Barriers to Women's Education: Participation in Adult Education in Saudi Arabia in The Past and Present.

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Barriers to Women's Education: Participation

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Abstract:

This paper examined the reasons why women do not continue their quest to achieve higher education. It highlights and explores the barriers and difficulties faced by women who want to continue their studies or re-enter educational institutions to pursue lifelong learning. Women face many situational, institutional and financial barriers that can prevent them from continuing or even starting their education. Furthermore, gender inequalities have also been debated and how these boundaries may affect the growth of today's woman. Therefore, women need appropriate support to overcome these barriers and resolve their particular challenges.

This paper examined the barriers from a Saudi perspective, both as a Saudi female and Master student, and use transformative learning theory to explore my perspective. This paper also discussed the theoretical framework discussing how transformative learning plays its role in development of women's confidence.   Additionally, it also compared the previous state of Saudi women with the current state especially after the advent of vision 2030 by H.E. along with the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman initiated and proposed vision 2030. This vision has given a ray of hope to women's intentions towards seeking higher education and working alongside men in various fields of life. Solutions to the problems have been summarized, which include distant learning.

Key words:

Continuing Education, Higher Education, Education Restrictions, Women's Education, Vision 2030, Transformational Education

ملخص بالعربي:

تبحث هذه الورقه في الأسباب التي تجعل النساء لا يواصلن السعي لتحقيق التعليم العالي ويستكشف الحواجز والصعوبات التي تواجهها النساء اللواتي يرغبن في مواصله دراساتهن أو العوده إلى المؤسسات التعليميه لمتابعه التعلم مدى الحياه.

تواجه النساء العديد من الحواجز الظرفيه والمؤسسيه والماليه التي يمكن ان تمنعهن من مواصله تعليمهن أو حتى البدء فيه. لذلك تحتاج النساء الى الدعم المناسل التعلب على هذه الحواجز وحل التحديات الخاصه بهم.

في هذه الورقه سأبحث الحواجز من منظور سعودي، كطالب سعودي وطالب ماجستيرواستخدام نظريه نظريه التعلم التحويليه لاستكشاف وجهه نظري، بالإضافه إلى ذلك ، سأقارن الحاله السابقه للمرأه السعوديه بالوضع الحالي خاصه مع رؤيه ٢٠٣٠ بواسطه الماك سلمان والأمير محمد بن سلمان وتمكين المرأه ومساواتها بالرجل في جميع المجالات.

هناك أربعه حواجز رئيسيه أمام المساعي التعليميه ناقشتها وهي: الحواجز الظرفيه مثل مسئوليات الرعايه أو رفض الاسره أو الزوج للسماح للمرأه بمواصلة دراستها، الحواجز الماليه مثل القيود الماليه الناجمه عن عدم كفايه التمويل، الحواجز المؤسسيه مثل قيود العمر أو عدم وجود التوجيه المهني والإرشاد الاكاديمي والتحيزات بين الجنسين سأبحث في هذه الصعوبات في السابق وكيف اختلف في الحاضر.

الكلمات المفتاحيه:

التعليم المستمر،التعليم العالي، قيود التعليم ، تعليم المرأه، رؤيه ٢٠٣٠، التعليم التحولي

Barriers to Women's Education:

"It's difficult to be a woman with dreams of attaining education. It's sad to think that maybe I

won't continue to come to my current school" (cited in Stromquist, 2008, p. 155).

This paper examines the reasons why women do not continue their quest to achieve a higher education. It highlights and explores the barriers and difficulties faced by women who want to continue their studies or re-enter educational institutions to pursue lifelong learning. Women face many situational, institutional and financial barriers that can prevent them from continuing or even starting their education. Therefore, women need appropriate support to overcome these barriers and resolve their particular challenges.

Need of the study:

In this paper, I will examine the barriers from a Saudi perspective, both as a Saudi female and Master student, and use transformative learning theory to explore my perspective. Additionally, this paper compares the previous state of Saudi women with the current state especially after the advent of vision 2030 by H.E. King Salman bin Abdulaziz. There are four main barriers to educational pursuits that were initially identified by Patricia Cross (1977): situational barriers, such as caring responsibilities or refusal of the families or husband to permit the woman to continue her studies; financial barriers, such as financial restrictions caused by insufficient funding; institutional barriers, such as age restrictions or lack of career guidance; and, gender biases.

In addition, as mature students, women frequently experience particular obstacles because of their position and responsibility in their community. Heenan (2002) argues that the government's commitment to widening access to higher education is simply rhetoric if it does not take into account the broader inequalities faced by women. For instance, policies to increase access *to higher education* are not very practical if there is no financial assistance offered to those who need it (Heenan, 2002). In this paper, I discussed some of these difficulties and examine how they can be addressed and rectified.

