مجلة البحوث الإعلامية

مجلة علمية محكمة تصدر عن جامعة الأزهر/كلية الإعلام

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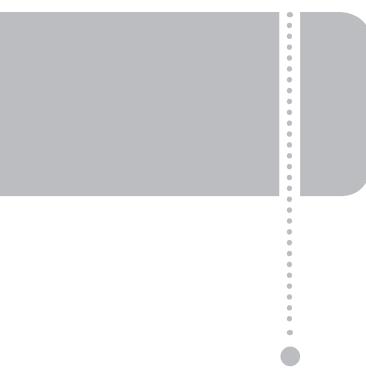
Media in Saudi Arabia:
The Challenge for Female Journalists

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- **التحديات التي تواجهها الصحفيات السعوديات في الإعلام**

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جامعة الحدود الشمالية

Abstract

This study explores the role of women journalists in Saudi Arabia and provides more understanding of the challenges and barriers that working in the media presents for them. The social changes that are taking place may not fit well with a more conservative society, but female journalists are showing that they have been facing up to these challenges.

Using a qualitative approach, this study sought to elicit the perceptions of a range of women working in the media and also interviewed male editors to gain their perspective on females working in their domain.

The study revealed that the women chose journalism as a career because it was an area in which they excelled and which they very much enjoyed, despite numerous challenges they encountered. Although they had faced disapproval from family initially, they managed to win over parents and husbands once they started to have their work published. In more recent years the universities have been establishing media and communication courses for women and this is giving more support to journalism being a career choice. Nevertheless, it was clear that women were restricted by their gender in having access to influential chief editor positions, which were reserved for males.

It was also found that the male editors approved of women working in journalism and spoke highly of the quality of their work. However, this may also be because the women open up the readership of newspapers by writing articles targeting other women and thus increase sales.

Key words: Media, Female Journalists, Challenge.

ملخص الدراسة

تستكشف هـذه الدراسـة دور الصحفيـات ﯿﻲ المملكة العربية السـعودية، وتوفر فهمًا أكبـر للتحديات والعقبـات التي يمثلهـا العمل ﯿﻲ وسـائل الإعـلام بالنسبة لهن. قد لا تتناسـب التغييـرات الاجتماعيـة التي تحـدث بشكل جيـد مـع مجتمـع أكثـر تحفظًا، لكن الصحفيـات يظهـرن أنهـن يواجهـن هـذه التحديات.

واستخدمت هـذه الدراسـة المنهـج النوعـي؛ حيـث سـعت لاسـتنباط تصـورات مجموعـة مـن النسـاء العامـلات ﯿﻲ وسـائل الإعـلام، وأجـرت أيضًا مقابـلات مـع المحرريـن الذكور لمعرفة وجهـة نظرهـم حـول الإنـاث العامـلات ﯿﻲ مجالهـم.

كشفت الدراسـة أن النسـاء اختـرن الصحافة كمهنـة؛ لأنها كانـت مجـالًا تفوّقـن فيه واسـتمتعن بـه كثيـرًا، على الرغـم مـن التحديـات العديدة التي واجهتهـا. وأيضًـا بالرغـم مـن أنَّهـنَّ واجهـن رفض الأسـرة ﯿﻲ البدايـة، إلا أنَّهـنَّ تمكنَّ مـن كسـب الوالديـن والأزواج بمجـرد أن بدأن ﯿﻲ نشـر إعمالهن ﯿﻲ السـنوات الأخيـرة، وقد أقامت الجامعـات دورات للإعـلام والاتصـال للنسـاء؛ وهـذا يعطـي مزيـدًا مـن الدعـم للصحافـة كونهـا اختيـارًا وظيفيًـا، ومـع ذلـك، كان مـن الواضح أن النسـاء مقيـدات بنـوع جنسـهن ﯿﻲ الوصول إلى مناصـب رؤسـاء التحريـر المؤثـرة، والتي كانـت مخصصة للذكـور.

