

# Breaking Barriers: Academic Women's Leadership in Saudi Universities under Vision 2030

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## Abstract

*Saudi 's Vision 2030 has catalyzed significant social and economic transformations, particularly in promoting gender inclusion and women's leadership in various sectors, including academia. Despite these advancements, female academics in Saudi universities continue to face institutional, cultural, and systemic barriers that limit their leadership opportunities. This study explores the challenges and enablers affecting academic women's leadership within Saudi universities, focusing on the impact of cultural norms, institutional policies, and government initiatives. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 female academics to gain insights into their leadership experiences, aspirations, and obstacles. The findings highlight persistent gender disparities, structural barriers, and the role of Vision 2030 in fostering change. While governmental and institutional reforms have facilitated progress, additional efforts are needed to ensure equitable leadership opportunities for women in academia.*

**Keywords:** *Academic Women, Leadership, Saudi Universities, Vision 2030, Gender Equality, Institutional Barriers, Cultural Norms, Women's Empowerment, Higher Education, Qualitative Research.*

## Introduction

Saudi Arabia has recently undergone significant transformations driven by the government's Vision 2030 strategy. Vision 2030 aims to diversify the economy, reducing its reliance on oil revenues by expanding non-oil-based industries and increasing economic investments with other countries (Saudi Vision, 2017). As part of this transformation, there have been substantial changes in social and cultural norms, particularly regarding women's empowerment. Reforms such as granting women the right to drive, participate in political elections, and engage in a wider range of professional sectors have marked a shift towards greater gender inclusion (Saudi Vision, 2017; Le Renard, 2018).

One of the most notable aspects of this transformation is the increased emphasis on women's participation in the workforce and leadership positions. The Saudi government has actively promoted gender inclusion in various sectors, including business, education, and governance (Alharbi & Alsubaie, 2021). Women are no longer confined to traditional roles but are increasingly entering fields such as finance, military, media, and technology (Metcalf, 2011; Hodges, 2017). These shifts align with broader modernization efforts aimed at integrating Saudi women into decision-making roles (Elamin & Omair, 2010).

Despite these advancements, women in Saudi higher education institutions continue to face challenges in attaining top leadership positions. Research indicates that although women have made significant strides in educational achievements, they remain underrepresented in senior academic leadership roles such as university presidents and vice-chancellors (Olson-Strom & Rao, 2020; Gandhi & Sen, 2021). While women increasingly occupy middle management roles—such as heads of departments, supervisors, and deans—the gender gap in executive leadership remains prominent (Shaw & Hernandez-Gantes, 2021; Caan-Palillo, 2022; Dahlan, 2023).

Several factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in higher education leadership. Cultural and institutional barriers, gender bias, and structural challenges continue to impede women's progress in leadership roles (Metcalf, 2008; Al-Sudairy, 2017). Studies suggest that despite policy initiatives encouraging gender equity, implicit biases and socio-cultural expectations limit women's advancement in academia (Elamin & Omair, 2010; Almansour & Kempner, 2016). Furthermore, work-life balance remains

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a challenge, with many female academics facing difficulties in balancing professional responsibilities with societal and familial expectations (Power, 2020; Tran, 2020).

Recent studies highlight the need for more inclusive leadership development programs tailored to support Saudi women in academia. Efforts to close the gender gap must go beyond policy changes and address workplace dynamics, mentorship opportunities, and institutional support mechanisms (Djan, 2020; Caan-Palillo, 2022). Additionally, creating a culture of leadership that actively encourages and facilitates female participation at the highest levels is critical to sustaining progress (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017).

Given these challenges and opportunities, this research proposal seeks to examine the factors influencing academic women's leadership in Saudi universities. The study will explore institutional policies, social and cultural influences, and personal leadership trajectories to better understand how Saudi women navigate leadership pathways in higher education. By identifying key barriers and enablers, this research aims to contribute to policy recommendations that foster a more inclusive and equitable academic environment for Saudi women.

This research is expected to provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics surrounding academic women's leadership in Saudi universities. The findings will contribute to the existing literature on gender equality, women's empowerment, and leadership in higher education, informing policy and practice aimed at fostering inclusive and equitable academic environments.

## Research Objectives

To identify the barriers hindering academic women's leadership roles in Saudi Universities.