Reasons why women participate in adult education:

There are several reasons why women participate in adult education. According to Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007), the major reason is work-related. For instance, education can help prepare a student for a particular job as well as upgrade or enhance current job and life skills. Merriam et al (2007) believe that the aims of engaging in educational institutions are many and varied, and include continuing a pre-set course of education, learning out of general interest, or gaining an additional degree or certificate from a college or university. Personal interest is other reason, as many women engage in learning to stay emotionally aware or because learning is a satisfying accomplishment (Merriam et al., 2007).

However, some people do not participate in adult education for any number of reasons. These reasons often include that they have encountered difficulties that negatively affected the likelihood of their participation. Such difficulties range from ill health, to advanced age, to lack of time or funding cost, though the latter two factors often decrease with age (Hammer & Shale, 1981). "Life transition" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 63) is another significant reason that can affect educational pursuits, whether positively or negatively. It includes events such as "marriage, retirement, [and] birth of children" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 63), as well as changes in religion and health. Further examples of life transitions revolve around moving, whether to another country through immigration or moving from a rural to an urban setting (Merriam et al., 2007).

Women Worldwide:

Merriam et al. (2007) argue that the most common as well as the biggest barriers for women in general are lack of time and money. In addition, according to Chitrakar's (2009) study concerning overcoming obstacles to girls' education in South Asia, barriers can take other shapes. These include barriers to entrance, barriers to the quality of facilities and services, and barriers to relevant courses and instruction. Furthermore, barriers to girls' education can also assume different forms in societies and cultures, based on socio-economic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Thus, barriers can be perceived as either intrinsic or extrinsic to girls in relation to how they experienced educational participation. Furthermore, some barriers can be obvious while others are subtle and tacit. What needs to be acknowledged is that the concept of barriers to girls' education is highly complex; hence, for the analysis to be comprehensive, the lived experiential meanings will have to be unpacked through qualitative, phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry processes. (Chitrakar, 2009, p.7).

Chitrakar (2009) lists UNICEF's (2007) summary of common barriers to girls' education as being: family poverty, frail legal agendas throughout education, unequal participating fields, problems related to safety and protection of nearby schools which negatively affects girls, and irrelevancy of schools to children's lives. These difficulties, which have a huge impact on girls in South Asia, also occur in many developing countries where the safety of the girls is rarely the top priority of the schools or the decision-makers. This lack of safety prevents many girls and young women from participating in educational pursuits.

Heenan (2002) studied women in the UK who chose not to continue their education, but the study's conclusions may be applicable to other countries. In addition to the barriers mentioned above, the results indicated that participants have been habituated into prioritizing their own desires and needs after the needs of their families. Because of this deeply ingrained mindset that is both cultural and personal, their individual improvement is frequently not given a high priority (Heenan, 2002), suggesting that women are constrained by both external and internal barriers. Interior barriers are usually self-limiting desires and outlook, while exterior barriers are financial and fundamental.

Women in Saudi Arabia:

Historically:

In Saudi Arabia, women have faced various difficulties coming from several directions when they want to engage in educational institutions and formal education. In response to these problems, women needed to be able to rise above society's restrictions and displace the barriers that prevent them from accessing their educational, career and personal free choices. In learning to negotiate the obstacles, Saudi women needed to change their way of thinking regarding higher education – to see it as a viable option, and to demand equal access to this option as well as the right to choose it. From a mainstream Saudi cultural perspective, however, 'housewife' was the appropriate and expected position for female high school graduates, and 'the home' was considered to be the correct place for a woman. Generally, society's attitude in Saudi Arabia did not allow women to work with men or in the public. Historically, education was mainly for boys; only after 1959 did the Saudi government officially address the issue of girls' education, and at that time, most families were not interested in the education of girls (Rawaf & Simmons, 1991).

Currently:

Trends have changed in the past decade towards the freedom of Saudi women in order to participate in the competitive and professional life alongside men. Women have excelled in the fields of health business, government, literature and media (Al-Rasheed, 2018). A big improvement has been observed in the field of literature as well. Saudi women have empowered themselves to a great deal by using pen as their weapon of choice and defining feminism. Furthermore, they have explained this process of feminism with its importance in relation to their rights, education and a significantly newer social change in Saudi Arabia (Ammar, 2018).

Recently, King Salman bin Abdulaziz along with the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman initiated and proposed vision 2030. Vision 2030 is focused towards the implementation of Saudized knowledge-based economy, which will enable the youth of Saudi Arabia to fulfill their dreams of achieving their goals through education and employment (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2018). Furthermore, lifting ban from women's driving has also played a crucial role in promoting freedom for Saudi women in the country. There are a handful number of women in Saudi Arabia who have benefitted from this regulation as they were dependent on their drivers and public transport previously. It is worth noting that this major development is also a part of King Salman's vision 2030 in order to advance towards women empowerment (Krane & Majid, 2018).

