

## Women and leadership: Challenges to women empowerment in academic leadership roles in Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract:

The gender gap in leadership in Saudi Arabian higher education circles is significant, persistent, and systemic. This study empirically investigates the barriers and challenges identified as obstacles to women empowerment in leadership roles at Imam Abdulrahman University (IAU). In addition, it highlights the encouragement and support that women leaders identify as important to their empowerment. All women faculty holding leadership positions at IAU were sampled, and a total of 74 valid responses (representing 90.2%) were collected. A survey research design was used to collect the data, and respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the items using a 5-point Likert-type scale.

The results suggest that the respondents had a higher level of agreement toward the barriers and challenges related to work environment and organizational culture (mean 3.71 and 3.59; standard deviation SD 0.77 and 0.78, respectively) compared to the barriers related to their personal life which scored a neutral level of agreement ( $m = 2.66$ ;  $SD = 0.73$ ); the overall level of agreement to all the barriers and challenges was neutral ( $m = 3.42$ ;  $SD = 0.60$ ). The findings also indicate a statistically significant difference among the groups based on the respondent's years of experience ( $p < 0.05$ ); however, no significant difference was found based on the respondents' own leadership position or their supervisors' gender ( $p > 0.05$ ). Furthermore, the findings show that there is no significant difference between empowerment challenges and gender after adjusting for leadership experience and years of experience ( $p > 0.05$ ). It may be concluded that female and male leaders have a similar influence on the barriers and challenges of women empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU. Owing to the interconnectedness between the identified barriers and challenges to women empowerment, this study suggests that more concentrated and fundamental efforts are needed to achieve gender parity at IAU by narrowing and eventually eliminating these barriers. A variety of recommendations to the IAU senior leadership are presented, which include developing a center for women leadership that serves as a platform for networking and mentoring as well as offering training and development programs for current and future women leaders.

**Keywords:** academic women, barriers and challenges, higher education, leadership roles, Saudi Arabia

### Introduction

One's ability to recommend an effective solution is called into question if they have misread the problem. This is the situation regarding the issue of women empowerment in academia. In higher educational (HE) institutions, few women are at the leadership table with men, and they are much less likely to be in top academic positions (Jarboe,

2019). Since women do not hold associate professorship or full-time professorship positions at the same rate as their male peers, they continue to remain in trial positions at the top tier of the leadership structure (Johnson, 2017). Thus, the HE institutions are not benefiting from their ideas, talent, and experience, especially in the upper

boards and prestigious committees (World Economic Forum, 2020).

The numbers are stark; it is evident that men greatly outnumber women in leadership positions worldwide. Despite women's impressive gains in HE over the past 50 years, there are only a limited number of women presidents in American universities, that is, only 13%, which has remained unchanged over the last 10 years (Johnson, 2017), whereas only 30% of women hold this position and 4% hold seats of the Board of Trustees in British universities (Manfredi, Grisoni & Handley, 2014). Furthermore, in Australian universities, only 25% of titles such as chairperson are held by women, and in Canada, women are 60% less likely to hold vice-president positions and 30% less likely to be promoted from entry-level positions (Devillard et al., 2017). A similar issue can be found in Italy where only 16% of the female tenure-academic staff are full-time professors as compared to 32.6% of the male tenure-academic staff (Hill et al., 2016).

The situation is no different in Saudi HE. Today, Saudi women receive a majority of all college degrees, and a little over 50% of the students are women. They are participating in teaching positions in equal, or in some cases, a higher number relative to their male peers with 55% women as demonstrators and 58% as lecturers (Ministry of Education, 2018). Owing to the years of progress made by women in the Saudi HE workforce, we expect to see women comprise a large share of the leadership positions. However, they are underrepresented among the higher ranks of academic positions, such as associate professorship. As of 2018, women held 14% of the full-time professor positions and 28% of the associate professor positions in Saudi HE (Ministry of Education, 2018).