To explore the institutional, cultural, and systemic factors contributing to these barriers.

To analyze the strategies and initiatives implemented to promote and support academic women's leadership.

To examine the perceptions and experiences of academic women leaders and aspiring leaders regarding existing barriers and enablers.

To evaluate the impact of cultural and societal norms on academic women's leadership opportunities.

To assess the effectiveness of governmental policies and organizational interventions in addressing barriers and fostering women's leadership in Saudi's universities.

## Research Questions

What are the barriers preventing academic women from attaining leadership roles within Saudi universities?

How do institutional, cultural, and systemic factors contribute to these barriers?

What strategies and initiatives have been implemented to promote and support academic women's leadership in alignment of Vision 2030?

What are the perceptions and experiences of academic women leaders and aspiring leaders regarding existing barriers and enablers?

How do cultural and societal norms influence academic women's leadership opportunities?

What is the role of governmental policies and organizational interventions in addressing barriers and fostering women's leadership in Saudi's universities?

## Literature Review

### Barriers Hindering Academic Women's Leadership Roles

Despite these advancements, women in Saudi higher education institutions continue to face challenges in attaining top leadership positions. Research indicates that although women have made significant strides in educational achievements, they remain underrepresented in senior academic leadership roles such as university presidents and vice-chancellors (Olson-Strom & Rao, 2020; Gandhi & Sen, 2021). Institutional barriers, gender stereotypes, and limited access to leadership networks contribute to these challenges (Shaw & Hernandez-Gantes, 2021; Caan-Palillo, 2022; Dahlan, 2023).

### Institutional, Cultural, and Systemic Factors Contributing to Barriers

Several factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in higher education leadership. Cultural and institutional barriers, gender bias, and structural challenges continue to impede women's progress in leadership roles (Metcalf, 2008; Al-Sudairy, 2017). Studies suggest that despite policy initiatives encouraging gender equity, implicit biases and socio-cultural expectations limit women's advancement in academia (Elamin & Omair, 2010; Almansour & Kempner, 2016). Furthermore, work-life balance remains a challenge, with many female academics facing difficulties in balancing professional responsibilities with societal and familial expectations (Power, 2020; Tran, 2020).

### Strategies and Initiatives to Promote Academic Women's Leadership

Recent studies highlight the need for more inclusive leadership development programs tailored to support Saudi women in academia. Efforts to close the gender gap must go beyond policy changes and address workplace dynamics, mentorship opportunities, and institutional support mechanisms (Djan, 2020; Caan-Palillo, 2022). Universities implementing mentorship programs and leadership training initiatives have reported a positive impact on women's career advancement (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). Additionally, creating a culture of leadership that actively encourages and facilitates female participation at the highest levels is critical to sustaining progress (Almansour & Kempner, 2016).

### Perceptions and Experiences of Academic Women Leaders

Understanding the perspectives of female academic leaders and aspiring leaders is crucial in assessing the effectiveness of existing strategies. Studies reveal that many women in leadership roles experience resistance from their male counterparts and institutional structures (Shaw & Hernandez-Gantes, 2021). However, those who have navigated leadership pathways successfully emphasize the importance of mentorship, networking, and policy support in overcoming challenges (Olson-Strom & Rao, 2020; Caan-Palillo, 2022).

### Impact of Cultural and Societal Norms

Cultural and societal expectations continue to play a significant role in shaping women's leadership opportunities. Traditional gender roles often place additional burdens on women, making it more challenging for them to balance academic and leadership responsibilities (Metcalf, 2008). While societal attitudes toward women's empowerment are gradually shifting, deep-rooted cultural norms still influence perceptions of women in leadership (Elamin & Omair, 2010; Al-Sudairy, 2017).

### Effectiveness of Governmental Policies and Organizational Interventions

Governmental policies have played a crucial role in promoting gender equity in higher education leadership. Vision 2030 initiatives have paved the way for increased female participation in academia, but there is still progress to be made (Saudi Vision, 2017; Dahlan, 2023). Organizational interventions, including gender-inclusive policies, leadership training, and institutional support systems, have proven effective in advancing women's leadership roles (Power, 2020; Tran, 2020). However, continuous efforts are required to address systemic barriers and ensure sustained gender equity in Saudi universities.