Studies have been conducted to demonstrate the after affects of Saudi women being granted permission to drive, which revealed an overall state of happiness among the women to be able to fulfill their dreams of freedom. Women were even found to be more enthusiastic than men as far as independency was concerned (Al-Ghalib et al, 2018). Furthermore, vision 2030 will play its role in improving the chances of women in various fields as well including nursing. Historically, foreigners have been employed on a large basis in order to fulfill the needs of home as well as hospital care. However, the advent of vision 2030 has provided an opportunity to the Saudi women to seek education in this field and play their role in improving the country's economy (Al-Dossary, 2018).

Situational barriers:

Historically

Generally, women shoulder multi-faceted responsibilities that revolve around the home and family. Because of this, they are constantly busy and have a shortage of spare time, particularly when they are working outside as well as inside the home. Their responsibilities likely include caring for their husband, children and household, but may also include other commitments such as supporting their husbands' career or looking after their elders or sick parents (Gouthro, 2007). By investing their time fulfilling their families and children's needs, they often set their own needs at a lower priority (Heenan, 2002).

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While this is not an 'official' cultural or gendered expectation, it has been internalized as something that women either should or must do. Similar to results from the UK study, research into the attitudes of Saudi expectations both for and by women reveal a tendency to set women's education and needs at a lower priority. The traditional attitude in Saudi Arabia is that a woman should, first and foremost, care for her children and home responsibilities as a wife and mother. Remaa Alwsweel (2004) argues that: Conservative parents often refuse to send their daughters to school because of the fear that they might lose interest in the traditional home-based roles of women. Those who were more conservative see the education of girls as an undermining factor to the very foundations of morality and family life. It must be noted that these conservative attitudes towards girls' education did not arise out of the influence of Islam but out of the traditions that formed around it.**"** (p. 5)

Furthermore, Baki suggests that this culturally pervasive perception of the role of Saudi women has prevented them from continuing or even starting higher education, because "in Saudi society and culture, a woman's primary role is that of nurturing mother and housewife" (Baki, 2004, p. 3). In keeping with prevailing cultural gendered norms in Saudi Arabia, my grandma is fond of saying, "a woman's certificate and degree is her house", meaning that a woman should be skilled at household duties, and for those and those alone she should feel a sense of accomplishment and reward. I always reply to my grandmother: "What if a woman can be a good wife and mother and an educator at the same time?", but she does not like my response. I am fortunate to live in an educated family, where my husband and parents support me furthering my education. In my opinion, learning would improve women's choices of having equal opportunities and enjoying their right to study to develop their self-esteem and skills. I am also fortunate to be a resident in a country that values education and democratic right (Baumgartner, 2007).

However, not all women come from a forward-thinking family and live in a forward-thinking country. In many cases, it is the husband's attitude about his wife's education that impacts a woman's choice to pursue higher education. Rather than encouraging them to continue their education, families frequently encourage girls to get married, although they do support boys in furthering their education efforts. Moreover, early marriage has a negative impact on girls' education due to family and marital responsibilities; early marriage also negatively influences women's employment options. In her article, Alsweel (year) included Badria Al-Bisher's comment on what most women in Saudi society must contend with: Imagine not being able to get your education without your male guardian's consent, even if you were applying for a PhD! Imagine not being able to work, to attempt to make ends meet, without his consent. Some are not even embarrassed to declare that women need the aforementioned approval in the private sector as well!" (Alsweel, p. 14).

In addition to cultural expectations, family background plays a key role in determining a girl's likelihood to pursue higher education. Families who are not educated may not have the correct or appropriate information that could benefit their children regarding educational or career pursuits. "Lisa", a female student, reinforces this: "I got little information from my parents because they know nothing about university. Neither of them went. The only person in my family who went to university is my aunt, so I was quite leaning on her (Lisa, private school, UK)" (Al-Yousef, 2009, p. 788). Nevertheless, as exposure to Western lifestyles and ways of thinking increases in Saudi Arabia, more women as well as men are being encouraged by their parents to continue their education (Brunner, 1984).

However, gaining society's or their family's permission and approval is just the first step. Lack of childcare support is a major barrier to women's access to higher education. For me, the quality of the daycares in Canada was an incentive to put my children in daycare, and the subsidy programs solved the financial problem of paying for it. However, for many Saudi women, there is a lack of good quality and inexpensive daycares. If the Saudi government were to consider daycare as an aspect of education and offer daycares that are affordable and have qualified teachers, then more women would be willing and able to participate in adult education.