كمـا تبيـن أن المحرريـن الذكـور أيـدوا عمـل المـرأة ﯿﻲ الصحافـة وأشـادوا بنجاحهـا، وقـد يكـون هـذا بسـبب اسـتخدام النسـاء الصحفيـات مواضيـع تخـص المـرأة ﯿﻲ عناويـن الصحـف وﯿﻲ كتاباتهـنَّ بهـدف زيـادة المبيعـات.

الكلمات الافتتاحية: الصحافة، الصحفيات السعوديات، الإعلام.

Introduction

 In today's world, the media plays a central role in defining the way we think about gender and how this affects our perceptions of identity (Gauntlett, 2008). In Western cultures women have managed to penetrate and excel in the media industries. Whereas once there were no women at the forefront of media roles, females are now finding a voice. According to Adorno (1991), the influence of media in the engagement and functions of society should not be underestimated, although Fiske (2011) viewed people themselves as the ultimate power in influencing the media.

In societies like the Middle East, women's gains have been more modest (Sakr, 2004). In Saudi Arabia, for instance, there has been a substantial increase in the number of female journalists working in international outlets, and some of those women have managed to advance within these newsrooms. However, the number of Arab female journalists in executive roles in the newsrooms is still rather limited which indicates that their influence on the news agenda may also be limited (El Issawi, 2014). Some scholars (e.g. El-Issawi, 2014), argue that the news content contributes to women's invisibility as their representation is either distorted, such as focusing on their sexuality not ideas, or their invisibility as news sources and as editors.

This study aims to explore the challenges, as well as the opportunities, for Saudi female journalists who are involved in the Saudi media sector inside the Arabian Kingdom. It is their stories that can bring more understanding of their position in terms of feminism in the Middle East, with particular reference to Saudi Arabia.

Theoretical Framework:

The motivation for this study is reflected in the importance of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and its religious and economic status in

the Arab, Islamic, and international world. Saudi Arabia has recently adopted a policy of openness, economic liberalization, and the lifting of constraints on Saudi women to enable them to participate effectively in the development of their country. The following are some of the motivations for conducting this study.

Firstly, the development plans for the KSA have begun to pay attention to the status of Saudi women and to believe in their social, cultural, and economic role in supporting and ensuring the success of these government strategies for the economic development of the country. Secondly, the subject of the study is one of the topics overlooked by many researchers, and there is consequently a limited number of references and studies concerning Saudi women in the media. Only a few studies have addressed this important aspect of Saudi women and their work in the media field, given the increasing number of women's employment in the media field compared with other Arab societies. Thirdly, this study will contribute to the knowledge on the profiling of Saudi women and their attempts to find their place in the male-dominated domain of journalism.

It is especially noticeable in Saudi Arabia that there is a wide gender gap, which makes the role of women journalists even more challenging. The Global Economic Forum (2017) report measured the global gender gap of 144 countries and considered three underlying concepts such as gaps versus levels, outcomes versus inputs, and gender equality versus women's empowerment; there were also four sub-indexes of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. Saudi Arabia held the overall rank of 138 out of 144 countries; economic participation was ranked 142, educational attainment ranked 96, health and survival ranked 130 and political participation ranked 124. The economic participation of Saudi women was particularly low.

Even though Saudi Arabia is positioned as one of the lowest ranking countries in terms of women's participation, this study explores the existence of the gender gap in the Saudi media, and the choices and challenges that are faced by female journalists in the country.

Before establishing the current Saudi Kingdom in 1932, media outlets, i.e. newspapers, were owned by foreign powers. The first newspaper

published in 1908 was established by a Syrian businessman (Beling, 1980); this was a weekly newspaper named Barid al Hijaz. Although some other newspapers were introduced in KSA, they lasted no more than six months. The Second World War further hampered the establishment of other newspapers. However, after the war, King Faisal decided that more information should be made available to the general population. This consequently became an era of mass media publications.

