of his experience in the Saudi higher education, I was able to avoid many wired situations and had knowledge about the work process and standers. I knew few colleagues who face challenges when they have been just hired due to lack of knowledge. (Aisha, Participant 3, Jordanian/American, 32 years old, Lecture, master's degree, 5 years' experience)

A finding emerging from these interviews is the disparity in training and support offered to staff in early careers compared to their counterparts in senior roles within Saudi Arabian higher education institutions. Participants in early careers, irrespective of their nationality, consistently report a lack of relevant and structured training, as well as being tasked with duties that do not align with their primary roles or professional development needs. For instance, Layla, a Saudi Demonstrator, highlights being assigned administrative tasks unrelated to her teaching responsibilities. This indicates a misalignment between her role and the tasks she is expected to perform, reflecting a lack of formal role definition and structured support. Similarly, Noura, a Saudi Laboratory Technician, points out the absence of relevant training opportunities, such as those in new laboratory technology, which are essential for her professional growth and efficacy in her role.

As a foreigner, I have not had enough formal support at the beginning of my time here at the university. There are surely many training opportunities such as time management skills, but no specific training sessions, that are essential and accurately designed for newly employed. For example knowing more about our rights and responsibilities at the workplace. (Nadia, participant 12, Indian, 36 years old, Demonstrator, bachelor's degree, 4 years' experience).

Looking at the excerpt by Nadia, an Indian national, illustrates the lack of specifically tailored training for beginners, which is crucial for understanding rights and responsibilities in the workplace. She mentioned: “...*no specific training sessions, that are essential and accurately designed for newly employed*”. This lack of guidance is especially challenging for foreign employees, who may also need to navigate cultural differences. Furthermore, Aisha, a Jordanian/American Lecturer, acknowledges the advantage she had due to her husband's experience in the Saudi higher education system, suggesting that informal networks and personal connections play a significant role in navigating the workplace. These experiences collectively reveal a gap in the support system for lower-ranked staff, where training and guidance are either generic, outdated, or misaligned with their actual job requirements. This disparity potentially hampers the professional development and overall job satisfaction of these employees, impacting their career progression within the academic sector.

Newly employed staff (irrespective of their nationality) seem to have a lack of knowledge about the university's policies and regulations, such as employee's rights and responsibilities and the financial support that employees might be eligible for. The vagueness of the basics of their job could have a negative impact on the academics' annual evaluation report. In addition, teaching assistants being unclear about their rights and responsibilities as newly employed might result in them being assigned additional work-related tasks that should be carried out by colleagues in administration or other academic members. This finding reveals a significant gap in the onboarding process and ongoing support for newly hired academic employees,

particularly teaching assistants or demonstrators, in Saudi universities. The absence of structured orientation or onboarding programs for new hires, which should ideally include thorough explanations of university policies, employees' rights, and responsibilities, could lead to confusion and misunderstandings. This can negatively impact job performance and job satisfaction.

Additionally, without proper guidance, new hires may not be fully aware of their eligibility for various supports, such as financial assistance, offered by the university. The research also highlights an issue where development opportunities are not thoughtfully scheduled to accommodate teaching hours and requirements, which makes it challenging for these staff to participate. This shows a lack of consideration for the actual working conditions and responsibilities of teaching assistants. It is also reflective of the potential for newly hired employees to be exploited. Without a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, newly hired employees may be tasked with additional work beyond their job description, which could result in exploitation and burnout, eventually contributing to an increase in employee absenteeism and turnover (Jung and Kim, 2012). What is particularly interesting about these findings is they underscore the significance of communication in successfully implementing equality policies and gender initiatives. Even if a university has policies in place to promote gender equality and support women staff, these policies cannot be effective unless they are communicated clearly to all staff members. Further, these findings suggest that efforts to support women in academia should not only focus on those in higher positions but also on those at the entry level or in early career stages. Ensuring that all staff have access to professional development opportunities, clear guidance on policies, and a fair workload can help to create a more supportive and equitable workplace.

The data shows that demonstrators/teaching assistants usually suffer from an overwhelming workload, which in turn impacts the professional development of their career because of limited time available to dedicate to professional development activities. Teaching assistants being occupied with long hours of teaching as well as advising and assessing students seems to be an obstacle that prevents them from joining in with training opportunities. Five participants who work as a teaching assistants in a recently established university confirmed that the lack of support and

guidance from management in the university has caused some confusion at work. The findings show a lack of formal support or guidance during the early stages of employment. Also, another two participants also reported that they had not been involved in any type of training courses or workshops during their employment at that university.

The above-mentioned finding of the interviewees could be examined with reference to the gendered division of labour due to its significance in the context of this study and repeated occurrence of the theme in interviews. The gendered division of labour refers to the allocation of different roles and responsibilities to men and women, often based on stereotypical conceptions of gender (Kreimer, 2004). It is a sociological concept that acknowledges how work is divided along gender lines, both in the household as well as in the workforce (Breene and Cooke, 2005). This division often leads to women being given roles that are less valued, lower paid, or involve more unpaid work, such as care work, while men are often assigned roles that have higher status, better compensation, and more opportunities for career advancement. In academia, the gendered division of labour is often manifested in the way that women, especially those at lower grades, are disproportionately tasked with teaching, advising, and administrative duties. Carrigan et al. (2011, p. 131) refer to this concept as "academic housekeeping" whereby such tasks are often time-consuming and undervalued in comparison to research, which is usually more prestigious and more likely to lead to career advancement. The interview findings support the pattern of gendered division of labour witnessed in the Western context. For instance, Misra et al. (2012) examined the gender, work time and caring responsibilities at University of Massachusetts, U.S. and noted that female faculty members spent significantly more time on teaching and service than their male counterparts, which in turn limited their research productivity.

The findings in the Saudi Arabian context align with the global pattern of gendered division of labour in academia, suggesting that female faculty members, particularly those in early careers, are often burdened with disproportionate teaching, advising, and administrative responsibilities, known as "academic housekeeping" (Carrigan et al., 2011, p. 131). This division results in women engaging less in research activities,

which are critical for career advancement and prestige in academia. The implication is that even within a distinct cultural and institutional context like Saudi Arabia, the pattern of gendered labour division persists, potentially hindering the professional growth of women in academia and reinforcing existing gender disparities in career progression and recognition.

Guarino and Borden (2017) reinforced this by confirming that women in academia carry a heavier teaching and service load than men, which could potentially hamper their career progression. Based on the response the interviewees mentioned above, it appears that the significant workload of teaching is serving as a barrier to their professional development. The overwhelming workload prevents them from participating in training opportunities, which is essential for their career progression and skills enhancement. This unequal division of labour contributes to gender inequality in academia, as it limits the ability of women to engage in research and other career-advancing activities, while also placing them under considerable strain and stress. Moreover, the lack of support and guidance from the management can exacerbate these challenges. Without adequate induction and ongoing professional development, these teaching assistants may struggle to navigate the academic environment and may even feel alienated. Therefore, it's crucial to address these issues not only for the sake of gender equality but also for the well-being and professional development of female academic staff.

The analysis illustrates that workers in junior roles, specifically teaching assistants as exemplified by the above participants, often find themselves burdened with substantial teaching loads. This includes preparing for classes, delivering lectures, marking assignments, advising students, and other related responsibilities. The nature of these tasks is such that they are time-consuming and often extend beyond the typical working hours. This workload directly impacts their professional development in multiple ways. First, the excessive teaching responsibilities leave them with limited time to pursue activities that are critical for their career progression. These activities include research, publishing papers, attending conferences, or participating in professional development workshops and training sessions. Second, the focus on teaching and service tasks at the expense of research might also impact their prospects

for promotion, as research output is often a significant factor in academic promotions. This is a key aspect of the gendered division of labour in academia, where research is often viewed as more prestigious and is thus typically more valued when considering promotions or tenure (Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022). The findings indicate a significant gendered division of labour in academia, especially impacting women in junior roles like teaching assistants. Their substantial teaching loads and associated responsibilities limit their time for research, a key factor for career progression and academic promotion. This scenario reinforces gender inequality within Saudi academic institutions, as research is more valued for career advancement but remains less accessible to women burdened with excessive teaching duties. Consequently, it constrains the professional development of female academics, contributing to the underrepresentation of women in senior academic and research-oriented positions in Saudi Arabia.

On the contrary, Sarah, also a Lecturer at a prestigious university in Saudi Arabia; reported the following:

There are many internal and external training opportunities. Internal opportunities are organised by the department or college or nominated by the university administration, which is responsible for training and development. As for external training opportunities, they depend largely on professional relations; if you know someone powerful (people with a higher position or a higher rank), they can nominate you to the organisers of the event, so you will have a greater chance of taking place in an academic event. (Participant 23, Saudi, 28 years old, Lecture, master's degree, 1 year of experience in HE)

Participant 23 is working in one of the well-established universities which is located in the central region of Saudi. She confirmed that a variety of skill-developing courses and workshops are available for academic members where she works. However, Sarah indicated that some external career development opportunities could be allocated to candidates who have a professional relationship with the event's organiser or academics with higher positions. Therefore, there will probably be some bias towards employees who have strong professional relationships, at the expense of new employees or those who do not have relationships with academics in certain fields.

Participant 23's response highlights the significant role of "Wasta" in professional advancement within Saudi academia, a system where personal connections and influence play a pivotal role. This network is inherently gendered, often disadvantaging women, particularly those new to academia or lacking connections with influential figures. Women might find it challenging to access these networks due to societal norms or limited opportunities to build influential relationships. Consequently, women may face obstacles in accessing career development opportunities and formal support, which are more readily available to their male counterparts or those within the influential network. This gendered networking dynamic hinders equal opportunities for women's career advancement in academia.

The notion of "professional relations" in the context of Saudi is limited to association with academics in senior positions who have some influence in the academic field. Professional relationships are quite different from informal networking among colleagues in academia; the common name for it is "Wasta" (Abalkhail Jouharah and Allan, 2016). Wasta is limited to a group of people which give those people an advantage over others in academia; the latter group would probably have unequal opportunities accessing training programmes and have formal support. Participants tended to speak about informal support from colleagues and family members when asked about support in the workplace. Ghadah, an academic member and a lecturer in another prestigious university, answered the following when she was asked "who is supporting you in your career?":

In the department that I work in, there is a great cooperation between work colleagues, especially between faculty members, as they always encourage me to complete my PhD study. The Deputy Head of department is understanding and always willing to help and advise every employee in our department. (Participant 29, Saudi, 30 years old, Lecturer, master's degree, 6 years' experience).

Maria, demonstrators from the Philippines who is currently working in Saudi Arabia, was also asked "who is supporting you in your career?", shared:

When I started my work here, many colleagues were willing to help me understand how work is managed, what is acceptable what is not in terms of culture at the work place. ... it is not formal mentoring, but more casual relationship. (Participant 11, Filipino, 44years old, Demonstrator, 4 years' experience in Saudi HE)

The concept of informal networks and their impact on gender equality is an extensively studied area. Informal networks are acknowledged as important resources that can impact career progression. The presence of strong informal networks can create opportunities, facilitate knowledge sharing, foster mentorship relationships, and provide social support (McGuire, 2002). However, research has also highlighted the gendered nature of informal networks, where men often have access to more powerful and resourceful networks than women and senior workforce (men or women) enjoy a better access to the network than their junior counterparts in the organisation (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2014). This can lead to unequal career advancement opportunities, contributing to gender inequality in the workplace (Wreyford, 2015). In academia, this can be particularly significant as strong networks can facilitate access to research opportunities, co-authorship, mentorship, and professional development opportunities, all of which are critical for career advancement (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2010).

In the Saudi context, as indicated by Sarah, a Saudi Lecturer, a specific form of networking called "Wasta" is prevalent. This cultural phenomenon is based on using personal networks and influence to gain advantages, often linked to people in higher positions or ranks. It can be seen as a form of social capital that can have a significant impact on one's career progression. However, like informal networks in other contexts, Wasta can lead to unequal opportunities and reinforce existing power dynamics and hierarchies (Alsarhan et al., 2021). For instance, new employees or those without established relationships with influential academics might find themselves at a disadvantage. Ghadah comments, the Saudi lecturer working for a prestigious university, further illustrate the importance of informal support in the workplace, where cooperation and encouragement from colleagues can be pivotal for career advancement. In her case, this seems to create a supportive environment that

encourages her to pursue further studies and career progression. It shows how a positive informal network can contribute to an individual's career development and job satisfaction. However, while informal support can be beneficial, it does not serve as a replacement for formal support structures and policies that ensure fair opportunities for all employees. This is especially true in academic settings where formal mentorship programs, equitable distribution of resources, and clear and fair promotion criteria are crucial for fostering gender equality. These observations highlight the significance of fostering both formal and informal support structures in academic institutions and the need for policies that ensure fair access to career advancement opportunities. They also highlight the unique cultural context of Saudi Arabia and how local practices such as *Wasta* can impact the career progression and experiences of academic staff.

Academics in junior ranks always refer to colleagues and sometimes their direct managers as the individuals who offer help and support in the workplace. The support is usually informal support, such as moral support, advice, and responding to work-related enquiries. Prestigious universities have various professional development opportunities for their staff members, such as teaching strategies for staff members, creative thinking seminars, using technology in teaching, skills for online teaching, communication skills and quality management training. These training workshops and courses are promoted to all employees at the start of each academic semester, but this is not the case in recently established universities where training opportunities are rare or not available to all academics due to their workloads, as confirmed by three interviewees.

The majority of the interviewees confirmed that they have formal and informal support in the workplace despite their nationality. Formal support includes internal and external professional skills development and direct communication and support from higher management. Academics with senior positions seem to have a better chance of securing more training opportunities and direct communication with male staff in senior positions in the male campus. Ongoing communication with higher management facilitated the career progression of females with regard to advancing to higher positions or running for several administrative positions. In addition, it

provides further assistance to senior academics, who might appeal to certain behaviours made by specific individuals or disagree with decisions made by the management. In general, most of the 30 female staff who were interviewed have access to internal and external training opportunities but not formal mentoring. Internal opportunities could be organised by relevant departments, divisions, colleges or the university's training and development administration, whereas external training opportunities are usually organised by third parties such as the Ministry of Education, labour office in the Ministry of Labour, or relevant higher education agencies. These third parties organise academic events and training courses, where participants can attend the events at their local university or nationally, especially in the largest cities of Saudi that have well-established public universities.

Travelling abroad is considered a requirement in academia, in order to attend international academic events to build international networks in order to exchange knowledge and experiences. The professional mobility and career opportunities available to women in higher education industry are discussed in the next chapter, with an emphasis on international mobility as well as the daily work-related mobility.

5.3 Conclusion

The research has highlighted various aspects of the career development of women in academia within the sociocultural context of Saudi Arabia, bringing to light both significant progress and challenges that are yet to be overcome. Saudi higher education institutions are making progress to support the career development of women through frequent training opportunities. These efforts are breaking down traditional patriarchal norms by equipping women with leadership skills, thereby facilitating their rise to senior roles. However, these opportunities for advancement are not equally distributed, as evidenced by the unclear selection process for these programs and the potential for bias favouring those with influential network relationships. This calls for a push towards increased transparency and inclusivity in the selection process, such as the deployment of unbiased software to ensure equity. Women in higher positions have demonstrated their ability to rapidly adapt and grow when thrust into demanding roles, as demonstrated by the experience of Vice Dean

Hanna. This underlines the necessity of continuing to provide women with opportunities to occupy higher-level positions and providing robust institutional support structures to help them succeed without excessive stress.

The issues of communication and institutional type emerged as significant influences on career advancement opportunities. A shift towards a bureaucratic administrative structure has been observed in some instances, causing concerns regarding efficiency and communication within the institution. Furthermore, foreign academics often find significant career advancement opportunities, especially in recently established universities or smaller cities, suggesting these locations may present unique chances for women's career growth.

The professional development programs established within Saudi Arabian higher education institutions signal a commitment to gender equality by providing women in senior leadership roles with comprehensive training opportunities. These initiatives are vital for the professional growth and skill enhancement of women in academia, supporting their journey towards achieving and sustaining leadership positions. However, the effectiveness of these programs in reducing deep-rooted societal and structural barriers remains unclear. Although these programs visibly support women in top positions, fostering their leadership and managerial skills, it is essential to scrutinise whether these efforts translate into tangible career advancements or merely serve as performative gestures. The real impact lies in their ability to not only prepare women for leadership but also in challenging and changing the systemic issues that hinder their progression, ensuring that support extends beyond symbolic acknowledgment to effect genuine, inclusive change across all levels of academic hierarchy.

The chapter also uncovered a significant gap in the onboarding process for newly hired employees, suggesting a need for structured orientation programs that include comprehensive explanations of university policies, employees' rights, and responsibilities. This can help mitigate misunderstandings and boost job performance and satisfaction. An overemphasis on teaching workload for junior staff is observed, limiting their time for research and other activities essential for career progression.

This highlights the need for a more balanced distribution of teaching and research responsibilities to support the career growth of those in junior roles.

The cultural practice of "Wasta," using personal influence to gain advantages, has also been identified as a significant factor affecting career progression. Therefore, efforts must be made to ensure fair access to opportunities regardless of personal networks. State policies, such as the King Abdullah Program for External Scholarships, have been instrumental in shaping societal norms and promoting opportunities for women. Despite initial societal resistance, these initiatives have contributed to a gradual shift in societal perceptions, suggesting the need for continued state intervention to further gender equality. Women perceive "Wasta" as offering a benefit but also a challenge for their careers. While it can be a form of social capital which offers career progression for those with access to influential networks, it also embodies a system that perpetuates inequalities. (employees who have personal or formal relationships with other co-workers in power, or colleagues with mutual interests that might favour some employees on the expense of others based on self-interest, not on merits). Wasta is most pronounced along the lines of position and academic ranking within the institutions. Senior staff members, who often already occupy positions of responsibility and influence and have established professional networks, seem to benefit the most from it. They enjoy direct access to professional development opportunities and decision-making processes, often facilitated by their connections within the higher echelons of university administration. In contrast, junior staff, especially those without established networks or who are new to the academic system experience notable disadvantages. They find themselves excluded from these critical pathways to career progression, highlighting a significant disparity rooted in institutional hierarchies and personal influence rather than merit or potential. While informal support and encouragement from colleagues, as experienced by some participants can be beneficial and enhance job satisfaction and career advancement, it cannot substitute the need for formal support mechanisms that ensure equitable opportunities for all, regardless of their access to influential networks.

Chapter 6: Women's professional mobility and career opportunities

6.1 Introduction

The emphasis of this section is on analysing professional mobility of women in the higher education industry in Saudi Arabia by drawing on the findings of the interviews, corroborating the findings by referring to the literature. The data shows that women might face many challenges in terms of work mobility in general, and international mobility in particular, which constitute a barrier towards career progression. Travelling abroad for postgraduate studies is vital to progress in academia since postgraduate studying opportunities is limited to few universities in big cities in Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, daily work mobility for women might be challenging as well due to the gendered relations at home and work (Syed et al., 2018; Bursztyń et al., 2020).

The notion of spatial and international mobility carries different connotations and implications in the context of professional growth for women in universities in general and in Saudi Arabian context in particular. Spatial mobility, in the day-to-day context, refers to the physical movement or travel within a specific geographical area, such as commuting between home and the workplace (Savage, 1988). However, due to cultural and societal norms in Saudi Arabia, there has historically been a form of spatial segregation, limiting the mobility of women in public spaces. Despite significant reforms in recent years, including allowing women to drive, spatial mobility can still present challenges. For instance, the segregation of campuses between males and females may limit the ease of communication and interaction among all members of the institution, potentially hindering collaborative work or access to certain resources.

On the other hand, international mobility within higher education institutions, such as studying or attending conferences abroad, is often viewed as an asset in academia, contributing to an individual's social and cultural capital. It allows individuals to gain exposure to different educational systems, networks, research methodologies, and cultures, thereby enhancing their knowledge, skills, and eventually career growth prospects (Favell and Recchi, 2011). For women in Saudi universities, international

mobility can be an integral pathway to advance their careers, offering opportunities for higher qualifications and international exposure that might not be available locally. It also provides a platform to showcase their work on an international stage, further enhancing their professional reputation. The contrast between daily spatial mobility and international mobility presents an interesting dichotomy. While daily spatial mobility may pose challenges due to sociocultural norms, international mobility can serve as a significant boost for career progression. It is important for institutions and policymakers to recognize these dynamics and implement measures that facilitate both forms of mobility, ensuring that women have the necessary support and resources to navigate these challenges and capitalise on opportunities.

The following sections provide a detailed account of women’s international mobility and women’s daily work-related mobility by exploring the experience of Saudi women and women from various national backgrounds, and how the social norms influence the freedom of women’s mobility in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the analysis also focuses on how the experience of Saudi women might differ from the experience of women from other nationalities. The breakdown of research participants (for primary data) by nationality is provided in the table below. A total of eight out of 30 interviewees were non-Saudi, constituting 26.7% of the population for this study. Two of the eight non-Saudi women are single and remaining are married with children.

Nationality	Number	Marital status	Children
Saudi	22	12 Married 3 Married 2 Divorced 5 Single	Yes No Yes No
Egyptian	2	Married	Yes
Filipino	1	Married	Yes
Indian	1	Single	No
Jordanian / American	1	Married	Yes

Jordanian	1	Married	Yes
Sudanese	1	Married	Yes
Yemeni	1	Single	No

Table 4: Study population by nationality, marital status and children

6.2 Women's international mobility

Mobility is a vital part of academic profession, given the requirement for academics to travel nationally and internationally to participate in global scientific conferences, conduct research, pursue postgraduate studies, and attend the programmes focused on development of professional skills and competencies. Although female academics have achieved higher degrees and occupied senior positions in Saudi universities, they might find traveling remains a significant challenge due to cultural factors. Tribal values and patriarchy help to explain the restrictions that women experience in Saudi Arabia, limiting their ability to travel for professional and work purposes.

For Saudi women who do seek to work in higher education, the challenge associated with tribal values persists in terms of barrier to career progression: working in a position of responsibility involves interaction with various stakeholders on a regular basis. This is inconsistent with the patriarchal values prevalent among most tribes in Saudi Arabia (Adham, 2022). According to Bourdieu, patriarchal order is premised upon achieving an objective agreement and consensus on the sense of gender relations and societal practices. The existing consensus within most tribes remains that women should not hold a position in higher education (or any other industry) where they would be put in a position to frequently engage with male counterparts and would be required to travel. In addition, patriarchal values and social norms also mean that women feel obliged to put their family (husband and children) first (Havril, 2018). It means their career becomes secondary to their family needs. When women in higher education industry are required to commit greater hours and the need for work-related travel, the potential detrimental impact of work responsibilities on the ability of women to fulfil their family responsibilities means many women are reluctant to accept the additional workload which comes with the career promotion (Myers and Griffin, 2019). It demonstrates that the conflict between family and work roles and

the need for women to prioritise their family over work has and will continue to remain an important challenge which eventually serves as a barrier to their career advancement.

In the interviews with 22 Saudi academics, it emerged that 14 of them have been granted scholarship to study abroad and obtain postgraduate degrees from universities in the US, UK and Australia. The 8 participants from other nationalities (Egyptian, Filipino, Indian, Jordanian, Jordanian/American, Sudanese, Yemeni) obtained their degrees before moving to Saudi Arabia to work in HE. The experience of traveling abroad for professional development differs among Saudi women, depending on the traditional norms and beliefs of Saudi societies (Ida, 2017). Amal is an Assistant Professor working as the Vice Dean of a College. Amal shared her experience when she decided to pursue higher studies abroad about ten years before:

At first, my father found it difficult to accept the idea of me traveling abroad to complete my higher (education) studies; even though my father was not too strict, but due to societal pressure, he rejected the idea of traveling. Two years later, he finally agreed and accepted my wish to finish my postgraduate studies abroad; my brother came with me as well so that we both had better opportunities in higher education because ten years ago the chances of acceptance in master's programmes were very low in Saudi universities. (Participant 19, Saudi, 34 years old, married with 3 children at the age of pre-school, assistant professor).

Hebbah shared:

I had the opportunity to travel aboard and study at the best universities in my field all study expenses will be covered by the government. I guess I would be heavily blamed by everyone if I travelled because I was just married and it did not feel right to leave. Even my family will not be happy about me traveling and leavening my husband to study aboard, so I had to finish my masters' in Saudi. (Participant 6, Saudi, 38 years old, married no children, laboratory technician).

Also, Lina stated:

... I think you know it is not common to travel internationally and move abroad for years alone even if it is for studying. I know my parents did not want me to travel alone because of the society's negative perception on women travelling alone! So the our nanny had to travel with me before I got married. The same nanny used to look after me when I was a child and she lived with us for many years. (Participant 8, Saudi, 34 years old, married with 2 children 4 and 6 years old, lecturer).

The above excerpt from the interview with Amal, an Assistant Professor working as the Vice Dean, highlights the relevance of gendered norms and the resultant conflict it poses for women wishing to achieve higher education to pursue career within education industry. Many women tend to position themselves within the family, as care for the family has priority. Women who prefer to dedicate their time to the family might be aware of the importance of educational and occupational opportunities, they might not be prepared to sacrifice the security of their home life and social beliefs. Social beliefs support the importance of the role of women within the home environment as the main carer of housework and children (Abdalla, 2014). Moreover, the social values include a belief that home is the best place for women to be protected from the conflicts of work. These beliefs resulted in male-dominated originations and gendered hierarchies and practise at the workplace (Al-Asfour et al, 2017).

Amal clarified that her family is not conservative or liberal, but they are somewhere in between. However, the pressure of society had an impact on the participant's career experience, as she had to postpone the idea of studying abroad until the point in time when it was acceptable for women to study abroad. Amal refers to the time when the Saudi government launched King Abdullah Program for External Scholarships in 2005 (Unified National Platform, 2021.). At the time at which the Government launched the Programme of International Scholarship, in 2005, it was socially unacceptable for women to study abroad without being accompanied by a male member of the family or, in some occasions one of their family members.

The above analysis signifies that state policy can play a pivotal role in shaping the societal norms and structures that influence women's workplace and social mobility. Policies enacted by the state can either directly or indirectly encourage or restrict the opportunities available for women. In case of Saudi Arabia, the King Abdullah Program for External Scholarships, launched in 2005, is an excellent example of state policy impacting women's workplace and social mobility. This initiative facilitated international study opportunities for both male and female Saudi students, providing them with the ability to gain higher qualifications from institutions abroad. By offering such a program, the state primarily signalled a shift in social norms, making it more acceptable for women to study abroad and thus expand their educational and professional horizons. However, the societal acceptance was not immediate and came with caveats. For instance, it was generally expected that women studying abroad be accompanied by a family member, a rule that might have posed additional challenges for some women, as witnessed in Amal's experience who was initially not permitted to study abroad due to societal norms and subsequently allowed but accompanied with her brother. Despite this, the policy did contribute to a progressive shift in societal perceptions and norms over time, as highlighted by experience of the Saudi assistant professor Amal.

The accounts of Hebbah and Lina further reinforce the complex interplay between societal norms, familial pressures, and state policies in shaping the educational and professional trajectories of Saudi women. Hebbah's decision to forego studying abroad, despite having financial support from the government, due to recently getting married and societal expectations, illustrates the impact of cultural norms on personal and career choices. This choice highlights the societal expectation for women to prioritize family life over personal academic aspirations, even when opportunities for advancement are available. Lina's experience adds another dimension to this narrative. Despite the societal acceptance of women studying abroad post-2005, due to the King Abdullah Program for External Scholarships, the societal stigma associated with women traveling alone remained a barrier. Her need to be accompanied by a family member, even as a home assistant, for studying abroad underlines the persistent societal concerns over women's independence and mobility.

It indicates that while state policies can facilitate opportunities, their effectiveness is often moderated by deeply ingrained societal and cultural norms. Together, these accounts from Participants Hebbah, Lina, and Amal demonstrate the challenges Saudi women face in balancing personal decisions, societal expectations, and career aspirations. They highlight that policy changes, while crucial, are not sufficient in isolation.