Further underscoring the prevalence and uniqueness of women's barriers to education in Saudi Arabia, Rawaf and Simmons (1991) argue the following: The history of education in Saudi Arabia shows that women have had unique difficulties in realizing their educational aspirations in the face of widely held conservative attitudes coupled with the belief that a woman's natural place is in the home and aggravated by a number of restrictions placed upon women's education. (p. 6)

As mentioned previously, these barriers surround conservative society attitudes that persist even to today – that the proper place for women is in the home. Also as mentioned previously, this attitude is not due to the influence of Islam but to long-standing cultural traditions. Because of this mindset, some families refuse to permit their daughters to pursue higher education, as they consider that marriage and having children are women's main responsibilities. Furthermore, some families claim that women's education is contrary to religious values. This is in fact an erroneous assumption, as Islam encourages the education of women. In any case, education in Saudi Arabia is presented under Islam value and rules, so it is unlikely that women's education in particular would be contrary to the same values that permit it. Indeed, Islam advises its followers to seek out knowledge and consider it as important an

obligation as the other obligations that every Muslim man and woman must abide by, stipulating the importance of education not only for individuals but also for communities. From an Islamic perspective, knowledge is food for the mind and heart and enlightens one's insights. Islamic law encourages education and the seeking out of knowledge. In one Hadith in the Quran, the prophet says: "seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave." Rather than hindering education, Quran-based Islamic law instead encourages it "from cradle to grave", meaning that education should be a life-long pursuit that is seemingly not gender-specific (or, at least, no reference to gender-based restrictions are given in the Quran regarding education).

However, and in contrast to the teachings of Islam, lack of encouragement and support from family members of women who want to further their studies often gives the women no option but to stay at home. Some women must also deal with their husband's refusal, as he wants a housewife and mother to his children, not an educated wife, while other women must deal with jealous husbands who have little or no educational qualifications and who do not want their wife to be more educated (Leste, 2004).

In Saudi Arabia, there is a growing argument around the role of women in Saudi society. Being a society that is extremely traditional and conservative and holds family related pursuits as the highest value, the Kingdom has been reluctant to fully embrace any 'progress' that appears to threaten the traditional family unit. As Saudi women's role in Saudi society has usually centered on domestic work as wife and mother, many Saudi men are uncomfortable with the notion of women working outside the home. As well, many Saudi men and women are hesitant to question or break away from traditional attitudes, while others simply fear change (Al Munajjed, 2010).

Even when girls do go to school, they often experience problems simply getting there due to gender-imposed restrictions on travel and movement from one place to another: "Women are not allowed to board public transportation to travel between different parts of the country or abroad without written permission from their closest male relative, [whereas] men can travel anywhere" (Baki, 2004, p. 3). Generally, the reason for this restriction "is Saudi society's strong belief in family honor. Saudi society is structured to keep a woman within strictly defined limits, which make it difficult if not impossible for her to lose her sexual virtue" (Baki, 2004, p. 3). These restrictions and limitations powerfully influence the education and employment opportunities of Saudi women.

Al-Yousef (2009) suggests that many people in Saudi Arabia, including peers, teachers, career officers, parents and other significant adults, influence young people. Furthermore, students with educated and well-informed parents have more confidence and support from their parents as sources of knowledge. Conversely, students with less educated parents tend to trust employers more for career and education information (Al- Yousef, 2009).

A further situational challenge is location. Generally, females who live in rural areas experience difficulties accessing an education at every stage, from primary school upwards. This is mainly due to isolation factors but can also be due to economic reasons. Therefore, adults who live in the country tend to have much lower participation rates in education than adults who live in urban areas. This is certainly the case in Saudi Arabia, where "women in rural areas often experience higher illiteracy rates along with more conservative and patriarchal social norms, [and therefore] are doubly challenged" (AlMunajjed, 2010, p. 4). As well as numerous external barriers, as outlined above, there are also internal barriers such as personal problems, health issues, and lack of confidence or interest. Lacks of educational skills are additional barriers some adult students are faced with (Ahmad & Mohammad, 2009).

Currently:

Recent advancements towards providing the Saudi women with an environment to flourish have resulted in the initiation of entrepreneurship in various sectors. Women seeking their graduate degrees in business have been provided with opportunities to become the owners of their small to moderate sized businesses. Moreover, the overall unemployment ratio of Saudi women back in 2013 has gone down considerably, as we see them working in banks, shopping malls and other sectors alongside the males (Mathew, 2019).

