Exploring the challenges for women working in the event and festival sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the participation of women in many activities, including employment, is severely restricted and their continued exclusion from public life is a significant issue as KSA looks to improve its economic prosperity. Women’s underrepresentation in many economic sectors is a focus of the national ‘Saudi Vision 2030’ programme. By cultivating an understanding of the workplace challenges and employment limitations faced by women in KSA, government and industry can improve employment opportunities for Saudi women. The primary aim of this study is to explore the challenges for women working in the KSA event and festival sector. This research used a case study approach involving semi-structured interviews with personnel from within event and festival organisations and ministries in KSA. The study identified several challenges to Saudi women’s inclusion in the sector: cultural values, social network, workplace environment, education and training, gender diversity and regulation. Addressing these issues through evidence-based strategies can improve empowerment and inclusion of women in the event and festival sector. The lessons learned can also be applied to other employment sectors in KSA and extend our current knowledge of challenges to women’s empowerment by providing new perspectives arising from the context of KSA.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Empowering women, Saudi Vision 2030, Tourism, Entertainment, Event and Festival.

Introduction

The extent to which the lives of men and women are kept separate and women’s lives restricted, varies from country to country. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the limitations upon women are strict and the persistence of women’s exclusion from public life, including employment, is one of the biggest problems facing the country (Rajkhan, 2014). Despite the potential capacity for increased employment of women in a range of sectors in the KSA, women continue to be underutilised. For example, Saudi women occupy only 13 per cent of private and public positions, but account for 54 per cent of Saudi graduates (Gazette, 2015). This underrepresentation is now highlighted in a national programme, Saudi Vision 2030,
which includes the goal of increasing the employment rate of women from 22 per cent to 30 per cent (Saudi Arabia Vision 2030, 2016). Vision 2030 is designed to empower women in the workforce and to support and encourage them to work in different areas. It is expected that increasing the participation of women in the workforce will increase the economic prosperity of the KSA, but to date, there have been no empirical studies evaluating the effectiveness or extent of the Vision 2030’s goals for improving women’s participation. There is also a need for more women to work and be trained in the field of event management because having more women involved in the management of festivals will enable more inclusive strategies to be developed and the development of marketing materials that cater to the needs of female event attendees as well as promote equality (Fullagar, 2012).

The General Authority for Entertainment was launched in 2016 by a monarchy order of King Salman’s regime to ‘organize, develop and lead the entertainment sector to provide exciting entertainment options and tailored experiences to meet the needs of people from all walks of life around KSA. Also, to contribute in improving and enriching the lifestyle and social cohesion among the community’ (General Authority for Entertainment Saudi Arabia, 2017). The entertainment industry is closely linked to the tourism market (Gowreesunkar, 2015) with the two industries having substantial overlap. For instance, the festivals and events sector is one of the key converging points of the tourism and entertainment industries. KSA’s tourism industry is flourishing; between 2005 and 2016, the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) established approximately 730 events and festivals in KSA, which attracted more than 28 million international tourists and 85 million local visitors (SCTH, 2017). These events and festivals generated over SR8 billion (USD2 billion) and contributed to the creation of more than 86,000 temporary jobs, of which 70 per cent were for young people (SCTH, 2017). Despite the economic and cultural importance of the entertainment tourism industry in the KSA, and its potential to provide significant employment opportunities, in 2008
KSA was the lowest-ranked country globally in terms of women’s participation in tourism employment (1.5%), which included the entertainment sector (Baum, 2013). In comparison, in another Gulf country, Oman, Omani females made up 25.6% of workers in the tourism sector in 2016 (Räisänen, 2018). Improving the empowerment and participation of women’s in the KSA event and festival sector is therefore an important goal that will contribute to the overall aims of the Saudi Vision 2030 (Saudi Arabia Vision 2030, 2016).

This exploratory study is the first to provide an understanding of the challenges for Saudi women working in the event and festival sector. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the issue of women’s empowerment in the event and festival sector through the identification of obstacles to women’s inclusion and the provision of evidence-based strategies to ameliorate these challenges. Given the increasing numbers of events and festivals hosted in the KSA, along with substantial employment, revenue and diversity implications of those activities (SCTH, 2017), this research provides constructive information regarding women’s empowerment that may be used to improve the KSA event and festival sector, specifically, or other sectors in the KSA and other Middle Eastern countries with similar cultural structures, more generally.

**Literature Review**

**Status of women in the workplace**

Carreon et al. (2013) claimed that the number of women working in the labour force is increasing, including married women and women in their prime child-bearing and rearing years. Statistics have shown that 45 per cent of women worldwide are participating in the workforce, although the rate varies in different regions. However, Krivkovich et al. (2017) argued that gender inequality persists in the workplace, relating to leadership, pay and responsibilities, despite women having improved access to education. Unfortunately, the
commitment to the career development of women is still slow in many places (Krivkovich et al., 2017). Despite the low proportion of women in leadership positions, many workers believe that women are well represented in leadership (Krivkovich et al., 2017). However, there were only 24 female CEOs in Fortune 500 companies in 2018, compared to 32 a few years earlier, which demonstrates that gender equality in the workplace is not improving (Atkins, 2018). Perhaps this is because people appear to be comfortable with the status quo and do not see the need for urgent change (Atkins, 2018). In addition, male managers might not fully understand the obstacles holding women back at work, so they are less concerned and committed to gender equality and increasing workplace diversity (Krivkovich et al., 2017). This is a concern because equality for women in the workplace requires the participation and commitment of men (Krivkovich et al., 2017).