Given these challenges and opportunities, this research proposal seeks to examine the factors influencing academic women's leadership in Saudi universities. The study will explore institutional policies, social and cultural influences, and personal leadership trajectories to better understand how Saudi women navigate leadership pathways in higher education. By identifying key barriers and enablers, this research aims to contribute to policy recommendations that foster a more inclusive and equitable academic environment for Saudi women.

## Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative method, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 12 female academics. Qualitative research is particularly useful for exploring complex social phenomena, as it allows for in-depth insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible yet structured approach to data collection, enabling researchers to probe key themes while allowing participants to share their perspectives in their own words (Bryman, 2016). This method is widely used in gender studies and leadership research as it helps to uncover nuanced barriers and facilitators influencing women's leadership in academia (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The selection of 12 female academics was based on purposive sampling, ensuring a diverse representation of disciplines, career stages, and leadership experiences. This approach enhances the reliability and validity of findings by capturing a range of perspectives (Patton, 2015). Interviews were conducted in a confidential setting to encourage open discussions, and thematic analysis was applied to identify common patterns and emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodology aligns with previous studies on women's leadership in higher education, emphasizing the role of institutional and cultural factors in shaping career trajectories (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The sample population will consist of academic women across various disciplines and career stages within Saudi Arabian universities. Additionally, key stakeholders including university administrators, policymakers, and relevant government officials will be included in the study. A purposive sampling technique will be utilized to ensure diversity in perspectives and experiences.

In Saudi, there are about 30 public universities, and 13 private universities, with a total of 42 universities.

**Table of Saudi Public University President by Gender (2023-24)**

No	Name of university	City	Male	Female
1	King Abdulaziz University (KAU)	Jeddah	Tarif bin Youssef Al-Aama	-
2	King Saud University (KSU)	Riyadh	Badran Al Omar	-
3	Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU)	Riyadh	Ahmed Alamer	-
4	Umm Al-Qura University (UQU)	Makkah	Maadi Al-Madhab	-
5	The Islamic University of Madinah	Madinah	Hassan Al-Awfi	-
6	King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM)	East Region	Muhammad Al-Saqqaf	-
7	Naif Arab University for Security Sciences	Riyadh	Farouk Murad	-
8	King Faisal University (KFU)	Hofuf	Muhammad Al-Ohali	-
9	King Khalid University	Abha	Falah al solamy	-
10	Princess Nora bint Abdul Rahman University	Riyadh	-	-Enas Al-Issa
11	Qassim University	Qassim	Abdul Rahman Al-Dawoud	-
12	Taibah University	Madinah	-	Nawal Al-Rashid
13	Taif University	Taif	Youssef Asiri	-

14	Hail University	Hail	Rashid Al-Sharif	-
15	Jazan University	Jazan	Marai Al-Qahtani	-
16	Al Jouf University	AlJouf	Muhammad Al-Shaya	-
17	Albaha University	Albaha	Abdullah Al-Hussein	-
18	University of Tabuk	Tabuk	Abdullah Al-Otaibi	-
19	Najran University	Najran	Abdullah Al-Khudairi	-
20	Northern Border University (NBU)	Arar	Ahmed Al-Rumaih	-
21	King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences (KSAU-HS)	Riyadh	Bandar Al-Qenawi	-
22	Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University (IAU)	Damam	Abdullah Al-Rubaish	-
23	King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST)	Riyadh	Tony Chan	-
24	Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University	AlKarj	Abdul Rahman Al-Talhi	-
25	Shaqra University (SU)	Shaqra	Ali Alsaif	-
26	Majmaah University (MU)	Al Majma'ah	Saleh Al-Mazal	-
27	The Saudi Electronic University	Riyadh	Mohammed Al-Zahrani	-
28	University of Jeddah	Jeddah	Adnan Al-Humaidan	-
29	Bisha University	Bisha	Muhammad Al-Sahafi	-
30	University of Hafr Al Batin	Hafr Al Batin	Muhammad Al-Anzi	-