Contrary to the perception of Saudi families mentioned above in 'historically' section, recent studies have showed a positive inclination towards achieving tertiary education as far as women are concerned. Saudi parents have begin to take pride in sending their daughters, sisters and even wives to the higher educational institutes to fulfill their dream of acquiring professional education. Descriptive analysis of certain investigations has revealed that the Saudi couples have progressed in the society by working in their desired professions and supporting each other financially (Almalki & Ganong, 2018).

Previously, access to higher education has been a challenge as mentioned above. However, public universities have been established in smaller cities of Saudi Arabia that were lacking behind in educational sector (Hossain & Hoque, 2018). During the past decade, multiple numbers of women universities have been established in different parts of the country. Majority of the total number of universities in Saudi Arabia have been formed in this period, which shows a clear progress towards the provision of education to Saudis with equal opportunities for women. University such as Princess Noura University is an example of such steps taken towards the improvement of women's educational milestones (Alhareth et al, 2015).

Theoretical framework:

Transformative learning involves knowledge and education that have meaning in our lives; it does not simply involve classroom learning. This type of learning for adults can change many things in people's outlook toward life, family, work and the whole world. Jack Mezirow began examining transformative learning in the 1970s (Imel, 1998). Mezirow described a set of stages that individuals go throughout when experiencing transformation. These stages are: facing a confusing dilemma; self-analysis; critical evaluation of expectations; identifying that others have gone through the same process; discovering choices and options; and expressing a strategy of action.

According to Imel (1998), transformative learning occurs when individuals change their frames of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds. This theory describes a learning process that is primarily rational, analytical, and cognitive with an inherent logic. (p. 3)

Transformation is frequently caused by a problematic situation or a dilemma. Moreover, transformative elements usually involve emotionally painful experiences. Once people recognize they have a problem or challenge, they do a lot of thinking about their situation and also talk to others to find a way to deal with their experience. During the thinking period, people might discover that they can change their old ways of thinking and being to the extent that their old way of living no longer occurs (Imel, 1998).

In Saudi Arabia, women tend to participate in adult education to solve personal problems such as unemployment. According to a recent study (Al Munajjed, 2010), the unemployment rates for Saudi women are much higher than for Saudi men: "[In 2007], women in the Saudi labor force had an unemployment rate of 26.9%, nearly four times that of men" (p. 2). Thus, for many Saudi women, the biggest dilemma facing them is unemployment. There is not only a lack of jobs for women, but also a lack of good quality career opportunities. Because of this, thousands of undergraduate students cannot find jobs when they graduate, and so they go back to school either in Saudi Arabia or abroad. Since the advent of the King Abdullah scholarship project, adult females have been able to continue their higher education in Western countries. This experience changes so many things in a learner's life that it is considered transformative. Saudi women who live and study abroad are keen to learn the local language and get a driver's license, for example. They also step outside the "wife and mother" roles by doing things to benefit their community, showing that, when given the opportunity and trust from their spouse and society, they can do much more than Saudi tradition deems them able to do.

However, though ultimately a positive experience, moving to another country can initially be an unhappy dilemma for Saudi women. I have personal experience in this regard. Rather than embrace the challenges of living abroad, I suffered two years of culture shock and homesickness, being away from my country and my family. Only after a while did I start to engage in adult education and reap the benefits from it. Luckily, I overcame my initial problems but there are many Saudi women who are not so lucky. They face many struggles and challenges to adapt to their new community and environment, and are not always successful in overcoming them. This is, in my experience, due to lack of supports. Eric (1993) states that the worst cases of culture shock are those

experienced by students who travel abroad to study, and that most students have a hard time overcoming it. One of the best ways of acquiring understanding and knowledge is learning through experience (Lave, 2008).

When an individual or anyone in the community shares his/her experience and knowledge with others, this act of sharing becomes part of a proactive community that grows and develops by swapping knowledge. Women need to broaden their thinking through lifelong learning. The more they know, the more they can share with their community. Moreover, gathering and sharing information is an effective method that immigrant women and international students are comfortable with. It helps them familiarize with their surroundings and relate to others, as it provides them with a sense of community and helps them feel that they are productive members within that community (Sutherland & Chenga, 2009).

Adapting to a new environment involves many initiatives as well as flexibility. One of the most important steps, however, is learning the local language. This helps foreign students get the greatest benefit of learning and education abroad. The statement below is from participants in a project dealing with immigrant women. It describes how women face the situation of living outside their home country. We, as newcomers, have needed to adjust ourselves to adapt to this new environment by speaking in a different language, by observing and following the law, rules and customs, by studying and working hard to prove that we're not here begging someone's generosity, and that we're qualified in pursuing a degree or getting a job to obtain what we deserve, and by enduring the loneliness and becoming stronger and more independent because that's what our life is like most of the time (Sutherland & Chenga, 2009, p. 305).