In some regions, the expectation for women to assume greater parenting responsibilities has driven researchers to address whether the career priorities of working men and women differed, although there was little difference between the two (Walters, 2018). However, in the KSA, the average unemployment rate for women is disproportionately higher (26.6%) than it is for men (7.2%). This discrepancy is one reason behind the Vision 2030 goal to increase the contribution of Saudi women in the workforce and decrease their high unemployment rate (Elmulthum & Elsayed, 2017). These changes are attributed to several factors, including increased education of women, increased need for services provided by the traditional female occupations, changes in life and family patterns, and changing social standards.

**Barriers to women in the workplace**

There is a common perception in the tourism industry that women are uncommitted and lack ambition (Costa et al., 2017). This view can be explained by the social role of women, who are expected to assume the responsibility of raising the family and providing care for children. Exiting the industry to raise a family is misconstrued as demonstrating a lack of
commitment and ambition (Benschop, van den Brink, Doorewaard, & Leenders., 2013; Teasdale, 2013). This perception has not only experienced by the working women but even tourist women were perceived differently to men. Therefore, increasing women employment would help in increasing female tourist engagement, satisfactions and would increase the need of female workers (Rasoolimanesh, Khoo-Lattimore, Md Noor, Jaafar, & Konar, 2020). Therefore, women suffer as a consequence of the gendered social roles they are expected to perform, which limits the opportunity for growth and the opportunity for promotion for women, and restricts the progression of women into managerial levels of the industry (Costa et al., 2017; Hester, 2007). According to Whitelaw (2003) some studies suggest that “the women's lower satisfaction with future career options may indicate that these women have encountered a second, higher glass ceiling” (p.42). The problem of the ‘glass ceiling’ is amplified by culture, which intersects with gender, education level, generation, religion, organisation or department in shaping the glass ceiling or barriers that impede women’s progression in the workplace. Remington and Kitterlin-Lynch (2018) found women who have broken through the glass ceiling have addressed the issue of gender bias in the organisation and they have been proactive in highlighting the benefits that they bring to the organisation and have sought to influence cultural change in the organisation.

According to Wilson (2014), there are several strategies to overcome barriers and to manage diversity and intercultural competence skills, including differentiating diversity through cultural awareness, enhanced employee engagement and reduced harassment complaints in the workplace (Distelhorst, 2007). A study by Andrews (2013) supports the idea of different styles of gender communication, in that there are distinct variances between men and women in the workplace in Saudi culture. He added that communication between males and females is not encouraged in general and this has hindered the ability and willingness of women to communicate with their male counterparts (Andrews, 2013). In many cases men do
not even recognize communication as being an issue that may affect women’s participation. They fail to acknowledge that working in a mixed-gender environment is a major difficulty for women. As evidenced by Al-Hazmi et al. (2017), this factor is amplified in the KSA because Saudi society is staunchly patriarchal and male-dominated. Moreover, sexual harassment is often justified due to an absence of harassment deterrent laws and regulations (Al-Hazmi et al., 2017).

**Women and employment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

The KSA is a gender-segregated society, in which men and women are not allowed to work together, which is one of the major obstacles hindering women’s participation in the workplace (Hakem, 2017). Further, KSA’s law of guardianship—in which women must be accompanied by a male relative at all times—is a barrier to Saudi women (Karolak, 2013). In particular, women are required to obtain permission from a male guardian to work (Alhabidi, 2013). However, Hakem (2017) argued that Arab women are confident and have the ability to make changes in society. For example, some social movements in the Middle East and Arab countries have attempted to eliminate restrictions on women’s work opportunities by recruiting them into gender-segregated facilities to enable women to represent themselves in public fields (Hakem, 2017). There are currently improvements being made in the KSA to emancipate Saudi women through opportunities to study abroad and hold leadership positions (Karolak, 2013). However, there has been no empirical research to investigate the effectiveness of these initiatives. Additionally, it is important to gather insights from practitioners, which can contribute to the empowerment of women in the workplace.

There are significant cultural barriers faced by Saudi women in the workplace, including limited access to higher education, traditional attitudes toward women, male-dominated work environments and low wages (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Al-Gabri, 2012). These barriers can be explained by the gender-segregated social system and cultural values that
prevail in contemporary KSA. In many strict Muslim countries, the debate of empowering women has mostly not occurred. In the Saudi gender-segregated society, the activities of women are very limited and often prohibited. Further, open and public discussion of these matters raises great objections (Rajkhan, 2014). Although the custom of keeping women secluded is considered by many Muslims to be respectful and protective of women, in the West and more recently amongst Muslim women, it is considered oppressive. Moreover, this is not a general reflection of Muslim society because there are several cultures with Muslim women working and thriving in the workforce (e.g., India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Turkey). Therefore, with the changes in Saudi rules and policies to enable more work opportunities for women in different fields, it is beneficial to investigate whether these challenges remain barriers.