(2023-24) Table of Saudi Public University President by Gender 1.2

No	Name of university	City	Male	Female
1	Prince Mohammed bin Salman College of Management and Entrepreneurship	Riyadh	ZEGGER DEGRAEVE	-
2	AlMustagbal University	Qassiam	Muhammad Al-Shtewi	-
3	Sulaiman Alrajahi university	Qassiam	Muhammad Al-Muhaimid	-
4	Ibn Sina National College	Jeddah	Shali Al-Jadani	-
5	Batterjee College of Medical and Technical Sciences	Jeddah	Osama Ksara	-
6	College of Vision	Riyadh	Badran Al-Omar	-
7	AlMaarefa University	Riyadh	Zaid AlZamal	-
8	Riyadh Elm University	Riyadh		-
9	Dar Al-Hekma University	Jeddah	Muhammad Sharbatly	-
10	University of Prince Mugrin	Madinah	Bandar Hajjar	-
11	Dar Al Uloom University	Riyadh	Khaled Al-Hamoudi	-
12	Prince Sultan University (PSU)	Riyadh	Ahmed Al-Yamani	-
13	Effat University	Jeddah	-	Sarah Al-Faisal
14	Arab open university	Riyadh	Ali AlShahrani	

Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns, themes, and categories related to barriers and enablers for academic women's leadership. Quantitative data from surveys will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods to examine trends, correlations, and associations among variables.

## Tables and Figures for Data Presentation

**Table 1: Participants' Background Information**

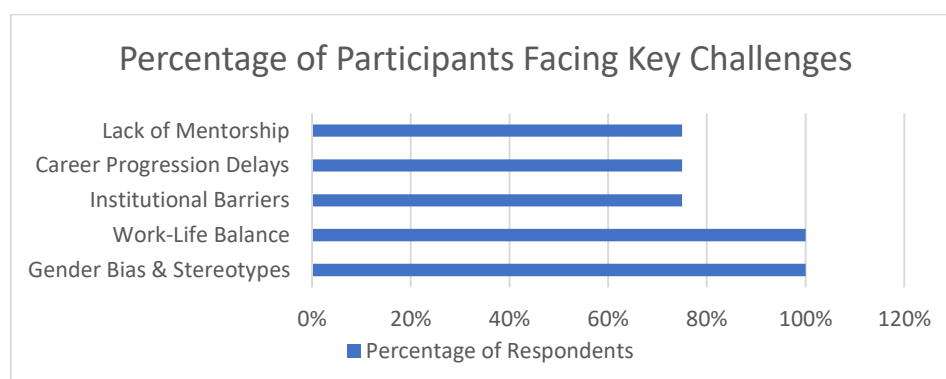
No	University	Academic Rank	Years of Experience	Leadership Position
1	A University	Associate Professor	15+	Department Chair
2	A University	Professor	20+	Vice Dean
3	A University	Assistant Professor	10+	Research Director
4	B University	Associate Professor	12+	Vice Dean
5	A University		5+	Head of Research unit
6	B University	Assistant professor	6+	Vice Dean
7	A University	Assistant professor	8+	Vice Dean
8	B University	Assistant professor	9+	Head of student adviser
9	A University	Assistant professor	4+	Course leader
10	A University	Assistant professor	9+	Head of Research unit
11	A University	Assistant professor	10+	Course leader
12	A University	Assistant professor	11+	Course leader

The participants in this study come from two major universities in Riyadh coded them as A and B for the privacy of the data, representing a range of academic ranks, leadership positions, and years of experience. The majority hold positions as assistant or associate professors, with a few at the professor level. Their experience ranges from 4 to over 20 years, indicating a diverse sample in terms of career progression.

Several participants hold leadership roles, including Vice Deans, Department Chairs, Research Directors, and Heads of Research or Student Advising Units or Course leader, reflecting their active engagement in academic administration. A University has the highest representation, with multiple faculty members at different ranks, including one participant with 5+ years of experience leading a research unit. On the other hand, B University participants are primarily assistant professors in leadership roles such as Vice Dean and Head of Student Advising.

This diverse background provides valuable insights into female leadership in academia, illustrating how different experience levels and institutional contexts influence career progression and leadership opportunities.

