Women's Educational Leadership and Career Readiness
New Perspectives and Innovative Tools

Rania Sawalhi, Ghaith Hawari and Rneem Alhawari

This study presents a unique perspective on career readiness and educational leadership in Saudi Arabia, a topic that has been largely unexplored. The research is distinct in its departure from the predominantly Western theories and approaches that have been applied in existing studies. Instead, it adopts a mixed-methods approach to share the perspectives of female undergraduate students on women's educational leadership in Saudi Arabia. The study also introduces the model developed by Arar and his colleagues which demonstrates how women lead from where they stand through formal and informal leadership practices. Additionally, the research sheds light on career guidance tools and programs that aid women in identifying their aptitudes and defining their various roles, thereby showcasing the impact of women's career readiness programs in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Women educational leadership, Arab, Career readiness, educational leadership.

Rania Sawalhi is a Jordanian educational leader and researcher. She brings a diverse perspective to her work across K-12, higher education, and informal learning. Her focus is on fostering effective educational leadership through innovative approaches.

Ghiath Hawari is a strategy and leadership consultant. A certified trainer in several international educational, leadership and innovation institutions. Co-owner and co-manager of Horizons Learning for Training and Education Solutions, UK; Qudra Strategy for Social Innovation Solutions, Bahrain; and SABR Consulting for Analytics and Strategy in Turkey and Bahrain.

Rneem Alhawari is a master's student in clinical psychology with a strong interest in psychological research, particularly in mental health, therapeutic interventions, and women's studies. With a background in public relations, she integrates her expertise in communication to enhance awareness and engagement in psychology. Her research interests include exploring the relationship between career readiness and mental health, with a focus on its impact on well-being and professional development

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INTRODUCTION

There is an increased interest in exploring gender-based leadership practices. However, these studies follow Western theories and approaches (Arar et al., 2023). While gender-based discrimination is a universal phenomenon and remains a global challenge in the 21st century (Weiner & Higgins, 2023), there is a need to examine gender-based leadership practices in different contexts and explore factors like religion and culture.

Researchers indicate that women's access to leadership is constrained due to social systems. Scholars theorize that men seek status while women aim for successful relationships (Fuller, 2015; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Furthermore, as Blackmore (1999, p. 29) elucidated, men strive to reinforce dominance in management: "The values, ideologies, and structures associated with dominant theories of administration and associated cultural practices favor certain images of masculinity".

In collaboration with Arar, Blik Hourani, Hollweck, and Brion, Sawalhi conducted in-depth interviews with over 40 women and co-authored a recent book (2023) that focused on women from underrepresented countries. Their findings showed that "Women practice leadership and influence in their homes and families, work, and communities." Building on this insight, our study takes a similar approach, highlighting the multifaceted roles of women in various spheres of life. We also recognize that women's identity formation is a dynamic process, shaped by personal values and beliefs and influenced by gender, racial, and class identities that reflect their current context (Ranjitha & Unnithan, 2018). Al-Lamky 2007) indicates in her study that empowering women in Arab countries, as in any other country, requires policies and human resources programs that support this aim. Discussing women's leadership in the context of Arab countries brings to light the numerous challenges women face, including those stemming from conflict zones and political, economic, and social obstacles (Arar et al., 2023; Sellami et al., 2022). This study explores localized and culturally relevant tools and programs innovatively designed to empower women and address their specific needs away from borrowing policies and programs from the West.

This study investigates a women's leadership preparation program for undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia using the design thinking approach, following the model proposed by Arar et al., (2023). The model emphasizes self-empowerment, role modeling, mentoring, and ecological

leadership and is tailored to underrepresented countries such as Saudi Arabia. Design thinking facilitates self-exploration and empowerment and aligns well with the previous model. In 2017, we worked with our colleagues working in SABR[1] to conduct a mixed methods study to identify the needs of Saudi female undergraduate students in terms of developing their competencies and providing career guidance. Based on the study's results, a framework was developed that includes five competencies: communication, critical thinking, social and religious responsibilities, career readiness, and personal responsibility. Using the design thinking approach, the team created a training program, which drew in more than 1,000 participants. This study aims to explore the impact of the soft fortune program on participants' leadership skills. To what extent can design thinking be used in career guidance programs? The study's results will encourage international readers and researchers to revisit their methodologies to ensure localizing and decolonizing educational practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers suggest different career development and counseling theories (see Super, 1957; Holland, 1973; Belenky et al., 1986; Friedan, 1963; Gilligan, 1982; Rogers, 1961). However, these theories were largely grounded in men's experiences and influenced by employability policies shaped around male-centered practices. In contrast, voices like Berger (2023), in her book *Work Like a Mother*, have introduced models designed to support women in their career development and well-being journeys. As Frankl (1984, p. 131) stated: "Everyone has his specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is unique, as is his specific opportunity." We believe every human needs to identify their abilities, attributes, and strengths. Therefore, self-exploration greatly influences identity formation and includes self-awareness and self-assessment (Franks et al., 2012; McDonald & Asher, 2018). In addition, we believe that Guajardo and colleagues' model (2016), which involves relationships, assists, stories, place, politics, and action (RASPPA), is fundamental in clarifying men's and women's roles in a community learning exchange (CLE), as primary stories anchor the dynamics for change and enhancement. "CLE converse a mosaic of groups and individuals to bring to surface community issues and engage in the stimulation and mobilizations of actions and collective change . . . at the core, stories 'must inspire, motivate, and move citizens to act toward the public good" (p. 35).