Family approval relates to different lifestyles, such as Bedouin or provincial thinking (Aldraehim et al., 2012). Al-Shehry et al. (2006) addressed the reasons behind the effects of the tribal system in the KSA on the business environment. Family customs and traditions limit the opportunities of women to work in many sectors. In Saudi society, many employers and managers use family and tribal connections to their advantage in introductory meetings, which is different from Western cultures (Algumzi, 2017). Although many Saudi women have the ambition and ability to adapt to changes in economic, social and cultural variables, cultural and social pressures and barriers often prevent them from attempting to overcome these issues within the workplace and amongst broader society (Hakem, 2017).

Additionally, nepotism significantly limits employment opportunities for women. In this context, nepotism involves ‘the employment of relatives’ (Ford & McLaughlin, 1986, p. 78). While nepotism is common around the world, it is more observable and serious in developing countries (Abdalla et al., 1998; Arasli et al., 2006). For cultures that have different religious, tribal and national backgrounds, nepotistic practices are more common (Vanhanen,
Al-Shehry et al. (2006) investigated the effects of the tribal system and the significance of nepotism in the KSA on the business environment. As a result of the gender-segregated society and the lack of networking opportunities, women appear to be left out because they are unable to socialise with policymakers, who are generally all males and who prefer to employ male relatives.

Saudi women experience multiple social and cultural challenges, although they are now beginning to overcome the barriers as a result of societal development, which has been supported by national initiatives. Women have begun collaborating extensively in the job market and the KSA has begun to appeal for foreign investment. Families now travel overseas for tourism and educational opportunities (Al-Khateeb, 2007). This international exposure has led Saudi citizens to become more experienced with tourism possibilities, while their improved education and heightened economic status has encouraged them to be more open-minded (Alghamdi, 2014).

According to Thompson (2015), members of the Shura Council (consultative council), executive directors, teachers, bankers and other sectors have agreed that women have the ability to work in leadership positions and that the participation of Saudi women and their work in leadership positions plays a major role in encouraging other women to achieve great things and succeed in the future. However, only 3.2 per cent of managers are women (Glowork, 2017). Until recently, careers for women in KSA were limited to the education sector. However, Saudi authorities have begun to provide scholarships and incentives to employers in other fields in which women hold positions, including tourism (Alfarran, 2016).

**Women in the KSA tourism sector**

According to UNWTO (2011), women’s participation in the tourism industry is very low in the Middle East countries, especially in the KSA. Saudi women make up only 1.5 per cent of employees in the tourism and entertainment sector. Given that Gulf countries, including
the KSA, have attempted to diversify their economies to decrease their reliance on oil revenue, tourism has become an increasingly important economic sector (Baum, 2013). For example, 10 per cent of the Egyptian population depends on tourism for employment, in Bahrain 17–18 per cent of jobs are in tourism and in Oman, 50 per cent of hotel employees must be local citizens (Baum, 2013). Greater involvement of women in the tourism sector could make a significant contribution to the economy of KSA and improve the empowerment of women working in the sector. Within the handful of studies that have investigated the event and festival sector in the Middle Eastern region from the practitioners’ perspective, Valek and Fotiadis (2019) examined the happiness and wellbeing of event organisers without discerning gender differences. As such, gaps remain in terms of gender equal participation in the field is not well documented.

Prior research has identified gender inequality in events (Khoo-Lattimore, Yang, & Je, 2019). However, little is known about Saudi Arabia and Saudi women participation in Tourism and Event and festival sectors. Empowering women is important to enhance the numbers and roles of women working in the event and festival sector in the KSA and to increase the economic prosperity of the country. Within the context of Saudi Arabia multiple factors influence the empowerment of women in the workforce, such as education, culture, religious context and working environment, including in the tourism and entertainment industries. Although the KSA wants to increase the representation of women in the workforce through the Vision 2030 programme, little is known about how to practically make that happen. Therefore, much more discussion is required around the challenges women face and how to overcome them to achieve a more equitable KSA work environment.
Materials and methods

Research design and sampling

A qualitative case study research design was utilised for this exploratory study, which used inductive research to explore the meanings of specific contexts and develop new insights and understandings of human behaviour (Hyett, 2014; Spector, 2017). The qualitative case study approach is appropriate for a study in a bounded system with clearly defined parameters (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), which allows for an in-depth study of the system. In this study, the bounded system was Saudi women working in the event and festival sector in the KSA.

Purposive sampling (Robinson, 2014) was used to identify policymakers in the event and festival sector and women working in these sectors, to collect data on the problem of women’s empowerment in the industry. Participants were selected based on their ability to provide in-depth details and comprehensive information about the selected phenomena (Ray, 2012; Tongco, 2007). There were two participant groups: the first included the event and festival sector policymakers who occupied higher positions and the second included women who worked in events and festivals as managers or organisers. Participants were recruited via personal connection through key informants who worked in the field and personal connections to identify and recruit participants from six different event and festival businesses.