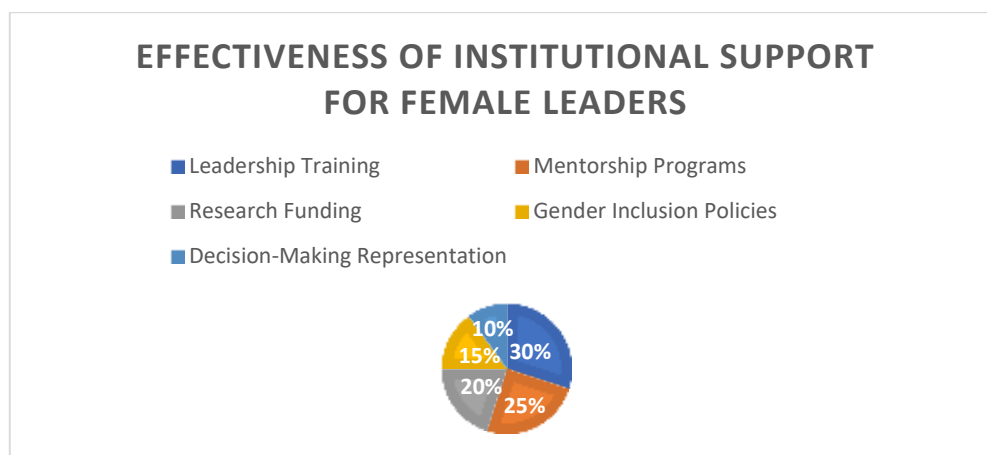
**Figure 1: Percentage of Participants Facing Key Challenges**



The bar chart above presents the percentage of interviewees who reported facing key challenges in their leadership journey within academia. The data highlights that gender bias and stereotypes (100%) and work-life balance (100%) are the most universally acknowledged challenges, indicating that all participants have encountered these barriers in their careers. Institutional barriers (75%) were also commonly cited, reflecting challenges such as limited opportunities for promotion, lack of transparent leadership selection, and



resistance to female leadership in certain administrative roles. Similarly, career progression delays (75%) were reported by most participants, emphasizing how structural and cultural constraints often slow the advancement of women in leadership positions. Finally, lack of mentorship (75%) was identified as a significant obstacle, suggesting that many female academics struggle to find senior mentors who can guide them toward leadership roles. The chart underscores the persistence of systemic challenges that hinder women's progress in academic leadership, despite ongoing institutional and governmental efforts to support gender inclusion.



**Figure 2: Effectiveness of Institutional Support for Female Leaders**

The pie chart above visually represents the distribution of institutional support mechanisms that assist female academics in advancing their leadership roles. The chart segments reflect how various support strategies contribute to promoting female leadership, based on participant feedback.

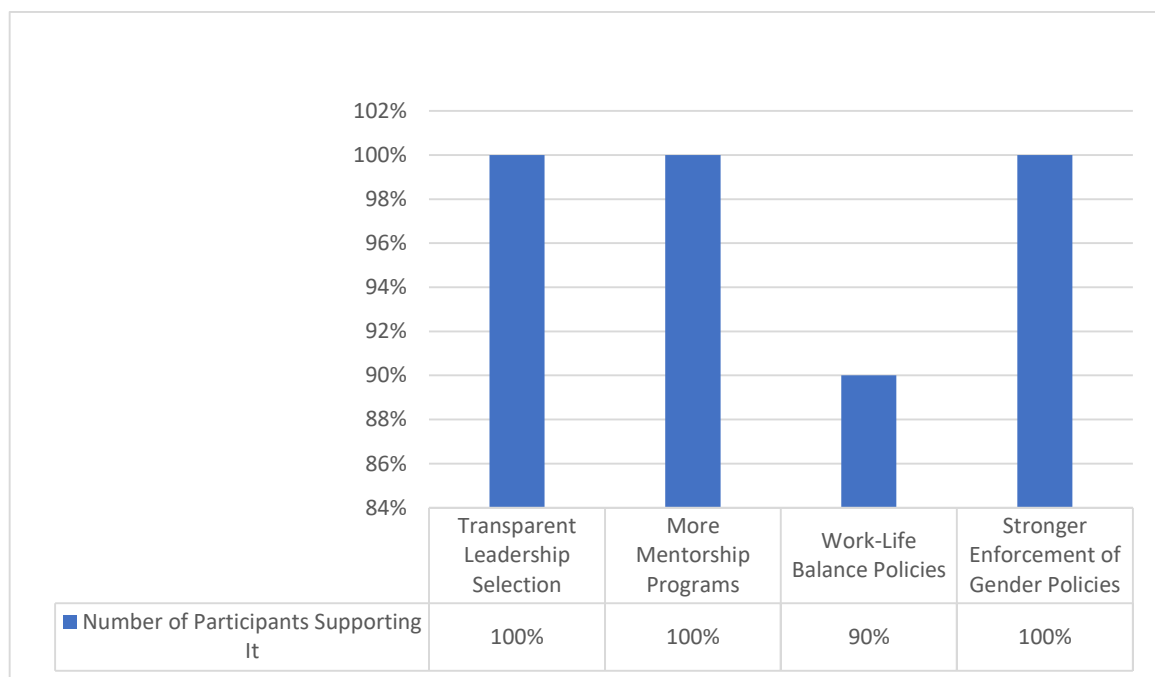
The pie chart illustrates the effectiveness of various institutional support mechanisms in promoting female leadership in academia based on participant responses. The largest segment, leadership training (30%), indicates that structured programs aimed at developing administrative and strategic skills are considered the most effective in preparing women for leadership roles. Participants emphasized that such training enhances confidence and equips them with the competencies needed for higher positions. Mentorship programs (25%) rank as the second most impactful, as they provide guidance from experienced leaders, helping women navigate challenges and career progression. Research funding for women (20%) plays a crucial role in academic leadership advancement, as it enables female scholars to establish themselves as experts in their fields, increasing their chances of securing leadership roles. Gender inclusion policies (15%), while acknowledged, were seen as inconsistently implemented across institutions, limiting their overall effectiveness. Lastly, decision-making representation (10%), though improving, remains the least effective mechanism, as many institutions still lack significant female presence in top-tier leadership positions. The chart underscores the need for stronger enforcement of gender-inclusive policies and expanded mentorship opportunities to further support women in academic leadership.