Other government initiatives, such as the decision to allow women to drive and the Vision 2030 plan, which aims to increase women's participation in the workforce, further underline the regulatory role of the state in shaping women's mobility and workplace opportunities. It should be noted that these policies do not operate in isolation from the environment in which they are implemented. Their effectiveness and impact are subject to a variety of societal and cultural factors. In the case of Saudi Arabia, deep-rooted societal norms and attitudes towards women's roles and mobility can influence the implementation and outcomes of these policies. Therefore, while state policy is a powerful tool for change, its interplay with societal norms and attitudes must be taken into account in a comprehensive analysis of women's workplace and social mobility. In comparison to other countries, state policies can vary significantly in Saudi Arabia based on cultural, societal, economic, and political factors. In many Western countries, for instance, policies around gender equality and women's rights in the workplace have been in place for a longer time and are often more comprehensive, covering aspects like equal pay, maternity leave, sexual harassment, etc. In some Scandinavian countries, policies have also been enacted to encourage men's participation in childcare and household duties, to achieve a more balanced division of labour (Neilson and Stanfors, 2013). However, even in these contexts, the impact of such policies can be influenced by societal norms and attitudes, illustrating the complex interplay between state policy and societal factors. The below participant, Suzanne an Egyptian professor, confirms the above:

I came to Saudi to work as professor in the university, my husband came with me to all my work trips. (Participant 7, Egyptian, 50 years old, Married 4 children the youngest is 17, professor).

The social pressure exerted by the family of origin had an impact on all aspects of life of those individuals who have been raised and live within this society. For example, Egypt is a North African country where people share similar traditional norms and beliefs to Saudi Arabia. Despite the higher age of the former interviewee, her husband insisted on accompanying her during all international work trips. And although the other Saudi participants (Amal, Lina), who were mentioned earlier in this chapter, eventually managed to pursue higher education, they spent a period of time before their families gave them permission to travel with the company of one of their family members to obtain a higher degree so they could work in academia, as they had always aspired to.

Traveling abroad is also dependent on the participant's marital status, meaning whether the woman is married or single. Interview results confirmed that three other participants who were also single emigrated with one of their male family members to obtain higher qualifications. The other seven Saudi participants were married when they moved abroad to study, which illustrates that no woman travelled alone to pursue higher education overseas. Rania, aged 40 years, also worked as the Vice Dean of a College. She was married when she moved abroad, and reported:

My husband got a scholarship to study abroad, so we went with our children. While we were abroad, my husband kept encouraging and urging me to complete my postgraduate studies as he believed in my ability to advance in my career. I completed my studies and my husband kept supporting me (financially) for a further two years after his graduation and the completion of the scholarship; when I graduated, we all returned to Saudi Arabia. (Participant 13, Saudi, 40 years old, Married with 4 children aged 8, 10, 14, 17, years, VD of college and academic member).

The participant above decided to complete her Master's and Doctorate degrees after moving to the country where they had secured the university admission and scholarship. It was her husband who had a scholarship first and convinced the participant to complete her higher education degree. The Saudi government provides financial support in the form of covering the tuition of the scholarship holder and their family members who want to study in undergraduate and postgraduate levels (World

Education, 2020). All study expenses being covered by the government is a significant motive to convince someone to complete their education. However, Rania, confirmed that her husband supported her to join academia when she applied for a distinguished graduate program and had a place at one of the Saudi universities. In the beginning, Rania, worked as a lecturer, and afterwards she was promoted to Assistant Professor and held different managerial positions, finally becoming the Vice of the College of Education. The participant had her parents' and husband's financial, psychological as well as affective support throughout her journey in academia.

Rania, had the support of her husband as he worked in academia and had the chance to travel abroad for studying. Other married participants who work in higher education institutions had the opposite experience, depending on the field in which their husband works. Abeer, is 35 years old, and works as laboratory technician, despite holding a Master's degree. She reported:

My husband works in the private sector. The idea of traveling alone to complete my studies was rejected, and my husband could not accompany me because his job required him to stay in Saudi. After 6 years we broke up and I decided to travel again; this time I travelled to Australia because my brother was studying there. Although I would have preferred to go to the UK, my father refused that because I would be alone there. (Participant 24, Saudi, 35 years old, divorced with 3 children aged 9 twins and 12 years, laboratory technician).

The experiences shared by Participant Amal , Rania, and Abeer highlight key findings around gender, marital status, familial support, and their interplay with opportunities for international mobility and professional advancement. The narratives indicate that a woman's marital status plays a significant role in determining her ability to pursue higher education abroad. Unmarried participants , were expected to be accompanied by a male family member, underscoring the societal norms and gendered expectations within Saudi society. For married women, the husband's role becomes more important over the role of other male family member such as father and brother. Rania's story indicates that having a supportive husband can significantly facilitate a woman's international mobility and academic advancement.

In contrast, the story of Abeer, the Saudi 35 years old holding a Master's degree, shows how an unsupportive spouse can obstruct a woman's educational and professional progression. The importance of social networks is also uncovered through the interviews. The interviews highlighted the crucial role of both financial and psychological support from family and spouses in facilitating women's international mobility and career progression. Without such support, the path to higher education abroad and subsequent professional advancement becomes more challenging. This is witnessed in Abeer's response that: *“My husband works in the private sector. The idea of traveling alone to complete my studies was rejected, and my husband could not accompany me because his job required him to stay in Saudi. After 6 years we broke up and I decided to travel again; this time I travelled to Australia because my brother was studying there.”*

The narratives also demonstrate the way personal aspirations and choices are often negotiated within societal norms and expectations. For instance, Abeer had to alter her choice of study destination due to her family's concerns about her being alone abroad, as many other participants. Finally, the decision to study abroad has a significant impact on women's professional trajectories, as noted in the interviews. The ability to pursue higher education, facilitated by both state policy and familial support, provided a pathway to more advanced roles and managerial positions within academia. For example, both Rania and Amal are now in Vice Dean positions, reinforcing the positive impact of higher education on their careers.

The interview also uncovered that Abeer travelled abroad following her separation from her husband after six years of working as technician in the College of Biology. The reduced international mobility of women had impacted her career development. For instance, the above participant spent six years in the same position as a technician because she missed out on many opportunities to advance in work, as the work required traveling domestically and abroad. The participant lives in a small town in Saudi where social norms pertaining to women's work remain more traditional. Thus, the geographical location of participants (where they currently live and work) has an impact on female career advancement. It is because of a conflict between traditional beliefs and the image of women between older generations or those with conservative

mindset which remains dominant in smaller towns and villages. This is in contrast to the younger generation and people with more relaxed ideas predominant in major cities. Of the 12 Saudi participants who moved abroad for studying, only one was single and had her family's support to pursue her postgraduate studies. The participant came from what might be considered a liberal family in the Saudi context, and it by no chance lives in the capital city Riyadh. Sarah stated:

My parents are both academics, especially my father is a well-known author in his field. My parents have encouraged me and my sister to move abroad to obtain higher degrees. I travelled back and forth to Saudi for around 6 years, I have my own work and studied at the same time.
(Participant 23, Saudi, 28 years old, single, lecturer).

Only Sarah had been fully supported by her family to move abroad, travel internationally and travel nationally, which have full freedom of mobility without traditional strains to hold her back. Comparing this to other single women who have no childcare commitments, this is the only participants who had complete freedom of movements. The other three single participants were able to travel with the company of one male of their family, whether father or brother because of the traditional beliefs which prevent women from travelling alone.

The experiences shared by Sarah, who work in the capital city, and Abeer, who work in a small town, (from rural and the geographical considerations of the participants shed light on interesting dynamics which shape women's professional advancement, international mobility, and negotiation of traditional and modern norms in Saudi society. For instance, Abeer's experience highlights the importance of international mobility in career progression. Her inability to travel abroad due to societal and familial constraints kept her in the same position for six years, suggesting that opportunities for advancement were linked to international exposure and higher education. The above quotes from Sarah and Abeer stories also highlights how the geographical location can influence women's professional progression. Women living in smaller towns and villages, where more traditional norms predominate, may face greater travel-related constraints in pursuing careers or further education, especially

if these require travel or moving away from their community. This finding supports the significance of geographic location and the cultural norms associated with it in shaping women's career trajectories.

Sarah's experience, as a single Saudi woman from an academic family in Riyadh, contrasts sharply with Abeer from a traditional family in a small town highlights the significant role of geographical location and familial background in shaping the mobility and career advancement of Saudi women. Her ability to travel internationally and pursue higher education without traditional constraints highlights the variability in the experiences of Saudi women based on their family's beliefs and geographical location. Sarah, hailing from a more liberal family in the capital city, enjoyed greater freedom and support for her professional growth. This disparity illustrates how familial support and urban versus rural cultural norms can dramatically influence women's opportunities for international mobility and career development in Saudi Arabia.

The differences in generational cultural norms as explained by Lyons and Kuron (2014) are also witnessed in Abeer's, Lina's and Amal's responses. There is a tension between traditional beliefs and evolving perceptions of women's roles, which vary between older and younger generations and between smaller towns and major cities. The changing attitudes towards women's education and career in major cities could provide more opportunities for women, though these changes might not yet be reflected in more conservative or rural areas. This dynamic is not unique to Saudi Arabia but is a global phenomenon (Whiteoak et al., 2006), adding another layer of complexity to the issue of gender equality. The role of family background also influences the women's ability to pursue higher education and eventually secure a career in education industry. The experience of the single participant from a liberal family in Riyadh is notable. It suggests that family beliefs and attitudes, as well as their geographical location and socio-cultural factors can greatly influence a woman's access to higher education and her career progression.

A total of nine participants from different background were interviewed in this study, as the following: two Egyptians, one Filipino, one Indian, one Jordanian, one

Jordanian/American, one Sudanese, and one Yemeni. All the previous participants completed their education in their home countries and then moved to Saudi Arabia to work in HE. Seven participants were married and have children, two were single, none of them were willing to travel abroad for professional opportunities due to familial reasons such as child or elderly caregiving duties, as well as domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, lack of professional development opportunities was also witnessed for employees from lower ranks and in some academic fields, as also discussed in chapter five. Therefore, the Saudi traditional customs and norms might not have major influence on the experience of non-Saudi women. Some issues such as gendered roles, unpaid work, multiple burdens of working women are deeply rooted in many cultures not only in the Arab world but also across Asia. In some cases, women themselves believe that they were better suited for certain roles in the household and their husband might not necessarily be entitled for these roles particularly domestic chores. Maybe the context of working and living did not create gender inequality in work advancement but did not challenge these beliefs and helped maintain gender role attitudes against women who are aspiring to attain career advancement and equal opportunities. as Salam, 46 years old lecturer from Egypt shared:

I had my first child when I was 19, I was studying at the university in Egypt, I managed to raise two children and graduate from the university. Then I decided to postpone my higher education studies because I could not travel and leave my children, so I waited until I was in my forties as my children became adults and independent, then I could study for my master's and doctorate degrees abroad. (Participant 27, Egyptian, 46 years old, married with sons over 18, Lecturer)

Salam has always referred to herself when speaking about looking after the children and managing home and work responsibility. Although the participant is married to the father of her children, she frequently made use of the words such as: *I have to manage domestic work and my studies, I found it difficult to look after the children and work, and as a woman my children are my priority*. The expressions used to speak about the burden of raising two children and graduating from university refers to that the participant is the main carer of her children in addition to home chores. When the

participant was asked about the contribution of her husband at home, she stated: *He helps me morally with words of encouragement and emotional support when I am too stressed and occasionally with the laundry (the participant was laughing and being sarcastic).*

The previous participant Salma (46-year old Egyptian) managed to move to Saudi Arabia with her husband for a job opportunity in HE and enrol for an online PhD program in another country. The narrative of the women from neighbouring countries is viewed as largely similar to women in Saudi Arabia, in terms of the sacrifices they make regarding career advancements although women have many opportunities but they do not have the choice to pursue their careers. Women tend to struggle with time management, workload, passing career advancement opportunities and are required to handle multiple burdens put on their shoulder based on social norms and gender roles derived from the patriarchal system. The narrative of Salam, the 46-year old Egyptian participant in Saudi Arabia, who balances her academic career with family responsibilities, aligns closely with the literature on patriarchy, discussed in section 3.1.1. This system, characterised by male dominance and female subservience, significantly impacts women's career choices and advancement, especially in higher education. The participant's struggle with time management, workload, and missed career opportunities reflect the broader patriarchal constraints highlighted in the literature. These constraints, stemming from traditional gender roles and societal expectations, limit women's autonomy and professional growth. This scenario is echoed in Saudi Arabia's patriarchal structure, where male authority pervades both public and private spheres, influencing women's participation in the workforce and decision-making roles in academia, as detailed by Al-Asfour et al. (2017) and Aldossari and Calvard (2021). The participant 27's experience exemplifies how patriarchal norms shape women's career trajectories and present significant barriers to their advancement in higher education settings.

The above analysis also highlights the geographical and generational dynamics within professional mobility. The geographical location is seen to play a critical role in influencing women's career trajectories. Women situated in larger, more cosmopolitan areas, such as Riyadh may benefit from slightly more liberal norms, while those in

smaller towns might encounter more conservative expectations. There is also a clear generational divide, with younger generations having more progressive views on women's roles and professional mobility compared to the older ones. However, irrespective of generation or location, familial support, both psychological and financial, emerges as a crucial factor in determining whether women can capitalise on professional opportunities, especially those that require international travel.

The above narrative also illustrated the dual burden shouldered by women with respect to professional aspirations and traditional domestic roles. Salma, the 46-year old Egyptian lecturer's experience emphasises how women, even when provided opportunities, often find themselves as the primary caregivers and homemakers, despite having advanced educational and career pursuits. This dual responsibility means that even when opportunities for career advancement are available, women may not always be in a position to capitalize on them due to family commitments. The responsibility is so deeply internalized that even when a woman might technically have the option to travel for professional reasons, the guilt or perceived responsibility towards family may deter her. A related finding is the persistent influence of societal norms, familial expectations, and gender roles on women's professional choices, especially in the realm of international mobility and higher education. There is a considerable tension between traditional beliefs and changing perceptions of women's roles. While societal progress can be seen in major cities, traditional norms persist, particularly in smaller towns or conservative families. These norms influence the decision-making process for women, with many prioritising family responsibilities over personal aspirations for career or higher education, especially if it involves travelling abroad. This tension results in some women postponing opportunities for professional advancement, as witnessed by the experience Salma.

Another participant eliminated the idea of travelling alone for career advancement opportunities and leaving her family. As Aisha, a 32 years lecturer, expressed:

My child is only five years I can't imagine travelling without him even for few days. Also, I do not think my husband will be happy with the idea of leaving him and our child for work trips unless they both are

able to travel with me. (Participant 3, Jordanian/American, 32 years old, Married with 5 years old child, Lecturer)

This is not unique to the Arab women, also women from another part of the world share the challenges, struggles, and constraints when it comes to gender roles that influence their career upward advancement which become harder during the pandemic (Clark et al., 2021; Craig, L., et al, 2021). As the next participant named Maria from the Philippines, shared:

It is impossible to travel abroad and leave my husband with three children. Two at school age and one is a toddler, work trips is an unlikely idea given their young age. ... I believe the mother is the best at managing everything at home and with regards to the children. (Participant 11, Filipino, 44 years, married with 3 children aged 2, 6, and 8 years, Demonstrator, married).

Universal impact of gender roles is witnessed from the responses of Aisha and Maria, Jordanian/American and Filipino interviewees. The constraints faced by women due to societal expectations and traditional gender roles are not limited to a single culture or region but span across diverse cultural and geographic contexts. The accounts from the Jordanian/American and Filipino participants underscore that even in varied cultural backgrounds, women often face similar challenges in their attempt to achieve a balance between family responsibilities and career aspirations. The inclination to prioritise family, especially when it concerns young children, is prominent. These societal pressures and expectations persist across borders, indicating a global trend where women's career aspirations are shaped, constrained, or influenced by traditional gender roles. The Filipino interviewee believed that certain roles are primarily made for female like the idea of mothers are best at home while fathers are best outside the house. This idea seems to be rooted in Asian countries in general and Southeast Asian countries in particular, which is similar to some Arab societies (Booth, 2016.; Chauhan, 2021; James-Hawkins, et al, 2017). Despite the changes in gender equality in some countries, gender stereotyping continues to be a significant issue obstructing

the career progressions of women in Saudi Arabia and beyond (Tabassum and Nayak, 2021).

The experiences shared by Aisha the Jordanian/American and Maria the Filipino participants demonstrate that women are not merely passive victims of patriarchal ideologies, but they also actively reproduce and reinforce these gender norms. Their statements reflect an internalisation of traditional gender roles, where they see themselves as the primary caregivers and managers of the household, an outlook deeply rooted in their cultural backgrounds. This internalisation leads them to prioritise family over professional opportunities, illustrating how women themselves can perpetuate the very gender stereotypes that constrain their career progression. Such attitudes highlight the complexity of gender roles, where societal expectations and personal beliefs intertwine, leading women to actively uphold and propagate traditional gender norms, as argued by Barsoum (2019).

Moreover, motherhood is viewed as a core facet of women's identity. There is a prevalent belief, as expressed by the Filipino participant, that certain roles are inherently suited for women, especially in the context of motherhood. This idea that "mothers are best at home" reinforces the deep-seated societal belief that primary caregiving and home responsibilities should rest with the mother, irrespective of her professional aspirations. Such beliefs can be deeply internalised by women themselves (as witnessed in the above-mentioned responses of Jordanian/American and Filipino interviewees), leading them to limit their professional opportunities voluntarily.

The analysis of interviewees responses based on international mobility of Saudi and non-Saudi women revealed the cultural universality of gender roles. The interviewees, coming from different ethnic and national backgrounds collectively expressed a reluctance to travel for professional opportunities due to family responsibilities. This points to a broader, almost universal understanding and acceptance of traditional gender roles common to these countries. Indeed, these roles, which prioritise women as primary caregivers and homemakers, appear to transcend individual cultures and are prevalent across various national backgrounds, both within and beyond the Arab

world (Eum, 2019; Hakiem, 2022). The sentiment expressed by interviewees is consistent: their familial responsibilities, be it child or elderly caregiving or household responsibilities, take precedence over their professional growth. This highlights the deep-rooted nature of these gender norms across diverse cultural landscapes.

The role of self-perception and inherent beliefs is also viewed as relevant in constraining the career progression of women because it impedes their international mobility. Interviews revealed that some women inherently believe they are better suited to focus on domestic roles, suggesting that gender stereotyping is not just externally imposed but often accepted internally. This internalised belief system can be a significant impediment to women's professional growth. Even if an external environment (like their workplace in Saudi Arabia) does not explicitly enforce these roles, it does not necessarily challenge them either (Keshet et al., 2015). Without a push against these ingrained beliefs, women may continue to prioritise domestic responsibilities over professional opportunities, constraining their career progression. The next section examines the role of families and their values in influencing mobility and career opportunities of women.

6.3 Role of families and their values

In this study, a total of 22 Saudi women were interviewed, 14 of them have completed their higher education studies abroad. Only one participant left Saudi Arabia individually to complete her education in the UK with the support and encouragement of her family. The participants came from well-educated family in the capital city of Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, three other participants two of whom are single and one is divorced and has three children, were able to travel to complete their education abroad with the company of one of a male member of their direct family weather the father or the brother. The two participants who travelled with their father, were only accompanied by their father at the start of their scholarship. Then, their father returned to Saudi Arabia once they settled down in the country they were pursuing their higher

education. It potentially indicates that the initial reason for family members (such as fathers) to travel is the social pressures that force women to not travel alone.

The social customs and beliefs in the Arab world state that women should be conservative and not be exposed to new experiences that might put women in danger or influence their 'conservative' beliefs (Varshney, 2019). Families who support women's freedom to travel abroad and/or women choosing to focus on career progression are perceived as liberal families. This is viewed as a negative quality from the conservative point of view (Benstead, 2021). Based on Saudi law, women were not allowed to travel without a consent until 2019, as mentioned earlier. The recent change in law enabled Saudi women to travel abroad (BBC, 2019) nevertheless, Saudi families are still restricting women from travelling alone. It is particularly true for women who have children because it is socially unacceptable for women to leave their children even if the father is able to provide domestic care and look after them, since it is related to the culture of the patriarchy which constructs the thought of the division of roles between women and men (Mansyuroh, 2019).

When it comes to finance, all women who applied for a scholarship were entitled to dependent's financial dues. The Saudi government pays for the scholarship holder, whether they are female or male including their dependent, which includes paying monthly salary, study fees and health insurance. Male scholarship holders have the choice of bringing one dependant if they wish to. Almost all participant in this study did not travel for international conferences except for two - one who is single and has a family with liberal values, allowing her to travel to seeking professional development opportunities. The other participant is married to a husband with liberal values and has 3 children. Her husband supported her in all her work travels internationally, although she was not allowed to travel before her marriage, as her father did not prevent her from travelling to complete higher education studies abroad before getting married, so her husband could travel with her as well.

The analysis shows that the role of family remains instrumental in determining a woman's professional and educational trajectory. While Saudi law has evolved to allow women greater freedom, societal expectations and family beliefs have continued

to supersede legal permissions. The cases of women travelling with a male family member, even if it is just for the initiation of their education abroad, underline the weight of societal expectations. This suggests that the 'permission' for women to seek opportunities is often mediated by familial gatekeeping instead of legal constraints. However, it is also evident that women from families with progressive values have greater leeway, highlighting the critical influence of family background on a woman's career and educational opportunities.

The patriarchal constructs also clearly have an influence on availability of professional opportunities for women in HE. The cultural underpinnings of the patriarchy that segregate roles for men and women significantly shape the choices available to women. While there is financial support available for women pursuing higher education, or attending international conferences, the societal expectations associated with their roles as primary caregivers or their perceived 'vulnerability' when travelling alone limits their ability to take advantage of these opportunities. Even in families where there is a support for women's education or professional growth, there are often implicit boundaries set by deeply ingrained patriarchal beliefs. This is evident when women, who are mothers, are restricted from travelling despite having husbands capable of caregiving, pointing to a broader societal perception about women's primary roles.

6.4 Women's daily work-related mobility

Interviews also provided relevant information to comment on and assess the daily work-related mobility of the respondents. The ten academics, who hold higher administrative positions, agreed in the interviews that they have an important role when it comes to decision making, authority delegation, promotions and skills development opportunities. However, some of these women are facing false assumptions from their male peers regarding their work mobility. As Sahar, said:

“when we receive an invitation to participate in a conference overseas, most of the times one of our male colleagues takes this opportunity because they

assume that we as women wouldn't be able to travel abroad due to our responsibilities as mothers and wives ... what upsets me the most (is that) they never ask, they just assume and act upon their way of thinking". (Participant 5, Saudi, 37 years, married with 5 children, Vice dean and academic member,).

Sahar added that some conflicts have occurred at one of the board meetings when a number of female managers were dissatisfied with the professional development opportunities they had missed due to these assumptions made by male colleagues. It indicates ineffective communication and the tendency of male workers to presume that senior female colleagues may not be able to attend. The information from the interviews reveals interesting points about gender biases and assumptions in academia, particularly when it comes to professional development opportunities and work-related mobility. Unconscious bias is witnessed among male staff based on the assumptions they make, supported by the discussion on bias in the literature (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). The narrative uncovers how even in professional settings, women's mobility and potential can be underestimated based on unconscious biases. As Hannah another participant shared:

Although I have 12 years of experience in the academic field, there are still few male colleagues who suggest that I would prefer not to attend external academic events due to family obligations, knowing that I did not ask to not attend. (Participant 14, Saudi, 41 years old, married, have 4 children aged 1, 7, 13, 15 years, VD of college and academic member).

The pervasiveness of gender bias in professional settings is reinforced by the above interview quote from Participant 14, Saudi, 41-year old assistant professor and Vice Dean. Despite significant professional achievements and experience, women in academia continue to face underlying gender biases. The presumption that female academics, especially those with families, would naturally prioritise family obligations over professional commitments is an apparent stereotype. This is clearly highlighted by Hannah a Vice Dean who despite having 12 years of experience

continues to face assumption about her preferences and willingness to attend external academic events. Limited agency and voice is another relevant factor with implications for daily work-related mobility of women. Although these female academics hold senior positions and have notable professional experience, they are still not directly consulted or asked about their preferences. The assumption that women would automatically prioritise family over work is made without any direct communication. It shows that there is a systemic lack of recognition or understanding of women's agency, autonomy, and voice in making decisions, which limits their daily work-related mobility and has resultant implications for their careers.

Despite holding high administrative positions and being decision-makers, women may face barriers due to the assumptions made by their male counterparts about their roles as wives and mothers. The finding also illustrates the absence of effective communication. The assumption that women will not be able to travel for professional reasons without asking them directly indicates a lack of effective communication. It is concerning that these assumptions are not being challenged and instead, they are accepted as a norm and acted upon. This brings out the need for more open and clear communication in professional settings, where opportunities are discussed and decisions are made based on individual's willingness and capabilities, rather than assumptions tied to their gender and past/ present social norms. This is witnessed in Ahlam's excerpt below:

Few years ago, I knew from different sources that my direct manager (female) did not file my promotion request to the upper management because I had two toddlers, she believes I will not be the perfect nominee for that position because it requires attending national conferences and visiting other government agencies. (Participant 30, Saudi, 36 years, married have 3 children aged 7,9, and 10 years, Deputy head of deanship).

In this case, direct manager (female) assumed that working mothers with young children are not adequately qualified to hold certain positions. Although the employees did not ask for not attending external events, nor for less work tasks, they

have been treated differently. As the former employee, she came to know after a few years that her previous female manager delayed her request without the employee's knowledge, which cost the employee a loss of opportunity to engage in professional development to advance her career. The above interview response from Ahlam, a Deputy Head of Deanship, highlights the internalised gender norms prevalent among women in leadership roles. It is not only male colleagues, but also female managers who can hold and act upon gender-biased assumptions about women's roles and responsibilities. The female manager's decision to withhold her subordinate's promotion request, under the assumption that her familial responsibilities would interfere with the job requirements, demonstrates how deeply ingrained the gender norms can influence professional decisions with direct implications on career advancement opportunities for women in higher education in Saudi Arabia. This highlights it is not just men perpetuating these gender norms, but women also have a role in internalising and exacerbating them. Such internalised gender biases can often have a more detrimental impact, as they are less likely to be acknowledged and overtly challenged (Bursztyn et al., 2020).

A lack of clear communication and insufficient transparency is also noticed, resulting in decision-making premised on assumptions. Decisions that have long-term effect on the career prospects of women in higher education such as their promotions are being made without clear communication, transparency, or consideration of the actual capabilities and preferences of the female concerned. The employee was kept in the dark about a major decision affecting her career progression, and it was solely based on an assumption rather than her actual performance, capability and willingness. This highlights a systemic problem where personal judgments based on gender norms override meritocratic considerations in professional advancement in higher education.

These assumptions and unconscious bias have a significant detrimental impact on the career progression prospects of women due to the loss of opportunities for professional development. When women are not considered for international conference participation because of presumptions about their personal responsibilities, it means they are losing out on professional development opportunities. These experiences could contribute significantly to their careers,

providing valuable networking opportunities, professional recognition, and potential collaborations (Crosby and Bryson, 2018). The dissatisfaction and conflicts mentioned by the participant show that women are not passive recipients of these biases and assumptions. They are aware of the inequalities and are willing to voice their concerns and fight for their professional rights and opportunities. For instance, Sahar, a 37-year old Vice Dean with 4-years of experience, acknowledged during the interview that at the board meeting, she expressed her dissatisfaction around tendency of some male colleagues to make specific assumptions. She took the board meeting as an opportunity to highlight the importance of not making such assumptions if women are to enjoy sufficient career development opportunities. This is an important aspect of changing workplace cultures and moving towards greater gender equality in academia and beyond.

In addition, there is evidence of questioning females' ability to attend meetings that take place late in the day due to the same gender-based assumptions. The assumption is that, as the main carer of your family, married women should prioritise their household related duties, which will then restrict their work-related mobility. In the case of single women or women with no childcare duties, travelling alone without the company of a family member is not acceptable in the patriarchal societies of Saudi Arabia (Denman, 2011). Women's work related mobility is legal and even in special cases female workers would receive financial support provided by the government.