It was not only newspapers such as Al Bilad, Al Madina, and al Yamama that were established in the 1950s, but this also introduced electronic media like television & radio. However, most of these electronic forms of media were engaged in broadcasting the recitation of the holy Quran and regular news of the Saudi royal family. It took some years before King Faisal decided to restructure the media outlets and allow electronic media to meet the recreational purposes of the people.

All the information ministers of the Arabian countries met in Cairo in 2008, in order to reach a consensus regarding the television policy of these countries. They concluded the meeting by signing a charter called the Arab Satellite Television Charter (ASTC). Following this agreement, Saudi Arabia entered into a new culture, known as a geo-cultural reality, which has significantly influenced the broadcasting of television in the country. This marked the growing trend for the number of satellite channels accessible in the KSA. Mansell and Raboy (2011) have estimated that there are almost 500 satellite channels in the state of Saudi Arabia and these are focusing on programmes for women, religion, music and youth. Nevertheless, the Saudi government is responsible for determining the absolute role of satellite televisions with regards to Shariah law. Mansell and Raboy (2011) illustrated restricted behaviours on television channels, which are totally banned from broadcasting such items as women dancing in skimpy clothing, drinking alcohol, gambling, profane activities and criticism of the Saudi royal family. Currently, even in this age of satellite television, in Saudi Arabia these practices are not allowed at all.

The relationship between women and the media in Saudi Arabia is further influenced by the politics and religion of the country. Sakr (2007) comments that in the Middle East any discussion about the rights of

women is heavily influenced by traditions and other regulatory boundaries, which are invariably in force. Regulations, especially Shari'h law, are used as a token for purifying the context of politics throughout the Middle East Muslim countries. In consideration of a male dominant society, the rights of women go unnoticed. A study by Ginsburg, Lughod and Larkin (2002) asserted that it was a sign of their colonial heritage that Muslim women were discriminated against and were an oppressed section of society. However, with the increase in social media, it has been noted that Saudi women are beginning to find a voice.

Literature Review:

Journalism is regarded as a medium of transmitting aspects of current interest to the general public. It is a form of communication and has been seen as important for social systems (Reese, 2016). There is no doubt that the media system in general, and the press in particular, is not considered an independent entity from the state, but rather an integral part of other systems in society, such as the economic, political, cultural, and social system, and it affects and is affected by these systems in all countries according to their different ideologies and doctrines (Bye, 2007). Theories of Western media emerged, which are a reflection of social and economic ideologies and beliefs that are linked to media policies in society. According to Kan'an (2018), "theories are related to media policies in society in terms of the extent to which the method is controlled in terms of politics and control over it, and on the content that is published through it. Is it controlled by the government is it absolutely free, or is it determined by some laws"?

The chapter also explores the gender divide and the participation of women in journalism. Following the end of the Second World War, the participation of women in media functions and programs increased noticeably, and this was supported by the establishment of the UN which upheld the empowerment of women. In addition, greater participation of women in different sectors of the economy began to show dividends as nations that included women in the workforce increased their economic development (Olivetti, 2013).

Byerly and Ross (2006) focus on how the early feminist movement with its emphasis on greater participation and equity between men and

women ensured the involvement of women in the arena of media. They suggest that the use of media was a mouthpiece for females in raising their voices to achieve their rights in all spheres of life. Media can also be used as a means for conveying accurate information to a higher governmental authority about the sufferings and demands of women. However, media broadcasts have not been given freedom in all parts of the world; there is censorship in some countries. Europe has given the media freedom to publish and has upheld the rights of women to participate fully and was at the forefront of this renaissance. Other countries such as South Asia and Africa have been slower to follow as they have not been sufficiently developed in terms of technology, but they too are including women in their media outputs.

There are some countries where the Islamic Shariah Laws are strictly followed and this has had a significant impact on the participation of women in media. This chapter focuses particularly on the Saudi context, and the factors that contribute to the challenges faced by women journalists operating in Saudi Arabia. The political and social factors are presented and provide the environmental context within which Saudi women participate in the workforce.

