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**Perspectives on the Construction of (*Multisecting*) Identities of Female Academics in Saudi Arabia**

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## **Perspectives on the Construction of (*Multisecting*) Identities of Female Academics in Saudi Arabia**

### **Abstract**

In under-researched contexts in the global south and specifically in Middle-Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, uncoupling how preconceptions of social and career constraints are infused into the psyche of women, and how paradoxes implicit influence how their sense of self is crafted while theoretically fundamental, remain largely unexplored. In this article, we introduce the construct *multisecting identities* to explore contextual paradoxes regarding how patriarchal relations influence the construction/crafting of identities among women in academia in Saudi Arabia. We adopt a qualitative approach, using unstructured interviews of twenty women in two universities in Saudi Arabia, whom we engage in a conversation in which they tell their life stories by way of narratives. We hope to contribute to the discussion on intersectionality and diversity management by showing nuances of identity/identity construction among women in under-researched contexts of the global south, specifically in the academia in Saudi Arabia and implications for addressing/challenging inequality.

## 1.0. Introduction

In the last few decades, a trend has emerged across professions in the global north in the form of empirical research and theoretical analysis on diversity management and specifically gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age amongst others (Zanoni & Janssens, 2004; Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008). However, regarding gender research in under-researched contexts in the global south and specifically in Middle-Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, uncoupling how preconceptions of social and career constraints (stereotyping, power structures, gender roles, socio-cultural attitudes, and institutional constraints) are infused into the psyche of women, and how implicit paradoxes influence how their sense of self is crafted while theoretically fundamental remain largely unexplored. In this article, we explore how patriarchal relations influence the construction/crafting of identities among women in academia in Saudi Arabia. We argue that the assumption that gender is a performance imposed upon the woman by the patriarchy (Butler, 1988) is overly simplistic and counterproductive for analysing relations of power between the sexes in Saudi Arabia. Therefore we suggest that analysing or challenging female subjugation in that context may require the need to treat female identities not just as intersecting (Zanoni, 2011) but as *multisecting* – literal as well as symbolic, co-constructed, shifting/fluid, paradoxical, coerced yet approved and even self-refuting.

### 1.1. Purpose

While patriarchy is evidenced in much of the Middle East and specifically in Saudi Arabia (Almassi, 2015), there is scholarly evidence that a patriarchal, hierarchical structure within organisations is also present in developed (and secular) countries (Powell, 1999). Indeed, predispositions towards women as the weaker, less valuable sex in much of the Middle-East are exactly the stereotypes that were used to rationalise disallowing female suffrage in an earlier period in Western societies (Lorde, 2000). The difference, however, is that in Saudi Arabia, male domination and the discriminatory tagging of social identities as well as power and class relations is official, institutionalised and legitimated by both state and the dominant religious institutions (Almunajjed, 2010). Thus, Alwedini (2016) argues, while this form of domination against women happens in the developed West *subtly*, it happens more *openly* in Saudi Arabia. Studies like those of Sidani (2005) specifically point to the existence of discrimination against women within Saudi organisations even before they enter those organisations. Most of these studies, though describe rather than explain female identity in these contexts, which they view as literal, bounded and granted, adopt a more general approach and do not reveal if stereotypical attitudes towards women career progression and job roles are unique to certain professions and if this has implications for the dynamics of power relations between the sexes (Al-Lamky, 2007; Almunajjed, 2010).

We argue in this paper that to challenge or address female subjugation in Saudi Arabia, nuances and paradoxes of how women craft identity in that context must be uncoupled. For instance, Sidani (2005) has argued that not every woman in Saudi organisations sees career restrictions as limiting. Rather, many perceive organisational constraints *positively* (in the sense that they see themselves as endangered and that these societal and organisational barriers are meant to guide and honour them). That is, implicit in these constraints, paradoxically, are elements that are perceived by these women as liberating. This state of affairs has a social but also a cognitive side, which translates into some level of responsibility

on the part of women for reinforcing inequalities. Indeed, the need to raise consciousness is suggested by classical writers like de Beauvoir (1952). These state of affairs, though are in contrast to some studies of mainly Western orientation, which present these constraints as perceived negatively by all women (Acker, 2006). Consequently, in this study, we suggest a need to explore a woman's identities in these contexts as *multisecting* - that is literal as well as symbolic, bounded but also shifting/fluid, coerced yet co-approved and paradoxical/self-refuting. We argue that *multisecting identities* also include implications of imperatives like class/status, wealth/influence/affluence and ethnicity for how women see self or are seen/treated within and outside the organisation.