It is important to note that several studies have considered work readiness in Arab countries. For example, Frenech et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive examination of the work readiness of female Emirati graduating students. They utilized the well-established four-factor work readiness model by Caballero et al. (2011), which includes personal work characteristics, work competence, organizational acumen, and social intelligence. Their findings revealed that graduating students are less prepared for personal development, confidence, and stress management (personal work characteristics). However, our study emphasizes the distinction between work and career readiness, as career readiness encompasses all activities and practices in life, not just formal positions.

We also emphasize Arar and colleagues' (2023) description of the need to share stories as part of a women's leadership development model, as women may feel isolated or believe their achievements are below expectations. Sharing stories helps women to recognize that women leaders have different traits and are individualized according to each context, which also helps them mentor other women in their own contexts. Women's leadership traits might be connected to being creative and ambitious. Some women's leadership styles have been identified by researchers, such as the "horizontal leadership style," where they tend to share leadership (Arar et al., 2013). In addition, Earley and Weindling (2004) stated that women might be interactive, spiritual, and nurturing. Scholars such as Naidoo and Perumal (2014) suggested that women's leadership styles can vary according to circumstances.

Similarly, researchers encourage "womenpreneurship" (Arar et al., 2023). Earlier this century, entrepreneurship programs proliferated due to the market needs and the focus on enhancing and promoting entrepreneurial skills and attitudes, especially for secondary and undergraduate students. Despite the increase in such programs, international knowledge about the impact of these programs remains thin. Entrepreneurial skills include a growth mindset and the ability to increase motivation and initiative (Siba, 2019). In addition, they focus on instilling aspirations, providing examples of successful initiatives, and outlining job opportunities.

While there is a need to develop leadership skills among women in Arab countries due to the challenges and cultural roadblocks they face, researchers must recognize and respect Arab women's unique cultural backgrounds and provide them with tools and opportunities to thrive in a globalized world. Sawalhi et al. (2017) explored the needs of Saudi female undergraduate students. They identified five main competencies to develop

their leadership competencies: communication, critical thinking, career readiness, social and religious responsibility, and personal responsibility. Although these competencies are common among 21st-century skills and other studies, their findings showed unique subthemes for Saudi students, such as communicating with male siblings and instructors. In addition, their results showed that students are interested in volunteering and leading community working groups. However, they could not identify their own strengths and available opportunities and resources that fit with Saudi culture. Hawari's team established a professional development program to empower female undergraduate students and develop their leadership competencies. The program was given the Innovation Award in 2019 by ICSEI/JPCC[2] based on its design thinking approach. This program has been developed and implemented in other countries, targeting Arab graduates and working women.

Design thinking studies have experienced increased interest and growth since the middle of the last century, and scholars are following this approach in sectors such as technology, business, and education. In addition, career guidance and development scholars are creating tools based on design thinking that help participants to think as designers: being optimistic, empathetic, and open to testing new ideas and collaborating. Design thinking is an accelerated problem-solving process to develop innovative, feasible, and desirable solutions with a user-centered approach that includes the following main steps: identify the challenge, understand the user/empathize, generate ideas, and test the solution.

This study follows the design thinking approach and the model developed by Arar et al. (2023). This includes self-empowerment, role modeling, mentoring (leading others and capacity building), and ecological leadership (leading communities and promoting sustainability), to analyze the results of this study, as they have been tested in Arab countries and recognize the need for sensitivity regarding the Saudi Arabian context.