These strong gender inequalities among the senior academic positions limit women empowerment in formal leadership positions at the college and university level. Women occupy less than 13% of all leadership positions in Saudi universities with only one woman occupying the role of president (Alsubaie and Jones, 2017). The Saudi Arabian government has announced a national plan, known as the National Transformation Program (2016), with several indicatives, reforms, and legislation

to boost women's skills and performance and enable empowerment into leadership positions in all sectors including HE (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

Overall, the academic and popular literature on women empowerment in HE is vast and continuously growing; it investigates the challenges and barriers that women face that cause leadership gaps. These include a lack of administrative efficiency, professional exchange opportunities, and effective networks which may help secure cooperation with other institutions to gain diverse experiences (Abalkhail, 2017; Alghofaily, 2019; Alfawzan, 2017). Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that the amount and quality of leadership training available to women are not adequate to meet the demands of their roles as leaders. Women often undertake training based on self-initiative, which does not follow a strategic plan for leadership development in the organization (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Alsubaie & Jones, 2017).

There exist other elusive barriers that discourage women empowerment in top leadership positions, such as the hostile work environment, which encourages stereotypes and biases in the work environment; the exclusion of women from strategic policy and regulation making; and the absence of a strong record system on gender-disaggregated statistics held at the institutional, regional or country level (Abalkhail, 2017; Crites et al., 2015; Devillard et al., 2017; Sanchez & Lehnert, 2019). Therefore, no information is available to evaluate effective policy implementation, which implies that the progress is not being monitored or managed (Alice & Eagly, 2019)

Other personal challenges specified in the extant literature suggest that a few competent and experienced women make a conscious personal decision to not aspire for the top leadership positions as they face challenges in creating a balance between professional stress and familial responsibility (Hill et al., 2016; Bin Bakr & Alfayez, 2021; Sanchez & Lehnert, 2018; Shabbir et al., 2016). And compared with men, women's aspiration for leadership is lower since they have negative perceptions of the tradeoffs of leadership as well as their own competence; and

interestingly, women with less work experience were more likely to aspire to leadership (Sanchez & Lehnert, 2018).

The good news is that HE institutions at present, more than ever, recognize the benefit of utilizing all of their human resources, both women and men, and are willing to provide leadership roles to women (World Economic Forum, 2020; Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). They acknowledge that women and men alike bring value to the table, and with their combined efforts, they can create the strongest foundation for innovation and prosperity and can help build better competitive institutions (Bin Bakr & Ahmed, 2018; Wilson, 2009).

Over the past 10 years, empirical research has built a case for the higher empowerment of women in top management positions, thus emphasizing that women empowerment in HE can be achieved through the following means: by granting sufficient authority and access to information as well as by providing self-development and training programs, allowing their participation in setting organizational strategic goals and policy-making while identifying the means and methods for accomplishing them, and sharing the recognition of their accomplishments and success (Devillard et al., 2017; Kattan et al., 2016; Al-Ahmadi, 2011).

Numerous prior studies have also presented recommendations to improve women empowerment, but unfortunately, not much has been achieved in terms of closing the gap during the last decade, which indicates a misreading of the symptoms, challenges, or perspectives on academic women empowerment (Alice & Linda, 2019; Alsubaihi, 2016; Saleem et al., 2017).

This paper investigates the barriers and exclusive challenges which discourage women empowerment in the top leadership roles at IAU. The difficulties examined were sub-grouped into three domains: organizational cultural factors, work environment factors, and personal factors. Furthermore, this study explores the encouragement and practices that enable women to overcome these empowerment barriers and challenges.

As a senior faculty at IAU, the author has witnessed the birth of the IAU senior leadership

commitment to gender diversity during the last couple of years. It has finally moved beyond a mere vocal commitment as the first appointment of a woman vice-president and an increase in women holding deanship and vice-deanship positions has taken place. Moreover, women have started to attend prestigious boards, such as the University Board, starting from the academic year 2017.

Given that there is little research-based evidence on women leadership empowerment in Saudi HE, this paper aims to provide researchers and practitioners in various fields of study with recommendations, which may inform and guide the senior decision-makers at different levels in the educational system and in IAU, in particular, in adequately moving women into diverse leadership roles and positions. Thus, this paper sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What barriers and challenges do women identify as obstacles to their empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU?
2. Is there a significant difference in the barriers and challenges of women empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU based on the participants' demographic categories (current position, years of experience, and supervisor's gender)?
3. Does a supervisor's gender influence the barriers and challenges of women empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU based on the aforementioned demographic categories?
4. What source of encouragement and support do women leaders identify as important to their empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU?