However, some working women, who live in patriarchal societies or extremely traditional families, might face some challenges or obstacles in term of work related mobility whether using public or private transportation. Work related mobility such as: 1) attending top management meetings that requires women to visit the male's campus. 2) attending academic events held in different cities in Saudi that might require domestic traveling. 3) assigning employees to perform certain work tasks internally and externally. Maram, a single woman working as a lecturer, shared:

I gained more experience and financial benefits because I was delegated to undertake certain work assignments in other universities in Saudi Arabia. This is because many of my female co-workers are not allowed to travel outside the

city due to the norm that prevent women from travelling alone without a family member. (Participant 20, Saudi, 26 years old, single, Lecturer)

The above example shows the complex nature of gender dynamics in Saudi workplaces, specifically academia. It highlights how mobility restrictions imposed on some women inadvertently create professional opportunities for others. The restrictions on women's mobility due to sociocultural norms and familial obligations mean that certain tasks, such as attending inter-city academic events or management meetings at other campuses, can only be fulfilled by those who are able to travel. In the interview excerpt above, Maram, Saudi as a single woman, is able to capitalise on these opportunities. She gains more experience and financial benefits because she is able to take on these tasks. In this sense, her mobility has allowed her to take on the projects that her married female colleagues cannot, thereby advancing her professional development. Also, Layla shared:

In honesty, being single has helped so much in developing my career, I worked in the private sector before working in higher education. I worked for major corporation in my region, I had to commute daily and attend corporate social events in the city. Then when I moved to higher education I made excellent professional progression in only 2 years, I made academic collaborations and enrolled within a high-level program in my field, all due to freedom of mobility. I have achieved many goals in 5 years, which I do not believe I would fulfil if was married and had main role in caregiving and household responsibilities. (Participant 18, Saudi, 30 years, single, demonstrator)

The response of Layla, a 30-year old demonstrator/teaching assistant, above signifies the relevance of mobility and marital status in professional advancement, especially in regions with patriarchal societal norms. For women who have the freedom to travel, either due to their marital status or liberal family views, there is a clear advantage in terms of career progression. Maram and Layla experiences show how the limitations placed on many women inadvertently create opportunities for those who are not subject to or able to overcome these barriers. It indicates a unique dimension of gender

equality; while it is a disadvantage for many, it unintentionally offers a competitive advantage for those who do are not subject to the same restrictions. The notion of mobility differential, as discussed by Alberti (2014) refers to the varied degrees of mobility experienced by different groups within the labour market. This concept is applicable to the context described above, where the restricted mobility of some women in patriarchal societies inadvertently creates career opportunities for others. In this scenario, women who are not bound by the same travel restrictions, due to either being single or having liberal family dynamics, find themselves with an unintended competitive advantage. This form of mobility differential, distinct yet parallel to Alberti's discussion, emphasises how mobility in the labour market can be significantly influenced by social and cultural norms, especially those related to gender. Here, the differential is not just about physical movement, but also about the freedom to engage in career-enhancing activities, illustrating the association between societal constraints and professional opportunities.

Marital status also emerges as a factor with implications for career progression, especially within societies that have strict gender roles. The interview response of Layla , a 30-year old teaching assistant, offers a contrasting perspective where her single status acted as a facilitator for her professional growth. The fact that she attributes her rapid career progression and accomplishments to her singlehood, and implicitly her resultant mobility, is noteworthy. It highlights the perceived, and perhaps real, trade-off that women in such societies may have to consider between their personal and professional lives. It suggests that in certain environments, traditional roles and responsibilities associated with marriage can act as a constraint on the career trajectory and growth prospects of women in higher education.

Mobility can also be examined using gendered roles based on the above-mentioned interview responses. The assumption that married women should prioritise their domestic responsibilities, even in their professional context, demonstrates the pervasive influence of traditional gender roles in the workplace. Gender roles not only limits their mobility but also restricts their participation in important decision-making meetings and professional development opportunities that can significantly enhance their career progression. Additionally, the different experiences of women are

witnessed in the workplace. While some women are impeded by societal norms and familial restrictions, others (like single women or those from more liberal families) are able to navigate these barriers more easily. This differentiation is crucial for understanding the nature of women's experiences in the workplace. The findings have implications for gender equality. While the mobility restrictions for some women are creating opportunities for others, this does not necessarily advance gender equality but rather entrench some biases that married women should prioritise their family duties. It further highlights the importance of addressing these societal and familial norms that restrict women's mobility and opportunities in the workplace.

From the data illustrated in this chapter, many participants tried to explain the view of conservative societies on women's work mobility. If they travel for work reasons, married women will be judged and considered not reliable women because while travelling, they have left their homes and children for the purposes of work. Single women are not allowed to travel as well because of the patriarchal views that women should have a male guardian to be able to travel otherwise their families' reputations might be negatively affected. However, the later participant has a supportive family that encourage her professional development despite her working in a very conservative town in Saudi. These traditional norms and customs' views on women work mobility vary depending on those women's beliefs and their families' beliefs, and also on the geographical area in which these women work.

All the interviewees, who hold higher positions in this study are working at universities in large cities in Saudi Arabia and did not indicate any sort of challenge or negative experience in regards to daily work-related mobility such as attending off campus meetings, visiting external governmental agencies, and attending external academic events. This is reflected by the following excerpt from Dina who stated:

I usually have regular visits to the male campus due to the requirements of my job, for reasons such as college meeting and training workshops. (Participant 1, Saudi, 45 years old, married with 5 children aged 8, 15, 18, and over 18 years ,Director of department)

Dina shared that as a director of department in both female and male sections, she usually attends meeting in both campuses without any constrains. A similar finding was reported by the other 11 participants who hold high positions and had the similar administrative roles. All eleven participants are married and have children but did not share any difficulties regarding inter-town work mobility. However, women with young children might experience challenge in joining work events outside working hours, due to childcare responsibilities. Most childcare facilities are closed by the end of the working hours, thus working women have to ask for extra help, either through hiring a nanny at home or ask a member of family to look after their young children while she attends the events out of working hours. Having a childcare responsibility for young children is considered manageable challenge which could be addressed by providing additional help. Nevertheless, working women (with children) who work in academia might face major challenges and constraints if they do not have access to external help or their spouse does not share equal childcare duties. Of the 11 participants, only four have children under the age of 7, who would require extra help in case of duties and responsibilities arising out of official working hours.

Inter-city daily-work related mobility is unlikely to be as challenging as travelling internationally for work purposes. All the five single women who work in different positions in this study, whether Saudi or from overseas reported that they have the freedom to engage in daily work-related mobility. Married women with school age and older children, who hold senior positions also reported they do not have the negative experiences in terms of inter-city mobility. In contrast, women with children under the age of 7 tend to face more challenges in terms of finding childcare support. Once women with young children find external support or the father is willing to share equal childcare responsibility, they could overcome this challenge.

Apart from the participants holding leadership and senior roles, for the rest of the 14 participants (who work in lower ranks, all are married and have children) that reported as not having constraints in daily commuting but did not attend external formal events. In fact, the majority of training opportunities are held on campus or held online, which is considered more convenient for their career progression. Attending external

academic events might not be considered a priority for women in the lower ranks interviewed in this study, as some of them have the desire to attend off campus events to expand their network but they reported lack of opportunities, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Role-based differences in mobility emerged as a key finding in this chapter, as confirmed through the discussion of interview responses above. Holding higher positions in universities in large cities provides women a different mobility experience compared to their counterparts in lower ranks. Women in senior roles regularly participate in off-campus meetings, training sessions, and other professional events without reporting mobility constraints. This contrasts with women in lower positions who, even though they do not face commuting constraints, have limited exposure to external formal events. This distinction suggests that while physical mobility might not be the primary issue, the real constraint lies in the opportunities made available to women based on their professional rank. In addition, childcare, particularly for young children, emerges as a central mobility challenge for working women in academia. The nature of this challenge is not necessarily about societal norms, but more logistical – primarily tied to the availability of childcare facilities and support after standard working hours. While single women and those with older children do not face such issues, mothers of children under seven are more likely to deal with these challenges. The interview data illustrated that the impact of childcare responsibilities can be mitigated if there is access to publicly or privately provided childcare support or shared childcare duties within the household. This shows the importance of supportive infrastructures and egalitarian domestic partnerships to facilitate professional mobility for working mothers.

6.5 Stigmatisation of mobility

The interview finding also show how deep-seated cultural norms and societal expectations in certain regions in Saudi Arabia can result in the stigmatisation of mobility for women. This stigmatisation is a manifestation of the patriarchal views that permeate across Saudi Arabia (Adham, 2022), especially in more conservative areas or among more traditional families (Alwedinani, 2017). The social stigma

associated with travel of married women is clear. The fact that married women who travel for work reasons are judged and considered "unreliable" reflects a strong societal expectation for women to prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional ones. This viewpoint not only stigmatises women's mobility but also undermines their professional aspirations, as it implies that their primary duty is towards their family and household. Such a perspective reinforces traditional gender roles while marginalising women who seek to transcend these roles. This can be compared to the stigma associated with travel of single women. The belief that single women should not travel without a male guardian's company is another manifestation of patriarchal norms, which perceive women as needing protection or supervision (Keshet et al., 2015). This perspective could stigmatise women who travel alone for work, marking them as deviating from 'acceptable' behaviour. It can lead to societal judgement and potential damage to their family's reputation.

The extent of stigmatisation arguably varies by region. The intensity of the stigma seems to vary depending on the geographical area where women live and work. Women in smaller towns and villages, which are often more conservative, may face more stringent societal norms and a higher degree of stigmatisation compared to those in larger cities. It reflects a broader societal trend where urbanisation often brings more liberal social norms. The findings also indicate that family values and beliefs play a pivotal role in women's mobility. A supportive family, like Marram's, can help women overcome societal barriers and advance in their professional lives. However, families that adhere to traditional norms might inhibit women's mobility due to the fear of societal judgement or the potential negative impact on their reputation.

Many well qualified female faculty members were promoted to occupy higher demonstrative positions besides their work as academics in the female section. Therefore, their outstanding performance and dedication to work have led to their successes in both roles. Women in higher education have proved their success so far in managing the female section. However, women's professional performance is still being questioned by male counterparts on some occasions, such as attending urgent meetings and international and national academic events. Therefore, women might

not be considered as reliable candidates for attending international academic events that require travel, due to the barrier of women's work mobility.

The previously mentioned findings indicate complex interplay between the progress achieved in women's professional advancement in Saudi Arabian higher education and the persisting gender biases. On one hand, it is arguably encouraging to note that many well-qualified female faculty members have been promoted and are succeeding in higher administrative positions, besides their academic roles. It reflects a positive shift towards gender equality in higher education, demonstrating that women can effectively hold and perform in leadership roles when given the opportunity. Despite these successes, the fact that women's professional performance is still questioned by their male counterparts, particularly regarding their availability for urgent meetings and academic events, highlights the persistent gender biases. This is an issue not exclusive to Saudi Arabia; women in leadership roles worldwide often face heightened scrutiny and doubts about their competence and commitment (Brieger et al., 2019). This bias, coupled with the societal norms that limit women's mobility, may result in women being overlooked for international academic events, training and development opportunities. This not only limits their professional development opportunities but also lowers the representation of women in international forums, which can impact the overall development and reputation of Saudi Arabian higher education on the global stage.

Finally, labelling women as "unreliable" candidates due to their perceived constraints in mobility perpetuates gender stereotypes and undermines their professional achievements. It creates an incorrect narrative that women's family responsibilities, imposed by societal norms, could interfere with their professional responsibilities. This shows a lack of understanding and flexibility in accommodating women's needs and unique challenges, ultimately holding them back from equal professional opportunities.

6.5 Conclusion

The chapter examined the challenges relating to professional mobility of women, distinguishing the analysis based on international and in-country work-related mobility. When it comes to the international mobility of women in higher education, multidimensional dynamics surrounding the professional mobility and growth of women highlighted the broader socio-cultural challenges faced by women across different geographies and generations. It was found that there is continued tension between traditional gender roles and the evolving aspirations of women in the professional realm. A key finding in this chapter is the influence of familial obligations and societal expectations on women's decision-making processes regarding their careers. Even as opportunities in higher education and the job market become more accessible for women in Saudi Arabia, they, whether native Saudi Arabian or from neighbouring countries, continue to face the weight of dual responsibilities. The roles of primary caregiver and homemaker, deeply ingrained within the patriarchal systems, present a significant hurdle, often compelling women to forgo altogether or defer their career advancement opportunities.

Geographical dynamics further complicate the environment in which women operate in higher education. While urban and cosmopolitan areas such as Riyadh present a somewhat more liberal environment for women, smaller towns uphold more conservative norms. This geographical divide is reinforced by a generational divide, where younger cohorts demonstrate more progressive views on women's roles compared to their older counterparts. Yet, across these divides, familial support remains vital, influencing whether women can fully exploit available professional opportunities. The international perspective brought by the interviewees from diverse backgrounds illustrated a universal challenge faced by women: the tug-of-war between professional aspirations and traditional gender roles (Essers and Benschop, 2009). This struggle is not limited to Saudi or Arab women; instead, it is shared across cultures, reflecting a broader global trend that often witnesses women's careers constrained by these roles. Notably, some of these constraints are not just externally

enforced but are also internalised, with women believing they are intrinsically better suited for domestic roles, thereby limiting their own professional trajectories.

Furthermore, the societal perception of motherhood as central to women's identity is a prevailing theme uncovered in this chapter. Such perceptions not only shape societal expectations but can also influence women's own beliefs about their roles, further anchoring them to traditional responsibilities. While the Saudi Arabian context presents a unique lens to view these challenges, it also reveals that these gendered dynamics are deeply entrenched across cultures. The experiences of non-Saudi women in the country, although shaped by their own cultural backgrounds, find resonance with the broader narrative of gender roles and professional mobility. This implies that even as societies progress, without significant challenges to these deeply ingrained beliefs and norms, women's professional growth might remain limited. The chapter highlighted the complexities of women's professional mobility in the context of Saudi Arabia, reflecting both unique regional challenges and universal gender dynamics. To foster genuine professional growth for women, it is important to address and challenge these entrenched norms, both within societies and within women themselves.

When it comes to in-country work-related mobility, there remains a push and pull between progress in women's professional roles and the deep-seated societal norms and cultural expectations that act as barriers. Women in Saudi Arabia have made significant progress in their professional careers, with many progressing to higher administrative and academic positions. Their successes in such roles is a testament to their competence and dedication. However, this progress is constrained by the societal and cultural norms that limit their mobility. These constraints, rooted in traditional beliefs and patriarchal views, manifest in various forms, such as stigmatisation of travel, expectations of familial duties, and perceptions of women's reliability in professional contexts.

Differentiating the experiences further, the data revealed that mobility and its associated challenges are not uniform. Factors such as marital status, professional rank, age of children, and family responsibilities influence the experiences of women

in higher education. For instance, while women in senior roles often find greater mobility and fewer constraints in attending off-campus events, their counterparts in lower positions face limited opportunities. Single women and those without young children enjoy more freedom and are less affected by societal judgments compared to their married peers or those with younger children. The critical role of childcare facilities and the logistics tied to it further compounds these challenges. Additionally, there is a distinct urban-rural divide. Women working in larger cities face fewer mobility constraints and societal judgments compared to those in more conservative, smaller towns. The geographical variance in experiences indicates that while urban centers might be embracing more liberal views, smaller towns remain entrenched in traditional norms.

However, one of the more unsettling findings is the persistent gender bias in the professional realm. Even as women prove their competence in leadership roles, their male counterparts sometimes question their reliability, especially in contexts that require mobility. This scepticism, along with the societal constraints means women often miss out on essential growth opportunities, such as attending international academic events. Such biases undermine the tremendous progress made by women in Saudi Arabian academia and can potentially constrain the country's ambitious objectives stated in Vision 2030, such as to raise the employment rate among women to 30%. Overcoming the challenges uncovered in this chapter requires not just the changes in policy but also a deeper societal shift in perceptions and attitudes towards women's roles in the professional world. Only then can Saudi Arabia harness the full potential of its female workforce and move towards a more inclusive and equitable future.

Chapter 7: The role of Families in Women's Career Advancement in Saudi Higher Education

7.1 Introduction

Women worldwide have historically encountered gender stereotypes, and Saudi Arabian women, given the nation's deep-rooted traditions, are no different (Alotaibi, 2020; Lari, 2023). However, in the 21st century, Saudi Arabia has seen significant advancements in the inclusion of women in the workforce. The data in figure 2.1 illustrated an increase in female labour force participation rate from 16% in 2000 to 28% by 2022 (World Bank, 2022). This positive shift can be largely attributed to the Vision 2030 initiative, which aimed to increase women's engagement in the labour market by providing enhanced opportunities across education, employment and greater rights/ independence within society (Alshammari, 2022). Despite this progress, and while Saudi Arabia exhibits one of the most rapid growth rates in female labour participation among the G-20 nations, women remain notably underrepresented in senior roles within higher education institutions (Alghofaily, 2019; Mulligan, 2019).

The objective of this chapter is to analyse the findings of the interviews conducted with 30 women employed in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia with a focus on the role of families in career advancement of women. The women's role in the family is explored in section 7.2 with an emphasis on key themes emerging from the interviews. Some of these themes include dual responsibility of women, amplification of stress experienced by women, traditional gender roles and expectations and the burden associated with societal expectations. The differences between married and single or separated women, as well as women from Saudi Arabia versus other countries in the context of the role of family in influencing their career advancement are also explored. The chapter also analyses the challenges faced by working women in higher education, followed by the analysis of family's influence on career of women. Finally, the findings of this interview and wide literature are used to explain the strategies for improved work life balance for women in higher education in Saudi Arabia.

This chapter examines the role of families in the career advancement of women in Saudi Arabian higher education through an intersectional lens, offering valuable insights into the complex interplay between gender, marital status, familial obligations, and cultural norms. By considering these intersecting dimensions, the chapter uncovers the distinct ways in which societal expectations, family responsibilities, and professional aspirations intersect and impact women's careers in academia. The intersectional analysis reveals how traditional gender roles and societal norms significantly influence women's professional development, highlighting the differential experiences of women based on their marital status, familial responsibilities, and the cultural expectations tied to their tribal affiliations. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted barriers women face in their career progression, underscoring the importance of considering diverse experiences within the context of gender equity in academia. By focusing on the varied experiences of married, single, and divorced women, and taking into account the influence of family traditions and tribal affiliations, the chapter emphasises the critical role that supportive family structures and flexible institutional policies play in enabling women to navigate the challenges of balancing professional growth with personal responsibilities. Through this intersectional approach, the chapter contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies needed to promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in higher education in Saudi Arabia.

7.2 Women's role in the family

Women around the world have various responsibilities and expectations as they are considered primary carers in their families. These responsibilities mean women have limited time to invest in development of relevant skills and progress their careers (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). This continues to remain a problem, which manifests itself in underrepresentation of women in the senior academic roles (McGuinness, 2015). Saudi Arabia as a highly traditional country has its unique culture and Arabic traditions with a history extended several thousand years. Therefore, the strict beliefs in such a conservative society have contributed to shape the experiences of working women in academia. Interviews revealed five key themes relating to women's role in the family and its implications for their career development, as explained below.

7.2.1 Dual responsibility (work and household) and emotional labour

Dual responsibility on women is the first theme. A number of interviewees admitted to facing a challenge in terms of being able to manage the work and family responsibilities. The dual responsibility (i.e. the need to fulfil the family's expectations attributed to their role as a mother and wife along with the professional responsibilities associated with their career) creates a challenge because of the limited time and resultant need to manage the workload. Women interviewed are not just employed but hold roles of significant responsibility that require them to dedicate time and effort in fulfilling these responsibilities. Despite their demanding jobs, they are expected to leave the work-related stress at work and fulfil their domestic duties with the same rigour as they would if they are not working at all. For instance, Shayma (an interviewee) is a 39-year old working as a lecturer with 10 years of professional experience in Jordan prior to moving to Saudi Arabia. Despite being the primary earner due to her husband's unemployment, Shayma is still mainly responsible for caring for her young children and household chores. The societal construct appears not to factor in her professional status when it comes to determination of her responsibilities at home. Shayma commented:

Although I'm the main provider to my family now because my husband did not find a job yet, my responsibilities at home never end. I don't have external help, so I must handle most housework myself. Especially that my daughters are too young 5, 3 and 1 years, cooking and feeding them are my main responsibility (Participant 4, Jordanian, 39 years, married with 3 children under the age of 5 years, lecturer).

The lived experience of Shayma illustrates pervasiveness of dual responsibilities - professional role in the academic world and the role of a primary caregiver at home. Despite her professional accomplishments and responsibilities, societal expectations dictate she (as with most other women in the region) also excel in their roles as

mothers and wives. This dual responsibility, wherein professional accomplishments do not lessen familial expectations, signifies a deep-rooted cultural norm that women navigate throughout their careers. Women's role in the family in case of Participant 4, also highlights the challenge when integrating work and personal life. The separation of work-life and home-life appears to be a blurred line. Even as she holds prominent positions at work which requires significant dedication and effort, she is still "expected to set her professional achievements aside and immerse fully in domestic roles", as uncovered in the interview. This points to an implicit societal understanding that a woman's commitment to her family should not be influenced by her professional life.

Shayma's experience also demonstrates that a woman's economic contribution to her family does not necessarily translate to a redistribution of household responsibilities. With a decade of experience in higher education, Shayma would be considered an experienced professional in higher education, given her more than 10-years of academic experience in Jordan prior to moving to Saudi Arabia. Her move to Saudi Arabia and continued commitment to her profession highlights her dedication to her career. However, this professional seniority does not appear to translate into a shift in domestic expectations. Despite her evident professional expertise and her role as the primary earner for her family, Shayma's domestic responsibilities remain largely unchanged, as also witnessed among almost 90% of the interviewees with whom data was collected in this research. This suggests that, irrespective of professional stature or experience, traditional familial roles and expectations might be deeply ingrained and resistant to change based on professional accomplishments alone.

The experiences of Shayma around women's role in the family can be corroborated through another interviewee – Ghadah, a 30-year old Saudi woman who works as a lecturer and is married with one child. She commented:

My husband is currently searching for jobs, in the meantime we decided it is for the best that my child and I move to my mother house, so my mother could look after my daughter while I'm at work.
(Participant 29, Saudi, 30 years, married with one child aged 2 years, lecturer)

The above participant is the main earner in the household and she is the prime carer for her 2 years old child. Considering long working hours and main domestic duties in the household, the participant and her husband agreed that it is the best if she and her daughter moved to her mother house. The participant explained that it is financially and emotionally most convenient for her to move to her mother house during weekdays. At the weekends, the participant and her daughter return to their own house to spend time with the husband. The previous participant clarified that parenting a toddler is challenging for husband on a day-to-day basis, especially as the mother is not around. In addition, hiring external services provider to help with household work or babysitting is not an option presently, considering the financial resource constraints experienced by a single income household. She added that her job responsibilities do not stop at the end of the working hours, as she needs to work extra hours at home to meet her professional deadlines. These job-related requirements are alongside the need to undertake most of household chores after work. The interviewee referred to this as “similar situation if I’m working in two full time jobs at the same time”, which is emotionally exhausting.

In this research sample, 18 participants from different nationalities are married and have children, 13 participants of total sample have children of school age or younger. The husbands of all 13 participants are willing to help with childcare occasionally. They show support mainly in the form of helping with homework and dropping/picking children from school when the mothers cannot manage to fulfil these responsibilities themselves due to work commitments. The other five participants who have children at the pre-school age (6 years or younger), reported lack of support in regards to childcare from their husbands. In terms of domestic responsibility, the majority of respondents (over 80%) reported lack of support from their husbands, stating that support was available in limited situations, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic when external cleaning services were not an option. However, 18 participants managed to receive external support in terms of childcare and domestic work whether by their families, not too young children or paid services, which indicates lack of equal childcare and domestic responsibilities.

The above two participants are main earners in the household and the prime carer of their children while their husbands are looking for employment opportunities,

highlighting the similar gender roles and challenges experienced by women in HE despite differences in nationalities. Only two participants reported being the prime provider for their family, both are married and have children under the age of 6, both reported their husbands are temporarily unemployed and are looking for jobs. Women in higher education often find themselves making significant adjustments to their living arrangements to cater to familial needs, especially when they are the primary earners. The decision of Ghadah, the 30-year-old lecturer to temporarily relocate to her mother's house during the weekdays showcases a pragmatic approach to balancing professional and personal demands. The involvement of extended family, particularly maternal figures, to support childcare needs is reflective of the familial structures that exist within many traditional societies, emphasising the communal nature of caregiving (Al-Rasheed, 2021).

The dual full-time job phenomenon also emerges from the analysis of responses from two interviewees above. Women's experiences often revolve around navigating two parallel worlds: the demanding professional arena and the equally demanding domestic environment. Ghadah's, the 30 years old lecturer with a toddler, description of her life as similar to "working in two full-time jobs at the same time" highlights the emotional and physical toll this balancing act can take. The comparison emphasises the intense workload and expectations placed upon women, even when they hold significant professional roles, also highlighted by Syed et al. (2018).

Apart from the need to manage both professional and domestic responsibilities at home as part of the dual responsibility, emotional labour is also witnessed in the comments from Shayma, 39 years old lecturer with 3 children under the age of 6 years. Besides the physical exertion associated with undertaking domestic tasks at home, the emotional labour –process of managing the expectations and feelings to fulfil the given emotional requirements (Harris, 2002) which comes with the dual responsibility tends to be exhausting. This is reflected in Shayma's comment, as she mentioned that "responsibilities at home never end." Constant fulfilment of responsibilities is one way in which emotional labour is witnessed in her response to a continued demand on her time and energy. But it is not just about the physical aspect of doing chores or caring for her children; it is also the emotional and mental weight of always needing to be present, available, and attentive. This requirement to always be 'on' for her

family, even after fulfilling her professional responsibilities, is emotionally draining. This is further compounded by the need to manage both external and internal expectations. As the primary earner due to her husband's unemployment, the above discussed participants Shayma and Ghadah as many other participants bear majority of both economic responsibility and traditional domestic duties. The societal construct does not seem to adjust its expectations of her as a mother and wife despite her professional status. This mismatch between what is expected of her at home and her professional commitments requires participants to “juggle between job and household duties which is emotionally demanding and exhausting at times”, constantly balance, prioritise, and manage emotions tied to both roles - a classic representation of emotional labour (Isenbarger and Zembylas, 2006). In addition, Participant 4’s earlier comment that she doesn't have external help means she is continually juggling work, childcare, and household chores. The emotional toll of managing these tasks without support is significant. Knowing that there is no reprieve, especially when she also remains the main provider, can worsen the emotional labour she experiences.

Moreover, a finding which emerges from the interview data is that working married women carry more responsibilities at home than single women living with their parents. Lina, Saudi, 36 years, Divorced and has 2 children at the age of 6 and 4 years, assistant professor, stated: *“I have found my workload at home increase to almost double what it was before I had children. I am under constant pressure at work and at home, worsened (financially and time-wise) by the fact that I am a single parent”*. Thus, being a woman in traditional places constrains women when it comes to carrying the main responsibilities of home chores and childcare while pursuing their career. Farah, (33-year old lecturer from Yemen with six years of work experience who is single) confirmed that she is the provider for her family, she is single and live with her mother and three younger siblings as the father past away, the participants shared:

I don't do much in when at home, I usually take care of housework that require going out such as running errands and take my mother to the hospital appointments. (Participant 2, Yemeni, 33 years, single without children, lecturer and coordinator)

The above excerpt from interview helps to highlight that the range of responsibilities varies by marital status. There is a considerable contrast between the responsibilities shouldered by married women and single women, even when they both live within traditional settings. Married women often bear most of household chores and childcare, suggesting that the institution of marriage comes with embedded expectations about a woman's role at home. On the other hand, single women like Farah, the Yemeni lecturer might not have the same depth of domestic responsibilities. However, single women are not completely exempt either. In her case, she undertakes tasks that might be traditionally considered more 'external' or perhaps ones that require interfacing with the public realm, such as running errands or accompanying her mother to hospital appointments, since taking care of elderly parents seem to be mainly carried by the females within the family as two other participants stated the same. This distinction provides an understanding of how marital status can shape the nature and scope of responsibilities women face.

Farah, the Yemeni lecturer's situation also highlights the flexibility of gender roles when familial circumstances demand it. With the passing of her father, she has taken on the role of the primary provider for her family. Her role as a provider, in conjunction with her being a single woman living with her mother and siblings, challenges the conventional norms (see section 3.2.2 in chapter 3). She does not hold the primary responsibility for all household chores, but her responsibilities have shifted to more 'external' tasks. It demonstrates the adaptability of women in traditional societies, and how roles can be negotiated or redefined based on familial needs, economic necessities, or unforeseen circumstances. In traditional societies, gender roles are often rigidly defined, with women typically expected to undertake domestic chores and caregiving responsibilities. However, Farah, the Yemeni lecturer's situation challenges these norms, demonstrating that when economic and familial dynamics shift, so too can the distribution of responsibilities within a family, a finding also supported by Alobaid et al. (2020) as discussed in the literature review section 3.1.1. Her transition to the primary provider due to her father's passing represents a significant deviation from the typical expectations placed on women in her society. It shows that gender roles, while deeply entrenched, are not immutable and can be reshaped by necessity and circumstance. This adaptability also demonstrates the broader theme of women's agency. Farah's, the 33 years lecturer, willingness and ability to assume a role traditionally occupied by men in her society

– that of the primary breadwinner – is a powerful testament to the capacity of women to navigate and negotiate within patriarchal structures (Alkhaled, 2021). It reflects the resilience and resourcefulness of women in adapting to challenging situations, redefining their roles, and taking on responsibilities that transcend conventional gender boundaries. Moreover, her experience highlights the importance of recognising and valuing the diverse roles women can play in their families and communities. It challenges the notion that women's contributions are confined to the domestic sphere and highlights their potential to significantly impact their family's economic well-being.