Data collection through interviews

Interviews were conducted online via Skype and Facetime—video call with women and voice call with male policymakers—and were conducted in Arabic then translated to English by the first author whose is a native Arabic speaker and fluent in English. The interviews took into consideration geographical and time limits as well as financial constraints. The relatively low number of participants was due to the relatively young age of the industry in the KSA, the limited number of women working in the industry and the potential reluctance of some women to participate in the study. Moreover, there were difficulties in recruiting policymakers in this
study, who may be considered difficult to access because they occupy intensive positions and do not have enough time to assign to other activities. The social norms regarding contact between women and men in KSA presented another challenge for data collection because Saudi men are usually unwilling to communicate with unrelated women. The study was conducted in 2018 from July to Oct 2018. The average length of the interviews were 45 to 60 minutes.

The first author of this article is a Saudi female. Being a Saudi woman was helpful in connecting with the men and women interviewed in this research because she was able to speak with them in their language and share experiences with the women in relation to being a Saudi woman. Being a Saudi woman, she was also able to select the cases based on several criteria including her background and own experience and was familiar with the relevant policies.

Interview questions focused on the challenges faced by women in the workplace in the event and festival sector, and potential strategies to empower women in this sector. Data collection began with female organisers of events and festivals and then shifted to policymaker participants. The focus of those interviews was to explore the factors and challenges affecting their participation in the event and festival sector as well as general challenges experienced while working. The interview with policymakers aimed to collect insights about women’s inclusion in the event and festival sector from an administrative perspective because these interviewees have the authority to bring about changes and to include women in the industry. The focus of these interviews was to identify what policies should be implemented to empower women in the field.

Data analysis

The recordings were first transcribed into Arabic then translated into English for further analysis. Thematic analysis was utilised as the guiding data analysis technique because it permitted flexibility and provided rich, detailed and complex interpretations of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The technique enabled the researcher to identify the themes and patterns that
were present in the data (Nowell et al., 2017). The process began through the coding of key concepts raised during interviews using NVivo, which enabled flexibility in analysis and had a range of tools to handle the rich information. Using a line-by-line coding methodology, the data were analysed and the themes and key concepts were identified. The themes were organised according to the research questions. All themes were reviewed and checked to ensure they contained relevant responses and were compared with the original dataset and across the transcripts. The analysis and presentation of findings were consistent with an interpretivist epistemology. For example, different opinions expressed in this research were considered rather than attempting to reduce the findings into a single objective truth. The interpretation was influenced by the researcher’s identity as a Saudi woman. The findings did not emerge from using an automated text analysis software, but rather through meaning being generated from the data by the researcher.

Results

Twelve participants were interviewed for this bounded exploratory case study: six female organisers and managers, and six male policymakers. There were no women employed as policymakers. Interview extracts from female workers are denoted by the code ‘FW’, while male policymakers are denoted by the code ‘MP’. Tables 1 and 2 display the demographics of the twelve participants. The targeted participants were from different regions in the KSA. The participants’ positions were purposefully chosen to provide a broad perspective for this research. All participants were experienced in the field, with a range from two to five years’ industry practice. The women interviewed were educated with no less than a Bachelor or a Masters degree. An indication of the women’s marital status is provided because it matters in women’s cases—although not for men—due to the cultural and social expectations of women in the KSA.
The main research question explored the challenges faced by women in the event and festival sector. This section presents the findings about women’s experiences and the challenges upon which women and policymakers agreed. These challenges included culture, workplace environment, education and training and gender diversity (see Figure 1). There were some differences for women regarding the challenges of social networking and regulation, although these themes were not mentioned by the policymaker group.

--- Insert Table 1, Table 2 and Figure 1 near here ---------------------------------------------

**Culture**

The first challenge that both groups of participants spoke about was culture, which was related to religion, beliefs, knowledge, values, spatial relations and roles (Al-Ahmadi, 2011). The cultural norms faced by women in the KSA are complex, with stricter boundaries imposed on their freedoms compared to men. All participants agreed that there were many difficulties relating to culture for women who want to work, or are working, in the event and festival sector.

One factor that contributes to cultural challenges for women in the workplace is the women’s families. Ten out of 12 participants identified family as a significant barrier and challenge faced by women in this sector. The women workers and male policymakers stated that the main factors that negatively impacted women’s inclusion in culture were disapproval from family and societal perception of women working in a mixed-gender workplace. A mixed-gender workplace was also considered to be a major challenge faced by women. Four out of six female participants identified how family and social perceptions negatively affected women and their participation in these sectors:

My family don’t like this kind of job and prohibit me from working in any of these workplaces because they are mixed-gender workplaces. And they care a lot about what people are going to say about me if I work in these places. I consider my family as extreme
who care about everything to do with religion, culture and community. They believe in what they hear about women working in places such as events or festivals. And how women are seen as morally corrupted who will spend their lives partaking in immoral behaviour, breaking the rules, traditions and cultures. They think those women will give up their morals and ethics and become westernised. (FW6)

Family—particularly older male members—was identified as the most significant barrier to women working in this sector. The policymakers agreed that family acceptance is one of the biggest challenges faced by Saudi women in work participation. A male policymaker stated: ‘The difficulty is the social acceptance of women working, because some families still refuse to allow their women to work in this place or field’ (MP3). However, there is hope that attitudes may be changing. For example, FW3’s family holds a different opinion towards women participation in the workplace. FW3 stated that she received ‘support from my parents and brothers. They are so proud of me and they helped me a lot … My husband was one of the most supportive and encouraging … My husband encourages empowering Saudi women’. Although Saudi culture is patriarchal, the effects vary across families. Responses like those from FW3’s family suggest that change may be coming. Further, well-educated families tend to be more open-minded and open to change because they differentiate between moderate religion and extreme and between tradition and the right of women to work. Therefore, some women have more flexibility to choose the work they want.

