

Chapter 19

Expert Commentary on New Opportunities and Challenges for Women Within Saudi Distance Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Access to post-secondary education is an essential condition for advancing women's leadership opportunities. This chapter provides an expert commentary on how distance education in Saudi Arabia contributes to the advancement of female leadership opportunities by providing women greater access to education and new opportunities for leadership roles. However, despite the new opportunities that distance education offers to Saudi women, there are pervasive challenges that hinder them from acquiring leadership roles in education. The expert commentary draws on professional experience and research to provide insight into the advantages and disadvantages of distance education to prepare Saudi women to be leaders in higher education. It also offers recommendations on how to better leverage distance education experience for female students and instructors by applying the rules of netiquette in Saudi online learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

I believe the future of Saudi higher education, and especially the successful implementation of e-learning, will be driven by women faculty, despite the difficulties they face. The women faculty I worked with showed great determination and a commitment to change which was not always present with the male faculty. (Bates, 2009)

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This chapter assumes that a holistic picture of women in leadership requires a systemic understanding of women in leadership, as well as the underlying drivers that shape it. One key driver that this chapter focuses on is Distance Education and the greater access to learning and opportunities for future leadership roles it provides to women in Saudi Arabia. Tony Bates, a Canadian consultant who runs many e-learning workshops and provides e-learning training across Saudi Arabia, was one of the first international experts to recognize the potential of e-learning to leverage leadership opportunities for women within Saudi society. Indeed, leadership opportunities are expanding, as Hanan Al-Ahmadi observes that “Saudi women are slowly but definitely assuming high positions that include deputy minister, university president, Shura Council consultants, board members of Chambers of commerce and many other new and exciting positions in both the public and private sectors” (2011, p. 150). Within the education sector, the highest leadership position ever held by a Saudi woman is deputy minister of education, first held by Norah al Faiz in 2009 (House, 2012).

Gender equality in terms of women’s leadership not unique to Saudi Arabia; rather, it is a global concern. However, despite strides in recent years, as Carli and Eagly (2017) note, “Gender equality remains a distant goal, with men currently possessing considerably more power and authority than women in organizations and governments. Patriarchy, although weakened, still prevails” (245). For example, academic women tend to occupy lower level positions worldwide (Airini et al., 2011), while men still hold more powerful positions within Higher Education as well as in other areas (David, 2017). This issue was explored by Davidson and Burke (2004), who invited authors from twenty-one countries, including both developed and developing countries, to discuss the status of women in management in each of their countries in general topics such as women in education and their country’s legislation supporting women’s advancement. The main finding was that women were not holding senior management positions at a comparable rate with their male counterparts (Davidson & Burke, 2004). Seven years later, Davidson and Burke (2011) decided to update their first book and requested some of the authors who participated previously in that book to update their chapters in presenting the current status of women at management and expressing the changes that has occurred within the previous six or seven years. Additionally, they invited new authors to represent new countries and cultures. The main finding was that in general women have made advancements at lower-management positions; however, they are still marginalized within senior management positions (Davidson & Burke, 2011).

Gender equality is a particularly complex challenge to women’s leadership in Arabic societies where culturally-entrenched gender roles create formidable barriers for women seeking leadership roles in society. Research has indicated that the unique Arab culture constitute a different set of challenges for women “(Hodges, 2017). Arab societies are still considered to be highly masculine with significant gender-role variances (Omair, 2008). There are a variety of reasons why Saudi women have received unequal opportunities compared to Saudi men within traditional Saudi society, including social, economic, and cultural aspects (Saleh & Luppigini, 2017). Family obligations, geography, limited female mobility, gender segregation, and cultural norms create Higher Education access challenges for Saudi women

However, within contemporary Saudi society, one major reason for optimism concerning leadership opportunities for women stems from the advancement of information communication technologies (ICT’s) and the rise of online social networks. The importance of ICT’s to women’s leadership is particularly salient in countries like Saudi Arabia where women have historically experienced restricted mobility compared to male family members who have power and authority over female family members (Luppigini & Saleh, 2017). In a recent survey research study completed by 248 divorced Saudi women, Luppigini

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