7.2.2 Increase in stress, worsened by the pandemic

The second theme emerging from the interviews relating to women's role in the family is amplification of stress experienced by women in relation to working from home during the pandemic. Covid-19 led to the rise in flexible working whereby many employers including higher education institutions allowed employees to work from home to maintain social distancing (Vyas, 2022). Flexible working and work from home presents a unique situation in that it led to blurring of lines between work and home responsibilities, thereby increasing the demands on women. This is witnessed in Hannah's response who stated that:

My home duties as all mothers and wives, which are tiring most of the time, I come home after work I start cooking, help with the kids' homework. The stress got worse than ever during Covid-19 pandemic I had to work remotely while home-schooling 3 kids and looking after a toddler at the same time. (Participant 14, Saudi, 41 years, married with 4 children aged of 15, 13, 7 and 2 years, assistant professor, and VD of college.)

The stress of working online and the challenge of having professional help or the help of the extended family members during the national lockdown because to avoid endangering the lives of the children and others was a major obstacle women faced

during the pandemic, especially women with children of school-age. As Ahlam, shared:

By the end of the day, I could not feel anything, I become emotionally and physically drained as I'm studying my masters, home-schooling three kids and taking care of everything else at home. (Participant 30, Saudi, 36 years old married with 3 children at age of 10, 9 and 7 years, Deputy head of deanship).

The above interview quote by Saudi 36-year old Deputy head with three children is complemented through the response of Abeer a 35-year old Technician with two children who is divorced. She stated:

I hold main responsibility of home schooling my three daughters, I had to cancel some work commitments to be with my daughters to attend online classes, as a result I had to work extra hours late at night but also wake up early to work again which is madness. (Participant 24, Saudi, 35 years old, divorced with children 12 years and a 9 years twin, laboratory Technician)

The above excerpts show that with remote working, boundaries between professional tasks and domestic responsibilities became less clear. Hannah had to juggle her role as an assistant professor and Vice Dean while also attending to her children's educational and emotional needs. The closure of schools meant that children were home, increasing the demand for attention, meals, and supervision. Moreover, for those without external support such as ability to get help with domestic responsibilities including childcare, the workload at home saw a significant increase, which can be overwhelming. Although pandemic was an unusual and non-recurring event, Hannah's experience has relevance in the post-pandemic world, given the increase in flexible working and work from home post-pandemic (Marzban et al., 2023). Beyond the physical demands of domestic responsibilities, the psychological stress of ensuring one's children are coping with online schooling, while also managing professional duties, can take its toll. Hannah's interview response above

clearly highlights this stress, indicating the heightened burden during the pandemic. In total 21 out of 30 participants in the study mentioned at least one time during the interview that they are being stressed out, exhausted, managing a lot at home and in work. It illustrates that stress and exhaustion experienced by women in HE is prevalent. 19 participants were married and 2 were divorced, all have children in the age of school and pre-school age and infants.

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its emphasis on remote working and online schooling, significantly blurred the boundaries between professional and domestic spaces. For working women, particularly those in roles of significance, this convergence meant navigating an environment where they had to constantly manage between their responsibilities at work and at home. Hannah's experiences exemplify this duality; she was not just a professional or a mother at separate times but had to be both, almost simultaneously. What's particular relevant is the absence of clear demarcation, leading to scenarios like working late into the night and then waking up early, or cancelling work commitments to attend to children's online classes. This constant need to manage reflects a profound shift in work-life dynamics during the pandemic, emphasising the amplified responsibilities borne predominantly by women.

7.2.3 Traditional gender roles

The third relevant theme from the interviews with regards to women's role in the family is around traditional gender roles and expectations. The experience of interviewees in terms of managing their workload and responsibilities at home highlights the expectations among their husbands and family members of the traditional role of women at home, without any regard for their growing professional responsibilities and their implications on their health and wellbeing. Aisha's experience with her husband reflects how even in modern times, there is a deeply held belief about her duties at home. Even though her husband offers some help with household responsibilities occasionally, the primary responsibility is still seen as hers.

At the end of the day, I'm married to a Middle Eastern man (referring to his traditional views and beliefs), he helps sometimes cooking when

I'm too tired, but he refuses to share the responsibilities of other chores around the home. (Participant 3, American/Jordanian, 32 years, married with a 5 years old child, Lecturer,)

In the above quote, it is noteworthy that the phrase "married to a Middle Eastern man" is not only about nationality of her husband. Instead, it symbolises a set of cultural and societal expectations. Despite being in a position of responsibility (university lecturer) which demands respect and equality, at home, Aisha is still subject to traditional expectations without any consideration of the effect that her professional responsibilities in the workplace may be having on her ability to allocate time and effort to the domestic duties. Resistance to change is also noticed from Aisha's husband whose occasional cooking but refusal to share other responsibilities at home is reflective of the selective adaptation exhibited by the family members (Alsharif, 2018). They might adopt some aspects of modern roles but resist a complete shift away from the traditional expectations.

7.2.4 Expectations of society

The fourth issue which emerges from the interviews is the burden associated with societal expectations, including both covert and overt expectations due to the traditional Saudi society in which women work in the higher education sector. Single women in roles of greater responsibility in higher education may be assumed to have lesser responsibilities at home however, the interviews conducted with Farah, a Yamani single lecturer, and Layla, a Saudi single demonstrator, uncovered that societal expectations do not necessarily reduce when they are not married. Farah, despite being single, shoulders the financial and emotional responsibilities of her family due to her father's passing. Layla, despite her professional aspirations, feels duty-bound to care for her elderly parents. It illustrates the societal expectations that unmarried women shoulder familial duties. Detailed quotes from both Farah and Layla below help to understand this argument further: Farah, stated:

My father passed away so I'm the main provider to my family since I'm the only one who is working, and my siblings are still in school. I

usually take care of outdoor tasks such as running errands and taking my mother to the doctors' appointments. I can barely manage family responsibilities and job requirements because being a coordinator added more hours to my teaching schedule. Most of the time I work up to midnight at home, (laughing) thank God I'm not married and I have no obligation to look after a husband nor children otherwise I'll be heavily criticised because of my lifestyle. (Participant 2, Yemeni, 33 years, single without children, lecturer and coordinator)

Layla shared:

I live with my parents, and I hold main responsibility of them financially and emotionally speaking. My siblings are all married live with their families in their own houses, I couldn't leave my parents alone as both are senior in age which hold me back from travelling to obtain my PhD degree. I could have been abroad studying 10 years ago, I just felt too guilty to do so at that time. (Participant 18, Saudi, 30 years, single without children, Demonstrator)

Farah's laughter when discussing her unmarried status may indicate her relief at not having an additional responsibility associated with being married. However, the laughter also indicates a reflection on how society scrutinises and critiques her lifestyle as a single individual with no husband or children. Being unmarried may mean she does not have to allocate time to fulfil the spousal duties, but she is not exempt from scrutiny imposed by the society, particularly in contexts where marriage remains the expected norm.

7.2.5 Economic responsibilities

Economic responsibilities is another emergent theme when it comes to discussion of women's role in the family. Primary research uncovered that traditional gender roles extend beyond mere chores and influence the financial decisions including who should pay for what, irrespective of the practical circumstances. Interview conducted with Lina highlighted this whereby despite being a professional, she was expected to

bear the financial responsibility associated with household help. Such expectations persist in many cultures, where irrespective of a woman's income or status, certain financial responsibilities are 'assigned' on the basis of gender (Quamar, 2016; Alfarran et al., 2018). Lina's comments below help to illustrate this:

At the time I was married my husband did not share the expenses of employing a maid or a nanny and said it is the wife's duty to take care of household work. Unfortunately, we live in a masculine society where there is a common belief that the wife should pay for any sort of external help in case she needed help with domestic housework. (Participant 8, Saudi, 36 years, divorced with 2 children, assistant professor).

Another three participants also clarified that they are financially responsible for providing external professional helper at home whether a nanny or houseworker. The participants explained they are responsible to pay for the nannies and houseworkers, using the words such as: *"my salary paid for the nanny"*, *"I hired a nanny"*, *"when I finished my study I was finally able to hire a houseworker"*. These participants were all married and have children in school and pre-school age. At work, all the three participants have managerial roles and teaching responsibilities that required commitments including the need to work long hours. The rest of the participants who have professional helper at home remain private regarding whether they share the financial responsibilities with the husbands or not.

Traditional gender roles and financial responsibilities is a noteworthy finding from above interview responses. It becomes apparent from Lina's account and the experiences of other participants that traditional gender roles extend to financial responsibilities. Despite being a professional, Lina, A Saudi assistant professor who has two pre-school aged children, is expected to bear the financial burden of hiring household help. This indicates a strong cultural belief that it is the wife's responsibility to manage household matters, including finances related to them. This reveals a deeper societal expectation wherein even if women earn or occupy significant roles professionally, certain financial burdens related to domesticity remain firmly their

responsibility, rooted in gendered expectations. A contradiction between status and expectations is also witnessed. Despite holding managerial positions and facing work commitments that require long hours, these women are still expected to shoulder the financial responsibility of hiring domestic help. Phrases such as “my salary paid for the nanny” or “when I finished my study I was finally able to hire a houseworker” imply that even when women ascend to positions of responsibility and garner personal incomes, their professional accomplishments do not shield or exempt them from traditional expectations at home. Their professional status does not seem to allow them to renegotiate their domestic and financial roles within the family.

The term "masculine society" mentioned by Lina carries a deep-rooted patriarchal culture where roles, responsibilities, and even financial obligations are pre-defined (Aldossari and Calvard, 2021). Women are labelled into certain expectations, even if those go against practical considerations or are unfair. The traditional family roles and societal expectations in the Saudi Arabian society influence not only the ability of women to manage their professional workload but also their future career progression and aspirations. For instance, Layla's, a 30 years single, Saudi demonstrator, experience of holding back from pursuing a PhD abroad because of her responsibilities toward her elderly parents (see Participant 18's comment above) highlights the conflicts experienced by numerous women in senior roles within higher education. Despite having the opportunity, the cultural onus on women to be the primary caregivers to their family, whether unmarried or married, impedes their career growth. Layla's internal conflict—between her personal aspiration of pursuing higher education abroad and her societal role as her parents' caregiver—highlights a picture of the broader struggle women face in aligning their aspirations with societal expectations.

Similarly, there is a struggle between independence and fulfilment of their obligations, reinforcing the internal and external conflicts women face between their personal desires for independence and the societal and familial obligations placed upon them. Interviews revealed that even as successful women experience growth in their careers and aspire for more, women such as Farah and Layla have to continually navigate societal norms and expectations, which may not always align with their personal

aspirations. In particular, Layla's experience of feeling of guilt for even considering leaving her elderly parents behind to pursue a PhD is a reflection of the emotional burden of societal expectations on women.

The women's role in the family as analysed through the interview responses could be further examined based on their specific backgrounds. Married women, especially working mothers, are portrayed as managing multiple roles. They not only take the responsibilities at their workplaces but also majorly manage domestic chores, child-rearing, and caregiving. Beyond the household tasks, some married women, such as Shayma and Lina are also expected to take on financial responsibilities. Participants such as Shayma and Ghadah, for instance remain the main provider due to their husbands' unemployment. Lina, faced expectations to bear the financial cost of domestic help despite being married and before the divorce. Some of the Saudi society views married women based on traditional expectations. Lina's experience, where it was considered a wife's duty to bear household servants'/helpers' expenses, underscores the deep-rooted gender roles still prevalent, as few others participants agreed that they hold full financial responsibility of providing external cleaning services.

When it comes to similarities and differences between Saudi women and the women from other backgrounds employed in higher education in Saudi Arabia, a similarity is noticed that both Saudi women and those from other backgrounds experience the dual burden of professional duties and household responsibilities. They also experience similar traditional gender roles. For instance, Aisha, an American/Jordanian, is subjected to Middle Eastern expectations due to her husband's beliefs. However, there is a distinction between Saudi women and those from other backgrounds in terms of the intensity of cultural expectations. Even though both groups face societal expectations, Saudi women might experience more intense pressures due to the particularly conservative nature of certain societal segments in Saudi Arabia, a finding supported by Alkhaled (2021). Even though most women experience the dual burden of professional and household responsibilities, Saudi women often face more stringent societal pressures due to the deeply entrenched conservative norms within certain segments of Saudi society. This heightened intensity for Saudi women means a

potentially greater struggle in balancing their professional aspirations with traditional roles. For women from other backgrounds, while they encounter similar challenges, the degree of societal scrutiny and cultural expectations may be comparatively less stringent, affording them a slightly different, perhaps slightly more flexible, navigational space within the same societal framework.

From an intersectional perspective, some differences between married and single or separated women are also noticed from the interview responses. The first such difference relates to the nature of responsibilities. Although married women, such as Shayma and Fatima, deal with both work and significant household tasks, single women such as Farah and Layla often have to accept other familial responsibilities. Also, divorced women with children considered prime caregiver to children play a major role at the absence of the father while also providing care for elderly. This was confirmed by both the divorced women interviewed, who indicated they moved back to their parents' house to better fulfil their household responsibilities. For Farah the Yamani single lecturer, it is about supporting her siblings and mother after her father's passing. For participant 18 the Saudi single demonstrator, this expense is associated with caring for her elderly parents. Another point of difference between married and single or separated women is around career aspirations and familial responsibilities. Single women, such as Farah and Layla, might face direct conflict between their career aspirations and familial obligations. Especially Layla, who could not pursue her PhD abroad due to responsibilities towards her parents. Societal judgments also remain relevant with distinct implications for women based on their marital status. Farah's experience indicates that single women might face a different type of societal scrutiny. While married women are judged based on their roles as wives and mothers, single women, especially in conservative societies, might be scrutinised for their marital status. The distinction between "marital status" and "role as wives" is nuanced but significant. "Marital status" refers to the legal and social classification of an individual's state regarding marriage—such as single, married, divorced, or widowed. It serves as a categorical label without implications of the individual's daily responsibilities or societal expectations. In contrast, "role as wives" reflects the specific expectations, duties, and societal norms imposed on women due to their position within a marriage. This encompasses traditional gender roles around household management, caregiving, and often financial contributions to domestic

help, as highlighted by participants such as Lina. While marital status is a broad classification, the role as wives contextualises the specific societal and familial expectations and responsibilities that married women are presumed to fulfil.

Finally, emotional experiences are also likely to be distinct. Lina's experience as a divorced woman brings out the emotional challenges faced by separated women. They not only have to navigate societal perceptions but also manage their roles as single parents, often with limited support.

7.3 Challenges faced by working women

Building on the insights from section 7.2 which highlighted the economic responsibilities and traditional gender roles impacting women's financial obligations within the family, the focus is now on the broader challenges faced by working women in higher education in Saudi Arabia. This section aims to uncover the complexities of work-life balance, particularly how familial duties and societal expectations intertwine with professional responsibilities and aspirations. It explores the tension between personal life and career advancement, shedding light on the institutional and structural barriers that further complicate this dynamic. By examining the lived experiences of female academics, the aim is to understand the challenges that contribute to the difficulty in achieving career progression and maintaining a fulfilling personal life.

A number of studies in the literature have reported that women's household and family-related responsibilities make them a poorer fit for leadership roles due to the need to spend more time to fulfil their professional responsibilities (Buckalew et al., 2012; Edwards, 2016). Women typically struggle to strike a balance between their work and familial responsibilities, which makes them feel less able to assume leadership positions role (Hodges, 2017). Interviews uncovered a number of challenges experienced by working women in Saudi Arabia (both Saudi and non-Saudi women) which are relevant in explaining the role that families play in impacting the career advancement and growth potential of women.

The first challenge from a career advancement standpoint faced by women working in the higher education is difficulty in achieving integration between their work and personal lives. In academia, the pressures are not limited to teaching but academics are expected to spend time to undertake research and attend conferences (Abouammoh, 2018). For many women, particularly those with families, balancing these responsibilities with household duties becomes difficult. Latifah, commented:

“Three young children adds to my workload at home, which combined with the demands of my work makes it challenging for me to balance my work and household responsibilities”. (Participant 21, Sudanese, 40 years, married with 4 children the eldest is 10 years and the youngest is 9 months, Assistant professor)

12 of the 20 participants with children of different age groups reported difficulty in balancing the work responsibilities with household duties. This challenge increases in magnitude when familial responsibilities are significant, and there is limited external support. The challenge is witnessed in the response of the following interviewees who mentioned the following: Latifah added:

There are enormous missed training opportunities because some of the trainings sessions were taking place outside of working hours and I couldn't leave my kids at those times. (Participant 21, Sudanese, 40 years, married with 4 children the eldest is 10 years and the youngest is 9 months, Assistant professor)

Shayma:

It is very difficult sometimes to perfectly manage home duties with three very young children. Also, being mentor and help students outside classes hours even it is one of my main responsibilities at work. (Participant 4, Jordanian, 39 years, married with 3 children under the age of 5 years, lecturer).

Abrar:

Giving my position's duties I tend to take some of my unfinished work to home with me, so I work on them after I do the cooking and cleaning

before I could finally spend time with my kids which sad and often I feel guilty about it. (participant 16, Saudi, married with 2 children at the age of 11 and 14 years old, head of department at male and female campuses).

The above interviews responses highlights that although the interviewees occupy an important positions in academia, their professional commitments are in direct contradiction with her personal responsibilities at home as mothers. Training sessions are crucial for professional development as an academic because training helps to become aware of the latest developments in one's field and their relevance in practice to effectively discharge the professional responsibilities (Almaki et al., 2016). The fact that these training sessions are scheduled outside standard working hours means they are in conflict with her responsibilities as a mother of four children. Missed training sessions due to familial commitments of working women means they are at a disadvantage compared to their colleagues who can attend. These sessions often contain valuable insights, up-to-date methodologies, and networking opportunities - all of which are important for academic growth and progression (Hodges, 2017).

In addition, there is an emotional dimension associated with this challenge. The continued tug-of-war between professional growth and familial responsibilities can translate into feelings of guilt, stress and inadequacy (Al-Rasheed, 2021). Working women in higher education may feel guilty for missing trainings that benefit their career while simultaneously feeling guilty for considering time away from their children (Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2023). The scheduling of these training sessions outside regular working hours may also highlight a lack of understanding or empathy from the educational institution towards those with familial responsibilities, primarily women. For example, official working hours for most public schools in Saudi Arabia are normally from 7 am to 1 pm while working hours in higher education are significantly longer, lasting up to 4 pm. Taking into account that women are primer caregivers, it would be more difficult from them to manage both personal life responsibilities and work commitments in comparison to male counterparts who hold similar positions and roles at work. The difference in working hours between public

schools and higher educational institutions reveals an implicit expectation about who is responsible for caregiving.

While the shorter hours in public schools might accommodate primary caregivers (often women) who need to be with their children post-school, the longer hours in higher education suggest a traditional assumption that individuals in these roles might not have primary caregiving duties or can afford to delegate them. This disparity not only presents a logistical challenge for women but can also be viewed as an institutional reflection of broader societal norms. The implication is that the structures and schedules within higher educational institutions may inadvertently perpetuate gender imbalances by not considering the dual roles many women have to play. This could imply a broader challenge where the policies and prevailing culture of educational institutions in Saudi Arabia is not accommodating of diverse personal responsibilities, as also highlighted by Akbar et al. (2023).

The second challenge experienced by working women in higher education with implications for career advancement is the limited opportunity to spend time conducting research. The exhaustive nature of academic responsibilities coupled with household tasks can hinder the research pursuits, which are crucial for career advancement in academia 15 out of 25 participants who are teaching staff reported a lack of time to conducting research. For instance, Dunya commented:

The biggest challenge is achieving my research goals, I have workload from teaching schedule. When I return home, it feels like a second job with cooking homeschooling, and the husband (being sarcastic). By the time my kids sleep I feel too exhausted to work on academic research. (Participant 28, Saudi, 35 years, Married with 2 children at the age 8- and 1-year, Assistant professor, 16 years' experience).

Hebbah stated:

I spend most of the time in the lab during my classes and other teaching staff classes to support student with laboratory equipment and tools and safety measurements... and I kept delaying working on my own research I haven't been able to participate in any research paper yet!

(participants 6, Saudi, 38 years old, married no children, laboratory technician with masters' degree, 11 years' experience)

Sarah added:

... I have many interesting research topics to work on but because of the teaching hours and related tasks such as mentoring, office hours and other duties, it seems impossible to find time for academic research. (participant 23, Saudi, 28 years old, single, lecturer, 1 year experience).

The above interview quote highlights a genuine concern among working women in higher education relating to a lack of time to undertake integral responsibilities as part of their roles as academics, such as conducting research. By the end of the day, the energy and mental strength and energy required for academic research is depleted due to household chores and familial responsibilities. This challenge has implications such as limited career development prospects and reduced passion of women as academics. This is because research publications play a vital role in promotions, tenure, and professional recognition achieved by academics (Zacher et al., 2019). A lag in this can constrain career progression of women in Saudi Arabia. Over time, the inability to pursue research might lead to reduced passion for academic field.

The third key challenge experienced by working women in higher education with implications for career advancement is the cultural and emotional difficulties associated with studying abroad. In most academic roles in Saudi Arabia, progressing to a position of greater responsibility such as a lecturer or senior lecturer at university requires a candidate to successfully complete a PhD, usually from a top university in United Kingdom, United States, Canada or Australia. Moving to a foreign country for higher studies brings with it a unique set of challenges, from adjusting to a new culture and educational system to managing feelings of isolation. 4 out of 14 Saudi women who emigrated abroad for studying reported experiencing cultural and emotional challenges when they moved abroad for higher education. For Saudi women, who might be experiencing a vastly different cultural environment for the first time, this transition can be particularly challenging, as witnessed in the following response by Maram:

I think the biggest challenge for me was traveling abroad alone I thought of quitting my studies many times especially in the first year. I was frustrated living alone in a forging country and being responsible for many things that I did not experience before. (Participant 20, Saudi, 26 years old, single, Lecturer)

Ghadah said:

I have been to the US to study for my masters' degree, I have had my daughter there alone with my husband, ... I couldn't adjust to the lifestyle and the culture where I used to live, so I moved to another state. After my graduation, I did not want to travel again to pursue my doctorate studies. (participant 29, Saudi, 30 years old, married with a 2 years old child, lecturer)

As witnessed from the interview response above, feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and culture shock can adversely impact mental well-being. The emotional challenges can also translate into reduced focus and a detrimental impact on performance in academic pursuits of these women. Moreover, living overseas exposes individuals to new responsibilities, some of which they might have been shielded from in their home country due to societal or familial norms (Hendrickson et al., 2011). For instance, tasks like managing finances, housing, or even daily chores can become new challenges. Continuously navigating the unfamiliar tasks can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed (Pedersen et al., 2021). Interviews revealed that challenges experienced as part of studying abroad tend to be short-term in nature and are overcome over time, as they become more familiar with the differences in culture, improve their understanding of the way of living and language.

For instance, Amal, a 34-year old Vice Dean who previously completed her Master's qualification overseas commented:

"It took me six months to familiarise myself with the way of studying, more research-based nature of the degree in my Master's programme. The fact that I was living away from home for the first time also added

to the challenge because I felt lonely and homesick. But it helped me to become a stronger person at the end through becoming emotionally stronger and organised. These are important skills I continue to use in my professional life to date". (participant 19, Saudi, 34 years old, married with 3 children, assistant professor and VD)

The excerpt from the interview with Amal a 34-year old Vice Dean above highlights that studying overseas presents a twofold challenge: adjusting academically and adapting personally. Beyond the core academic shift, such as the change towards the research-based approach, women also face a combination personal challenge. They might encounter responsibilities they were previously unaccustomed to due to the protective nature of their native cultural or familial norms. This dual dimension of adaptation — academic rigour and personal responsibilities — can exacerbate the feelings of being overwhelmed. It showcases the profound impact of cultural differences on daily life experiences and emphasises the integral role of cultural and familial structures in shaping our coping mechanisms and skills.

It also shows the achievement of growth among female HE professionals through experiencing adversity. Despite the initial hardships and emotional challenges of studying abroad, the experience results in significant personal and professional growth. Over time, as these women familiarise to the new environment and its demands, they not only overcome initial challenges but also acquire and hone valuable life skills. The interview response from Amal, the Vice Dean reinforces this transformation. Her journey from feeling homesick and grappling with a different academic structure to developing emotional resilience and organizational skills highlights the potential silver lining of such overseas experiences. This adaptability and resilience not only assist them during their academic pursuits but also become foundational skills that benefit their future career growth and development.

Another critical challenge for some women was getting permission from their family to move abroad for pursuing higher education or attending international academic events, as discussed in more detail in chapter 6. Overall women who have the opportunity to obtain higher academic degrees from universities abroad reported

increased confidence, independence, and intellectual growth, as some of the results of their academic journey and development of professional skills.

7.4 Family influence on women's career

Family has a significant influence on women's career in higher education because the support and role of husbands and/or fathers can be influential in supporting or constraining the working lives and opportunities of these women. This section of the chapter explores the family influence on women's career, comparing between the experiences of women in higher education working in different locations such as urban and rural areas.

Shared responsibilities in dual-career families helps working women because sharing of responsibilities with their spouse and/or other family members alleviates their burden around family duties, allowing them more free time to concentrate on developing and progressing their careers through activities such as participation in training and conducting research in their field. The experience of Participant 1 highlighted a situation where both partners are working in the same field. This mutual understanding of professional demands promotes a more collaborative approach to managing home responsibilities. Dina mentioned:

My husband and I both work in the same field, during the pandemic we shared the responsibilities of home tasks and the children and in other times we hire someone to help, or we ask our parents to help with babysitting. (Participant 1, Saudi, 45 years, married with 5 children at the age of 27, 23, 18, 15 and 8 years, head of department).

The experience of Dina is unique in that only two interviewees in total out of 30 were in a situation where they both worked in the HE profession. Dina's response can be

corroborated through Amal's, whose husband also works in the HE. Amal commented:

When I have conference out of the city, my husband does not mind looking after my 5 year-old son and he asks me to drop off the other two children at my mother house with nanny to look after them while I'm gone. (Participant 19, Saudi, 34 years, married with 3 children at the age of 5, 3, and 1 year, VD of college and teaching member)

The above interview quotes reveal that where both the spouses are employed in the same profession (for instance, both are academics working in higher education industry in Saudi Arabia), there appears to be a better understanding of shared duties. This can lead to better work-life balance and career support for women. However, Dina has 5 children three of them are over the age of 18, one is aged 15 and the youngest is 8 years old which is a different situation to that of Amal whose all three children are 5 years or younger. Amal specified that her husband would help with children while she has work-related commitments with the help of the nanny and her mother, but no further help with housework, as Amal and many other participants mainly take care of cooking, cleaning, laundry etc. Both participants reported that their husbands share responsibility for children while they fulfilled their work commitments after official school hours from 7 am to 1 pm. Nevertheless, it was also uncovered that their husbands do not share equal caring responsibilities at all times. Instead, it is only when they reported to being away due to work obligations. In addition, Dina, Amal and twelve other participants, also reported obtaining occasional support of houseworkers with regards to household chores. Therefore, husbands support does not seem continuous at all times nor equal provision of care responsibility. Husbands are found to offer help when participants asked for it and were absent for work-related obligations.

To some extent, profession-based empathy is noticed among dual-career couples. When both partners are employed in the same field, there appears to be a heightened mutual understanding and appreciation of the specific demands and challenges that come with the profession. This understanding arguably resulted in a somewhat more collaborative approach to sharing familial and domestic duties, albeit only when Dina and Amal reported to be away for work-related commitments. Dina and Amal's

examples show how working in the same industry (higher education) has led their spouses to be more empathetic and supportive, especially during times of increased work-related commitments. This suggests that there's a correlation between mutual professional understanding and a supportive domestic environment. Selective and situational support remains the norm, based on the responses of Dina and Amal. Although there is some shared responsibility, the support provided by the husbands is considered selective and contingent on specific circumstances. The husbands' involvement is greater when the wives have work-related obligations that necessitate their absence from home, rather than being a consistent pattern of shared domestic responsibility. This situational support highlights that even within dual-career households in the context provided, there remains a gendered expectation around domestic roles. Women predominantly shoulder the domestic responsibilities, with their spouses stepping in predominantly during periods of their absence. The assistance of external aids, such as houseworkers and other family members, also played a role in managing the home and children.