## Methods

### Sample & Data Collection

The study participants were all female faculty members holding upper and mid-level leadership positions at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University (IAU), which is located in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. Using a list provided by the Deanship of Human Resources at

IAU during the academic year 2019–2020, the researcher identified the sample ( $n = 82$ ). A survey research design was used to collect the data. Voluntary participation, data confidentiality, and data security were all guaranteed. The overall completed and usable responses were 74, representing 90.2%. Of the respondents, only 12.2% were deans, 40.5% were assistant deans,

and 29.7% were department chairs. About 43.2% of them had direct male supervisors, 56.8% had direct female supervisors, and the majority had less than 10 years of leadership experience 64.9%. The detailed demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents ( $n=74$ )

Demographic categories	N	%
<b>Leadership Position</b>		
Dean	9	12.2%
Assistant dean	30	40.5%
Department Chair	22	29.7%
Other	13	17.6%
<b>Supervisor's Gender</b>		
Male	32	43.2%
Female	42	56.8%
<b>Years of experience</b>		
10 years or less	26	35.1%
More than 10 years	48	64.9%
Total	74	100%

### Instrument

The survey had three sections. The first section included the demographic characteristics: current leadership position (deans, vice deans, department heads), supervisor's gender, and years of experience in leadership positions. The second section used a 30-item scale that measured the participants' perception of the barriers and challenges identified as obstacles to their empowerment in securing leadership roles at IAU; it was divided into three domains: work environment (13 items), organizational culture (10 items), and personal life-related challenges (7 items). Finally, in the third section, the participants were invited to state the three most

important sources of encouragement and support they identified as important to their success and empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU through an open-ended question.

Sample questions included the following phrases: centralization of power at the top management, selection criteria for leadership posts are unclear and non-transparent, lack of career planning, women are poorly represented in top councils and committees, lack of leadership training and professional development programs, lack of confidence in females leadership abilities, a predominance of men in top leadership positions, lack of teamwork, lack of networks within HE, impact of personal and social relationships on

work progress, lack of aspiration to hold top leadership positions, fear of responsibility and accountability in case of failure, and fear of prejudice toward gender-related biases.

The survey was developed by the researcher based on previous work on empowerment challenges and work identified by Hill et al. (2016), Manfredi et al. (2014), Alfawzan (2017), Alghofaily (2019) and Alsubaihi (2016) in the English language; it was then translated into Arabic to ensure the stability and accuracy of the translation. Then, a back translation of the survey from Arabic to English was performed; recommendations from a panel of eight experts with higher degrees in educational leadership were reviewed and adjustments were made. Next, the survey was piloted on a convenience sample of 15 faculty members to examine its reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha and the Pearson Correlation for the questions were calculated using the SPSS package, and the overall values of both were strong, ranging between 0.91 and 0.88. Finally, the survey was issued via email, and the data was collected during 28 consecutive days with two reminders sent two weeks apart. The respondents were requested to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the survey items using a 5-point Likert-type scale.

## Data analysis and Results

### Data analysis

This study used quantitative analysis methods. Firstly, mean scores and standard deviations (SD) were computed for the responses to each item on the survey. For interpretation purposes, the rating was segmented into five categories: strongly agree (averaged at least 4.50), agree (averaged 3.50–4.49), neutral (averaged 2.50–3.49), disagree (averaged 1.50–2.49), and strongly disagree (averaged <1.50). Secondly, ANOVA and an independent sample *t*-test analysis were used to describe the variables. Finally, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted to study the association between gender and overall challenges. Variables were added using StataMP 16.1 (StataCorp, College Station, TX) and the significance level was set at 0.05.

### Results

Q #1 What barriers and challenges do women identify as obstacles to their empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU?