The findings of this study suggested that a change in culture should be considered as one of the strategies to overcome barriers (Wilson, 2014), which concurred with Al-Gabri’s (2012) finding that social standards was a major obstacle faced by women working in the KSA because the conservative local culture impeded women’s entry to the event and festival sector. The cultural background and effects of that culture on human behaviour are significant for Saudi women. Extensive research (e.g., Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Alghamdi, 2014; Almathami (2019); Metcalfe, 2011; Zamberi Ahmad, 2011) has confirmed this conclusion, which
highlights how restrictions, such as male permission being required when making life and work decisions, can affect Saudi women’s ability to work. A policymaker participant lamented: ‘Some people in society still don’t accept women working in these sectors and fields’ (MP1). However, some women choose to challenge tradition (Alghamdi, 2014) and have become very successful (Alzahrani, 2012). These trailblazers can potentially begin to incite cultural change within the workplace. However, the significance of cultural values and attitudes that women have received from their family and society should not be dismissed. It is evident that this restrictive traditional view results in few jobs being available for women in the event and festival sector. Attempting major changes to cultural attitudes and people’s mind-sets will be difficult. While the current norms remain, Saudi women will continue to face barriers to working in these sectors.

**Social network**

Saudi women working in the event and festival sector considered their social network to be another challenge they faced. Four of the six women participants mentioned nepotism and a lack of networks to be challenges they and other women encountered. They suggested that people who gained their jobs via networks and nepotism were generally unqualified for their employment, whereas qualified candidates were not necessarily considered. One of the interviewees mentioned: ‘It is hard for women because men have more relationships than women and most of the employees in these agencies are men’ (FW2). Another participant added: ‘Most of the women can’t find a job because they do not have a strong network’ (FW4). A study on culture by Algumzi (2017) suggested that in Saudi society, some employers and managers use family and tribal connections to their advantage in introductory meetings, which is different from Western cultures. Al-Lamki (1999) and Al-Ahmadi (2011) demonstrated that women in the KSA lacked professional networks, which made it more difficult for them to get a job. Al-Ahmadi (2011) noted that women were usually left out of group socialising and
gatherings, which impeded their networking opportunities. Conversely, men often controlled key networks, with access to significant information of the organisation. By excluding women from these networks, they lost out on opportunities to forge new working social relationships that could benefit their careers.

An interrelated challenge for women in the workplace is nepotism. The Arabic term ‘wasta’ directly translates into ‘the employment of relatives’ (Ford & McLaughlin, 1986; Mellahi, 2007). Nepotism presents obstacles for women attempting to enter the field or further their careers. This was recognised by a participant: ‘Wasta works for men either inside or outside of the workplace which benefits them more than women’ (FW1). Nepotism appears to play an important part in the employment process. Another participant supported this claim: ‘If you have wasta, you will get the approval quickly’ (FW3). In Saudi society, your background (e.g., tribe and region), your networks and nepotism can have a strong influence on getting and advancing within the workplace (Algumzi, 2017).

Workplace environment

A further challenge faced by women, which prevents them from working in the event and festival sector is the workplace environment. Most participants identified the workplace environment as a challenge. The factors that negatively affected women’s inclusion in the workplace included inconveniences for married women, mixed-gender workplaces, communication barriers between different sexes and harassment. This finding is consistent with research from the KSA and Western countries.

Regarding inconveniences for married women, three female participants identified how workplace environments may trap or force out women in this sector. One stated: ‘It is difficult for married women, because the environment of this work takes much of your time. It is a bit difficult for them if they don’t have any help or support’ (FW1). Further, most of the policymakers agreed that the work environment is a major barrier. One participant explained:
In this work environment, the long working hours are a challenge that faces women in the workplace, specifically the married women who have children (MP3). These challenges need to be explicitly addressed to make the workplace more flexible and to meet the demands of working families and working mothers. Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (1998) demonstrated that a change in family structure means that there will be shifts in traditional family roles. Without changes to these aspects of the workplace environment, women who have or intend to have children will continue to be discriminated against. Benschop et al. (2013) and Teasdale (2013) found that exiting the industry to raise a family is misconstrued as demonstrating a lack of commitment and ambition. Saudi women may have the ambition and ability to adapt to changes in economic, social and cultural circumstances (Hakem, 2017), but they need workplaces to accept them for these changes to occur.

Working in a mixed-gender environment was found to be another major difficulty. One participant F4 identified the challenge of working in a mixed-gender workplace:

The work was difficult for me because I worked in a mixed-gender workplace. That was my first time working with men. As you know, we did not study or work with men before, not in school nor at university, only in hospitals and some private companies. (FW4)

A male participant supported this point: ‘As this sector is new for women, it is a bit strange for them to work with men and some of them still cannot talk to the men’ (MP5). Mixed-gender workplaces are considered to be a significant factor in Saudi and Arab culture. For example, Hakem (2017) highlighted that segregation between the sexes is one of the major obstacles that hinders women’s participation in the Saudi workforce. Arab societies are gender-segregated, in which men and women are generally not allowed to work together. In particular, communication barriers present additional problems between the sexes. One participant stated: ‘There are barriers in communication among the sexes. Sometimes the girls working with me resort to me to communicate with men [Manager]’ (FW3). Another agreed that the barriers of
communication were problematic: ‘Still there is a gap communication between males and females’ (MP3). Andrews (2013) suggested that there are distinct differences between men and women in the Saudi workplace, including key contrasts between men and women’s communication styles and the conduct of meetings. Communication between males and females is discouraged, which has hindered the ability and willingness of women to communicate with their male counterparts (Andrews, 2013).