The findings from interviews with Participant Dina and Amal around support from their spouses is confirmed by the next participant – Rania, whose experience exhibited a shift in culture with respect to allocation and sharing of domestic responsibilities.

My husband was the one who kept pushing me and encouraging me to pursuing my postgraduate studies. We lived abroad for many years we helped each other around the house and raising our children. When we returned to Saudi Arabia, he would no longer participate in doing chores but only help with childcare as it is joint responsibility. I'm not sure what changed when we returned home country maybe it is the structure of our traditional society where men and women are expected to do certain roles even when women are employed (Participant 13, Saudi, 40 years, married with 4 children at the age of 17, 14, 10 and 8 years, assistant professor and VD of college)

However, all the three participants Dina, Amal, and Rania had the support of their husbands in terms of childcare and household chores occasionally. Husbands seems to be willing to participate when wives are overwhelmed with work, during the

extraordinary times such as Covid-19 pandemic but do not share equal responsibilities of childcare and domestic duties.

In contrast, Rania's experience abroad demonstrates a more egalitarian distribution of responsibilities, with both partners participating equally in household chores. However, this changed upon their return to Saudi Arabia, indicating a strong cultural and societal influence on familial roles. It suggests that even though couples may have progressive and supportive dynamics and values, they can still be influenced by larger societal norms and expectations when placed back in a traditional environment, a finding supported by Aldossari (2020). The positive role of spousal encouragement is also witnessed in Rania's interview response above. Rania's husband encouraged her to pursue postgraduate studies, highlighting the critical role a supportive spouse can play in a woman's academic and professional advancement. This support from close family, particularly spouses, can be instrumental in overcoming societal barriers and achieving career milestones (Hakiem, 2021).

However, it seems that Rania's husband has selective support ability. Although he supported her in developing her career and share equal household work and care responsibilities but then stopped helping with domestic responsibility based on the change of location. Rania and her husband demonstrated a more egalitarian approach to domestic responsibilities while living abroad, suggesting that the environment or society they were a part of at that time played a role in fostering such shared responsibilities. However, upon their return to Saudi Arabia, traditional gender roles re-emerged, with her husband taking a step back from household chores. This indicates the powerful influence of societal norms and cultural contexts on individual and familial behaviours. Even if a couple develops a certain dynamic in one environment, returning to a traditional or previously familiar environment can reintroduce established cultural norms and expectations, which can reshape behaviours and role allocations within a family. This highlights the tension between personal family dynamics and larger societal pressures.

The shift in her husband's behaviour upon returning to Saudi Arabia from abroad demonstrates situational conformity, where individuals' actions align with the predominant gender norms and cultural expectations of their immediate environment. This phenomenon illustrates the strength of "cultural scripts," which dictate the roles and behaviours deemed appropriate for men and women within specific social

contexts. In environments where gender egalitarian practices are more prevalent and supported, he felt less constrained by traditional gender roles, demonstrating a willingness to engage in household and caregiving responsibilities equitably. However, the reversion to a more traditional division of labour upon returning to a context where such participation contradicts prevailing gender norms highlights the pervasive influence of "cultural hegemony" in shaping domestic roles. This suggests that the selective support offered by Rania's husband is deeply rooted in the "normative frameworks" that govern gender roles within different cultural settings, reflecting a broader societal expectation rather than personal preference or individual choice.

Interview analysis revealed that Rania's husband was eager for her to take the opportunity to complete her studies for better job opportunities, as she was unemployed at that time. Her husband did not mind supporting her with household chores, especially as children were too young when they both were studying abroad. Upon return to home country, children were of school age, which along with the presence of families from both husband and wife's side helped to offer care responsibilities was a source of support. Her husband viewed that he had made his contribution by supporting his wife during her early career journey. Participants confirmed their husband's willingness to support them with the children whenever participants needed help but not very much with household chores. The temporary nature of the support from husband indicates that men are deeply convinced they are not obliged to provide domestic support at all times. They will offer help with childcare whenever women need help but do not represent equal domestic and care responsibility.

Situational and selective spouse support emerged as a core finding from above. Participants experiences such as Rania highlighted that support from spouses can be both encouraging and selective, contingent on specific circumstances or phases of life. While her husband remained a strong supporter of her academic pursuits and was actively involved in domestic chores abroad, this changed upon their return to Saudi Arabia. His active encouragement for her academic growth suggests that he valued her professional development and recognised the importance of her contribution to

the family's well-being. However, his selective participation in household responsibilities upon their return demonstrates that while he was willing to challenge certain gender norms (such as supporting her academic pursuits), he was still influenced by other ingrained societal expectations related to domestic roles. This highlights that support can be multifaceted and can evolve based on various factors, including societal pressures, personal beliefs, and situational contexts.

Another noteworthy finding which shows the influence of family on women's career relates to spousal support when it comes to childcare relative to the household duties. The interview quote below by Yasmin illustrates this further:

In previous years, I had teaching hours up until 4 pm and my kids finished their school at 1 pm. My husband was in charge of picking the kids up and stay with them until the time I got home. My husband is happy to help looking after the kids while I'm overwhelmed by my job, but he has traditional beliefs about our roles as husband and wife, which means I had full responsibility of housework. (Participant 22, Saudi, 31 years, married with 2 children aged 7 and 3 years, lecturer).

The above excerpt from the interview highlights a distinction in spousal support. Even though Yasmin's husband was supportive in terms of childcare (for instance, picking up the kids), traditional beliefs meant she was primarily responsible for household duties. The finding has an important implication: even in situations where husbands are supportive of their wives' careers, the cultural beliefs deeply ingrained in Saudi culture about "women's work" can mean that housework remains primarily the woman's responsibility (Alqahtani, 2021).

7.4.1 The influence of family traditions on women professional development

The family traditions including social and cultural norms in Saudi Arabia have a major influence (both positive and negative) on women's professional development in higher education. Supportive and understanding spouse can help women to better manage their dual responsibilities (professional and household/ personal), as witnessed through the experience of Dina where both partners are working in the same field. This mutual understanding of professional demands promotes a more collaborative approach to managing home responsibilities. However, family restrictions in terms of the ability of women to pursue higher education overseas serves as a major constraint, especially as these roles in higher education are contingent on successful completion of a particular degree such as a postgraduate degree. The following comment by Raya who has 13 years' experience in HE helps to explain this:

Personally, I know few female colleagues who were downgraded because they were hired on a conditional contract they must obtain higher degree within a specified period of time but their family did not allow them to travel abroad to pursue postgraduate studies.
(participant 17, Saudi, Single, assistant professor)

The above interview response shows that societal norms and family traditions can act as a constraint to the academic and professional advancement of women. There remains an underlying belief or apprehension associated with sending women abroad for education, which might stem from concerns about cultural assimilation, safety, or the departure from family tradition (Hakiem, 2021). These restrictions in Saudi Arabia are only imposed on women, translating into limited growth prospects in higher education because certain roles and career progression routes clearly outline that the successful candidate is expected to possess a minimum level of qualifications such as

a postgraduate or a doctorate qualification from an internationally recognised university.

Family traditions also have an influence on ability of women in higher education to undertake professional development in terms of its impact on professional boundaries in marriages. Interview with Sahar confirmed that her husband prefers not to be informed about certain aspects of her job, especially those that involve interactions with male colleagues. Sahar commented:

I don't share anything that relates to my job with my husband based on his request especially my formal connections and job meetings with male colleagues. (Participant 5, Saudi, 37 years, married with 5 children, assistant professor and VD of deanship)

The above interview response illustrates that traditional beliefs and family traditions in Saudi Arabia relating to gender interactions in a professional workplace setting influence women, including those holding a position of considerable seniority in academia. It is also reflective of a broader societal inclination to uphold gender segregation in various spheres of life. These restrictions can limit women's networking opportunities, which are vital in academia for collaborative research, projects, and other professional endeavours (Syed et al., 2018). It might also create a psychological barrier for women, making them cautious in their professional interactions which limits the potential to network and broaden the social capital (Almalki and Ganong, 2018).

In addition, this dynamic can also introduce strains in marital relationships, where a woman may feel the need to compartmentalise and withhold her professional life from her personal life (Alobaid, 2022). Sahar's response is also reflective of the dual role of professional women in academia. Women, especially in more traditional societies frequently find themselves playing dual roles: one that conforms to societal and familial expectations and another that aligns with their professional aspirations. The

balancing act between these roles can be exhaustive and challenging, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

7.4.2 Women's employment and Family name (Tribalism) in Saudi

The family and tribe serve as the foundation of the social structure and are considered to be the primary social units in the Saudi society as a whole (Alotaibi, 2019; Al-Bakr et al., 2017). All social relationships depend on kinship and affiliation, and tribes have a significant influence on how individuals live (Alomiri, 2015). Within several zones, there are strong tribal ties, and when the tribe's reputation is on the line, tribal customs and influences can have a significant impact on a person's independence.

Being a member from certain tribe (family name) has an impact on its members. For example, women who came from conservative major tribes in Saudi might face more challenges regarding work experience. Traditional tribal norms could impact women's progress at work such as hindering women advancement to higher positions, travelling abroad for work trips, formal networking with male counterparts (Hakiem, 2022). On the other hand, being a member of specific tribe might give its member a status and an advantage in getting promoted or nominated to higher position (Al-Bakr et al., 2017). The following participants Salma, who work at universities located in small town, where most of these universities staff members are around the area or the same zone.

The university I work at is in small town, which is the home of one of the biggest tribes in Saudi, is a very conservative community. I think the national transformation program (The new vision of Saudi 2030) has forced Saudi citizens who hold strict beliefs to accept the changes by the power of law. The speed of the changes in Saudi after the announcement of its new vision has increase the pressure on the academic community. For us the academics we had to adopt to the new HE policies also be extremely considering to the traditional beliefs of

the locals and avoid conflict. (Participant 27, Egyptian, 46 years, lecturer, 9 years' experience in Saudi).

As in the above quote, it appears that the rapid changes in Saudi might not be perceived as a positive movement by the point of view of some conservative group of people in Saudi. Changes such as empowering women in the HE sector by creating more opportunities for women in male-dominated schools, advancing women into higher positions, and developing policies for equality at the workplace. University staff who work in small towns or within very traditional zones in Saudi Arabia, may face massive pressure at work. Specifically, university staff who come from different backgrounds are making more effort trying to fit in and avoid conflict with the locales.

Others may be judged based on their behaviours that might not conform to the beliefs and norms of the strict views of these traditional groups. For example, formal connections with male counterparts may not be perceived as necessary for female staff in higher education. The lack of building formal relations with male colleagues is not preferable for female staff based on the request of their male family members in very strict areas. However, this is not the same with female staff who work in major cities or come from families with progressive values. Other participants who work in major cities have confirmed that they find building formal connections within academic places helpful and denied any negative experiences or feeling judged on the basis of communicating with their male counterparts.

Saudi Arabia has a distinctive culture. The traditional views based on customs, values and traditions in Saudi and the new policies around female empowerment are controversial because "gender politics and religion", are all intertwined (Al-Rasheed & Azzam, 2012: p. 7). Therefore, the rigid views in such a traditional society have influenced how working women experience their lives. This viewpoint is reinforced by the following quotes by Nadia.

I can say that there is bias in hiring in the academic sector to the most powerful Saudi families whose its members holding senior positions in the higher education. Which generated racism against people who come from less powerful families both men and women. (Participant 12, Indian, 36 years, lecturer, 4 years of experience in Saudi)

Maya shared:

My Father did not oppose the idea of travelling abroad to complete my postgraduate studies but was not happy being criticised by our extended family as from their traditional perspective women need protection and must accompany by a male companion. Therefore, my father had to travel with me in the beginning of my scholarship for couple of months then he returned to Saudi. (Participant 10, Saudi, 36 years, single, assistant professor, 8 years of experience in HE).

Abeer stated:

My family is highly supportive at all stages of my career advancement, my parents specifically helped a lot with my kids since I became a single mother. However, I had difficulty convincing my family of the idea of traveling abroad to study a master's degree because of old traditions. Few years later they were finally convinced but my brother had to travel with me. (Participant 24, Saudi, 35 years, divorced, laboratory technician, 8 years of experience in HE)

Tribal affiliation is viewed as influencing the employment opportunities available to women in HE. One of the interview excerpts highlights a perceived bias in hiring within the academic sector, particularly favouring individuals from powerful Saudi families whose members hold senior positions in higher education. This indicates that tribal affiliation can significantly influence employment opportunities in academia. Individuals from less powerful families or non-prominent tribes might face challenges in securing positions or advancing their careers, not necessarily due to their academic qualifications or capabilities but because of their tribal or family background. Such a

system can lead to feelings of discrimination or exclusion among those who don't belong to the influential tribes, as expressed by the Indian lecturer.

Moreover, tribal values are also found to influence the perception around women's autonomy in HE. Although both Saudi women had supportive immediate families, traditional tribal beliefs influenced their educational journeys. In the case of the 36-year old single Saudi lecturer, her father initially supported her decision to study abroad. However, traditional views on the protection of women and the belief that they should be accompanied by a male companion influenced her father's choice to travel with her, highlighting the weight of tribal opinions and potential criticism from the extended family. Similarly, the laboratory technician faced challenges convincing her family about traveling abroad for further studies, despite their general support for her career. Again, the traditional tribal expectation that a female family member should be accompanied by a male figure prevailed, leading her brother to travel with her. Both instances reinforce the broader tribal values and customs that emphasize the protection and guardianship of women. Even as these women pursue advanced educational and career opportunities, they are still bound by the constraints and expectations set by tribal norms.

The tribal beliefs are different from the prevailing customs in Saudi Arabia, as tribal beliefs tend to be more strict and specific to people who belong to these family names. Moreover, all the above participants are members of major family tribes in Saudi Arabia and live in strict societies. Each tribe has their own beliefs that could differ to an extent along with the legitimacy of these beliefs within their community and their members but not necessarily influence the prevailing norms of all society members from various nationalities, who live in different regions in Saudi Arabia. The interview responses show that the family and tribe serve as the foundation of the social structure and are considered to be the primary social units in the Saudi society as a whole (Alotaibi, 2019; Al-Bakr et al., 2017). All social relationships depend on kinship and affiliation, and tribes have a significant influence on how individuals live (Alomiri, 2015). Within several zones, there are strong tribal ties, and when the tribe's reputation is at risk, tribal customs and influences can have a significant impact on a women's ability to continue to work long hours to further her career.

7.5 Work-life balance during Covid-19 pandemic

As data collection for this study occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, it led to emergence of the findings around the impact of COVID-19 on female staff attempting to manage their families' obligations and work responsibilities. Many participants noted that finding care and support of partner or a family member were favourable solutions. An interviewee emphasised the importance of setting specific working hours and avoiding work discussions outside these hours, highlighting the importance of drawing a clear line between professional and personal life, especially when both are happening in the same physical space. Raghad, noted:

During the pandemic we had to work online so I tried to set specific hours to work. Also, I made sure I did not talk about the job or any work-related issues out of working hours unless it is a case of emergency. (Participant 15, Saudi, 44 years, married with 6 children with ages range between 9 and 24 years old, assistant professor and deputy head of department, 17 years' experience in HE)

The above excerpt highlights that establishing boundaries is a coping mechanism for maintaining a semblance of normalcy and preventing work-related stress from permeating all aspects of daily life. Seeking support and external assistance was another relevant coping mechanism. Maria, the Filipino teaching assistant (interviewee) opted for using cleaning services multiple times a week to manage the dual pressures of work and homeschooling. She mentioned:

I had to ask for cleaning services 3 times a week before full lockdown because working and homeschooling 3 children was a disaster. (Participant 11, Filipino, 44 years, married with 3 children aged of 8, 6 and 2 years, teaching assistant, 12 years' of experience in HE).

The response of Maria shows that it can be overwhelming to admit the need to manage all responsibilities without external help especially during a pandemic, it nevertheless illustrates the significance of seeking support to maintain balance. Effective time

management was also reported as a suitable strategy to enhance the work-life balance during the pandemic. The vice dean's interview responses signify the steep learning curve that many experienced due to new roles or abrupt shifts in work methods, compounded by the pandemic's challenges. Recognising the value of time management was a key revelation for her. Adapting to new responsibilities, especially in leadership roles during crises, requires not just learning new skills but also effectively managing time to juggle personal and professional tasks. Aseel commented:

As a director of college administration during the pandemic, I had too many deadlines in a very short time. When all employees moved to work from home, I had to work at random hours and at any time I can manage to find to ensure maximum productivity.. then I realised time management is key in such global crises . (Participant 26, Saudi, 39 years, married with 2 children aged of 9 months and 2 years, director of college administration, 9 years' experience in HE)

Sharing of household responsibilities was another coping strategy, mainly available to the women in higher education who had grown up children. In the next quote by Suzanne, an Egyptian professor with 4 Sons and daughters as the youngest aged 17 years, pointed out that having older children, who can share in household chores was a boon during the pandemic, contrasting this with the potential challenges faced by mothers with very young children. It demonstrates that age and autonomy of family members play a crucial role in how families adapt to new challenges. Those with older, self-sufficient children might find it easier to delegate tasks, thus creating a more balanced home environment.

When it comes to division of household responsibilities, families with older children or more autonomous members can more easily distribute household chores and responsibilities, leading to a more balanced and less stressful home environment. As seen in the comments Suzanne, having older children meant that chores and responsibilities could be divided among all family members. This shared responsibility can significantly reduce the burden on any single member, allowing for a more manageable balance between work and home duties. In contrast, families with

younger children or members who are less independent may face additional challenges. In such cases, primary caregivers, often the parents, have to manage their professional responsibilities with increased caregiving and household duties. This can lead to increased stress and a feeling of being overwhelmed, especially when external support mechanisms, like schools or childcare, are disrupted, as was the case during the pandemic.

Flexibility in work schedule and routines also helps to corroborate this viewpoint. For parents or primary caregivers of older or more independent family members, there might be more flexibility in setting work routines. As these members can largely take care of themselves, caregivers can allocate specific times for work, even unconventional hours such as late nights, without significant disruptions. This is evident in Aseel's comment, who has quite young children aged 2 years and 9 months, about working in all times and hours during the day. In contrast, for those with younger children or family members requiring more attention, work routines might need to be more fragmented or interspersed with frequent breaks to cater to the needs of these dependents. This can lead to challenges in maintaining consistent work routines, having uninterrupted meetings, or dedicating longer periods to focused tasks. Suzanne commented:

My children are not too young, so we all shared home chores, but I honestly do not know how working mothers with too young children are handling the situation. (Participant 7, Egyptian, 50 years, married with 4 children the youngest is 17 years, professor, 15 years' experience in Saudi HE)

The above-mentioned findings illustrate work-life balance was equally important during the pandemic because of changes in work patterns and the increase in flexible working. It also reveals the unique and novel coping strategies developed by women in higher education during the pandemic to improve their work life balance.

7.5.1 Suggested strategies for achieving life work balance

The expectation of managing the professional workload along with the fulfilment of household responsibilities increases the relevance of work life balance for women in higher education. Due to a variety of factors, including the workplace's patriarchal culture and the lack of a supporting partner meant that many women worldwide felt compelled to quit their careers even if they did not want to (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Female staff have faced many challenges toward work advancement many factors that has been discussed before such as “lack of mobility; the salience of gender stereotypes; limited opportunities for growth, development, and career advancement; excessive workload caused by a lack of family-work balance; and gender-based challenges...” (Al-Asfour et al., 2017: p. 184).

The interview responses along with the wider analysis of the role of families in advancing or constraining the career of women in higher education has led to a number of strategies being uncovered that can help women working in academia to improve their work life balance. The first strategy is the introduction of flexible work arrangements. Implementing flexible work hours, part-time options, and allowing for remote work, when possible can allow women in higher education to better manage their domestic responsibilities alongside their professional roles. This is a suitable suggestion because interview responses (as examined in this chapter) revealed that women struggle with rigid work schedules that clash with their children's schooling or their own household duties. Therefore, heightened flexibility provided by the higher education institute can alleviate some of these pressures, enabling women to achieve a better balance between their professional and personal responsibilities.

The strategy of introducing flexible work arrangements for women in academia was mentioned by 18 of the 30 interviewees and is anchored in the idea of adaptability and accommodation. By providing women with a more malleable working environment, higher education institutions can acknowledge and cater to the multiple roles women often play, not only as professionals but also as caregivers, mothers, and homemakers. Flexible working hours mean that women could start earlier or finish later, depending on their personal or familial needs. For instance, aligning work timings with school hours can be beneficial for mothers. Part-time options might be especially useful for those who want to maintain their professional commitments but at a reduced capacity,

perhaps due to family commitments or pursuing further studies. Remote work provisions mean that women can perform their duties from home or another suitable environment, reducing commute times and allowing for a more comfortable integration of work into their daily routines. Even though some participants (such as Participant 14) reported struggling with remote work during the pandemic, this was because of a lack of familiarity with how to work effectively from a remote location. Over time, training and experience of working remotely during the pandemic helped to improve their performance while working remotely.

The suggestion is rooted in the interview responses that highlighted the challenges women face in reconciling strict work schedules with domestic or parental responsibilities. By implementing these flexible arrangements, higher education institutions can demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of these challenges and actively work to ameliorate them.

It is important to be aware of the limitations of above. Although the idea of flexibility seems attractive, without clear boundaries, it might lead to an over-extension of work hours. For instance, remote work can blur the lines between professional and personal time. If not managed properly, it presents a risk that women might find themselves working more extended hours or being available around the clock, leading to burnout (Wittmer and Martin, 2010). The above-mentioned suggestion could also result in career stagnation. In some institutional cultures, opting for flexible or part-time arrangements might be perceived as a lack of commitment or seriousness about one's career. This could inadvertently result in these women being overlooked for promotions, raises, or significant projects. Even though they might be as competent and dedicated as their peers, choosing a flexible work model might be misinterpreted as a lack of ambition or capability, potentially hampering their career progression (Tomlinson and Durbin, 2010).

The second strategy to improve the work life balance is provision of childcare services on-site at university/ higher education institute. Many women in higher education highlighted during the interviews the challenges of juggling work with childcare. Offering childcare solutions not only eases this burden but also increases job satisfaction and retention (Lekchiri and Eversole, 2021), thereby promoting continuity and reducing employee turnover. Therefore, institutions in Saudi Arabia should

consider offering on-site childcare facilities or partnering with nearby childcare services to provide faculty with affordable, reliable, and accessible care options.

The third strategy is in-country professional development opportunities to reduce the need for international travel. As noted in the interviews, some women faced challenges traveling overseas for higher qualifications. Bringing those opportunities in-house can help address this challenge. Therefore, a strategy recommended is that universities and academic institutions should provide opportunities for higher education and professional development within Saudi Arabia or via online international institutions. This reduces the need for women to travel abroad, which is problematic when they face familial restrictions. However, a limitation of this solution is to resign to the fact that women have limited access to mobility and development opportunities internationally than men, so this solution is not socially transformative.

The fourth strategy is availability of support networks and mentorship programmes. Shared experiences highlight common challenges, as uncovered in the interviews. Having someone who has navigated comparable circumstances can provide valuable insights and psychological support. Therefore, a suitable strategy is to establish mentorship programs and support groups within institutions where women can share experiences, seek advice, and gain guidance from senior women faculty or professionals who've navigated similar challenges (Albejaidi and Nair, 2019).

7.6 Conclusion

The chapter examined the role of families in influencing the career advancement and growth prospects of women in higher education. In terms of the role of women in families, interviews with 20 women employed in the higher education revealed that dual responsibility of women, amplification of stress experienced by women, traditional gender roles and expectations and the burden associated with societal expectations are key considerations for women. The intersectional analysis revealed that marital status and nationality played a co-constitutive role. The varying extent of

support offered by husbands highlights the concept of situational gender norms, where the expectations and behaviours regarding gender roles are heavily contingent on the surrounding cultural and societal norms. It illustrates how social conditioning and prevailing gender norms in different contexts can dictate the extent and form of support men provide within the family, demonstrating the malleability of gender roles in response to external societal expectations.

The chapter also highlighted the relevance of marital status and the age of children, which are similarly critical factors in determining every day and international mobility, as discussed in the previous chapter. These elements highlight the complexity of how personal circumstances, such as marital status and childcare responsibilities, significantly shape the extent and nature of professional opportunities and mobility available to women in academia.

Women working in higher education in Saudi Arabia face numerous challenges that are deeply embedded in both cultural expectations and professional demands. These challenges are exacerbated by their roles within the family and society, especially for married women with children. Traditional family roles often place the onus of domestic responsibilities on women, even when they are primary providers or are engaged in demanding professions. While there are supportive spouses who defy the traditional norms, many women still face the burden of managing dual roles at home and work. This balance was further strained during the Covid-19 pandemic when the lines between home and work blurred.

In terms of career advancement, family influences and traditions play a significant role. While some women benefit from supportive families, others encounter obstacles when family traditions clash with professional expectations. Such conflicts, such as the inability to travel abroad for studies or restricted interactions with male colleagues (as discussed in chapter 6), can hinder career progression. The interviews also highlight the significance of having an empathetic understanding within society, acknowledging that every individual's work-life balance circumstances are distinct. Strategies for improving this balance can be derived from these experiences, such as offering flexible work hours, increasing institutional support during crises, promoting

gender equality at home and work, and fostering environments that challenge restrictive traditional norms.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

The overall goal of this thesis was to better understand the work advancement for women working in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. From an intersectional perspective, the aim of this study was to explore the challenges of women's work advancement in higher education in Saudi Arabia, ways in which the intersection of traditional customs and beliefs, gender norms and nationality revealed the complex female experiences in Saudi universities. This qualitative study also aimed to research how the traditional customs and norms shape and impact female careers in HE. Furthermore, the factors that hinder or affect women's career advancement in different positions in academia were explored.

This chapter presents the answers to these goals. To connect the findings to earlier research, the empirical chapters offered a thorough examination of the research data collected via interviews and a discussion of the body of current literature. The findings highlight how traditional practices, gender, and nationality impacted female employees in academia in order to address the research questions. The empirical contributions of this thesis, taken as a whole, serve to explain the ways in which women in higher education section in Saudi Arabia experience career advancement and related barriers.

By analysing the three categories (traditional customs and beliefs, gender norms, nationality) for female staff in the higher education institutions, this thesis contributes a new perspective to view the complex and intertwined challenges that shaped the experience of women in the academia in Saudi Arabia. One of the main contributions of this thesis is to the intersectionality and policy literature in Saudi Arabia, by providing insights into how those three categories of intersectionality were combined in a way that created a unique experience of oppressions or challenges which contributed to marginalisation of these group of women. Therefore, this study advances the discussion of gender inequality and intersectionality framework in Saudi Arabia. Two distinctive contributions to the literature help to support this fundamental

contribution, will be briefly discussed here before being extensively covered in the parts that follow.

The first contribution is advancing the current debates of equality in Saudi Arabia which aligns with the Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia to introduce the challenges faced by women towards career advancement from an intersectional perspective. The framework of intersectionality is rarely discussed by scholars in Saudi Arabia (Rodriguez and Scurry, 2019, Aldossari and Calvard, 2021), as these studies failed to consider the customs and gender norms. The current literature on gender inequality particularly in Saudi Arabia focused on the challenges women face as factors which influence their working experience. However, studying the intersection of these challenges based on customs, beliefs, gender, and nationality would provide a more in-depth insight into these women's experiences, which is the contribution of this study.

The second contribution is incorporation of intersectionality into the study of gender inequality in Saudi Arabian higher education. Intersectionality, a concept rooted in critical race theory, examines how various social identities, such as gender, race, class, and nationality, intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege (Walby, 1989; Hennekam et al, 2017; Barsoum, 2019). By applying this lens, the study moves beyond a singular focus on gender to explore how intersectional categories such as nationality, marital status, and position within the university hierarchy shape the experiences of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The benefit of this approach lies in its comprehensive view of inequality. Traditional gender analyses might overlook how non-Saudi women or women in junior roles face different challenges compared to Saudi women or those in senior positions. Intersectionality provides a more nuanced understanding, revealing the complexities and layers of discrimination that can exist within the same institution. It allows for a more accurate and complete picture of the barriers to equality and inclusivity in higher education.