THE SAUDI ARABIAN CONTEXT

During this past decade, Saudi Arabia has experienced significant transformation, particularly regarding women's leadership development and opportunities. Historically, Saudi Arabia has maintained a conservative societal structure with strict gender segregation and limited opportunities for women in leadership positions. However, following Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision, there has been a notable shift toward empowering

women in various spheres, such as allowing them to drive and participate in different workforce sectors as well as a comprehensive plan to diversify the economy and modernize society. Women are also more involved in leadership roles. Government- and nongovernment-led programs provide women with opportunities for education, training, and mentorship, which allows them to pursue leadership positions. Despite these advancements, challenges remain, including cultural norms and gender biases.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, the researchers and their team designed a program to empower female undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia. The program design and development included several phases: conducting a mixed-methods study, developing a competency framework, creating content, and implementing a "train the trainers" approach to empower the trainers. This program was named "Soft Fortune" (*al-thurwa al-naʿima*).

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to collect data from undergraduate female students who participated in the Soft Fortune training program. Since its inception in 2019, more than 1,000 students from different cities, such as Jeddah and Dammam in Saudi Arabia, have participated. The researchers asked the project team to distribute online surveys and explain the program's impact, documenting the changes observed in participants since joining the program. The program took place over three days, six hours per day, and was conducted by female Saudi trainers following the trainers' model. The first researcher trained a group of trainers who then trained others. The participants attended sessions every week for four hours and worked on the tasks using the resources designed by a team that collaborated with the researchers.

The survey was shared online with all participants, resulting in 250 female respondents who completed both quantitative forms and qualitative open-ended questions, which were subsequently coded for analysis. The research questions focused on the five competencies introduced in the program and examined how participants acquired knowledge and applied skills in their daily lives. Specifically, the survey asked participants to understand how these competencies contributed to participants' career readiness and ability to evaluate resources. Importantly, participants were not just respondents but active contributors. They were encouraged to share stories and comments detailing the program's impact on other transformative practices they observed, thereby playing a crucial role in

shaping the study's findings. Furthermore, the study included interviews with seven instructors involved in program delivery. These interviews provided valuable insights into the instructors' perspectives on the program's effectiveness and their observations regarding participants' engagements and contributions.

RESULTS

This study aimed to answer the following questions: What is the impact of the Soft Fortune program on participants' leadership skills? To what extent can design thinking be used in career guidance programs? The innovative tools were designed to cover each competency, including the forms, templates and online platform. These were well-designed kits to meet the participants' needs. These resources are available in Arabic via the program's website (https://www.tarwah.com/). Results showed that 62% of participants indicated that they needed such a program, 88% stated that the program was suitable for their religious and cultural values, 92% of participants reflected that their communication skills improved, 65% of the participants were able to clarify their career path for the first time in their life. The same percentage reflected their willingness to contribute and work with other group members on their social projects, and 19% had a clear career path in advance.

SELF-EMPOWERMENT

One of the trainers indicated that a lack of confidence inevitably characterized their interaction at the beginning, due to what participants realized about themselves and they showed satisfaction with this self-discovery. Another trainer indicated that she was initially afraid that the women would grow bored due to the seriousness of the topic. However, she supervised them to ensure their feelings of belonging and commitment. All the trainers saw an urgent need for this program at a time when many life events distract women from their roles in life, and appreciated the importance of the program at this early stage in their lives. Participants also began to live with more awareness of living their lives with a fuller knowledge of their decisions and directions. They also learned to draw up her personal and professional. As one of the trainers described, the program gives the young women many years of experience as this was the program that ignited the first spark for change through an internal decision based on their own motivations.

On a personal level, 47% of the women were able to define their goals for the first time, while 67% created a personal action plan to achieve their goals. The trainers considered the program to be a turning point in the women's personalities, especially when they understood the available resources, such as writing a CV, which they used to focus on their personal resources and strengths. At the personal work plan level, the program reflected on managing women's resources and time. One of the trainers stated that the women began reviewing their work to focus only on what serves their goals and have a greater awareness of the distractions that they could exclude. Many activities occupy a woman's time and do not contribute to achieving their personal goals. Participants were better able to select activities that aligned with their goals and purpose. One such activity may be attending a course. One of the examples mentioned by the trainers is project management, which the young women may find beneficial.

The trainers indicated that one of the women had decided to complete her studies due to the program even though she had stopped. She decided to begin her project and gave up waiting for a stable job. Another woman decided to change her path of study. As one participant put it, "I have benefited greatly and more than you expected. I know my strongest personality and the following features that distinguish me. I want to choose a profession that suits my personality and orientation. I can solve problems innovatively, even if I create my own identity" (NG).