Anne McDonagh (2004) described how a young Asian woman from an uneducated and poor family experiences life as a new arrival to Canada. The story summarizes the struggles that face her when she wants to continue her education. She talks about on her family's negative attitudes and Asian culture's influence on women's education. The study compares Canada and the woman's birth country in aspects of educational and democratic rights. McDonagh (2004) explains how immigrant women continue their education when they arrive in Canada, since Canadian law guarantees the education of girls. Additionally immigration or moving to another country to learn new skills and a new language has become a common pursuit in the recent years (Eric, 1993).

Although Canada may be more advanced than other countries in its outlook and attitudes regarding females, barriers and challenges for education still occur. Even in Canada, women have to struggle for their own higher education, as many Canadian women do not value their own needs as highly as those of their husband and/or children. McDonagh (2004) also explains how Canada supports women's education by offering child support and subsidy programs that pay for daycare. I personally did not hear about that program until sometime after being here in Canada, even though my children were in daycare. I arrived in 2006 and lived on a very tight budget. Eventually, I asked the director of my children's daycare about the program, and she explained it to me. After that, I received childcare assistance.

Institutional barriers:

Knowing who is and is not participating in the educational institutions is helpful information for policymakers, especially regarding the issue of funding and literacy programs, as economics and politics play an important role in the educational system (Merriam et al., 2007). Hammer and Shale (1981) argue that "the educational environment can be made more accommodating by opening admission and residency requirements and removing the constraints of scheduling and location through innovative delivery of educational experiences" (p. 6). The Saudi government needs to place more emphasis on women continuing their education at all stages. Although the scholarship program gave me and many Saudi women the opportunity to study abroad, women who live in Saudi Arabia and cannot leave the country (for any number of reasons, such as family obligations or health concerns) need access to further education. I have many friends who graduated the same year as I did and who apply every year to do, for instance, a Master degree, but admission is very limited; so, for the foreseeable future, their dream of continuing their studies is just a dream.

In Saudi Arabia, some educational institutions will not accept learners who are above a certain age limit. Moreover, women usually curtail their education when they get married and have children; but when their children are grown up, they often go back to school. At this time, they are not admitted into Saudi universities or colleges because they are over the age limit (Ekstrom, 1972). Therefore, age restrictions at universities are considered a major barrier that prevents women from continuing their higher education. In addition, the number of female students graduating from high school is growing every year, and there are only a limited number of female higher education institutions. This shortage of female teachers limits the percentage of acceptance of female students, as male teachers cannot directly teach female students in Saudi schools.

For female students who wish to take courses taught by a male teacher, the following set-up is required: the male professor and his male students attend each one of these classrooms. A fixed remote-controlled video camera is provided as well as a receive-only telephone line. The professor clips the portable lavaliere onto his clothing; the microphone is linked by cable to studio sound input. This setup allows him to be the only one to hear his female students and to only be able to contact them by being videotaped. (Baki, 2004, p. 4).

Rawaf (1991) presented specific problems faced by Saudi women regarding higher education. For example, female students are taught either directly (in the classroom) by female teachers or indirectly (through closed circuit television) by male teachers (Rawaf, 1991). This type of learning environment is more difficult for students. I was a student who had to deal with these situations in Saudi university classes; indeed, I have personally experienced all of the barriers discussed in Rawaf's study, including the use of closed circuit TV, which made interaction between the teacher and the students impossible. It also caused boredom for the students (Rawaf, 1991). Rawaf's (1991) study outlines information on female universities and female campuses that have recently opened in Saudi Arabia, with some offering residences on campus.

However, distance education is currently limited to only one university in Jeddah city. This is unfortunate, as distance learning could solve a few problems. Many students have to travel from remote areas to attend school, and public transportation is not always available to them.

In the past ten years, Internet users have increased dramatically and educational policy-makers have become more interested in distant learning as a means to develop lifelong learning concepts (Alaugab, 2007). Yet, barriers arise to this technology due to, for example, instructors' lack of training or negative attitudes toward online instruction. Alaugab (2007) explains that the caliber of online instruction is "greatly affected by an instructor's attitude, motivation, and true commitment" (p. 73). However, using distance learning is nevertheless a convenient method for students who otherwise face life issues that could prevent them from attending university.

For women who have young babies to look after, evening courses would be most suitable, as baby-sitters are more plentiful in the evening hours. Similarly, for women who have school-age children, scheduling morning classes while the children are at school would be more convenient Ekstrom (1972). Rawaf and Simmons (1991) review the recent state of women's education along with the barriers that face them in Saudi Arabia. In particular, they highlight the gender inequality that is evidenced by some courses (such as economics and engineering) being offered to men but not to women, and libraries and laboratories being better equipped at men's universities. Another problem is the limitation of jobs for female graduate students. Thus, structural barriers related to gender inequalities need to be addressed if more equitable and democratic learning opportunities are to be realized (Alaugab, 2007).