For future research, using intersectionality helps to develop more effective and targeted strategies for addressing inequality. By understanding the specific challenges faced by different groups of women, universities and policymakers can develop

interventions that are more equitable and inclusive. This approach can also inform broader social policies, contributing to the development of a more just and equal society. Additionally, intersectional research in Saudi higher education could serve as a model for studies in other contexts, promoting a more sophisticated understanding of gender inequality in various cultural and institutional settings.

8.2 Intersectional perspective to examine the challenges experienced by females in career advancement

This study explored intersectionality outside of the western context and western scholarship by demonstrating how intersections produce and are produced by context-specific systems of differentiation, which is an important point of originality of this study. Studying intersectionality and gender in the context of Saudi Arabia's higher education sector is vital for uncovering the nuanced experiences of women navigating this environment. It allows for a comprehensive understanding of how various factors such as nationality, marital status, and job role intersect with gender, thereby shaping unique challenges and opportunities. This approach acknowledges the complexity of individuals' experiences, moving beyond monolithic views of gender inequality to reveal how systemic structures of differentiation impact women differently. Such analysis is crucial for developing targeted strategies to support all women in academia effectively. The emphasis is on using intersectionality to examine a range of challenges experienced by women (Saudi as well as non-Saudi) working in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia. Choo and Ferree (2010) also demonstrated the significance of considering the junction of gender and other categories of difference analytically in order to comprehend the factors influencing the disparate experiences of various groups. Intersectional perspective can be employed to explore and critically analyse the challenges of women working in the higher education.

The intersection of gender and position (junior or senior) of women at university emerged as the first relevant challenge with implications for their career advancement. Interview data revealed a distinct drawback for women in lower level of academic hierarchy (for instance, (teaching assistants, demonstrators, and technicians) when it comes to accessing the training and development opportunities. Women working as

teaching assistants or in other junior roles experience a significant workload. As they spend considerable hours to fulfil their job requirements, it results in limited time to participate in career progression opportunities such as enrolling in training and development programmes. The emphasis on teaching and service tasks at the expense of research compromises their prospects for promotion, as research output is often a significant factor in academic promotions. This is an important aspect of the gendered division of labour in academia, where research is often viewed as more prestigious and is thus typically more valued when considering promotions or tenure (Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022). While senior women in leadership positions benefit from training and mentorship, those in middle or junior roles are often overlooked for comparable development opportunities. This implies a layered experience of gender disadvantage: an employee is not just a woman but a woman in a specific role and stage of career development. It indicates a hierarchy of privilege even within the category of women in academia.

Interview conducted with participants (for instance, Raya) also pointed to how the creation of new roles aimed at women's empowerment, unexpectedly may have resulted in greater bureaucracy and reduced direct communication with the higher management. This suggests that well-intended gender equity policies can have unintended consequences which contribute to greater difficulty, instead of facilitation of, women's work experiences. Raya's critique is in line with the feminist critiques of institutional policies that superficially appear to promote gender equity but may further reinforce the existing inequalities (Acker, 2006; Barsoum, 2019). According to Acker (2006), the bases of inequality in organisations are represented in the form of class, gender, race and other differences such as ethnicity, age, sexuality, religion and disability. The finding regarding the intersection of gender and position of the worker is also consistent with the prior research on intersectionality in the context of power hierarchy. The female staff who hold positions of increased responsibility benefit from intersecting identities: they are not just women but also higher-ranked officials who are viewed as possessing power by virtue of their position (Hennekam et al, 2017). Their higher status may cushion them to an extent from gender-based discrimination, giving them easier access to professional development resources (Barsoum, 2019).

The second relevant challenge explained using intersectionality relates to the intersection of gender and technology. The use of automated systems for selection of candidates for development opportunities may appear neutral as uncovered through the interviews. Candidates are selected through automated process whereby software involves comparison of candidates' profiles, eliminates, and approves the most eligible candidates across female and male candidates from each the administrative and the academic staff. Then, the final nominations are discussed and approved by senior members from relevant parties before announcing the names. However, the use of automated software can actually exacerbate the existing inequities, especially if the algorithms are not carefully designed with gender balance and other forms of equity taken into account in developing the algorithms driving the software (Alsubaie, and Jones, 2017). Whereas automation is intended to eliminate human bias, if the system is designed or programmed with inherent biases (whether conscious or unconscious), this actually worsens discrimination (Wickens et al., 2015). For instance, if the criteria disproportionately favour characteristics or experiences more commonly found among male candidates, women could be unintentionally disadvantaged. The automated systems often rely heavily on quantifiable data, potentially neglecting critical but less quantifiable factors such as the leadership potential or interpersonal skills.

It is particularly concerning to note that final decisions on nominations within HE in Saudi Arabia, even when facilitated by technology, are influenced by higher-level management, which is predominantly male. The technology might be gender-neutral, but the underlying societal structures are not (Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022). Allowing the final decisions on recruitment, selection and career progression to be made largely by men means that women have to navigate not only the systemic gender biases but also the challenges brought about by the male-dominated field of technology (Bursztyn et al., 2020). The stereotype that women are less competent in technical subjects influences the hiring practices in Saudi Arabia including project assignments, and promotion opportunities as uncovered in the interviews which worsens the existing gender disparities.

Moreover, the rapid technological advancements in HE often requires continuous investment in upskilling (Adham, 2023). Given the societal expectations for women to also serve as primary caregivers (Syed et al., 2018), they are afforded less time for this continuous learning, more so in case of those in junior administrative roles as uncovered from the interviews with Raya and Ghada. It places them at a further disadvantage in keeping up with their male colleagues, who might not bear the same domestic responsibilities. This intersection between gender roles and technological demands adds to the challenge for women in HE section in Saudi Arabia to achieve career progress. They are not only competing against the deeply-rooted gender norms, but also against the implicit assumption that they are less technologically proficient - a perception which constrains their career advancement opportunities in an increasingly digitally advanced world.

Gender and social capital can be explained using intersectional perspective to understand the experiences of women in HE in Saudi Arabia, including the distinct challenges they face. The effect of networking or having a strong network relationship is significant in career development. The social capital (in the form of network) is usually more accessible to men who do not face the same social limitations as women in the Saudi society. Apart from having reduced access to the social capital relative to their male colleagues, there is differentiated networking opportunities for women too. Abrar and Raghad reported differing levels of support and direct communication channels with the senior management. This differential treatment is not entirely a result of their gender but also exhibits intersection with other factors such as their particular roles in the university, their seniority and the resultant power they enjoy through their roles. The interviews with Sarah and Mai uncovered the importance of professional relationships or 'Wasta' in accessing opportunities. The practice of Wasta intersects with both gender and professional rank, as those without influential connections (usually those at lower levels) find themselves at a disadvantage because of their inability to be heard, a finding reinforced by Abalkhail, and Allan (2016). This is why the term Wasta is considered more important in this context, and it is a related term to social capital as used in the Western context. This form of social capital is particularly important in influencing women's career trajectories and shows the complex interplay between cultural norms and career advancement opportunities

available to women based on the position they hold and the extent of social capital they can leverage.

The lack of an objective and transparent process of nomination and promotion of women in HE worsens this issue, disadvantaging women who may not have the same networking opportunities. It explains how the intersection of gender and social capital act as a barrier for women in higher education in Saudi Arabia. When women do get an opportunity to network, this opportunity is usually constrained by their professional rank or the lack of influential connections they possess, reinforcing the cycle of limited mobility (Adham, 2023). This complex interplay of gender and social capital forms an intricate web of challenges that women must navigate, leaving them at a unique disadvantage when it comes to advancing their career. It also highlights the intricate ways in which social, cultural, and institutional barriers intersect to hinder women's professional progress in the HE sector.

Gender and nationality (relevant in the context of non-Saudi women working in HE in Saudi Arabia) is another area which can be explained from intersectionality perspective to understand the challenges experienced by women when it comes to advancing their careers. The experiences of Noora (a professor from Egypt) speaks to the intersection of gender and nationality. Noora's career is shaped not only by her gender but also by her nationality. International staff face different challenges and advantages, and their experiences cannot be wholly understood without considering how nationality and cultural background intersect with gender. These experiences are explained further in section 8.4 – a section dedicated to the comparison of experiences of Saudi and non-Saudi women in HE.

Intersectionality also applies to geographic location. For instance, smaller towns in Saudi Arabia are more conservative, thereby restricting the mobility and career advancement opportunities of female staff compared to their counterparts in urban areas. An interviewee from Riyadh, who comes from a more liberal family enjoyed greater freedom and opportunity to travel for educational and professional development in comparison to those working in smaller towns. It highlights that even within Saudi Arabia, the challenges women face are not monolithic and instead, they

are influenced by regional differences. The experience of Abeer (the 35 years, Saudi, laboratory technician) helps to examine this viewpoint further. Abeer lives in a smaller town where traditional norms are more entrenched, limiting her professional mobility, which in turn constraints her career progression because she cannot travel as much as she would like to, to participate in training programmes, seminars and other conferences vital to her career development and establishment of the social network (Lyons and Kuron, 2014). Women in more rural or conservative areas might find that the gender segregation is more strictly enforced in educational and professional settings, that there are fewer opportunities for professional development, or that they have less access to a supportive professional network. The participant from Riyadh, however, enjoys more freedom and support from her family. It shows that the traditional beliefs and geographical location intersect to either facilitate or hinder professional opportunities available to women in HE in Saudi Arabia. The "urban privilege" (Holvino, 2010; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012) which comes from being in a more liberal environment and large cities such as Riyadh is in contrast to the experiences of women in smaller and more conservative towns. This urban privilege is also witnessed in access to opportunities, as urban centers have advanced research institutions and higher education centers, enabling those who work or train in these cities to enjoy a considerable advantage over their counterparts from non-urban areas. This was confirmed by Healy et al. (2019) in the study of intersectional inequalities.

Finally, intersectionality can be used from a country of origin or nationality perspective, to examine the interview results to investigate and compare the experiences of Saudi versus the non-Saudi women in the HE in Saudi Arabia. Three reasons how and why the experiences of non-Saudi women in HE differs from their Saudi counterparts in Saudi Arabia are access to senior management and decision-making, cultural and social norms, and ability to adapt to the rapid changes in external environment.

8.2.1 Comparison of Saudi and non-Saudi women

The first point of comparison is the access to senior management and decision-making. For Saudi women, local societal systems such as Wasta (social connections

and influence) are the traditional source of access to senior management and decision-making (Alsarhan et al., 2021), as also confirmed through the interviews. However, this system can be limiting, given that it is deeply ingrained in local politics, tribal and family-specific affiliations, which could sometimes be a constraint when it comes to ability of a Saudi woman to develop her social capital (Alobaid, 2022). In the Saudi context, as indicated by Sarah, *Wasta* remains prevalent. However, like informal networks in other contexts, *Wasta* can lead to unequal opportunities and reinforce existing power dynamics and hierarchies (Alsarhan et al., 2021). For instance, new employees or those without established relationships with influential academics might find themselves at a disadvantage. Mai's interview comments also illustrate the importance of informal support in the workplace, where cooperation and encouragement from colleagues can be pivotal for career advancement. In Mai's case, this seems to create a supportive environment that encourages her to pursue further studies and career progression. It shows how a positive informal network accessible to Saudi workers through *wasta* can contribute to their career development and job satisfaction. However, while informal support can be beneficial, it does not serve as a replacement for formal support structures and policies that ensure fair opportunities for all employees. This is especially true in academic settings where formal mentorship programs, equitable distribution of resources, and clear and fair promotion criteria are crucial for fostering gender equality (Derks et al., 2016).

For non-Saudi women, especially those with advanced qualifications, their foreignness and expertise might act as a substitute to social capital, as illustrated by the experiences of Noora, the Egyptian professor. She was the first woman with a professorial degree on the female campus of her university, providing her a unique standing and consequently, a closer access to senior management. Her expertise was not only a source of securing a job with significant responsibility; it also granted her influence. Another consideration in comparing the experiences of Saudi versus non-Saudi women is the medium of communication. The interviews (such as with Lecturer at G University and Assistant Professor at F University) uncovered that technology has facilitated a more direct and rapid form of communication between faculty and senior management. For non-Saudi women that are not very familiar with the local cultural and lack social capital, this direct line to decision-makers made possible through technology is a source of empowerment. Email or messaging applications are

a neutral ground, working to reduce bureaucracy and social dynamics that might otherwise slow down the pace of communication.

The second area of comparison between Saudi and non-Saudi women is the cultural and social norms. These norms not only shape the opportunities available but also influence how national policies such as Vision 2030 are implemented and received (Hakiem, 2022). From the interview findings, it became apparent that cultural and societal norms can have a different impact on Saudi and non-Saudi women. For instance, Egyptian women may find some similarities in social norms between Egypt and Saudi Arabia but also significant differences in how they are implemented. The interviewee from Egypt mentioned that her husband accompanied her on all her work trips, indicating that even for non-Saudi women (in this case, Egyptian) working in a senior position, social norms and expectations from her home country still influence her mobility. For Saudi women, family and tribe are more than just a social unit; they are a significant factor in their professional lives as well (Al-Asfour et al, 2017). If a Saudi woman in HE is from a conservative major tribe, this can impose additional challenges on Saudi women, potentially limiting their career progression and mobility because of time constraints (Aldossari and Calvard, 2021). The role of the family is so pronounced that no Saudi woman travelled alone for higher education overseas, as indicated by the interview findings.

Non-Saudi women, while also navigating societal norms, often experience these within a different context. They find similarities with their home countries' norms but also encounter distinct approaches in Saudi Arabia. For instance, the Egyptian interviewee's experience of her husband accompanying her on work trips reflects a mix of her cultural background with Saudi norms. These women perceive Vision 2030 differently, possibly viewing it as a progressive step toward gender equality in the workforce, as confirmed during the interviews. However, their interaction with these reforms is likely influenced by their own cultural lenses and the extent of their integration into Saudi society. They might have fewer restrictions in professional settings, particularly in urban areas, allowing them more freedom in career development compared to their Saudi counterparts.

The tribal and familial expectations also influence the interactions of Saudi women in the workplace, such as their capacity for formal networking with male counterparts, which may not be restrictive to the same extent for non-Saudi women. The interviews highlighted another relevant aspect: the differences in degree of conservatism across different regions in Saudi Arabia. The academic noted that staff working in universities located in rural (usually conservative) towns face a high degree of pressure, especially in adapting to rapid changes in women's empowerment policies such as Vision 2030. The interviews also suggest that non-Saudi women, especially those in major cities may have fewer restrictions on building formal relations with male colleagues, thereby potentially facilitating their career advancement. This would stand in contrast to Saudi women from conservative backgrounds who may not find such networking socially acceptable, as indicated by the interview findings.

Finally, another point of comparison is the ability to adapt to the rapid changes in external environment. From the interviews, particularly the account from the Egyptian lecturer revealed the pace of changes brought about by Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 with implications for HE sector. While these changes aim to empower women, and provide more equality at the workplace, the speed at which these policies are being implemented can cause tension, especially in more conservative communities. For academics, this has meant that adaptation to new HE policies needs to take place along with the consideration for and being sensitive to the conventional beliefs, so that any conflict is minimised (Abalkhail, and Allan, 2015). The Egyptian academic also stated a strong need to balance the opportunities offered by new policies with the pre-existing, traditional beliefs of local communities, finding supported by Sudanese and Filipino interviewees. Non-Saudi women have to navigate this complex landscape where they are expected to adapt to new HE policies but also be considerate towards the local traditions so any conflict is avoided (Havril, 2018). Although non-Saudi women in urban areas may experience fewer constraints on formal networking with male colleagues, suggesting a potential ease in career advancement, they still navigate the delicate balance between embracing Vision 2030's progressive policies and adhering to traditional societal norms. Thus, rather than facing fewer constraints, non-Saudi women encounter different challenges that require careful negotiation of cultural and policy-driven landscapes, highlighting the nuanced impact of intersectionality on career trajectories in Saudi higher education.

8.3 Key work processes and practices which hinder women from career advancement

This section identifies the key work processes and practices which hinder women from achieving career advancement and the way in which these work processes and practices are produced in the workplace. The main practices uncovered are inflexible work schedule, lack of time available to conduct research, emotional and cultural barriers when studying abroad, traditional family norms limiting the professional interaction and psychological barriers to networking and social capital.

The first practice which hinders women from achieving career advancement in HE in Saudi Arabia, as uncovered through the interviews is the inflexible work schedule. Inflexible work schedules and training hours is particularly problematic for married women with children or women who are caretakers of their elderly family members. In Saudi Arabia, this challenge is exacerbated by societal expectations that women shoulder entire or majority share of domestic responsibilities. Interviews in this study uncovered that when professional development activities are scheduled outside the regular working hours, women who cannot find substitute arrangements to fulfil their domestic responsibilities are essentially forced to opt between advancing their careers and fulfilling their family responsibilities. In academia, where continuous learning and professional development are vital, missing out on these opportunities can be detrimental because it translates into a slower rate of promotions, less recognition in the field, fewer opportunities to participate in meaningful research, and even reduced job satisfaction. It clearly demonstrates the intersection of societal structures and institutional practices to create distinct challenges for women in HE in Saudi Arabia – a society where traditional gender roles are strongly upheld. Even if a woman is highly motivated and competent, the structural challenges can significantly constrain her professional advancement (Albejaidi and Nair, 2019), effectively institutionalising gender disparity in career outcomes.

Traditional gender roles in the Saudi Arabian society dictate that women are the primary caregivers in the family, responsible for household responsibilities including childcare (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). These roles are deeply ingrained to an extent that they shape not just the expectations of the society but also institutional policies and practices (Alsharif, 2018). As a result, professional development activities including the training sessions or networking events in higher education industry are often scheduled without taking into account these familial responsibilities. The interviews uncovered that societal assumption is that someone else (normally a woman) will take care of the home whereas professionals (usually assumed to be men) extend their working hours for professional and career development.

The second practice which hinders women from achieving career advancement in HE in Saudi Arabia is insufficient time available to conduct research. Interviews uncovered that this challenge extended beyond the simple notion of "work-life balance" and examined how the structural elements of the Saudi higher education system and societal gender norms intersect to disproportionately influence women in academics. The time constraints are especially meaningful for women in positions of greater responsibility because of the need to spend time on formal training and skill development programs, as well as the practical learning that arises from tackling the complexities and challenges inherent in these roles. Although these experiences are a source of invaluable learning opportunities, they impose additional pressures and demands on women in these roles. For instance, Amal (VD with 5 years of experience) highlighted that she had to pay considerable attention to ensure she managed her work-life balance effectively and gave sufficient time to her family. As a result, the institutional support structures need to be robust enough to provide assistance and resources that can help these women succeed in their roles without undue stress.

Time constraints are not limited to those in senior positions. Interviews confirmed that staff in junior roles (such as teaching assistant) also experience this issue. Interview with Ghada uncovered that teaching assistants usually suffer from an overwhelming workload, which in turn impacts the professional development of their career because of limited time available to dedicate to professional development activities. Teaching

assistants being occupied with long hours of teaching as well as advising and assessing students seems to be an obstacle that prevents them from joining in with training opportunities. The intersectional analysis illustrates the significance of job roles within the hierarchy of Saudi Arabia's higher education system, revealing how these roles intersect with gender norms and institutional structures to shape career advancement opportunities. Both senior and junior women academics face unique sets of challenges tied to their positions. Senior roles, while offering invaluable learning experiences, come with the burden of balancing these opportunities with family responsibilities, intensifying the struggle to maintain work-life equilibrium. For junior staff such as teaching assistants, the extensive teaching and advising workload limits their ability to engage in professional development activities. This analysis highlights that regardless of their position in the hierarchy, women are disproportionately affected by systemic pressures, underscoring the need for institutional support mechanisms that recognise and mitigate these challenges across all levels of academic roles.

In academia, research is not an option at university level and instead, it is usually a fundamental part of one's job description and a key metric assessed to evaluate the performance of academics. Research output often influences the promotion, access to grants and the overall standing of an academic within their respective field (Alsharif, 2018). However, the exhaustive nature of academic responsibilities, which typically involves teaching and administrative work means there is limited time for research. For women in Saudi Arabia, their responsibilities extend beyond university. Gender norms and social expectations dictate that women are primarily responsible for household duties (Neilson and Stanfors, 2013). Therefore, when they return home from work, women are expected to pay as much attention to the fulfilment of household responsibilities without any regard to their professional responsibilities and the impact it may have had on their physical and mental/ emotional wellbeing (Adham, 2022). It was uncovered from the interviews that the cumulative exhaustion from the multiple roles means females in academia become too drained to concentrate on research. The reduced time and attention dedicated to research makes it challenging for women to compete with their male colleagues when it comes to career progression and seeking promotion (Denman, 2011).

The above-mentioned challenge highlights the ways in which systemic issues - within the academia and in society at large—exacerbate to influence the Saudi women academics disproportionately. Even when women do have the qualifications and ambition to advance in their careers, the structural limitations imposed by their dual roles as academics and primary caregivers is a constraint on their professional development. In the absence of a comprehensive and systemic change which includes flexible work hours, availability of childcare, and a cultural shift toward more equitable sharing of household responsibilities, this challenge will continue to hinder the career advancement of women in Saudi higher education (Alwedinani, 2017).

The third practice which hinders women from achieving career advancement in HE in Saudi Arabia is the emotional and cultural barriers when studying abroad. This challenge is relevant because it presents a complex combination of factors that uniquely influence Saudi women aspiring for career advancement in HE. Interview findings revealed that feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and culture shock can adversely impact mental well-being. The emotional challenges can also translate into reduced focus and a detrimental impact on performance in academic pursuits of these women. Moreover, living overseas exposes individuals to new responsibilities, some of which they might have been shielded from in their home country due to societal or familial norms. For instance, tasks like managing finances, housing, or even daily chores can become new challenges. Continuously navigating the unfamiliar tasks can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed. In addition, adjusting to new academic cultures and expectations also adds to the overall challenge of studying abroad. The educational systems in Western countries often differ significantly from those in Saudi Arabia, requiring adjustments not just in academic work but also in understanding the differential around the requirement to interact with peers and faculty, classroom participation and academic rigour. Although these challenges are common to most international students, they are greater in magnitude for Saudi women who may be encountering a co-ed environment for the first time, further complicating their adaptation process.

The underlying problem extends beyond either the intellectual capability or academic preparedness of the women and it is deeply ingrained in the intersection of gender, nationality, and cultural norms (Zacher et al., 2019). In Saudi Arabia, pursuing a doctorate degree is a prerequisite for significant career advancement in academia (Albejaidi and Nair, 2019). The doctorate degree is usually pursued in countries with superior reputation for higher education such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, or Australia. Educational experiences for Saudi women in these countries are not only enriching but also culturally different, presenting them with a range of emotional and cultural challenges that can be isolating. Most Saudi women have never lived alone or managed a household by themselves due to cultural and societal norms in their home country (Pedersen et al., 2021). Living abroad requires them to navigate day-to-day responsibilities that they are likely to have never undertaken in Saudi Arabia, worsening the feeling of homesickness and isolation (Arafeh, 2020). This is particularly significant for women who come from conservative families where gender roles are more rigidly defined.

The fourth practice that constraints women's ability to achieve career progression is the traditional family norms limiting the professional interaction, including the psychological barriers to networking and social capital. Interviews uncovered that Sahar's husband prefers not to be informed about aspects of her job that involve interactions with male colleagues, which highlights the complex interplay of personal and professional lives for women in Saudi academia. While Sahar holds a position of significant responsibility and seniority as an assistant professor and Vice Dean, her marital relationship imposes additional boundaries on her professional life. Such limitations could be a significant hindrance to career advancement opportunities in academia, given the need for transparency, open communication, networking, and collaboration including across genders. Such a restriction limits women's access to social capital (networks and relationships that can be leveraged for career advancement) (Syed et al., 2018). Networking is vital for securing research opportunities, collaborative projects, and even promotions. By being restricted in her interactions with male colleagues, Sahar and women in similar situations tend to miss out on these opportunities, putting them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts and even other women who do not experience similar constraints.

The family-imposed limitations also create a psychological burden. Knowing that one's professional interactions could be a source of argument and contention at home results in self-imposed limitations, such as declining opportunities for collaboration or not engaging in conversations that could result in professional opportunities (Alobaid, 2022). These limitations are also reflective of broader societal norms in Saudi Arabia that enforce strict gender roles and segregation. Even if women like Sahar achieve high-ranking professional roles, these societal norms can still permeate their professional lives, enforcing a glass ceiling which is increasingly difficult to break without broader societal change (Almalki and Ganong, 2018).

8.4 Strategies used by women across different ranks to overcome the challenges faced

Interviews revealed the four strategies used by women in HE institutions to overcome the challenges faced. These are: making use of flexible work arrangements, on-site childcare services or seeking external support, in-country professional development opportunities and the use of support networks including mentorship programs.

The first technique used by women to navigate the challenges faced is making use of flexible work arrangements and make a better use of available time. For instance, Assistant Professor and VD of college noted that: *“During the pandemic we had to work online so I tried to set specific hours to work. Also, I made sure I did not talk about the job or any work-related issues out of working hours unless it is a case of emergency”*. Setting specific work hours and maintaining a clear distinction between work and personal life are strategies uncovered through the interviews which have proved effective in several ways. Clearly defining the work hours enables the individual to mentally "switch off" from work, which is important for emotional well-being (Caffrey et al., 2016), also confirmed in the interviews. This was particularly important in a work-from-home setting during the pandemic, where the boundaries between personal and professional spaces can easily blur. In addition, by allocating specific hours for work, women in HE allocate the time for family, ensuring that the

family time is not compromised due to the work commitments. This is particularly important for women in these roles, as they often have to manage household responsibilities and childcare alongside their professional tasks. The interview with Vice Dean uncovered that she also keeps a provision for emergencies, indicating the flexibility required in real-world scenarios while generally maintaining a boundary between work and family life.

The above-mentioned strategy involves deliberately designating and adhering to specific work hours, even when working from home, to maintain a clear boundary between professional tasks and personal responsibilities, a strategy also employed by four other participants confirmed during the interviews. This is consistent with boundary management theory (Bulger et al., 2007). This strategy helps in achieving mental segmentation and assured family time as important outcomes. By setting defined hours for work, individuals can mentally compartmentalize their responsibilities, which can reduce the risk of feeling constantly on the job (Caffrey et al., 2016). This mental break is important for emotional and psychological well-being, especially when the physical boundaries between the workplace and home have been dissolved, as was the case during the pandemic. When it comes to family time, with specific hours carved out for work, there is also an assurance of undisturbed family or personal time. This can help maintain a sense of balance, ensuring that while professional commitments are met, personal and familial obligations are not ignored (Fuller and Hirsh, 2019).

The shortcomings of this strategy should also be acknowledged. While setting specific hours might work for some, it is not a universally applicable solution. The diverse nature of roles within higher education in Saudi Arabia means that for some, the demands might be unpredictable or extend beyond the conventional work hours. For instance, a researcher might need to run experiments at odd hours, or there might be international collaborations necessitating meetings outside of one's designated work hours. Instead of setting rigid work hours, women adopt a more flexible approach (Becker et al., 2022). This means setting core hours where they are most productive or where collaboration with colleagues is crucial, while allowing flexibility outside these core hours. For example, an individual might designate 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. as their

core work hours but be open to adjusting their schedule in the early mornings or evenings based on other commitments or responsibilities. However, it should be emphasised that different strategies work for different people and this is often dependant on their responsibilities and other commitments. The use of technology will also help to overcome this challenge. They should use digital tools like calendars, task management apps, or scheduling software to block out work hours, but also make use of their features that allow for shifting tasks or meetings as needed. This provides a visual representation of one's day and helps in staying organised, yet flexible.

The second resource women in HE in Saudi Arabia use is on-site childcare services or external support. Several interviewees highlighted the challenges of balancing their professional responsibilities with childcare. The interview data revealed that some sought external support to manage these challenges. A Filipino teaching assistant mentioned, *"I had to ask for cleaning services 3 times a week before full lockdown because working and home-schooling 3 children was a disaster."* An important challenge women face is the "second shift" (Blair-Loy et al., 2015, p. 436), where they come home from work only to begin another round of responsibilities related to household and childcare.