MENTORING

Among the trainees, 48% contributed to social or voluntary activities as a result of the skills, knowledge, and motivation they learned in the program. 38% have not yet contributed and are seriously considering supporting others in the community. Only 2% said they were not willing to participate in the contribution. All participants indicated they would love to share what they have learned, but the program did not include this as part of the design or tasks. One of the participants shared how she relaunched her project even after she stopped it due to financial issues. Because the program gave her tools to reevaluate resources, she utilized Instagram to promote and sell her products without renting a commercial space. Her project is still operating successfully and has excellent financial returns. She mentioned that she would love to mentor others and share resources on how she developed her project. However, this was not part of the program.

THINK AS A DESIGNER

As the design thinking approach enhances self-confidence and promotes creativity, participants were more willing to try and test new ideas and solutions and collaborate with others.

Interestingly, the three-day program helped the students achieve their goals and begin thinking as designers. The design thinking approach and customized tools helped them identify their personal values and religious beliefs, which helped them design their career plans based on a faith-based approach. The transformation of skills into daily behaviors and habits ensures the sustainability of skills for an extended period. 92% of the women confirmed that their daily habits changed in varying degrees due to the program, including 27% who changed their daily habits significantly and in the long term. Therefore, we can conclude that the program's impact is not limited to changing women's lives for the better, but has additional impacts. The program has a sustainable impact over many years because it provides self-supporting tools. According to one of the trainers, the women try to adhere to the new habits and changes in their lives, believing that the changes will continue. One of the participants was experiencing a family

Figure 1. Adapted from Sawalhi et al., 2020

problem that required her to stop her studies. As a result of the program, she resumed her studies at King Abdulaziz University. She was also able to present a personal project of high quality related to writing, drawing, and colorful children's stories.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study have shown the necessity for customized career guidance programs tailored to the challenges faced by female students in Saudi Arabia. Traditional career development theories, such as those proposed by Super (1975), Holland (1973), Belenky et al. (1986), Friedan (1963), Gilligan (1982), and Rogers (1961), often focus on men's experiences and employability policies, highlighting a gap in addressing women's specific needs.

The selected models shed light on the complexities of women's needs and methods for addressing different roles while embracing motherhood and family requirements. This is consistent with previous studies, such as Frankl's (1984) assertion that each person has a unique mission in life, which underscores the importance of self-exploration in identity formation. The results showed how the program allowed participants to self-assess and raised self-awareness about even basic skills such as writing CVs, which many universities and secondary schools provide training for as part of employability skills. Franks et al. (2012) and McDonald & Asher (2018) support this point, highlighting the role of self-awareness and self-assessment in career development. However, most participants had no guidance before the program, and the design-based tools helped them create their own plans and test their personal plans and projects.

Mentoring was the second theme mentioned in the analysis, and it was not part of the program. However, participants showed a willingness to support other women, which is consistent with Arar and others' findings (2023). The rise of "womenpreneurship" initiatives (Arar et al., 2023; Siba, 2019) highlights the importance of entrepreneurial skills, which the Soft Fortune program supports by fostering a growth mindset and innovative thinking. Unfortunately, neither method's results included storytelling and ecological leadership. That might be due to the program's design and modules, which could be developed and added to future versions. Incorporating Guajardo et al.'s (2016) RASPPA model—relationships, assists, stories, place, politics, and action—could enhance the program by connecting personal narratives and cultivating collective action and change.

Interestingly, although the program was only 18 hours long, the participants were able to show traits related to thinking as designers. In addition, participants were able to show how they gained leadership traits that transformed into habits, as described by the instructors. Studies that can be compared to design thinking and career guidance in Arab countries are few in number, and this study paves the way for researchers and practitioners to explore this domain in greater depth using different methods. Future research should explore the program's long-term impact, scalability, and adaptability to different cultural contexts. Additionally, structured mentoring components are needed. Furthermore, this program could be explored as a case study to help researchers design culture-based programs that meet women's unique needs.

The Soft Fortune program exemplifies the critical role of culturally sensitive and gender-specific career guidance interventions in empowering women. By reflecting on established theories with innovative approaches, this program guides future initiatives to foster women's leadership and career development in the Arab world and beyond.

This study invites a new wave of research—one that not only centers women but listens closely to their voices and honors the complexity of their social and cultural contexts. Rather than applying generalized solutions, future studies should embrace innovative, interdisciplinary approaches that are co-designed with women and rooted in their lived realities. This shift can lead to more meaningful, sustainable pathways for leadership and career development that truly reflect the diverse aspirations and challenges of women across the Arab world and beyond.

Notes

1. A company specializes in developing innovative solutions https://sabr-sp.com/

2. ICSEI/JPCC stands for International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement / Journal of Professional Capital and Community

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