A further factor identified in the workplace environment was sexual harassment. One participant claimed: ‘One of the female employees told me she was harassed when she went to sign a contract with a company for their resources for an event’ (FW3). Issues of sexual harassment have been identified in research on women working in the tourism and hospitality sector. For instance, Kensbock et al. (2015) identified how sexual harassment in the tourism and hospitality workplace has major implications for female room attendants. They identified the connection between patriarchal society, which rationalises sexual harassment by men so that it appears to be normal behaviour (Kensbock et al., 2015). This could be worse in the KSA because Saudi society is staunchly patriarchal and male-dominated, so sexual harassment is often justified due to an absence of harassment deterrent laws and regulations (Al-Hazmi et al., 2017).

**Education and training**

A lack of education and training opportunities was also perceived to be a major barrier for women wanting to enter festival or event work. Six participants (3 female workers and 3 male policymakers) identified the significance of this point. This finding was consistent with research in KSA and Western countries. A participant stated: ‘The biggest difficulty we faced, was not having enough experience to organise large events because of the lack of knowledge, information and education about this field’ (FW5). Gentry (2007) suggested that women being
more socially accepted in low-skilled jobs could deter them from seeking work in tourism-related industries because of their lack of education. A policymaker participant argued:

Women have a lack of education, training and qualifications. Therefore, they need to gain qualifications in this sector. However, most of event and festival and tourism degrees are available to men only in KSA. Furthermore, they do not have any experience to help them in working. (MP3)

Al-Lamki (1999) and Al-Ahmadi (2011) found that one of the central obstacles for women managers was their limited opportunities for education. Moreover, several scholars have discussed the need for more education in dealing with this matter (e.g., Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Alghamdi, 2014; Metcalfe, 2011; Zamberi Ahmad, 2011). The lack of available education in the event and festival field emerges as a negative factor or barrier for women who want to work or who are currently working in this sector.

**Gender diversity**

A further challenge was the attitude towards gender diversity, which was noted by five participants. Three of the female interviewees (FW1, FW3 and FW4) argued that the challenge faced by them in this job as a woman was that men dominate the sector. One male policymaker appeared to be opposed to the notion of women in the workplace: ‘Women are good, but I prefer men more than women. To be honest male is male and female is female, so there is a big difference’ (MP2). The perception of Saudi women has not changed substantially even with government support to include them in workplaces. Male workers still consider women to be housewives and nurturing mothers who are incapable of handling work outside the home (e.g., Alsuwaida, 2016; Hakem, 2017). This attitude toward gender diversity affects workplace entry and career development for Saudi women and it has broader implications. Krivkovich et al. (2017) argued that gender inequality persists in the workplace relating to leadership, pay and responsibilities. One policymaker was clear in his opinion: ‘I am against gender diversity
because men are better than women in the workplace’ (MP3). Costa et al. (2017) and Hester (2007) claimed that the glass ceiling—the invisible barrier that exists that limits the opportunity for growth and the opportunity for promotion for women—restricts the progression of women into governance levels of the industry. This factor is a concern for equality of women in the workplace and remains a barrier to women freely working in the event and festival sectors in the KSA.

**Regulation**

The final notable challenge was regulation. Five out of six women participants mentioned regulation as a challenge that they faced, as there are few requirements and regulations specific to women if they want to run an event. One stated: ‘The licence [required for running an event] was one of the biggest challenges for me. It was challenging and tiring for women. You go from office to office and from department to department. The requirements and conditions are different for women as I have to get permission from my male guardian’ (FW2). The female workers argued that government had a role to play in simplifying the system: ‘This thing is tiring and exhausting hope the government will help to make the process easier. They should establish one agency in each city or area in KSA to facilitate the process’ (FW1). Kaufman (1997), Edelman and Suchman (1997) and Mellahi (2007) examined the laws and regulations in KSA and the effect of regulation on the private sector, demonstrating how it sometimes hinders work and success. One participant stated that ‘the factors that can affect women in this field are the laws and some legislation that cannot be bypassed and that sometimes does not suit the culture of the Saudi country’ (FW5). When gender discrimination occurs within the workplace, society and in the country’s governing body, it can further impede and discourage women from meaningful inclusion in the workplace.
Discussion

This study explores the challenges that face Saudi women working in the event and festival sector. The findings of this study may be used to inform more strategic means to empower and increase the number of women working in the event and festival sector in KSA. From the bounded case study, it was evident that there were several factors that negatively affected women’s presence in the event and festival sector in KSA. These factors included:

(1) Cultural factors, including family disapproval and perceptions of working in mixed-gender workplaces.
(2) Social networks, including the lack of networking opportunities and nepotism.
(3) Workplace environment, including inconvenience for married women, mixed workplaces, communication barriers and sexual harassment.
(4) The lack of education and training.
(5) Negative attitudes towards gender diversity, including male-dominated perceptions of women.
(6) Regulations that make it difficult for women to contribute in the event and festival sector.