Having on-site childcare services or external support reduces this burden, freeing up mental and emotional energy which can be directed towards professional and personal development. Having access to reliable childcare services also allows women to benefit from greater flexibility in their work schedules. They can attend after-hours meetings, conferences, or dedicate time to research without needing to overly worry or spend time on household or childcare duties. This was reflected in how the Filipino teaching assistant managed to keep up with her responsibilities even during a lockdown situation. Interviews also revealed that some women use their social networks to find trustworthy external support services. This comes from a traditional sense of community but has been formalised to a certain extent, whereby professional networking can lead to solutions for personal challenges as well. Tapping into community or social networks to find and secure reliable support is a strategy rooted in the traditional sense of community. Such networks can be immensely valuable in finding trustworthy individuals or services that can aid in personal and domestic tasks (French et al., 2022).

However, the above-mentioned strategy has a limitation. Not all women have equal access to on-site childcare services or the financial resources to secure external support. While some women in more senior roles or in HE institutions with better resources might benefit from such services, those in junior roles or in lesser-funded institutions may still struggle. This creates an equity gap where only a subset of women truly benefit from such support, worsening the disparities in opportunities and work-life balance. To overcome this, HE institutions (as employers) can offer subsidised or even free childcare services, especially for junior staff or those who might not have the financial means. This can help bridge the equity gap and make childcare accessible to everyone, regardless of their rank or financial status (Sallee and Cox, 2019). Additionally, childcare fees could be determined based on income, ensuring that those with lower incomes pay less while those with higher incomes contribute more. It entails that each individual will pay according to their means, promoting equity. While some institutions may offer childcare facilities, the availability and affordability can vary significantly, reflecting broader socio-economic disparities rather than a uniform policy across all higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the effectiveness of this strategy in mitigating the "second shift" challenge is influenced by personal income and wealth, highlighting a gap in institutional support for women across different socio-economic statuses.

Another limitation of the second strategy relates to concerns around consistency and quality. While on-site childcare and external support services offer relief, there is always a concern about the quality of care provided. Consistent and high-quality care is crucial for the well-being of children. Additionally, relying on external support might lead to inconsistencies due to unforeseen circumstances, such as the helper becoming sick or being unavailable. This can disrupt the work schedule of women in HE and add stress. To address this shortcoming, regular evaluations and checks of on-site childcare facilities can ensure they meet certain standards. This can include checking staff qualifications, cleanliness, safety measures, and educational resources (Sallee and Cox, 2019). Institutions can partner with multiple external childcare providers to offer backup solutions and maintain availability. For instance, if a

primary caregiver falls sick or is unavailable, a backup can be made available to ensure continuity and reduce disruptions for parents (French et al., 2022).

The third technique used by women to navigate the challenges faced is in-country professional development opportunities. The interviews revealed that some women faced challenges traveling abroad for professional development. One respondent suggested bringing those opportunities in-house to mitigate this challenge. The notion was that offering in-country professional development could reduce the need for international travel, which is problematic for women that experience familial restrictions. Offering in-country professional development directly addresses the issue of international travel, making it easier for them to upskill without having to navigate complex logistical and social barriers (Albejaidi and Nair, 2019). By staying in-country, women can more easily balance their professional growth with family obligations. This is particularly important in cultures such as Saudi Arabia where familial responsibilities are primarily fulfilled by women, as indicated by the interviews.

Professional development opportunities, such as conferences, training sessions, and workshops, are essential for academic and professional growth in any sector. Traditionally, many of these opportunities are international, requiring employees to travel abroad. However, for many women in certain cultural contexts, especially in Saudi Arabia, traveling abroad can pose challenges due to familial responsibilities and societal expectations. As mentioned in the interviews, many women in Saudi Arabia play primary roles in fulfilling family obligations. Traveling abroad may therefore be viewed as problematic, both from a logistical perspective and from a societal standpoint. To address this challenge, the idea of in-country professional development was raised. By bringing these professional development opportunities within the national boundaries, it eliminates the need for women to travel internationally. This means they can continue to prioritise their familial roles while also investing in their professional growth. Such initiatives acknowledge and respect cultural and societal norms while still promoting professional enhancement for women. This approach ensures that women do not miss out on opportunities simply because of travel restrictions or societal constraints (Englund et al., 2017).

However, this strategy has its limitations. One of the significant advantages of attending international conferences or training sessions is the exposure to a global audience, diverse perspectives, and broader trends in the industry or academic field. By solely relying on in-country professional development, it poses a risk that participants might miss out on the broader, global context. This could limit their perspective to national trends, potentially hindering their ability to think globally or be aware of international advancements. This challenge can be addressed: one way to provide global exposure while still catering to those who cannot travel is to offer hybrid events (Guarino and Borden, 2017). These events have both in-person and virtual components. This way, international experts can present and participate without needing to travel to Saudi Arabia. Likewise, those in Saudi Arabia can benefit from international insights without leaving the country. Technology has made it easier to host such events, and the pandemic has already pushed many organizations to become adept at virtual conferences.

Another limitation is potential for homogeneity. Offering only in-country professional development could lead to a lack of diversity in thought and content. The input, experiences, and research could become insular, as the same national experts might be repeatedly used to offer training sessions or conferences. Without international presenters or participants, it leads to potential for homogeneity in the content and delivery, which may not stimulate innovative thinking or introduce new methodologies (Englund et al., 2017). To overcome this, HE institutions in Saudi Arabia can develop partnerships with international universities and organisations. These partnerships can lead to joint workshops, training sessions, and courses that offer global perspectives while being conducted within the country. Such collaborations can bring in diverse voices and counter the risk of homogeneity in content and delivery.

Finally, another strategy women in HE in Saudi Arabia use is the support networks including mentorship programs. The interviews indicated that shared experiences among women in higher education helped to highlight common challenges. Women who had navigated similar circumstances were seen as valuable sources of advice and

psychological support. One respondent specifically highlighted the importance of establishing mentorship programs and support groups within the institution where women can gain insights and guidance. Having a supportive network allows women to share their struggles and victories, bolstering emotional resilience. This is particularly important in academia, where the pressure to perform can be high (Lekchiri and Eversole, 2021). Moreover, access to a mentor that has successfully navigated similar challenges in the past is viewed by women as appropriate role model. It helps to address issues of representation, which can be particularly challenging in male-dominated fields or levels of hierarchy (Albejaidi and Nair, 2019).

However, support networks and mentorship programs has its shortcoming in the form of limited scope of shared experiences. Although shared experiences can be an invaluable source of support and guidance, there is a risk that the shared experiences within a particular network or mentorship program might become too homogenous (Albejaidi and Nair, 2019). If mentors or support groups are drawn from a narrow demographic or experience set, they may not adequately represent or address the diverse challenges faced by different women. For instance, the challenges faced by a single mother might differ vastly from those faced by a woman without children (Lekchiri and Eversole, 2021). A solution to overcome this is to ensure that mentorship programs and support networks are diverse in terms of the backgrounds, experiences, and challenges faced by mentors and members (Lunsford et al., 2017). Mentorship programs with a diverse range of mentors based on diversity of experiences, ethnic background and age has proved successful in helping women to make the most of these support networks within HE in Finland, UK and U.S. (Skaniakos et al., 2014; Lunsford et al., 2017). Offering a broad range of mentors and peer support ensures that women can find relatable guidance tailored to their unique circumstances.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined the experiences of Saudi and non-Saudi women working in the HE in Saudi Arabia, examining the challenges they face, the support structures that exist, the comparative experiences between Saudi and non-Saudi women, and the

strategies these women employ to navigate through the existing challenges. Drawing upon primary data from interviews, the discussion chapter highlighted that societal and institutional practices work in tandem to create a complex web of obstacles that constrain women's career advancement. From inflexible work schedules to traditional familial norms and international educational experiences, women in Saudi academia confront various hurdles. Other challenges are influenced by a variety of factors such as cultural norms, social structures like Wasta, and rapid policy changes triggered by Vision 2030. However, resilience and innovation persist among these women, who deploy varied strategies to navigate these challenges. They have harnessed flexible work arrangements, sought on-site childcare and external support, engaged in in-country professional development, and leaned into robust support networks and mentorship programs.

These challenges are experienced differently by Saudi and non-Saudi women. While Saudi women benefit and sometimes are restricted by local systems of social capital such as Wasta, non-Saudi women may leverage their foreign expertise and make use of technology for direct communication with decision-makers to overcome similar obstacles. The presence of deeply ingrained social norms also acts as a differentiating factor; influencing mobility, work dynamics, and overall career trajectory for women from both groups.

To counter these challenges, women use a range of strategies. Flexible work arrangements emerge as a significant coping mechanism, allowing women to balance their professional and personal lives effectively, particularly critical in a work-from-home environment induced by the pandemic. On-site childcare services and external support networks become invaluable for women juggling professional commitments with childcare and household responsibilities. In-country professional development opportunities offer an alternative to women restricted by family or social norms from traveling abroad for skill enhancement. Lastly, mentorship programs and support networks within institutions is a source of emotional and professional support, allowing women to navigate the unique challenges they face in the male-dominated or hierarchical landscapes. Each of these strategies is not just a testament to their

perseverance, but also an indication of the evolving landscape of HE in Saudi Arabia and the gradual shift towards greater gender equality.

The differences (cultural and familiar constraints) and commonalities in the experiences of Saudi and non-Saudi women offer valuable insights for policymakers, educational leaders, and professional women working in the profession themselves. Addressing these issues will require a multidimensional approach that incorporates not only formal policy changes but also informal support structures, ranging from technology solutions and flexible work environments to in-house professional development opportunities and mentorship programs. Women in HE in Saudi Arabia, like their global counterparts, continue to strive for excellence, equal opportunities, and a more inclusive environment. Their resilience and determination are not only shaping their own future but also paving the way for future generations of women in the kingdom. This chapter highlighted the importance of acknowledging, understanding, and addressing the challenges faced by women in HE with implications for career development.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This chapter provides the research contribution of this thesis and an overall conclusion to the thesis. It concludes by providing the conclusion to each research objective and explains how each research question was answered. The findings across the thesis are used to provide recommendations in this chapter to the higher education institutions and policymakers to make the environment more conducive for women working in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The conclusion chapter also acknowledges the limitations of this research and provides suggestions for further research.

9.1 Research Contribution

The study has a number of relevant contributions - both academic and practical. From an academic standpoint, in an environment in Saudi Arabia where intersectionality as a framework has been scarcely discussed (Rodriguez and Scurry, 2019; Aldossari and Calvard, 2021), this thesis focuses on customs, beliefs, gender, and nationality in influencing the experiences of women in Saudi higher education, especially in the context of their career advancement. While existing literature has predominantly concentrated on the general challenges women confront in higher education, this research takes a crucial step by exploring the intricate interplay of these factors such as customs, beliefs, nationality and gender. The result is an enriched, layered understanding of the unique challenges that stem from the intersection of these categories namely nationality, beliefs, gender, as well as age and socioeconomic status. It reaffirms the significance of the intersectionality framework as a vital tool in dissecting and analysing the workplace experiences not just of Saudi women, but also non-Saudi women working in higher education in Saudi Arabia.

This study further enriches the academic discourse on intersectionality by introducing the examination of gender, norms and customs along with aspects such as social capital, position, geographical location and nationality as pivotal elements shaping the experiences of women in Saudi higher education. The inclusion of norms and customs, in particular, marks a novel contribution to the intersectionality literature, offering fresh insights into how deeply ingrained societal norms and practices influence career advancement opportunities and challenges for women. By integrating this perspective, the research not only broadens the scope of intersectional analysis but also uncovers the distinct ways in which cultural traditions intersect with other

categories of identity, such as gender, to uniquely impact women's professional lives. This innovative approach highlights the complexity of intersectionality within the Saudi context and illustrates the critical need to consider cultural customs as a significant factor in understanding and addressing gender disparities in the academic sector.

Another contribution is that this thesis goes beyond mere identification of challenges. By detailing how customs, gendered norms, and nationality impact the professional development of women in Saudi Arabia, this research highlights the factors that serve as barriers to career progression usually overlooked by other studies. Recognising and addressing these factors holds the key to enhancing organisational performance and development of a multitude of opportunities for women, especially within higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia.

This analysis is among the first to unpack the views and experiences women in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia as they consider choices about suitable conditions for women's work in a society where the tribal values are one of the fundamental aspects of society (Maisel, 2018). Their lived experiences reveal important social and cultural barriers to women's work in gender-segregated environments, barriers that largely emanate from concerns over tribal women. Participants identified customs and traditions, conservative views, particularly regarding gender roles and family honour as obstacles to working in the academic field. Women's rationale for avoiding interacting with men in the workplace is to protect their reputation, which was essential for securing their families' support. As with the societal expectations based on tribal values on tribal women, which hold sway when it comes to the choice of career and what are the suitable or unsuitable occupations for men and women (Koburtay et al., 2022). It is within such an intricate hierarchical structure that patriarchal attitude towards women in Saudi Arabia is ingrained within social norms and values. Their narratives also revealed the gender roles and privileged position held by the family in Saudi Arabian culture is impacted by the conservative values as well as patriarchal ideologies (Abalkhail and Allan, 2015). Gender-segregated workplaces, along with the previously mentioned conservative behaviours, effectively maintained the patriarchal system. Under this arrangement, men assumed the role of guardians and protectors of women, while women depended on

demonstrating modesty while pursuing career advancement. Such findings have important implications for theory and research. Some of the traditional values and social structures in Saudi Arabia have a strong impact on creation of the perception regarding what is deemed a suitable gender division within the public sphere (Aldossari and Calvard, 2021). Yet, this investigation of women's perspectives reveals how the emphasis on women's individual choices may have obscured the structural accommodations to patriarchy that governments and employers have posed on women. Our theoretical contribution is to suggest that, in some settings, women's agency in innovating strategic accommodations of patriarchy can be limited and, instead, women may face a working environment in which a structural accommodation is built into the workplace, and thus, that would isolate working women from participating in male-dominated fields in particular higher education (Al Alhareth et al, 2015b). This study also suggests, all the traditional norms and customs discussed in the previous chapters that pose challenges against women career and advancement have led to gender inequality by creating spatial segregation and generating gendered stereotypes and practices in the workplace. Gender inequality in the workplace has been widely examined within the context of developed countries; however, few have investigated women employment in the Middle East. This research contributed to the literature on women employment in the specific context of Saudi Arabia because the structural barriers that limit women's career development are embedded in cultural practices to define gender roles in very particular ways.

As such, this thesis also can make an important practical contribution with regard to the Saudi Vision 2030 objectives and more broadly on the strive for more equality in Saudi Arabia. By analysing the intersectional challenges that women face, this study contributes to and advances the prevailing debates on gender equality within Saudi Arabia. As Vision 2030 is aiming to drive transformative changes across various sectors, understanding these challenges from an intersectional lens becomes crucial for several reasons. Firstly, the intersectional perspective considers not only gender but also the association with cultural beliefs, nationality and other social variables. Through these factors, the study provides a deeper insight into the specific barriers to women's career advancement. This understanding is important for developing targeted strategies and policies that can more effectively promote gender equality and women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia (Al-Nasrallah, 2023). Secondly, through identification

of specific work processes, cultural elements, and institutional practices which hinder women's career progression, the study provides a roadmap for making higher education environment in Saudi Arabia more conducive to women's career progression. This aligns with Vision 2030's objectives of modernising the education sector and fostering an environment that supports the development and empowerment of all citizens, including women. By addressing these challenges, Saudi Arabia can ensure that its educational institutions not only contribute to the academic and professional growth of women but also reflect the progressive ethos of Vision 2030. This research therefore also offers a roadmap on how the objectives of Vision 2030 can be actualised for women by addressing the complex web of cultural and societal issues they navigate daily.

9.2 Research problem, aim and objectives

Although a number of studies in the past have examined the cultural challenges confronting Saudi women in the public sector, there remained a distinct gap in the current literature when it comes to exploring the challenges experienced by women in attaining career advancement within higher education in Saudi Arabia. In particular, the literature remains scarce which has explored the interplay between Saudi Arabia's deep-rooted conservative traditions and gender norms, particularly when intersected with variables like nationality. This is even more pronounced in the context of females within higher education institutions. As a result, there is an incomplete understanding of the factors that potentially hinder the professional growth of Saudi women, especially within the educational sector (Jackson and Witenstein, 2021).

An examination of existing literature revealed two main limitations: Firstly, numerous studies had adopted a broad lens, focusing on various issues linked to women's experiences in higher education, rather than providing a comprehensive exploration of distinct challenges (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017; Al-Sudairy, 2017). This approach has a drawback that it limits the extent of insights gained. This is because it often results in a generalised understanding which fails to capture the nuanced and specific challenges faced by women. By encompassing a wide range of issues, these studies have overlooked the depth and complexity of individual factors. This approach dilutes the focus on particular aspects, such as the intersectionality of gender, culture, and

professional roles in higher education. Consequently, crucial details vital for a comprehensive understanding and for developing targeted solutions have remained underexplored. Secondly, the limited number of studies specifically addressing career progression barriers for women in higher education tend to concentrate on women in leadership roles based in major cities. This approach neglects the experiences of those at the grassroots or those based in smaller, traditionally conservative regions, exhibiting a biased sample (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Abdalla, 2014; Abalkhail, 2017; Al Alhareth, et al., 2015b).

Moreover, while some studies have uncovered the challenges women encounter in the wider public sector (Hamdan, 2005; Abalkhail & Allan, 2015; Abalkhail, 2019), there remained a noticeable absence of research focusing on the day-to-day dynamics and institutional as well as individual practices which shape female experiences in their immediate work settings and at home, in addition to further intersectional insights such as nationality and culture. Notably, an intersectional perspective, which factors in elements like gender, race, and class concurrently, has been under-explored in the context of the Arab world (Keshet, et al., 2015; Barsoum, 2019). The limited instances of its application in Saudi Arabia further reinforces this gap in the literature and research problem this research sought to address (Syed, et al., 2018).

Addressing these identified gaps, this thesis aimed to present an intersectional perspective to understand and investigate the challenges Saudi women in higher education face. Given the growing significance of the public sector and Saudi Arabia's ambitious Vision 2030, there remains a strong interest in this domain. The aim of this research was to investigate the challenges experienced by women in achieving career advancement within higher education in Saudi Arabia, exploring these challenges from an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality was deemed relevant because it allows to explore a wide range of challenges faced by women involving the intersection of gender norms, customs and beliefs, as well as nationality to uncover and assess the complex nature of the experiences of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Qualitative research methodology was used to collect primary data collected with 30 interviewees using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were undertaken with the members of higher education institutions in the public universities in Saudi Arabia. The findings were corroborated with reference to the literature on intersectional perspective, processes and practices which constrain women from achieving career development. The 30 interviewees included the women in higher education working at different positions (in terms of seniority), differences in country of origin, geographical locations the interviewees were based at (major cities versus smaller towns), marital status and age. The sampling strategy was aimed to provide a diverse group of women to allow an intersectional analysis. Even though some key dimensions such as gender, job role/positions in academia as well as nationality were anticipated as important dimensions of difference in terms of career experience, others such as marital status, age of children and specific place of origin/values of the family emerged as critical dimensions for the intersectional analysis. These differences were useful because they helped to employ intersectionality to look at a range of diverse experiences and to understand how the intersection of these creates different set of opportunities and constraints.

The research aim was addressed by focusing on five objectives. The first objective was to examine the concept of intersectionality and the ways in which intersectional perspective can assist in understanding various challenges experienced by women in advancing their career in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The second objective was to understand the key organisational practices in higher education institutions which limit the women in their ability to successfully advance their careers in Saudi Arabia. The third objective was to compare the experiences of Saudi women in higher education against those of their non-Saudi counterparts in the context of career advancement to uncover whether if any differences exist and why. The fourth objective was to understand and assess the techniques used by women in higher education across different levels of seniority to address the challenges they face in career progression. The final objective was to offer recommendations to higher education institutions and policymakers to make the environment more conducive for women working in higher education in Saudi Arabia. Each of these objectives were addressed in the theses and the discussion of findings for each objective is provided in the next section.

9.3 Key conclusions

9.3.1 Intersectionality to understand challenges experienced by women in advancing their career in higher education in Saudi Arabia

The main conclusions around each research objective are offered in this section. The first research objective was to examine the concept of intersectionality and the ways in which intersectional perspective can assist in understanding various challenges experienced by women in advancing their career in higher education in Saudi Arabia. This study uncovered the multitude of challenges faced by women in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia through the lens of intersectionality, extending this understanding of gendered barriers to careers in higher education beyond the western context. It highlighted the complexity of the experiences of these women, intricately shaped not merely by gender but by the confluence of other categories such as position of women within educational institutions, technology, social capital, nationality, and geographic location. This aligns with and develops on the work of McCall (2005) that social categories and identities like gender, class, and nationality are dynamic and context-dependent. This approach acknowledges that the experiences and challenges of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia cannot be understood through a static or universal lens. Instead, these experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of various factors that vary across different contexts. For instance, the impact of being a woman in Saudi academia is intricately connected to other factors like the hierarchical structure of the higher education institution, technological access, social networks, and geographic location. These elements interact uniquely within the Saudi context, creating specific challenges and experiences that differ from those in other cultural or geographical settings.

The hierarchical nature of academia in Saudi Arabia explains the distinct challenges based on the position a woman holds, with junior roles often unduly burdened and less prioritised for training and development opportunities. In contrast, policies intended to empower women may inadvertently enact barriers, exacerbating the

communication gaps and greater bureaucracy. For instance, interview conducted with a single Saudi woman with 13 years of experience in HE pointed to how the creation of new roles aimed at women's empowerment, unexpectedly may have resulted in greater bureaucracy and reduced direct communication with the higher management. This suggests that well-intended gender equity policies and organisational practices can have unintended consequences which contribute to greater difficulty, instead of facilitation of, women's work experiences.

Moreover, the interplay between gender and technology revealed that technological tools, such as automated systems may unconsciously be worsening the gender biases, especially when final decisions rest predominantly with male-dominated individuals in senior management. The societal expectations levied upon women further exacerbate these technological challenges, restricting their ability to upskill in line with rapid technological advancements (Lambrecht and Tucker, 2019). Social capital, particularly the significance of networking, also remains vital in the professional landscape of Saudi Arabia's higher education. Yet, women often find their access to social capital and networking opportunities limited, further complicated by their professional rank and available influential connections. The lack of objective processes in nomination and promotion also exacerbates these disparities, explored through intersectional perspective. Furthermore, the intersection of gender with nationality introduces a new dimension, especially for non-Saudi women, illustrating that international staff navigate a unique mix of challenges that intertwine their gender with their cultural background. The geographic diversity within Saudi Arabia itself presents varied experiences for women, dependent on the conservativeness of the region. Women in urban areas tend to benefit from an "urban privilege" which comes from being in a more liberal environment and large cities such as Riyadh, in contrast to the experiences of women in smaller and more conservative towns. The women with urban privilege are likely to have relatively more opportunities and freedom compared to their counterparts in conservative, smaller towns, as discussed in chapter 6.

The findings in relation to the first research objective significantly enrich existing research by applying the concept of intersectionality to the context of higher education in Saudi Arabia. This approach extends beyond the traditional focus on gender alone,

or the intersection of gender and religious beliefs, incorporating a detailed examination of how various factors like position within educational institutions, technology, social capital, nationality, and geographic location interact to shape the experiences of women in higher education. This broadened perspective confirms and deepens our understanding of the complex, multifaceted barriers women face, moving beyond Western-centric views to acknowledge the unique cultural and societal dynamics at play in Saudi Arabia. It highlights how policies and initiatives, while well-intentioned, can have unintended consequences, emphasising the need for context-sensitive approaches in addressing gender inequality.

9.3.2 Practices in higher education institutions which limit women to successfully advance their careers in Saudi Arabia.

The second research objective was to understand the key practices in higher education institutions which limit women in their ability to successfully advance their careers in Saudi Arabia. The advancement of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia is constrained by deeply entrenched societal norms and institutional practices. The findings from this study showcase that multiple layers of barriers which intersect to hinder Saudi women's career progression. At its core, lack of flexible work schedules directly challenge the societal expectation placed on Saudi women as primary caretakers. This clash between professional demands and family/ household responsibilities means that women often miss out on vital professional development opportunities (such as training and development programmes), which compromise their career growth.

Furthermore, the limited time available for research due to both academic responsibilities and societal expectations puts female academics at a unique disadvantage in higher education industry that increasingly places significant value on research contributions made by academics. This predicament highlights the necessity for a more inclusive and flexible institutional structure to level the playing field for female professionals in higher education in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, studying abroad, while important for academic enrichment and career progression,

introduces Saudi women to a range of emotional and cultural challenges that can be overwhelming. Not only do these women face academic adjustments due to the differences in teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia versus the Western world (where most Saudi women seek higher education), but they also face a new set of daily responsibilities, often without the support structures these women are accustomed to in Saudi Arabia. Their struggles in foreign academic environments signifies the broader complexities of intersecting gender, cultural, and professional expectations.

Another factor which limit women in their ability to successfully advance their careers is the constraints imposed by traditional family norms, as they significantly impact women's ability to network and develop necessary social capital. In an environment where networking can influence the professional opportunities and advancements, restrictions on cross-gender interactions have a detrimental impact on women's careers. These constraints can also lead to self-censorship, further hampering their professional growth. For women in Saudi higher education to genuinely have equal opportunities for career advancement, there is a major need for both institutional changes in universities and a broader societal shift towards redefining gender roles and expectations. While individual resilience and efforts are commendable and necessary, systemic changes are vital to create an environment where women can thrive academically and professionally without the undue burden of societal and institutional constraints (Alkhaled, 2021).

9.3.3 Comparison of experiences of Saudi and non-Saudi women

The third research objective was to compare the experiences of Saudi women in higher education against those of their non-Saudi counterparts in the context of career advancement to uncover whether if any differences exist. The examination of the experiences of Saudi versus non-Saudi women in higher education in Saudi Arabia generated interesting insights, underpinned by the intersectionality arising from country of origin. This differentiation is manifested in three key areas: access to senior management and decision-making, influence of cultural and social norms, and the ability to adapt to the rapid changes in the external environment. When it comes to

the access to senior management, Saudi women's access to senior roles is deeply linked with the traditional societal system of 'Wasta', an avenue of influence based on social connections, which non-Saudi tend to be excluded from. While this can provide benefits (such as a supportive environment as seen in the experiences of Mai - academic member and a lecturer in the college of education), it also presents its challenges. Wasta can reinforce existing power dynamics and hierarchies, limiting those without influential ties and alleviating the prevalence of meritocratic culture. On the other hand, non-Saudi women leverage their foreign qualifications and expertise as a form of social capital (Bebbington, 2007). The technological medium of communication has further provided them with a more direct line to decision-makers, bypassing traditional social barriers. However, as with informal networks in other contexts, Wasta can lead to unequal opportunities and reinforce existing power dynamics and hierarchies (Alsarhan et al., 2021). For instance, new employees or those without established relationships with influential academics might find themselves at a disadvantage.

The second area of comparison when it comes to the experiences of Saudi women in higher education against those of their non-Saudi counterparts in the context of career advancement relates to the role of culture and social norms. Cultural norms in Saudi Arabia play an instrumental role in shaping the experiences of both Saudi and non-Saudi women. Saudi women often face constraints originating from familial and tribal expectations, significantly influencing their professional mobility and networking opportunities. Non-Saudi women, while having some shared cultural norms, exhibit flexibility in certain areas due to their foreign origins. Non-Saudi women often benefit from a degree of cultural leniency which allows greater professional mobility compared to their Saudi counterparts. This leniency, however, is not uniform and varies greatly depending on individual circumstances and the interplay with Saudi cultural norms. Saudi women, on the other hand, face a more rigid socio-cultural landscape which often restricts their mobility and career advancement opportunities, as confirmed in chapter 6. This contrast highlights a complex mix of cultural, professional, and geographical factors influencing women's experiences in Saudi academia.

Finally, adaptability to rapidly changing external environment is another point of comparison. Saudi Arabia's progressive initiatives, like Vision 2030, are driving transformational changes in the HE sector. The rapidity of these reforms, while promising, brings with it tensions, especially in conservative regions. Non-Saudi women find themselves navigating a complex landscape, balancing the advantages brought by these reforms against the need to remain sensitive to the traditional beliefs. For academics, this has meant that adaptation to new HE policies needs to take place along with the consideration for and being sensitive to the conventional beliefs, so that any conflict is minimised.

9.3.4 Techniques used by women in higher education across different levels of seniority to address the challenges

The fourth research objective was to understand and assess the techniques used by women in higher education across different levels of seniority to address the challenges they face in career progression. Based on the interview data, it became apparent that women in the higher education sector have actively sought and deployed a diverse set of strategies to tackle the unique challenges they face in their career progression. These strategies serve as crucial support mechanisms, enabling them to maintain a balanced interplay between professional aspirations and personal responsibilities. The first strategy is boundary management. A significant shift towards creating distinct boundaries between work and personal life has been witnessed. By demarcating specific work hours, women have successfully ensured that their emotional well-being is not compromised, and familial roles are respected. The rise of remote work during the pandemic made this distinction even more pertinent.