Research Gap:

There have been only a few studies carried out from the perspective of Saudi women. One of the gaps identified was that these studies have aimed at providing perceptions only from the female perspective. However, there have been no studies on how males perceive women working alongside them. As the editorial positions in the main newspapers are always taken by males, there was a gap in understanding how women working in the media were perceived by their employers. Even though some of the existing studies covered women working in the Saudi press and TV, those studies did not give perspectives for both women journalists and male editors. Moreover, none of these studies discussed the reasons Saudi females decided to enter into journalism, specifically in the newspaper journalism sector. . Therefore, it is believed that the originality of this study will help to fill the knowledge gap currently existing regarding Saudi female positions in the Saudi media. This study also wanted to explore how Saudi women journalists perceived themselves in a sector long-dominated by male

journalists. Women may have been empowered by these latest reforms, but this study questions whether they are taking advantage of this empowerment to make decisions and consequently make a difference.

A contribution to knowledge is that this study is applying the concept of Islamic feminism in a country that is regarded as an Islamic state; all the legislations, including labour laws, are enshrined in the principles of Islamic law and subject to Islamic legislation.

Research Questions (RQ):

RQ1. How do women journalists perceive their role within their media organizations and society as a whole?

RQ2. How do male editors perceive the role of women in media?

RQ3. To what extent do policies in Saudi Arabia promote women's access to journalism?

RQ4. What are the challenges facing women in their choice of journalism as a profession?

Research Aims:

The mission of the study is to explore the environment in which Saudi women journalists are employed

Research Objectives (RO):

The following are the three objectives of the study.

RO1. To review the gender and media discourse from an Islamic perspective as disseminated in the KSA.

RO2. To analyze the regulations under which Saudi female journalists are employed.

RO3. To evaluate the challenges for female journalists working in the Saudi media.

Research Context:

Gender and Media:

Solomon (2014, 40-42) provides an overview of studies that investigated the relationship between gender and media arguing that women journalists are still seen as the Other in the newsrooms, meaning that there is a sense of dualism between male versus female journalists.

The Dutch media scholar, Liesbet van Zoonen (1994) investigated this relationship between media and gender and argued that the gender

positioning within newsrooms, similar to that in society as a whole, should be placed on a continuum based on how people identify themselves. She further argues that unpacking the relationship between media and gender should be done on the premise that this relationship is primarily cultural i.e. it refers to meanings, symbols and values prevailing in our culture. Furthermore, van Zoonen (1994) questions the extent of women's influence within the newsrooms given the individual differences among them in terms of values and social identities; this means that the increase of the number of women journalists may not directly lead to different news output. These views then boil down to the role of cultural differences (values, meanings and identities) as a prerequisite factor in the analysis of gender and media. Given the specificity of the Saudi context, the following sections shed some light on the status of women in Arab media generally and the Saudi context specifically.

Women and Media: the Arab Media Context

Thanks to the proliferation of satellite broadcasting channels in the Middle East since the mid-1990s, the number of female journalists increased proportionately. The majority of such channels have been funded by Saudi business tycoons and have been usually headquartered outside Saudi Arabia, particularly in Dubai where local authorities set up a tax-free media city. Also, the majority of such channels, amounting to hundreds of them, are entertainment channels which are usually regarded as "harmless" content compared to news content (Mellor, 2010a, 152), although scores of such satellite channels are dedicated news channels such as al-Arabiya. In both entertainment and news channels, the debate in the Middle East has been about the import of western-style images of gender relations such as Arabising reality television programs (ibid.). One reality program, for instance, featured women living alone putting on display their skills in cooking and shopping in a bid to impress male viewers who could phone in to arrange meetings with the girls (Yaquobi, 2004).

In the news sector, the number of women journalists has also been increasing in proportion with the increasing number of pan-Arab news channels. Women who joined such outlets did not necessarily have the required experience but were offered on-the-job experience (Sakr, 2006). One example from Saudi Arabia was al-Sharq weekly newspaper, based

in al-Dammam, which launched a women's weekly newspaper, Donya, in 2003, and arranged its distribution throughout other Arab countries in 2004. Donya had a male editor-in-chief and a team of women staff writers (at the time of the research), who reported on such issues as health, education and people working in the media sectors (Sakr, 2006).