Table 2. Descriptive statistics to the barriers and challenges of women empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU (n=74)

Barriers and Challenges	Mean	SD	Level
Categories			
Work Environment	3.71	0.77	Agree
Organizational Culture	3.59	0.78	Agree
Personal	2.66	0.73	Neutral
Total	3.42	0.60	Neutral

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the barriers and challenges identified as obstacles to women empowerment in leadership roles at IAU. The results indicate that the respondents had a

higher level of agreement toward the barriers and challenges related to work environment and organizational culture with a mean of (3.71) and 3.59 and SD of (0.77) and 0.78, respectively,

compared to the barriers related to their personal life which scored a neutral level of agreement ( $m = 2.66$  and  $SD = 0.73$ ). The overall level of agreement for all the barriers and challenges was moderate ( $m = 3.42$  and  $SD = 0.60$ ).

The sampled phrases with the highest means related to “work environment barriers and challenges” included the following phrases: “lack of effective networks,” “lack of mentoring,” “lack of opportunities for external exposure,” and “poor women representation in top councils and committees on college and university level.” The phrases with the highest means related to “organizational cultural barriers and challenges” included the following: “lack of role models of strong women leaders,” “predominance of men in top management positions,” “lack of

opportunities to consolidate social relationships” and phrases with the highest ratings relating to “personal-barriers and challenges” included “lack of desire/aspiration to hold senior-leading positions,” hesitation of speaking in formal gatherings where there is no gender segregation,” and “fear of the prejudice related to gender-related biases.”

Q #2 Is there a significant difference in the barriers and challenges of women empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU based on the participants’ demographic categories (current position, years of experience, and supervisor’s gender)?

Table 3. Results of Analysis of variance and T-test for the overall perception of barriers and challenges based on demographic-related variables (n=74).

Demographic Categories	N	Mean	SD	Level	f-value/ t-value	P-value
Leadership position						
Dean	9	3.04	0.76	Neutral	1.67	0.18
Assistant dean	30	3.54	0.56	Neutral		
Department chair	22	3.44	0.64	Neutral		
Other	13	3.39	0.56	Neutral		
Years of Experience						
> 10 years	26	3.19	0.62	Neutral	2.55	0.013*
10 years or less	48	3.55	0.55	Neutral		
Supervisor’s Gender						
Male	32	3.49	0.55	Neutral	0.80	0.424
Female	42	3.37	0.63	Neutral		

Note: \* $p > .05$ ) significant

Statistical data in table 3 indicates that the ANOVA test of the results of the variance analysis

did not show any statistically significant difference in the barriers and challenges identified

as obstacles to women empowerment in securing leadership roles at IAU which can be attributed to the respondents' leadership position ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Furthermore, the independent sample *t*-test results demonstrate that there was no statistically significant difference among the groups based on their supervisor's gender ( $p > 0.05$ ); however, there was a significant difference in these barriers and challenges based on the respondents' years of experience ( $p < 0.05$ ). Evidently, it may be stated that women with fewer years of experience identify with the barriers and challenges to their empowerment at a higher level compared to the senior faculty.

In contrast, most respondents witnessed a similar neutral level of agreement to the barriers and challenges regardless of their own leadership position and their supervisors' gender, which implies that female and male leaders have the same effect on the barriers and challenges faced by the other female leaders at IAU.

Q #3. Does a supervisor's gender influence the barriers and challenges of women empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU based on the aforementioned demographic categories?

Table 4. Results of Analysis of variance and independent t-test for barriers and challenges of women empowerment by supervisors' gender based on demographic-related variables (n=74)

Demographic Categories	N	Mean	SD	Level	f-value/ t-value	P-value
<b>Males</b>						
Leadership position						
Dean	6	2.95	0.72	Neutral	4.40	0.01*
Assistant dean	15	3.66	0.44	Neutral		
Department chair	2	4.12	0.40	Neutral		
Other	9	3.42	0.33	Neutral		
Years of Experience						
> 10 years	11	3.64	0.09	Neutral	2.30	0.03*
10 years or less	21	3.20	0.21	Neutral		
<b>Female</b>						
Leadership position						
Dean	3	3.23	0.98	Neutral	0.09	0.97
Assistant dean	15	3.42	0.50	Neutral		
Department chair	20	3.37	0.68	Neutral		
Other	4	3.32	0.82	Neutral		
Years of Experience						
> 10 years	15	3.48	0.64	Neutral	1.45	0.15