In addition to university policies, other barriers involve interaction between university faculty members and students. Often times, there is a lack of understanding and communication between the parties as well as delay in feedback. Because of this, students are late finishing their assignments or complete them incorrectly. As well as missed deadlines and lower grades, lack of communication between instructors and students can also lead to isolated learners and low levels of student motivation to study and learn (Alaugab, 2007). Misunderstandings can even impact future academic careers. I personally experienced an intense misunderstanding with a faculty member when I requested a letter of reference from her. She was a non-Saudi faculty member who taught me in one of my undergraduate courses. I was preparing to apply for my Master program and asked her if she would write a recommendation in the references part of my application. To my surprise, she refused, claiming that she did not remember me. Considering that I was one of only fifty students, I thought she had a pretty bad memory, but I accepted her excuse and showed her my transcript as proof that she not only had taught me but that I had a good mark in her course. When she saw the evidence displayed in front of her, she laughed and said: "Do you want to study and come back to take my position?" She is not Saudi and she knows that the education system is starting a "Saudization" a program, which aims to replace non-Saudi faculty with qualified Saudi faculty. This situation was a very negative experience for me and was one of the barriers that I had to surmount when starting my studies.

As mentioned previously, online courses can provide a solution to many of the barriers facing women in their educational pursuits. However, problems arise from faculty not using the technology to its full potential and governing educational bodies not accepting the validity of the courses taught online. Indeed, gaining accreditation for online

learning is a huge challenge. Although online education is quickly increasing, some institutions do not accept online degrees as they believe that the quality of online education is lower than traditional face-to-face education (Alaugab, 2007). Nonetheless, online learning is an effective means to encourage women to continue their education and become lifelong learners, even though some critics of the method suggest that the technology itself might cause a barrier to both teachers and learners (Alaugab, 2007).

Heenan (2002) underscores the importance of women's awareness in making good choices about their educational future. However, in many cases, female students as being unhelpful and confusing describe communication with the student advisor. Furthermore, the university should be cognizant of the fact that many women are constrained not just by family obligations but also economic and geographic limitations. Consequently, it is imperative that women receive clear and concise information about their educational options so that they can make the best choices, given their circumstances. Moreover, education strategies should push for inclusion and societal fairness, with equal access and opportunities for all, regardless of gender. As well, universities have a social responsibility to investigate the causes for withdrawal from learning, and arrange structures and policies that will allow all people, regardless of age, socioeconomic status or sex, to enjoy and practice their social, financial and political rights as lifelong learners (Leste, 2004). Then women would have the opportunity to become active citizen who can enjoy all of their rights, including the right to further their education, if they choose.

Financial constrictions:

Lack of financial support to buy books and laptops as well as pay tuition, course fees, daycare and transportation is a significant problem that impacts negatively on females' decision to return to school or to carry on with their studies (Home, 1992). Funding educational requirements and purchasing expensive books is financially difficult for some women, whether they be single or married, employed or unemployed. For instance, even if employed, many women are in poorly paid jobs and their budgets to not allow for education-related expenditures. Other women who wish to study are unemployed and financially dependent on their husband's income, which means funds could be tight (if the husband is a low-income earner) or that the wife is dependent on the husband's approval to support her educational aspirations (Heenan, 2002).

Other options for funding include loans or grants, but according to (Westervelt, 1975), financial support from some universities discontinues when married women become pregnant because it is assumed that these women have to take care of their families as a first priority. Gouthro (2007) discussed financial restrictions on low-income female students, arguing they have fewer educational opportunities. This is particularly so in the case of divorce, where a woman's income is likely to drop substantially, either cutting off her study course or, if she chooses to continue studying, plunging her into poverty. Studies on students in higher education reveal that learners are not an equal group, but that their experiences of student life, including access to it, are based on gender, class and race (Leste, 2004).

Gender inequality:

Historically:

Gender inequity in higher education is still a comparatively under-researched field (Heenan, 2002), while gender and education in schools has been the subject of broad study. In Saudi Arabia, societal structure is based on gender separation due to Islamic law (Al-Yousef, 2009). For females, this means unequal education chances, mainly because female colleges have a lower level of academic quality than do male colleges (Mengash 2001).

Moreover, even though women represent 58 percent of all college graduates in Saudi Arabia, jobs for females after graduation are few and far between. The education system limits women's access to labor markets and the global economy and also limits their access within the country to certain fields of education. For instance, women are rejected from major fields such as engineering, journalism, pharmacy and construction. Those fields are open only to males (Baki, 2004).