With several Saudi businessmen setting up television channels in Dubai and London, more and more opportunities were made available for Arab and Saudi women to work in the media sector. Beginning with the ARA group, which launched MBC channels in London in 1991, and later the al-Mawared group launching Orbit channels in Rome in 1994, Prince al-Waleed bin Talal, who owns shares in international media outlets such as Twitter, has launched his Rotana channels in Dubai (Mellor, 2010b). At the beginning of the 2000s, and particularly in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, where the majority of attackers were Saudi citizens, the KSA found itself under pressure from the USA and Europe to introduce new political as well as societal reforms. It followed that women were allowed to apply for governmental positions such as board members in local and national organizations (Mellor, 2010b, 214). In 2009, for instance, the then Saudi King Abdulla, reshuffled his government to remove ultra-conservative judges who called for the prosecution of television stations owners because of what they saw as "immoral" television content being broadcast in those channels (ibid.). The ruling royal family found no better publicity of their reforms than to introduce more women in leading positions including editorial posts, although it was debatable whether those women could challenge the century-long patriarchal structure in Saudi Arabia. Ironically, many Saudi journalists, both men and women, saw the 9/11 shock as a blessing in disguise as it provided new opportunities for them to access the journalistic field inside and outside KSA (Mellor, 2011).

Women and Media: the Saudi Context

Women and Media Education

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has invested in male education since the 1950s, and in women's education since the 1960s, and this has led to social changes such as a delay in the age of marriage (Al-Munajjed, 2006). The state recently announced plans to promote women in education and the labor market (Mellor, 2011); it also launched a one-

year diploma in journalism for female journalists in 2000, and a women-only media department was launched at King Saud University in 2006 (Al-Nasser, 2005). The problem so far, however, has been the monopoly of religious codes in approving women's contribution to the labor market. The educational and health indicators in Saudi Arabia show that Saudi women are in a much better position compared to their Arab counterparts, with a high level of female enrolments at all educational stages (Mellor, 2010); on the other hand, the majority of women in the labor market complain about the lack of adequate childcare arrangements (Al-Munajjed, 2006), which often restricts their opportunities.

Television

It was in 1966 that Nawal Bakhsh became the first Saudi woman to appear on screen, although she had a very limited role mainly in children's programs (Al-Remlawy et al., 2005). However, in 1975 King Khalid banned all women from television screens and it was not until 1982 that the new King Fahd permitted women to return to children's programs; this was mainly due to internal pressure for political reforms (Sakr, 2009). Since then there have been a limited number of women working in television, generally in the satellite channels, and dealing with journalistic tasks, rather than working on children's programs. To continue with their work, female Saudi journalists have had to make the most of opportunities outside their own country but the satellite channels have been attracting young Saudi audiences; there has consequently been a demand for female reporters (Mellor, 2010). Yamani (2000) notes that many Saudi women like the freedom that working outside Saudi Arabia gives them, and are happy to find media opportunities in other countries.

The technological advances in the 1990s in Western cities such as London and Rome encouraged many Saudi businessmen to launch satellite television channels. The Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) was launched in London in 1991, before later moving to Dubai, and the Arab Radio and Television network (ART) was established in 1993 in Rome. The concentration of Saudi investments in media outlets triggered concerns over possible Saudi monopoly and the promotion of a Saudi agenda in pan-Arab media (Saghiya, 2006). Nowadays, there are 117

television broadcasting stations broadcasting to 5.1 million television sets in Saudi Arabia (Press Reference, 2018). According to BBC News (2015), the major state-run television channel in the country is Saudi TV, which operates four networks, including the news network Al-Ikhbariya. However, Saudi Arabia is a major market for pan-Arab and pay-TV, therefore, business tycoons are investing in UAE based televisions channels such as MBC and OSN (BBC News, 2015). Saudi television broadcasting is actively censored, especially when denoting the portrayal of women. The portrayal of women in television is considered as a very sensitive issue due to the Islamic opinion of the role of women (Press Reference, 2018).