## **1.2. Theoretical Contribution: How Female Identity is Crafted in Saudi Arabia**

Several studies such as Breines (2002) have challenged the conceptualisation of female identity as distinct, a view that has resulted in two opposing camps: one that *embraced identity* as the key to the liberation of the woman; and a second that sees freedom in *resistance to identity*. The former is best illustrated by feminists of colour and ethnicity, whose identity politics and intersectionality theory critiqued what it alleged as essentialist, and white-centeredness of feminist thought and failure to adequately address the simultaneous and multiple oppressions women experienced (Spelman, 1988). The latter critically questioned the notion of clear identities viewing freedom as the struggle against categorisation/identity. During the 1990s, this theory of intersecting, simultaneous and multiple oppressions/discrimination and identities was rearticulated, largely as a result of the writings of Collins (1990), who (re) named intersectionality theory.

These perspectives may be used to examine how a woman's sense of self is crafted in the Arab World and specifically in Saudi Arabia. It includes how power is unfairly distributed to the advantage of men, how women's reality (sense of self or identity) is perceived and interpreted (by women as well as men) as an exception to the male norm, as well as how the relationship between males and females is embedded in social, structural and institutional means rooted in religious dogma and traditional Arab culture. Based on this latter point, Almassi (2015) argues that the position of women in Saudi Arabia is defined by religious/cultural imperatives which are relatively stable rather than in flux as evidenced in most parts of the developed world. This assertion has some implications for the main ideas of the different perspectives of feminism in unravelling the issue of women underrepresentation in professions across Saudi Arabia, but more specifically in higher educational institutions (Al-Khateeb, 2007). It implies for instance that constraints on the woman imposed through structural, legal, institutional and organisational means founded on Islam may be difficult to change, unlike the more dynamic structures against which the *waves* (perspectives) of feminism developed in Western democracies.

Further, the idea by Lorde (2000) that women may be complicit in their domination by the patriarchy may not adequately explain the more complex state of affairs in Saudi Arabia. Neither does De Beauvoir's (1952) notion - of how women can be free from male domination by recrafting their identity or sense of self through refusal to internalise male slapped identity labels - resonate in this part of the world. Religious socialisation is woven into the very fabric of everyday life in Saudi Arabia and compels the internalisation of the expectations of a patriarchal society by Saudi women. A woman's progress/success or interpretations of same (as defined by the patriarchy) is dependent on the real-life portrayal of

an *approved* identity – one which keeps them dominated. Butler (1988) reveals this aspect of gender identity formation and subjugation in Saudi Arabia through the theory of performativity. The author suggests that the act of *performing gender* constitutes a woman's identity in these contexts. Identity then may be *retroactively created* by a woman's performances (acts of coerced compliance) compelled by social, institutional, religious and organisational controls by the patriarchy or by what Butler (1988) calls social sanction and taboo. In essence, the identities which inform a woman's behaviour in Saudi Arabia are the result of two imperatives: subtle as well as blatant coercion or external forms of oppression linked to patriarchy (Breines, 2002).