To compound the difficulty for female students, Saudi Arabian universities have little by way of on-campus residential housing (Rawaf & Simmons, 1991). However, even if more students housing were available for females, few Saudi families would allow their daughters to live outside their home. Thus, for female students who do not live near a university, attending university as a single female is almost impossible (Baki, 2004).

Mengash (2001) pointed out an additional barrier for Saudi women wishing to engage in formal education – restrictions on admissions. With the rapidly increasing registration in female universities, the admissions capacity of the universities is far below the numbers of applicants. Moreover, because females in Saudi Arabia must be taught be female faculty members (due both to tradition and religions conditions), there is a shortage of skilled Saudi female faculty to handle the growing of female student registrations. Consequently, Saudi Arabian universities have grown dependent on foreign female faculty members, but foreigners bring with them their own difficulties, ranging from raising the cost of their services to unwelcome traditions and culture. In addition to inadequate or non-existent accommodations, female campuses lack services and funding compared to male campuses (Mengash, 2001).

Islamic law is entrenched in Saudi education programs. The aim of education is to introduce to Saudi culture a specific concept of the ethical and spiritual life for Saudi citizens. This concept is based on the segregation of the sexes. The Saudi education system considers the genders separately because of their diverse social potentials. Therefore, men are trained to carry out male activities, such as engineering, constructing, and managing businesses, and women are trained to carry out female activities, such as mothering, nurturing and being good housewives. In accordance with this pre-set Islamic concept, university courses are different for females and males based solely on gender (Baki, 2004).

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Regarding the quality of female education under this system, Hamdan (2005) argues that women do not receive the same quality of education as men because teachers for men are better trained. More than 34 per cent of men teaching at men's universities hold doctorates compared to only three per cent of those who teach at women's universities and colleges (p. 53). Moreover, Gouthro (2000) points out the universities' general lack of response to female concerns. This lack of response is particularly evident in the refusal to address policies regarding fundamental practices about gender bias. In addition, universities need to address safety issues and policies such as sexual harassment for women so that they feel secure moving around campus (Gouthro, 2000). With all of these issues and barriers, it is clear that Saudi women still do not have the right to make choices and decisions about their higher education, as unfortunately those decisions are still in the hands of men (Mengash, 2001).

Currently:

Women's involvement in education has also been a massive step towards the freedom and the government has provided equal opportunities to them. Conversion rate of unemployment to employment among the Saudi women has drastically improved as tertiary education has reached them during the past decade. Government has played a crucial role in providing the females with equal opportunities towards the reception of modern education. This has definitely increased the amount of independence and empowerment among the women to equally participate in professional affairs alongside men (Mackinnon, 2018).

Another change in the current educational system to reduce gender inequality is the increased number of female students getting enrolled in public as well as private universities. This rising number is being observed as a result of King Abdullah scholarship program, which was started during the previous decade. In health related universities, the number of female students' enrollment has been observed to be double in number as compared to the male students. This wasn't the case previously (Sandekian et al, 2015).

Gender equality has been experienced in the job sector during the current times as well. Many public as well as private companies belonging to different professions have employed Saudi women. Saudis have replaced foreign workforce in multiple sectors and a handful number of these employees are females. It is important to address that the females in their workplaces, which include segregation, discrimination and harassment, have faced a few problems. But, the overall number of female employment has not gone down (Syed et al, 2018).

Conclusion:

Overall, as outlined above, women face many and varied barriers – whether situational, institutional, financial or gendered – which can prevent them from continuing or even starting their education. To overcome these barriers and resolve their unique challenges, women need appropriate support. Knowing and examining the barriers to women who want to participate in education and the difficulties that face them when they practice formal education would help to decrease the barriers and overcome the difficulties by finding solutions for policymakers and educational institutions. The role of lifelong learning is to change the

negative attitude that some families and husbands (and even some women) have towards education. As well, lifelong learning helps learners to grow a sense of collaborative participation in order to build up their communities and become skilled workers and informed and dynamically engaged citizens. For these reasons alone, women need access to lifelong learning, as the more they know, the more than can share with others and pass their knowledge to their families and children.

Nevertheless, the solutions that are occur now are still better than in the past when there was no technology, except for live lecture broadcasting. Today's technologies facilitate women's studies, as women can learn and get their degree from a distance. Currently, adult education is increasing in demand especially for women. This trend must be taken seriously by the governments and policymakers if they are to meet the needs of adults and of adult education.

This paper discussed the challenges that women must contend with if they decide to return to formal education programs after a long or short period of absence from the classroom. It also discussed the current trends and changes that have taken place during the past decade especially after the advent of vision 2030. Increased number of female students' enrollment and employment has resulted in a bright ray of hope in coming years for female empowerment.

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