Press

Women began to contribute to Saudi journalism in 1952, when Latifa Al-Khatib became a columnist with the *Al-Belad* newspaper and edited the women's section of the paper. Although a few other women became journalists, they wrote under pseudonyms and usually worked in women's and family magazines (Reda, 2004, cited in Mellor, 2010). A limited number of women also joined Jeddah Radio in 1964 and the television network in 1967. However, due to the shortage of women writers, between 1976 and 1996 male writers started adopting female pseudonyms; this added value to the newspapers and magazines as they appealed to female readers, who thought they were actually written by women (Al-Rayyes, 2004). Nevertheless, it did have the advantage of placing female journalism in the public eye and facilitated the entry of women into journalism, having made it seem more acceptable for women to write for other women.

Saudi women now, unlike their predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s, do not have to begin in local media or in women's and children's magazines, before moving to regional television channels (Al-Hamidan, 2006). The irony is that many of these channels were proactive in hiring female Saudi journalists, particularly presenters, thereby appealing to the Saudi advertising market while satisfying viewers' curiosity surrounding Saudi women. The veteran Saudi presenter, Mona Abu Soliman argues that this made it possible for unqualified women to appear in the media (cited in Mellor, 2010b). There is a lack of studies about women in journalism, however; one of the few references available is a study: 'Saudi women in

the Media: Saudi and Egyptian perspectives' by Amjad Reda (2011). There has been little research conducted in neighboring Gulf countries: Dima Nusaibah's study (2005) is one example, regarding Kuwaiti female journalists in magazines. These studies are mostly quantitative in nature and do not reflect the role of women as information agents, which can be best studied using qualitative methods such as structured and semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, in order to analyze and evaluate the data. The shortage of studies in the field of female journalism shows that there is still a gap to fill in this under-represented research area – hence the contribution of this project.

Saudi women in general suffer gender discrimination (Black, 2006). The prejudice against women is evident at every level, including in media organizations (Zawawi, 2007a). Saudi Arabia scored the lowest in the Middle East with regard to the political, social, cultural rights, and civic voice of women (Nazir, 2010; Memry, 2004). The segregation policies and the guardianship rule that gave men total control over women's lives have affected the lives of most women in Saudi Arabia (Al-Munajjed, 1997, pp. 8, 34). The debates on women in journalism in Saudi Arabia include significant struggles over the relationship between religion and the state. Al-Munajjed (1997) argues that segregation in Saudi society is an established control mechanism, claimed to protect the honor of men by restricting their women.

Online Journalism

Hedaya Darweesh was the first Saudi female journalist to switch from mainstream media to online journalism. She established HidayaNet in 2004 as a personal website but transformed it later into a bi-monthly online magazine, focusing on 'Saudi women's activities, but it did not last more than sixty days' (Al-Sagheer, 2004). She changed the title of her website which bore her name, 'Hidaya', to Kolalwatan ('The Entire Homeland'). She also deleted her name from the editorial information online (Kolalwatan, 2010). The changes she made on her project reflect submission to the pressures of society and the male-dominated media market. The new title allowed a shift from focusing on women to addressing audiences from both genders because media projects that bear women's names in Saudi Arabia 'have little chance of survival in

comparison with websites that bear classic masculine national titles' (Aldridge, 2001, pp. 91-108).

The above overview briefly captures important stages in Saudi women's journey to profile themselves in the journalistic field across different sectors: press, online and broadcasting. Although all these aspects highlight the role of women in the media, this study focuses on women in newspaper journalism, specifically the press.

Research Methodology:

The objective of the study was to investigate female Saudi journalists and their outputs. This required qualitative and documentary research as this section explains. The benefits of using a mixed-methods approach are discussed and the justification is placed in a theoretical-methodological context.

Research Design

The research questions that determined how this study was to be conducted and which approaches to use to collect data that would answer these questions, were as follows:

RQ1. How do women journalists perceive their role within their media organizations and society as a whole?