10 years or less	27	3.19	0.60	Neutral		
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Note: \* $p > .05$ ) significant

Table 5: Results of the linear regression analysis between the association of empowerment challenges and gender adjusting for leadership position and years of experience

Barriers and challenges	Beta-Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval	p-value
Gender (Reference Male)	-0.17	-0.048, 0.14	0.278

Table 4 demonstrates that among respondents with male supervisors, there was a statistical significant difference between the barriers and challenges and the demographic categories (leadership position, number of year of experience) ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, the case is different among respondents with female supervisors; there was no statistical significant difference between the barriers and challenges and the demographic categories (leadership position, number of year of experience), ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Table 5 demonstrates the results of the multivariate linear regression analysis between the association of overall empowerment challenges and the supervisor's gender after adjusting for leadership position and years of experience. The findings show that there is no significant difference between empowerment challenges and gender after adjusting for leadership experience and years of experience ( $p > 0.05$ ).

It may be concluded that all respondents face similar barriers and challenges regardless of their supervisors' gender; which may imply that female and male supervisors have a similar effect on the empowerment challenges faced by women leaders at IAU.

Q# 4 What source of encouragement and support do women leaders identify as important to their empowerment in attaining leadership roles at IAU?

Out of the (74) respondents who completed the online survey, only (52, representing 70.3%) have

responded to this open-ended question. The statements which summarized the different types of encouragement and support practices identified as important to women empowerment in leadership roles at IAU have been grouped as follows:

- **Training and development program (32):** Around (61.5%) of those women emphasized the importance of providing well-structured formal training and high-quality professional development programs; such statements included the following: "provide mandatory training to all faculty regarding the stereotypes and biases on women leadership," "deanship of continuous learning must have the financial support in order to budget high-quality training programs," "female participation in local and global conferences must be supported by the upper management."

- **Networking opportunities (13):** A total of (25%) of the women expressed the need to provide opportunities for external exposure in HE at the local, regional, and global levels; their responses included the following suggestions: provide opportunities to be nominated to different prestigious committees, develop women leadership networks platforms, and actively nominate women to upper leadership roles. One respondent suggested having many successful role models being of critical importance, both to work with and lean on rather than having some influential individuals appointed to the top positions.



**- Policies and practices (41):** Overall, (78.8%) of the respondents agreed that the policies governing IAU and the practices of its executive leadership team (i.e., president, vice president, board of trustees, deans) must reflect its support for women empowerment; their responses included "... they should become role models for empowering women in securing leadership roles ... ." One respondent suggested that there should be a "concrete and achievable plan to close the gender gap in leadership positions within a specific timeframe," and "it should be one of the IAU's strategic goals... ." Other suggestions in this matter included "employing formal and informal policies and practices at different managerial levels at the university which support decentralization in decision making," "IAU must encourage women to share the responsibilities of challenging tasks and accountability," "actively allowing a higher involvement of women in policy-making," and "implementing a transparent nomination program for leadership positions."

## Discussion

Empowering women in HE leadership is an issue that has captured the attention of innumerable scholars and researchers and is considered to be a significant and persistent problem. They are trying to analyze why women are being denied empowerment in top leadership opportunities at various points in their career paths. Although there has been a significant increase in women's representation in various leadership roles compared to the beginning of the last decade, gender inequality in senior academic positions, such as associate professorship and professorship, is linked to gender inequality in senior leadership positions, such as presidency and vice-presidency. In HE, the former is not possible without the latter, and to progress in the latter, HE institutions must take initiatives to overcome the challenges and barriers against women, thereby empowering them in achieving upper leadership positions (Hill et al., 2016; Devillard et al., 2017; Johnson, 2017).