The challenges identified in this study confirm and/or extend existing studies. In particular, factors related to culture confirm the existing literature and extend it to the Saudi Arabia context. For example, the barriers and challenges faced by Saudi women in the event and festival sector identified in this study confirm and extend previous studies (Algumzi (2017) Al-Ahmadi (2011); Al-Lamki (1999) that argue a gender-segregated society and mixed-gender workplaces, limits women’s access to these types of jobs.

Culture intersects with gender, education level, generation, religion, organization or department in shaping the glass ceiling or barriers that impede women’s progression in the
workplace. Cultural factors in a mixed-gender workplace are examined in the literature by Benschop et al. (2013) and Teasdale (2013). Their research shows that exiting the industry to raise a family is often misconstrued as demonstrating a lack of commitment and ambition. However, change in family structure means there will be a shift in some traditional family roles. Without changes to these aspects of the workplace environment, women who have children (or intend to) will continue to be discriminated against.

Another finding that has extended previous studies relates to nepotism. This study confirms the findings of Algumzi (2017), which states that nepotism or networks can have a strong influence on getting a job and that men benefit more from nepotism than women. This study extends this issue by demonstrating that in many cases men do not even recognize nepotism as being an issue that may affect women’s participation. This mentality only serves to create more obstacles for women trying to enter the workforce or further their careers.

Furthermore, the findings around gender communication in the workplace also expand on previous studies. There are distinct variances between how men and women communicate in the workplace, especially in Saudi culture (Andrews, 2013). Since communication between males and females is discouraged in Saudi culture, it creates a barrier for women when it comes to communicating with their male counterparts in the workplace (Andrews, 2013). In many cases, men fail to see that working in a mixed-gender environment is a major difficulty for women. Even more so in the KSA because Saudi society is staunchly patriarchal and male-dominated (Al-Hazmi et al., 2017). Moreover, sexual harassment is often justified because of a lack of harassment deterrent laws and regulations (Al-Hazmi et al., 2017).

While some aspects of education as a factor are discussed in the existing literature, this study specifically addresses the creation of new degrees. This research examined how lack of education opportunities was a potential cause of low participation in the field. These factors could be considered in future studies to identify whether this applies across other cultures or
just in the Saudi context, but within different fields.

Another finding that extends on previous studies relates to attitudes towards gender diversity and male-dominated perceptions of women. This study confirms the findings of Alsuwaida, (2016) and Hakem, (2017), male workers still consider women to be housewives and nurturing mothers who are incapable of handling work outside the home. Unfortunately, this study as well found that men are still thinking that women unable to do their work. They see women as mothers and wives who are incapable of handling work outside the home, and that men feel they are better than women.

Another notable factor in this discussion are government regulations as the requirements and conditions to get the licence. The effect of regulations on the private sector is demonstrated in how it sometimes hinders work and success. It can further impede and discourage women from meaningful inclusion in the workplace because the gender discrimination occurs within the government regulations for workplace, society and in the country’s governing body.

Implications

This study identified how the government can help in increasing women’s participation in the sector. Two strategies were discussed here. First, encouragement was perceived as the most significant support that government is offering. Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of the Vision 2030 plan, which encourages women’s inclusion in nearly all industries. Second, education is the most powerful way to help women develop the qualifications, skillsets, and knowledge they need to work and succeed. Most participants agreed that it was necessary to increase these supports to bring about more positive changes towards women’s employment and, more importantly, empowerment.

Finally, the study explored existing government support and strategy and examined what else can be done to encourage women’s participation in the event and festival sector. The
government supports were perceived as successful to some extent, but some strategies were recommended to advance the increase of female inclusion. This study suggests providing more specialised institutes and centres for women training purposes, help change Saudi society’s perception of women, and the launch of specialised degrees for women and in the field of events and festivals. These strategies included (i) increasing current encouragement which aims to empower women according to the Vision 2030, such as through the existence of more childcare and transportation; and (ii) offering more education by increasing degrees and training programs in this field, enhancing productivity by training employees and, perhaps most significantly, changing community perceptions of working women.

**Conclusion**

The low employment rates of Saudi female graduates and the lack of studies on low female employment in the event and festival sector were the impetus for this study. This issue is linked to the reasons that Saudi female graduates’ have low employment rates in all areas—that is, the cultural factors that work against women’s equality. And the representation of women in the labour force in Middle Eastern societies, including Saudi Arabia, is directly influenced by cultural aspects, particularly social and familial structures.

This research investigates the challenges that face Saudi women working in the event and festival sector, by thoroughly examining how women perceive the factors that affect their inclusion. It explored some of the opportunities that can help increase women’s participation and contribution in the event and festival sector. It offered a detailed discussion of working women and men policy makers’ perceptions of these opportunities. And it provided some discussion of policy-makers’ perception of the challenges that women workers face in the event and festival sector.