**Table 2: Impact of Government and Institutional Policies on Female Leadership**

Policy/Initiative	Impact on Career Advancement	Challenges in Implementation
Vision 2030 Reforms	High impact (increased leadership roles)	Slow cultural shifts
Leadership Development Programs	Positive (more women in training)	Limited access for junior faculty
Gender Inclusion Policies	Moderate impact	Lack of enforcement mechanisms

<b>Research Grants for Women</b>	Positive impact	Unequal distribution among universities
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The table above highlights the impact of various policies and initiatives on women's career advancement, along with the challenges they face in implementation. Vision 2030 reforms have had a high impact, particularly by increasing leadership opportunities for women. However, their progress is hindered by slow cultural shifts, which take time to change deeply rooted norms. Leadership development programs have a positive effect, as they provide more women with training opportunities. Despite this, limited access for junior faculty restricts participation, making it difficult for early-career women to benefit. Gender inclusion policies have a moderate impact, primarily because their effectiveness is weakened by the lack of enforcement mechanisms, reducing their real-world application. Finally, research grants for women contribute positively to career advancement, but unequal distribution among universities limits access, preventing equal opportunities for all female researchers. Overall, while these policies and initiatives create pathways for female leadership, addressing these challenges is crucial for maximizing their impact.



**Figure 3: Participants' Recommendations for Advancing Women in Leadership**

The chart above indicates that the majority of participants strongly support transparent leadership selection, increased mentorship programs, and stricter enforcement of gender policies, each receiving full support (100%). However, work-life balance policies received slightly lower support at 90%. This suggests that participants prioritize leadership transparency, mentorship opportunities, and gender policy enforcement as crucial aspects of workplace improvement, while work-life balance policies, although important, are considered slightly less critical.

## Results and Discussion

### Results

The interviewees expressed a strong motivation to pursue leadership roles in academia, driven by a desire to contribute to institutional development, academic excellence, and the empowerment of women in higher education. This aligns with previous research indicating that women seek leadership positions to influence policy, drive educational reforms, and serve as role models for future generations (Morley, 2013).



Additionally, societal shifts in Saudi Arabia, particularly under Vision 2030, have encouraged women to step into leadership roles in traditionally male-dominated sectors (Alnahdi & Riddick, 2022).

Despite these motivations, women in academic leadership continue to face significant challenges. Gender biases and stereotypes persist, affecting perceptions of women's leadership capabilities, similar to findings in other Middle Eastern higher education contexts (Karam & Afiouni, 2017). Balancing multiple responsibilities remains a major hurdle, as leadership roles require significant time and effort, making it difficult for women to manage administrative duties alongside research, teaching, and personal obligations (Airini et al., 2011). Furthermore, institutional resistance to change slows down necessary reforms and the implementation of gender-inclusive policies (Aman, 2017).