This study empirically investigated these barriers and challenges which were categorized under three domains: organizational culture, work environment, and personal/ individual factors as

perceived by the academic women leaders at IAU. The findings indicated an overall neutral level of agreement on the barriers and challenges identified in the study with a mean of (4.42); respondents were feeling the effect of empowerment challenges related to the work environment and organizational culture at a higher level in comparison to the empowerment challenges related to personal factors with means (3.71, 3.59, 2.99) respectively. This may imply that the women faculty are willing and able to overcome their personal empowerment challenges relatively more than the other challenges.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that regardless of the respondents' own leadership position and their supervisors' gender, they all felt the barriers and challenges at a similar rate. The findings also show that there is no significant difference between empowerment challenges and gender after adjusting for leadership experience and years of experience ( $p > 0.05$ ). This enables us to comfortably reaffirm that female and male leaders are, consciously or unconsciously, are playing a similar role in the precedence of these barriers and challenges as obstacles to women attainment to leadership roles at IAU.

Respondents identified the top prevailing challenges to women empowerment related to the work environment to be a "lack of effective networks" and a "lack of mentoring." Other research has identified access to influential networks as vital for ascending through the ranks of leadership and that the current appointment of leaders is often a political process requiring lobbying which often works against women who are excluded from influential networks and coalitions because of their gender (Hill et al., 2016; Al-Shamrani, 2015; Morley & Crossouard, 2015). According to Hewlette et al. (2010), networking with influential leaders can increase one's social capital, which can be as important for career advancement as job performance. For instance, sponsors and mentors may actively seek out future employment opportunities, co-author publications, provide vital contacts, and share meeting opportunities. Since women are typically perceived to have strong communication skills, it would be reasonable to expect them to succeed at networking, but because they are overburdened,

women lack the leisure to engage in the necessary social networking for their career progress (Hill et al., 2016).

As for the barriers and challenges related to the organizational culture, the respondents have identified a “lack of women role models” as the most challenging obstacle to leadership empowerment. The Saudi universities have had a masculine organizational culture with 86% of the upper-level leadership positions being held by men (Bin Bakr & Alfayez, 2021; Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). Owing to the fact that there are few older, more experienced women role models in Saudi HE, women leaders are being deprived of the opportunity to learn by example through mentorship and coaching. A study by Alghofaili (2019) found women in Saudi universities to be separated from peer groups while Al-ahmadi’s (2011) findings emphasized the need for academic women to be supported and inspired by role models who began at lower levels and rose over time to share their experiences, obstacles, and triumphs.

Some Saudi HE institutions have launched various initiatives to share the success stories behind the rise of successful women, thereby allowing an exchange of their struggles and challenges. For instance, Prince Nora Bint Abdulrahman University has launched the National Platform for Women Leaders (qiyadiyat), which contains a database of Saudi women leaders in the public and private sectors. It aims to improve networking among women leaders, information exchange, and professional support and encouragement, and increase visibility among the different networks (Alfawzan, 2017).

Another significant empowerment challenge revealed in this study is related to gender stereotyping. Hence, statements with the highest number of responses included the following: “fear of the prejudice related to gender-related biases,” “hesitation of speaking in formal gatherings where there is no gender segregation,” “lack of desire/aspiration to hold upper-leading position,” “preference for men holding leading position,” and “fear of the responsibilities and accountability in case of failure.” Even though personal life-related barriers scored the least in this study, the responses may reflect a lack of awareness of

severe and serious stereotypes and unconscious biases among the respondents themselves.

These findings are expected since Saudi society may be described as masculine and one where feminine leadership traits may not be highly prized. Al-Shamrani (2015) pointed out in his study that when women lead and wield authority outside of their feminine ideals and leadership style, they are confronted with a lack of support and criticism for violating gender stereotypes. This is similar to the other research findings (Alfawzan, 2017; Al-Mansoori, 2019; Kattan et, 2016) which indicate that great leadership is perceived as a masculine trait and with male stereotypes. Therefore, women leaders risk appearing too feminine, that is, too emotional and lacking assertiveness or not feminine enough and lacking empathy.

As stereotypes and biases affect how we view each other as well as ourselves, we disregard opportunities and make poor decisions regarding women empowerment in leadership positions. A study discovered that people keep their stereotyped ideas to themselves even when their real experience contradicts the stereotype (Crites et al., 2015). Thus, when it comes to self-evaluation, some women fall short; they tend to underestimate and undervalue their professional talents and successes (Schun et al., 2014).