### **1.3. Gaps and Contributions**

Since the initial gendered studies by Kanter (1977), others over time have focussed on different aspects of managing diverse identities (Romani, Holck, Holgersson, & Muhr, 2017), gendered division of labour/managerial styles (e.g. Vinnicombe, 1988) and under-representation of women in top management (Powell, 1999). These studies were influenced by the significantly low number of female professionals in top positions and more specifically, how discrimination has constrained the career progression of women in some countries, including countries in the Middle East (Alwedini, 2016). However, in contrast to extant studies, this present study reveals how patriarchal values – through religion, traditional beliefs and norms - determine paradoxes implicit in how women see themselves and how this may be linked to power relations between the sexes. These insights, while significant for challenging/addressing inequality and managing diversity, remain largely unexplored. Further, where studies relating to Saudi Arabia exist, the focus has been on certain considerations such as women's position in the labour market (Norris, 2009), women and education (Hamdan, 2005), women's socio-economic status (Al-Khateeb, 2007) among others. Though these studies reveal a picture of the changes that the country has gone through especially in the educational sector, they do not deal with the cognitive aspects of female identity and how this translates to power relations specifically within organisations and in this case, the academia. Indeed, the use of methods such as autobiographical life histories/narratives/self ethnography in these contexts as adopted in this study is novel. This study addresses the research question: *How do female academics negotiate multiple identities in pursuit of careers in Saudi Arabia?*

### **1.4. Methods and Methodology**

This study adopts narratives (biography/autobiography) to present participant's accounts as life histories and seeks to explore how professional women in academia see themselves while negotiating multiple identities. Using a Social Constructionist lens, we focus on the subjective experiences of women and the organisational and wider socio-cultural implications of these experiences for challenging inequality, which adds an emotional/empathetic dimension to the study and implies that certain experiences of our respondents are shared. The study assumes a political dimension because by lending a voice for the emancipation of women from discrimination, subjugation and suppression, the authors are motivated by the possibility of social change in that part of the world. The framework of this study is based on views on narratives, reflection and reflexivity within qualitative research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009) as well as views from other scholars on research methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Drawing on these studies, we adopt a qualitative approach, using

unstructured interviews as a data collection tool by engaging 20 women in two universities in Saudi Arabia in a conversation in which they tell their life stories by way of narratives. The findings of these conversations, which have been analysed using thematic analysis, are briefly discussed hereunder.

### **1.5. Findings (Ongoing)**

Preliminary findings which emerged from the analysis of data include the following:

- **Societal restrictions in organisational settings:**

Organisational practices are extensions of the subjugation of women in the wider society through male preferences, work processes/interaction.

- **Favouritism**

Not every woman was career stagnated or constrained. Preferential treatment was at play from male administrators.

- **Family support**

It was quite normal for male family members and relatives to intervene in official issues concerning female relatives.

- **Male Empathy**

Some women signified that at least a man connected to family members directly aided them. Familial-organisational connections, therefore, drove empathy or help here.

- **Agency**

Women form networks of informal relationships through which they get things done, have their voices heard and got their needs met.

- **Self-fulfilling activities**

Women circumvented limitations by engaging in activities within and outside the organisation not related to climbing the career ladder.

- **The paradox of religion**

Religious dogma was a constraint and yet offered relief simultaneously. Women attributed their limitations to its tenets yet saw its constraints as necessary to focus the woman's attention on her primary role, which is taking care of the home.

### **1.6. Summary**

Our study reveals how culture and convention may determine a woman's sense of self in under-researched contexts like Saudi Arabia. We argue that, firstly, in Saudi Arabia, the idea that identity as a performance (Butler, 1984) imposed upon the woman does not always fit into what Lacan (1982) terms the symbolic order (the system of signs and conventions that determines the perception of what the woman sees as reality). Secondly, analysing or challenging female subjugation in that context may require the need to treat female identities not just as intersecting but as *multisecting* - symbolic, co-constructed, shifting/fluid, paradoxical, coerced yet approved. Here, multisecting identities may not be limited to,

gender, social class, profession, pay, marital status, age, disability, organisational tasks/role, position etc then – it encompasses nuances of literal and symbolic elements of a woman's identity contingent on contradictions in identity construction which, in under-researched contexts like Saudi Arabia, has implications for relations of power between the sexes. These perspectives such as our study advances contribute to the ongoing debate on intersectionality and diversity management by showing nuances of identity/identity construction among women in under-researched contexts of the global south and specifically in the academia in Saudi Arabia.



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