Cultural and societal norms continue to shape women's leadership opportunities. While Vision 2030 has played a transformative role in redefining gender roles in Saudi society, traditional expectations still influence career progression (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). Family responsibilities and societal norms can create additional pressures for female academics, as observed in other Gulf countries (Metcalf, 2011). However, interviewees noted a gradual cultural shift in higher education, with increasing acceptance of women in leadership positions.

Institutional support for female leadership has improved, with mentorship programs, leadership training, and greater female representation in decision-making processes. However, consistent with findings by El Alfy and Male (2020), top leadership positions remain male-dominated, highlighting the need for more systemic reforms to achieve gender parity. Government initiatives, such as Vision 2030 and faculty development programs, have been instrumental in increasing female participation. However, research suggests that without effective implementation and accountability mechanisms, these policies may have limited long-term impact (Alghamdi, 2021).

Despite progress, gender bias in higher education leadership remains a challenge. Studies show that women often experience slower promotions, fewer leadership opportunities, and exclusion from informal networks that facilitate career advancement (Morley, 2014). Work-life balance also remains a significant issue, as many universities lack flexible policies, childcare support, and initiatives to help women manage both leadership roles and family responsibilities (Blackmore, 2014; Hodges, 2017).

While government-led initiatives have contributed to increased female participation in higher education leadership, universities still struggle with policy enforcement and cultural resistance (Alnahdi & Riddick, 2022). To enhance women's representation in leadership, interviewees recommended adopting transparent, merit-based selection processes (Eagly & Carli, 2007), strengthening mentorship and leadership training programs (El Alfy & Male, 2020), implementing flexible work policies to accommodate family responsibilities (Morley, 2014), and increasing the representation of women in decision-making bodies (Metcalf, 2011).

Improving the academic work environment for women requires the creation of leadership pathways, networking opportunities, and institutional policies that recognize women's contributions in academia. Research suggests that fostering a culture of inclusivity and gender equity can significantly improve academic work environments (Aman, 2017).

## Discussion

The findings suggest that Saudi universities have made significant progress in promoting female leadership, largely due to national policies like Vision 2030. However, challenges remain, as institutional barriers, gender bias, and work-life balance issues continue to limit the full participation of women in senior academic roles (Karam & Afiouni, 2017). While universities provide training and mentorship programs, these efforts are not always sufficient to ensure equal representation. Similar findings have been reported in higher education leadership studies, where women often encounter obstacles in promotion, tenure, and decision-making opportunities (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Despite increased awareness, biases in hiring and promotion decisions

persist, requiring women to work harder than their male counterparts to gain recognition (Morley, 2014). Addressing unconscious bias through leadership development and institutional reforms remains essential.

One of the most significant challenges women face is balancing family responsibilities with leadership roles (Hodges, 2017). Universities should implement family-friendly policies, such as flexible work hours, parental leave, and support for working mothers (Blackmore, 2014). To further enhance female leadership, institutions must ensure that leadership selection is transparent and based on merit (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Expanding leadership development programs for female faculty (El Alfy & Male, 2020), implementing work-life balance policies (Morley, 2014), and encouraging women's participation in executive decision-making (Metcalf, 2011) are crucial steps toward gender equity. Additionally, monitoring gender equity through institutional accountability is necessary to track progress and sustain reforms (Alnahdi & Riddick, 2022).

## Conclusion

Given these challenges and opportunities, this research highlights the need for comprehensive strategies to promote academic women's leadership in Saudi universities. Addressing institutional and cultural barriers, enhancing mentorship programs, and implementing gender-responsive policies are crucial steps toward fostering an inclusive leadership environment. By identifying key enablers and obstacles, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equity in academia and offers recommendations for improving women's leadership representation in higher education. Therefore, by examining the barriers and enablers for academic women's leadership in Saudi's universities, this research seeks to contribute to advancing gender equality and promoting women's empowerment in higher education settings. The outcomes of this study inform evidence-based interventions and initiatives aimed at addressing systemic barriers and fostering an environment conducive to women's leadership advancement.

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