A further empowerment challenge identified in this study was in relation to balancing work and family responsibilities, which supports other research concluding that significant family duties or demands may hinder women’s abilities to develop professional networks or mingle with colleagues outside of work given that networking frequently occurs during traditionally “male” social activities (Hill et al., 2016). In Saudi culture, it is not quite acceptable for women to socialize with men outside of the work setting; therefore, they miss this networking opportunity. Moreover, from the author’s personal career experience in HE, women colleagues choose to interrupt their careers to handle work-family trade-offs. For instance, maternity and other child-bearing leaves are fairly common among the women faculty.

In contrast, it seems as if the respondents have a good insight in regard to what is needed to encourage and support their empowerment in obtaining leadership roles at IAU with a high response rate toward the last section of the survey (70.30%). The participants articulated a variety of proactive and ambitious responses suggesting that more meaningful initiatives should be developed for the training and development programs currently offered to women at IAU, specifically the programs addressed to reducing gender bias and stereotyping of women in leadership.

The majority of the respondents to this question (78.8%) considered IAU top leaders' commitment and support to women empowerment to be the backbone of this combat. Thus, providing recommendations to the IAU leaders at all levels, undertaking clear support actions, advocating gender equity policies that support a truly inclusive work environment, and spreading awareness of the unconscious bias are the keys to overcoming the different interconnected barriers and challenges mentioned above.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the leadership gender gap in Saudi HE is considerable, continual, and systemic. This study contributes to the extant literature by providing an empirical examination of the levels of barriers and challenges identified as obstacles to women empowerment in leadership roles at IAU.

The findings suggest that more concentrated and fundamental efforts are needed to achieve gender parity at IAU to narrow down and eventually eliminate the gap. Furthermore, they indicate that the women faculty at IAU is willing to assume leadership roles and the responsibilities that come with them and is eager to be empowered. Most importantly, this study shows that the respondents perceived a similar level of barriers and challenges regardless of their supervisors' gender, which implies that overcoming the empowerment barriers and challenges should be the goal for all faculty holding varied leadership positions at different levels in IAU.

Owing to the interconnectedness between the empowerment barriers and challenges identified by the respondents in this study, IAU upper leadership needs to be committed to a holistic change and develop a variety of tactics and effective actions simultaneously, such as the following:

1. Set targets for women's representation in IAU executive leadership committees, and thus, hold leaders accountable for fostering gender diversity and reward them for it.
2. Implement a transparent recruitment and selection program for leadership based on quality rather than equality, which includes a gender performance tracking system with measurable criteria, in addition to sharing results and celebrating successes.
3. Develop a center for women leadership and grant it the support needed to provide professional quality training and development programs to enhance current and future women leaders' skills and competencies, and encourage it to serve as a platform for networking, mentoring, and sharing of success stories among women in HE at the local and regional level.
4. Encourage systems that promote and value different leadership styles, thereby making IAU a truly inclusive environment. Thus, providing formal training programs that raise awareness of the unconscious stereotypes and biases in the workplace would be an effective measure against these biases.
5. Set policies to create a more flexible workplace by allowing women to move in and out of the workforce to balance careers with child-bearing and family responsibilities, thereby overcoming certain personal and social challenges.

## Limitations

This study has few limitations. The first limitation is the sample size, only women faculty with leadership positions at IAU participated in this study; therefore, future studies could be conducted with a bigger sample representing women affiliated with different universities from

all regions in Saudi Arabia. Another limitation is the single qualitative method research design used, thus the study may be subject to common-method bias. The author attempted to minimize the potential of this bias, by encouraging voluntary participation and assuring confidentiality; it is recommended to use a mixed-method research which may include observations and interviews in order to overcome this possible biases in future related studies. The third limitation is related to the results of this study, which are highly contextual since Saudi Arabia is a highly masculine culture, participants may have some form of gender bias towards the barriers and challenges. Finally, it is suggested that additional longitudinal studies must be conducted to learn how and why if changes took place regarding the empowerment barriers and challenges.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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