The second strategy is around childcare and external support. A dual strategy, encompassing both institutional (on-site childcare services) and individual (seeking external assistance) has been adopted to tackle the "second shift" of responsibilities at home (Blair-Loy et al., 2015, p. 436). This dual approach helps to not only alleviates

the stress but also provides these women with more flexibility in their professional engagements at work.

The third strategy relates to in-country professional developments. Acknowledging the constraints related to international travel for professional growth, the emphasis has shifted towards leveraging domestic opportunities. This in-house approach to professional development has two benefits. Firstly, it circumvents the need for women to negotiate complex socio-cultural barriers associated with traveling abroad. Secondly, it aligns with the women's commitment to their families, allowing them to pursue personal growth without negating familial duties.

The fourth strategy is around support networks and mentorships. The power of shared experiences cannot be underestimated, as uncovered in this study. Establishing mentorship programs and supportive ecosystems offers women a platform to navigate their professional journey with guidance, solidarity, and emotional resilience. These networks not only validate individual struggles but also illuminate paths to overcome them.

9.4 Recommendations for policy and practice

The findings of this study are used to offer a number of recommendations to the higher education institutions and policymakers, so as to overcome the challenges experienced by women in achieving career advancement within higher education in Saudi Arabia

9.4.1 Recommendations for higher education institutions

Three evidence-led recommendations are provided to higher education institutions based on findings of this study. Firstly, it is recommended that higher education institutions implement flexible work arrangements. The traditional 9-to-5 working model do not always align with the unique challenges and responsibilities faced by

many women in higher education who juggle academic responsibilities with personal and familial duties. This is further accentuated in Saudi Arabia where women bear the primary responsibility for household chores and child-rearing. The Saudi context, influenced by cultural and societal norms, often places women in this primary caregiving role, making flexibility in work arrangements crucial. The research highlighted that one of the techniques used by women to navigate challenges in Higher Education was making use of flexible work arrangements. Specifically, an Assistant Professor and Vice Dean of a college emphasised the importance of setting specific work hours and ensuring a clear boundary between work and personal life, a practice that was particularly valuable during the pandemic's work-from-home scenarios. This approach not only preserved their emotional well-being by allowing them to "switch off" from work but also ensured that family time wasn't compromised due to work obligations.

Flexible work arrangements are justified due to their numerous benefits. It will improve the emotional wellbeing of staff. Establishing clear boundaries between work and personal time can significantly reduce burnout and emotional exhaustion (Wittmer and Martin, 2010). By adhering to set working hours and truly disengaging post those hours, women in HE can maintain better emotional health (Kaduk et al., 2019). Given that academia can be particularly demanding with pressures to publish, teach, and engage in institutional responsibilities, flexible schedules will improve emotional wellbeing. Another justification for flexible work arrangements is improved work-life balance. With women often taking most of the primary family responsibilities, having the freedom to select work hours or choose a flexible pattern ensures that they can attend to both academic duties and home responsibilities efficiently. This balance is not just a matter of convenience but is integral to ensure that women do not feel forced to choose between professional growth and personal/familial commitments. It is also expected to boost productivity and job satisfaction. Research has shown that when employees have greater control over their schedules, their job satisfaction increases, leading to higher productivity (McNall et al., 2009; Neirotti et al., 2019). This principle is just as applicable in HE. By providing women the autonomy to determine their working hours based on their individual circumstances, institutions are likely to see improved job performance and commitment.

Secondly, it is recommended that higher education institutions should facilitate the provision of on-campus childcare facilities. Childcare responsibilities disproportionately fall on women in many societies, and Saudi Arabia is no exception. Balancing childcare with professional responsibilities is a persistent challenge for women globally, and when academic demands are factored in, this challenge is compounded. Offering on-campus childcare services can serve as a tangible solution, easing the burden for women in academia. Several interviewees in the study underscored the challenges of juggling their roles as academics with their responsibilities as primary caregivers. A Filipino teaching assistant mentioned her struggles of balancing work with homeschooling three children, resorting to external cleaning services to cope. It highlights the "second shift" (Blair-Loy et al., 2015), where women, after their professional obligations, return home to another set of responsibilities, mainly centred around household and childcare. This is justified due to their numerous benefits. It will help to alleviate the burden of second shift. On-campus childcare services directly addresses the issue of the "second shift," enabling women in HE to concentrate on their academic responsibilities during work hours without the added stress of childcare arrangements. It eliminates the need for these women to manage or coordinate with external childcare facilities during their work hours (Aldossari and Chaudhry, 2021). It also increases staff productivity and their concentration level. The assurance that their children are cared for in a nearby, secure environment allows female academics to focus more intently on their work. Without the constant worry about the wellbeing of their children, these women can channel their energies towards teaching, research, and other academic duties, leading to heightened productivity and effectiveness (Davis et al., 2022). In addition, on-campus childcare services position HE institutions as forward-thinking and understanding of the unique challenges faced by their female employees. Such facilities can be a significant pull factor for potential female recruits and can play a vital role in retaining existing talent and attracting new talent.

The third recommendation is that higher education institutions should promote in-house professional development and mentorship programs. Professional development is crucial in academia for updating and advancing the skills and knowledge. However,

the need to travel abroad for such opportunities can be a challenge for many women, especially in cultural contexts like that of Saudi Arabia, where familial obligations and travel restrictions may pose barriers. Additionally, mentorship is a proven strategy that offers guidance, support, and can provide a pathway for career progression, especially in environments that may be traditionally male-dominated (Dashper, 2019). The interviews revealed that some women in higher education faced challenges with traveling abroad for professional development. One respondent expressed the idea of bringing those opportunities in-house to overcome this obstacle. Additionally, the study highlighted the benefits of mentorship programs. Women in academia found value in shared experiences, viewing those who had navigated similar career paths as invaluable sources of advice and psychological support.

Having in-house professional development and mentorship programs at higher education institutions is justified because of its benefits. By providing in-house professional development opportunities, institutions can directly address the logistical and familial challenges associated with traveling abroad. This makes it easier for women to access high-quality training without leaving the country, ensuring that they are not left behind due to cultural or logistical constraints. Additionally, when professional development is localized, it can be tailored to address specific institutional needs or gaps. This leads to the building of an internal knowledge reservoir that caters directly to the university's or college's requirements and strategic goals. Furthermore, mentorship programs, especially when they highlight women who have successfully navigated the challenges of academia in Saudi Arabia are likely to serve as a testament to the fact that success is achievable. This creates a positive feedback loop in that mentees of today become tomorrow's mentors, perpetuating a cycle of support and representation.

9.4.2 Recommendations for policymakers

Two evidence-led recommendations are provided to the policymakers in Saudi Arabia based on findings of this study. Firstly, the policymakers are recommended to support and incentivise the educational institutions to provide childcare services by

subsidising them. Balancing professional duties with childcare responsibilities is a well-documented challenge for women in Saudi Arabia. The provision of on-site childcare services can be a game-changer, enabling women to perform at their best in their professional roles without the added stress and logistical difficulties associated with seeking external childcare. The data from the interviews illustrated the challenges many women in higher education in Saudi Arabia face in balancing their roles at work and their childcare duties. A non-Saudi teaching assistant mentioned the difficulty of working while simultaneously home schooling three children, requiring her to seek external cleaning services for assistance. A similar viewpoint around challenge in maintaining the balance between work and home schooling children was also mentioned by eight other participants. Several of the women interviewed for this research pointed out the need for childcare facilities at work.

The support and incentives for educational institutions to provide childcare services is justified because of its benefits. By supporting and incentivizing institutions to provide on-site childcare services, policymakers would be addressing one of the most significant challenges identified in the study. Such a move would demonstrate a direct response to the needs of women in higher education. Additionally, when women are confident that their children are cared for and safe, they can direct more of their energy and focus towards their professional responsibilities. This leads to increased productivity, engagement, and overall job satisfaction (Madden, 2018). It will also promote gender equality in HE in Saudi Arabia: one of the roadblocks to women's career progression in academia is the need to take extended breaks or opt for part-time roles due to childcare responsibilities. By facilitating on-site childcare, this roadblock is reduced, providing women a more level playing field. By supporting higher education institutions in this initiative, policymakers could be setting a trend for other industries and sectors within Saudi Arabia, paving the way for broader societal change to promote productivity and competitiveness of various industries, contributing to the fulfilment of Vision 2030 objectives.

Secondly, the policymakers should review and update the current restrictions on women's mobility. Historically, women in many societies, including Saudi Arabia, have faced mobility restrictions due to a combination of cultural, legal, and societal

norms, as extensively covered in this study. While Saudi Arabia has made significant strides in recent years to improve women's rights and mobility, there might still exist some implicit or explicit barriers, particularly when it comes to professional contexts such as attending conferences or workshops abroad. Interviews with women in higher education in Saudi Arabia in this study pointed towards challenges associated with traveling abroad for professional development. The potential familial restrictions or societal expectations can limit their ability to fully engage in international academic or professional opportunities, which can be essential for career growth, especially in academia.

This recommendation for policymakers to review and update the restrictions on mobility is justified because of its benefits. It will promote career growth and access to opportunities for women. Access to international conferences, seminars, training programs, and collaborations are essential for academic growth and recognition. These platforms offer exposure to the latest research, networking opportunities, and potential for collaborative projects. Limitations on mobility can thus hinder women's career progression in academia. In addition, as Saudi Arabia has embarked on various progressive initiatives as part of its Vision 2030, reviewing and updating mobility restrictions aligns with the broader national objective of empowering women and integrating them more effectively into the workforce. More importantly, drawing on intersectional perspective, this recommendation will promote equity in professional development: in-house or in-country professional development opportunities, while valuable, might not always offer the same depth or breadth as international ones. Ensuring women can freely access these international platforms such as networking opportunities and collaborative projects brings equity in professional growth opportunities (Fay et al., 2021).

9.5 Research limitations and suggestions for further research

There are a number of limitations of this research which should be acknowledged. Firstly, given that the study involved semi-structured interviews conducted with only 30 interviewees, the sample size is relatively small particularly when taking into account the larger population of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Therefore, the insights drawn from these interviews might not be representative of the broader population, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Secondly, although thematic analysis provides a deep understanding of the data, it is also a subjective process, since different researchers may interpret the same data differently or prioritise different themes based on their perspectives (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012). This potential for subjectivity can lead to bias in data interpretation.

The third limitation relates to the potential for researcher bias. In semi-structured interviews, as the researcher has some flexibility in directing the conversation, this can unintentionally introduce bias. The way questions are phrased or the order in which they are asked can influence the responses provided by interviewees. Cross-sectional nature of the research design is another limitation because it means the findings in this study are based on the snapshot of participant experiences at a particular point in time when the data was collected. The cross-sectional nature of this research, conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, has specific implications for the data collected and its interpretation. The pandemic itself likely intensified certain experiences and challenges faced by the women in Saudi Arabian higher education. Issues like work-life balance, remote working, and the stress of managing professional and domestic responsibilities were possibly more acute during this period. Therefore, the responses might reflect an amplified version of these challenges, unique to the pandemic context. Moreover, Covid -19 restrictions likely impacted the research methodology, especially in terms of data collection. The pandemic would have limited the possibility of conducting in-person interviews or visiting campuses, which are crucial for gaining deeper, nuanced insights and understanding the lived experiences in their natural setting. This limitation could have influenced the depth and richness of the data collected. Relying more on virtual interviews or remote methods of data collection might not fully capture the non-verbal cues, environmental context, and subtle dynamics that in-person interactions provide.

Furthermore, focusing on the pandemic period means the findings might not fully represent the typical or long-term trends in the challenges and experiences of women in Saudi higher education. The pandemic was an exceptional situation, and the responses obtained during this time might be influenced by the unique pressures and

circumstances of this period. Therefore, while providing valuable insights into the women's experiences during a critical global event, the study's findings might not completely reflect the standard conditions or the potential future trajectory post-pandemic. This highlights the need for caution in generalising the findings beyond the specific temporal context of the Covid -19 pandemic.

Finally, the findings of this study are limited in scope, as they are only applicable to women in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. It means they cannot be applied to other countries with different cultural and religious norms, limiting their generalisability. On the other hand, this is a strength too, as it helps to offer a more in-depth view of what the specific challenges of women in HE are in this particular socio-cultural context.

These limitations form the basis of suggestions provided for further research. It is recommended that future research should implement a quantitative study, such as surveys, to assess the prevalence of the themes and experiences identified in the semi-structured interviews across a larger population. This would complement the qualitative data and improve the generalisability of the findings. Moreover, future studies should compare the experiences of women in higher education in Saudi Arabia with those from other Middle Eastern or North African countries. This can provide a more comprehensive regional perspective and reveal specific cultural or institutional differences, especially considering that these countries have some cultural and religious norms in common while also possessing different histories and institutions. The future research should also conduct a longitudinal study to understand the evolution of challenges and strategies over time and evaluate the effects of policy reforms such as Vision 2030 on women's career opportunities. This will provide insights into the durability of challenges faced by women and the long-term effectiveness of the strategies they employ to overcome the challenges experienced by women in achieving career advancement within higher education in Saudi Arabia.

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List of Abbreviations

HE	Higher Education
VD	Vice dean
GCC	The Guld cooperation council A regional, intergovernmental, political, and economic union comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the united Arab Emarits, and Saudi Arabia.

Appendix 1

Understanding Work Advancement for Women in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

Dear participant

Thank you for being willing to take part in this research project.

Briefing

I am a postgraduate researcher at Leeds University Business School (United Kingdom). This interview is part of my doctoral thesis and your participation would be much appreciated. The aim of this study is to identify the tradition and customs related challenges faced by Saudi and non-Saudi women at the workplace in Saudi universities and how these challenges might influence their work advancement. In addition, I would like to assure you that you will remain completely anonymous and no records of the interview will be kept with your name on them. You are free to choose to take part or not to take part or you can withdraw or refuse to participate at any stage without giving a reason.

Interview Schedule

Section one: Social and demographic information

- Nationality
- Age
- Social status
- Number of children (for married women)
- Occupational position
- Academic rank
- How long in the job/working for that institution

Section two: Professional/workplace experience

- 1- Can I start by asking you when did you start working in Higher Education?
- 2- How did you first come into academia?
- 3- How would you describe your current/first position? Does it reflect well your skills and educational level?
- 4- Do you personally seek higher position?
- 5- Tell me more about your experience at the workplace in terms of skill development and overall advancement.
- 6- What kinds of personal choices or career decisions have you made to get to your current career level?
- 7- What are the responsibilities and core duties you carry out in your job?
- 8- Who is supporting you in your career? (Colleagues? Male, female? Husband? Parents'? Friends? Foreign tutor?)
- 9- Can you describe the relationship with a person that supports you most in your career? Is there anyone or anything that makes it most difficult for you to progress? Could you describe how? And any assumption why?

Section three: Traditions and customs-based challenges

- 1- What are your responsibilities and duties within your family?
- 2- What role did husband play in helping you develop your career? What role did your parents play in helping you develop your career?
- 3- Has anything changed at home as a result of being a full time professional?
- 4- How do you manage both responsibilities at home and work? Do you get professional support at the workplace? (this could answer the question of the lack of professional network and lack of training and development opportunities- support of workers with children)
- 5- What are two or three biggest challenges in being a female worker that influenced your career development and empowerment?

Section Four: Gender norms related challenges

- 1- Being a woman, does it influence or affect your career progress?
- 2- Or Do women face obstacles in progressing into higher positions? (in terms of access to organisations resources, training opportunities, promotions, decision making, authority delegation and formal networking).

- 3- Do you feel that you are supported enough regarding work-related tasks as a woman in the workplace?
- 4- What do you feel about networking and communication with male colleagues?
- 5- What are your views on gender equality in the workplace and what can be done?
- 6- Do you have a total control over what happens in your department? (This question should be answered by women in managerial positions).

Section Five: Nationality

- 1- Being a Saudi or non-Saudi woman, What do you want to say about your experience at the workplace in terms of work advancement?
- 2- Have the Saudi customs and traditions influenced your progress as Saudi or non-Saudi woman? If so how could you overcome these barriers?
- 3- Do you think your nationality has influenced or affected your progress and if so how?

End of Interview

- 1- How could you overcome these obstacles?
- 2- What do you think the most that would support you and foster your professional development?
- 3- What would you recommend a young Saudi woman who wants to enter academia?
- 4- If you had magic/three wishes what would you change?

Thank you for your participation

Appendix 2

Participant Information Sheet

The title of the research project

Toward an intersectional perspective in understanding gender inequality in women's work advancement at higher education in Saudi Arabia

You are being invited to take part in the above research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Who am I and What is the purpose of the project?

My name is Demh Alghamdi, I'm sponsored by the Saudi Education ministry to complete my studies at Leeds University Business school and this project is part of my PhD studies. I'm looking at Understanding Work Advancement for Women in Higher Education, and the purpose of this study is to explore the challenges of women's work advancement in higher education in Saudi Arabia from an intersectional perspective. The intersection of traditional customs and beliefs, gender norms and nationality would be investigated to reveal the complexity of female's experiences in Saudi universities. This qualitative study aims to research the traditional customs and norms and gendered implications of becoming a working female in academia. Furthermore, exploring the factors that hinder or affect women's upward advancement in different level positions in academia.

Why have I been chosen?

You are contacted because you are a woman employee of an HE institution in Saudi Arabia. Also, you are invited to answer the interview questions and provide reflections/insights/thoughts and experiences on the societal and individual challenges faced in everyday work-related processes, such as work decisions, promotion opportunities and control of authority that might influence the work advancement of women in Saudi universities. The study focuses on female workers (Saudi and non-

Saudi) in different grades within academic and administrative roles in multiple public universities in Saudi Arabia to ensure the variety of the sample. Therefore, your participation would be very helpful to the success of this study.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in the research is entirely voluntary and you have the right to decline any question.

It is your free choice to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be provided with the research information sheet for you to keep. Also, you will be kindly asked to sign a consent form or give a verbal consent, by saying "I consent to take part in the research titled Toward an intersectional perspective in understanding gender inequality in women's work advancement at higher education in Saudi Arabia, conducted by Deme Alghamdi a PhD candidate at the university of Leeds, which focuses on exploring the factors that hinder or effect women's upward advancement in different level positions in academia to better understand work development of women in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/ letter and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research and request that the interview recording or notes be immediately destroyed during the interview and up to a month since the interview has taken place without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. I understand that the interview will be recorded only if I consent, then it will be fully transcribed. I agree for the data collected from me to be stored for a maximum of ten years after the completion of this project and used in relevant future research and possible publications in an anonymised form. I understand that other researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form. I agree to take part in the this research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change during the project and, if necessary, afterwards." at the start of the recording as an agreement to participate in the project as well). Also, you can withdraw at any time during the interview without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way and you do not have to give any reason for that. In addition, you can still withdraw from the study after the interview has taken place.

You will have up to one month after the interview day to let us know about your decision. Then, all data referring to yourself will be immediately destroyed

What do I have to do?/ What will happen to me if I take part?

The interview will take between 45 to 60 minutes and will take place at the convenient of the participants' such as the participants' offices in the case of face-to-face interviews if possible, or via online video call or by telephone. All interviews will be recorded only if you give consent for that, if for any reason you prefer not to be recorded, then the researcher will take extensive notes during the interview. if you decide to participate in this study, a copy of the information sheet will be given to you and you will be asked to sign a consent form as well. Or you can give a verbal consent in place of written consent, this is after the researcher reads and explains a verbal version of the consent form.

During the interview, you are invited to answer the interview questions based on your personal experience or perceptions of the traditional and gender related customs and challenges in the workplace. However, you can refuse to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable and you can stop the interview at any time. Do not hesitate and feel free to ask the interviewer any question if you have any concern or inquiries.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no potential risks or disadvantages of taking part in this study although that you have a chance to refuse answering any questions that you feel uncomfortable with and stop the interview at any time.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will further the analysis of women's existing situation in the workplace and the challenges they encounter in the daily life. The research will be relevant in understanding the areas where improvements could be suggested to improve the provision of equal opportunities for women working in the public sector in Saudi Arabia. The topic is relevant, given the growth of public sector organisations.

The government has developed an agenda for improving equal opportunities for women and aims to important major changes to promote the role of women in the Saudi Arabia' vision 2030, the vision to achieve certain objectives including diversified economy and progressive society by 2030 (Saudi Vision, 2017).

Use, dissemination and storage of research data

All the information that you give will be kept confidential and use only to serve the research purposes. Quotations may be utilized as a part in data analysis and any direct quotations from the interview, that are made available by the researcher through academic publication or other academic outlets in the future, will be fully anonymised (not linked to any individual and institution) in accordance with data protections and confidentiality guidelines at the University of Leeds, and only the anonymised quotations that are published may be used by other researchers in future research. Only PhD supervisors will have access to the anonymous data after being coded for analysis purposes. No data will be shared with external parties such as translators, government authorities. This includes the Saudi Education ministry, the funder of this research project, will not have an access to the transcripts nor coded data. Also, the dean and any management members and other employees at the university that you work for or any other universities, will not have access to any form of data you provide. In addition, all the data will be stored on the university of Leeds system and saved safely by creating a secure password. Research data will be kept for a maximum of ten years after the completion of this project before being destroyed. For future publications of this study, your identity will be kept confidential and your name, nationality, job title, employer and any information that relates specifically to you as an individual, will not be used or shown anywhere and it will be anonymised. All data will be processed anonymously during all stages of this study.

What will happen to my personal information?

All your personal information that will be provided such as your name, contact details, job title, employer and job duties will be anonymised so that you cannot be recognised. The recorded conversation will be transcribed by the researcher and only the researcher will have the right to access the audio files. Once the transcript has been completed and checked for accuracy, the audio file will be deleted securely.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of this study will be submitted to the University of Leeds as the researcher's doctoral thesis, and all or part of the content of my contributed data will be used in journal publications or conference presentations. You will not be identified in any thesis, publications or presentation. Direct quotes from the interviews may be used in thesis and publications; however, the quotes will be anonymised to ensure that you cannot be identified

What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

You will be asked some questions that cover several aspects about the work experience of female at higher education based on your answer you will contribute and help the research to achieve project's objectives by exploring the societal and individual challenges at the workplace. In addition, looking for work processes and practices that might hinder women from work advancement in Saudi universities besides the way that these work processes and practises produced in the workplace. Finally, knowing what women working in higher education institutions do to overcome these challenges.

Who is organising/ funding the research?

This is a funded by Saudi Education ministry via Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau in the UK. Also, this study was approved previously by the Research Ethics Committee for the Faculties of Business in the university of Leeds (approval number: AREA 19-116).

For further information please see below the researcher's contact details.

Contact for further information

Demh Alghamdi

Leeds University Business School

Charles Thackrah Building

90 Clarendon Rd, Leeds

Email: Bndaal@leeds.ac.uk

The student's supervisors' details as following

Dr Gabriella Alberti	Dr Vera Trappmann	Professor Jennifer Tomlinson
Work and Employment Relations Leeds University Business School	Work and Employment Relations Leeds University Business School	Work and Employment Relations Leeds University Business School
+44(0)113 343 0204	+44(0)113 343 1119	+44(0)113 343 4482
g.alberti@leeds.ac.uk	V.Trappmann@leeds.ac.uk	j.tomlinson@leeds.ac.uk

Appendix 3

<p style="text-align: center;">Consent to take part in [Toward an intersectional perspective in understanding gender inequality in women's work advancement at higher education in Saudi Arabia] This is a sponsored study by the Saudi Education Ministry</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Add your initials next to the statement if you agree</p>
<p>I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/ letter dated..... explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.</p>	
<p>I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research and request that the interview recording or notes be immediately destroyed during the interview and up to a month since the interview has taken place without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.</p> <p>Please do not hastate to contact the researcher at: Demh Alghamdi E. Bndaal@leeds.ac.uk</p>	
<p>I understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed only if I consent.</p>	
<p>I agree for the data collected from me to be stored for a maximum of ten years after the completion of this project and used in relevant future research and possible publications in an anonymised form.</p>	
<p>I understand that the researcher and possibly other researchers may use my words (direct quotations from the interview) that will made available through academic</p>	

<p>publication or other academic outlets will be confidential and fully anonymised so that I cannot be identified.</p>	
<p>I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change during the project and, if necessary, afterwards.</p>	

Appendix 4

Codes

The codes generated and their rationale is as follows:

Career development opportunities: This code was used to specifically address aspects related to the enhancement of professional skills and career progression within the academic sphere. It emerged from the data to encapsulate the experiences, availability, and accessibility of training sessions, workshops, and other forms of professional development that female staff in higher education encounter. By focusing on this area, the code helped to uncover how these opportunities are presented, perceived, and used by women in academia, and the extent to which they influence career advancement. This understanding is crucial in assessing the institutional support and barriers women face in their professional growth.

Senior administrative roles vs. lower positions: This code was instrumental in highlighting the differential experiences and opportunities based on hierarchical status within the university. It allowed for a comparative analysis of how women in senior roles, such as deans or department heads, navigate their careers differently from those in junior or entry-level positions. This distinction was vital to understand systemic issues within the academic structure, such as access to resources, decision-making authority, and representation in critical roles. By differentiating experiences based on position, this code highlighted the unique ways in which career trajectories are shaped within academia.

Gendered division of labour: This code focused on the allocation of tasks and responsibilities in academia which are often influenced by gender. It highlighted the disproportionate burden of academic housekeeping - tasks like administrative duties, teaching, and committee work – which women tend to shoulder. These tasks, although vital are less valued compared to research contributions which are crucial for career progression. By using this code, the research highlights systemic issues of gender bias and inequality in the division of labour within academic institutions, affecting women's career advancement and work satisfaction.

Guardianship/wasta: The inclusion of these codes is critical to understanding the socio-cultural context impacting women's careers in Saudi academia. Guardianship refers to the legal and social structures that may limit women's autonomy, particularly in travel or decision-making. Wasta, on the other hand, captures the role of networking and influence, which can be a crucial factor in accessing opportunities within the academic and broader professional environment. These codes help to analyse the external societal and cultural factors that shape women's professional experiences, highlighting how traditional practices and informal networks can influence career trajectories and opportunities in a patriarchal and network-oriented society.

Gender biases and assumptions: This code addresses the underlying gender biases and assumptions prevalent in the academic field, particularly those impacting women's career advancement and work-related responsibilities. I used this code to identify instances where interviewees discussed biases, especially assumptions made by male colleagues or superiors about women's capabilities and preferences. This code emerged from patterns in the data where gender biases were explicitly or implicitly mentioned.

Mobility and career progression: This code captures how the ability or inability to travel – both domestically and internationally – impacts career advancement for women in academia. I chose this code to explore the dynamic interplay between cultural norms, family responsibilities, and professional growth opportunities. It was generated from recurring themes in the interview responses related to travel constraints and career development.

Family dynamics and support: This code relates to how family support, or the lack thereof, influences women's career paths in academia. The varying degrees of support and understanding from family members, as shared by participants such as Dina and Rania was vital in forming this code. By condensing these experiences, I am able to demonstrate the critical role of family in shaping women's professional journeys, highlighting both supportive and restrictive family dynamics.

Professional development challenges: This code was used to capture the specific obstacles women face in advancing their academic careers, such as limited time for research and training due to familial responsibilities. The experiences of the Sudanese assistant professor, who missed training opportunities due to childcare particularly contributed to generating this code. Condensing the experiences under this code helped to highlight a significant barrier to career progression for women in academia.

Societal expectations and gender roles: This code encompasses the cultural and societal norms which dictate women's roles both at home and in their professional lives. It was used to understand how external factors shape women's experiences in academia. This code emerged from the narratives of interviewees such as Aisha and Farah, who discussed the societal and familial pressures they faced. By grouping these experiences under one code, I could illustrate the impact of societal expectations on women's career advancement and personal life.

Dual responsibility and emotional labour: This code reflects the simultaneous demands of professional and domestic roles which women in academia face. I chose this code to capture the essence of women's experiences balancing work and family life, a theme recurrent in the narratives of interviewees such as Shayma and the 30-year-old Saudi lecturer. This code was generated through the thematic analysis of interview transcripts, where repeated references to juggling work and family responsibilities were evident. By condensing these experiences under a single code, I could highlight a common challenge across different participants, thereby illustrating the pervasive nature of this issue in your findings.