In response to the lack of research on the topic of women in the Saudi Arabian event and festival sector, this study aimed to explore the challenges for women working in said sector.
The study also aimed to identify strategies to inform both the Saudi government and the industry to modify existing policies and develop new policies to tackle the problem of underrepresentation of women in the workforce. This is significant, as current government strategies have no clear evidence-based approach that enables effective implementation and subsequent increased participation of women in the event and festival sector.

This study has achieved its aim by exploring and identifying existing challenges that face Saudi women working in the event and festival sector. The findings of this study are critical to providing evidence-based recommendations to government on how to improve the representation and inclusion of women in the event and festival sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The shortage of women in this field is a serious dilemma that needs to be tackled soon, not only to support women’s inclusion but also to benefit the economy of the KSA, achieve the 2030 Vision’s goals, and increase the effectiveness of the industry.

This study has three main limitations that should be taken into consideration when applying the findings. First, due to the timeframe of this research and withdrawal of some interviews, the number of the sample was limited to just twelve participants comprised of policy makers in the event and festival sector and women working in these sectors in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, a concern with the case studies was not being able to recruit enough participants, which leads to two issues: a lack of comprehensive data and not achieving data saturation. This is a critical limitation because if saturation is not achieved, the depth of understanding that is required is also not achieved. Therefore, failing to meet saturation might have a direct impact on the validity of the findings. Second, all interviews were conducted in Arabic as it was preferred by the participants. However, translating can cause a loss of meaning, as sometimes expressions and phrases in one language have a different meaning or do not exist in the other language. Subsequently, this complicated the process. The last limitation was the nature of the online interviews where it was sometimes hard for interviewees to convey and
explain their perceptions and thoughts in detail and difficult for the interviewer to grasp the 
nuances of the answers since they were gathered by either voice-call or video-call. The problem 
is not online interview but voice call (video call is fine as you can still see the body language). 
The interviewer disastrous issue we had with the online interview was the gender segregation, 
as most of the interviewee prefer the voice call only, which made it hard for the interviewer to see 
their reaction. As mentioned in Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia (2018) study, lack visual and synchronous experienced with online interviews.

There are a few directions for future research. To begin with, larger study samples, 
capable of covering all organisational levels and improve the accuracy of outcomes and 
generalisations, is advised. Additionally, the use of mixed methods is needed in order to validate if the identified factors in this study apply to a wider sample, to identify other elements, and to improve on existing measures. Moreover, future studies may consider a comparison approach, in which two different (or similar) cultures are examined to identify whether the challenges are similar. To be specific, future research may aim to conduct a cross-cultural comparison between Middle East countries and western or Asian countries to determine what successful strategies were implemented to empower women in this sector and whether implementing them in the Middle East context would succeed. Another recommendation targeting the specific Saudi context is to identify the needs of working women in general. Furthermore, future research can attempt to fill the research gaps identified in previous studies, by exploring different perspectives of similar cultures in relation to the challenges that face the women who want to work in these sectors.
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Biographical note

**Rafiah Almathami** is a PhD Candidate at University of Queensland. Her research interests include gender diversity, culture, society, mixed workplace environments, particularly in the tourism contexts. She is currently exploring the challenges and opportunities faced by Saudi women in the Tourism and Entertainment industries in Saudi Arabia as part of her PhD research.

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References


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Table 1. Participant profiles of female workers in the events and festivals sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Education qualification</th>
<th>Job title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FW1</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Bachelor of Sociology</td>
<td>Event Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FW2</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FW3</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Master of Public Relations</td>
<td>Director for Events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FW4</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Master of Business Administration</td>
<td>Event Organiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5W</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education</td>
<td>Event Manager &amp; Organiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FW6</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts</td>
<td>Event Organiser</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Demographics of male policymaker participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Job title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MP1</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>Manager &amp; policymaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP2</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Manager &amp; policymaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP3</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP4</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>Manager &amp; policymaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP5</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>Policymaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP6</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>Manager &amp; policymaker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Challenges faced by Saudi women in the workplace in the event and festival sector
Appendix

Interview Questions for Female Event Managers/Organisers

1. What is your position/role in the event and festival industry?
2. How did you get into this job/industry?
3. How is your experience as a woman working in this industry?
4. What are the factors impacting your and Saudi women’s involvement in working in the event and festival in KSA?
5. What are the challenges faced by you and Saudi women who are working in the event and festival industry in KSA?
6. How do you see/anticipate your future career in this industry?
7. Ask demographic questions:
   a. Age
   b. Marital Status (If most say single, ask if the participants plan to continue working in the industry after getting married and/or having children.)
   c. No. of Children
   d. Education Level / Qualification

Interviews Questions for Policy Makers

1. How many women are employed in the industry and what are their positions?
2. What are the conditions for women working in the event and festival industry in KSA?
3. What are the career opportunities for women in the event and festival industry in KSA?
4. What are the challenges faced by Saudi women who are working in the event and festival industry in KSA? In your opinion, what could have caused these challenges?
5. Are there any private/public-sector training programmes for women in event and festival?
6. What is your opinion of gender equality in KSA / in the workplace / in event and festival industry?
7. Has gender equality training been provided by event and festival policy makers?
8. What are the existing measures/policies in place to include and empower women in the event and festival industry in KSA?
9. What could the government and the industry do to increase and encourage women employment in the event and festival industry?