RQ2. How do male editors perceive the role of women in media?

RQ3. To what extent do policies in Saudi Arabia promote women's access to journalism?

RQ4. What are the challenges facing women in their choice of journalism as a profession?

The most appropriate way of doing this would be by interviewing. To elicit views from males, a qualitative approach would also be needed. Exploring the policies would require documentary research.

In this study, it was the sources of information that would allow a form of comparison, which would not only provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, but also enable the data to be verified. The interviews with the women journalists were all presenting their different perspectives, but they would also allow stories to be checked against each other. Furthermore, the data sourced from the male editors could be used to substantiate any findings from the

journalists. Survey with open-ended questions to gain responses from the male editors.

he data for this study was therefore collected through interviews with the women journalists and by a qualitative questionnaire sent to the male editors. Further data were collected from online sources and from contact with selected Saudi universities to gain statistical information to support the experiences of the journalists.

Analysis of all the data was best approached using a narrative based on the identification of any patterns emerging from the data. The study has followed an exploratory method as it has been open to the perceptions of the participants and has sought to discover emerging patterns in the data (Walsh et al., 2015). These patterns have been categorized into themes to explain the experiences of the participants.

Selection of Participants

Broadly, the population of this study is the individuals, professionals, and practitioners currently working in the field of Saudi media.

As the questions related to both women journalists and male editors, two different sample populations were selected for this study. The first sample focused on Saudi female journalists working for Saudi newspapers published in the city of Jeddah (Okaz, Medina, Saudi Gazette, Arab News), as well as in Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, through its office in Jeddah. They consisted of nineteen female journalists. The second sample entailed a group of male editors in the Saudi media and comprised seven participants.

For the selection of the journalists, purposeful sampling was used. Initially, I contacted the female journalists by Twitter, but very few replied, and they showed little interest in participating in a research project. I then decided to target the newspapers and that was more successful as I found the journalists working there more helpful. This was a better decision as I could then investigate their real-life experiences in the workplace. I approached twenty-five women journalists and managed to interview nineteen, which I decided was a reasonable number for the study. I aimed to collect information that would be useful in understanding the experiences of women journalists operating in Saudi Arabia, and it was not for generalising a wider population, for which a larger number would be required.

The reason for selecting the locations of Jeddah and Riyadh in Saudi Arabia to conduct the study was because over 70% of Saudi daily newspapers are printed and issued in these two cities. Jeddah and Riyadh are the largest cities in the Kingdom in terms of population density, but journalists in Saudi Arabia have similar characteristics. However, it is more likely that female journalists can be found in larger cities.

Data Collection

Data collection refers to a process through which data are collected from a particular group of subjects to get authentic information through which ideas about them can be easily formed. The process helps the researchers to anticipate ongoing trends about the intended issues and provides a future platform for forming propositions and decisions. This study applies a qualitative data collection method based on interviews, specifically semi-structured interviews. Using qualitative methods enables more understanding of the phenomenon and gives more insight, and it is common for interviews to be used to elicit the information required. Although face-to-face interviews are mostly carried out, there are also other ways of interviews being conducted; these can be by telephone or, given the advances of technology, by Skype. This reduces barriers due to geographic limitations.

Semi-structured interview

For this study, a semi-structured interview was more appropriate as it enabled me to keep the interview related to the responses I needed; in addition, it also gave me some scope to ask more probing questions. As qualitative data collection and interviewing is not a common way of researching in Saudi Arabia, I was unsure that I asked the right questions at first, given that this was a new experience for me. In Saudi Arabia the use of more scientific methods is usual, and it is common to find research being through the use of quantitative surveys that can be effectively measured.

I carried out the nineteen interviews in two ways. The first eight were interviewed via the medium of Skype and telephone, after they had been sent the interview questions in advance. With the other eleven female

journalists, who were interviewed and recorded in the newspaper offices, no advance questions were seen by them.

Finally, for maintaining the authenticity of the collected data, the researchers must take proper steps to keep them confidential and anonymized. The interviews were all recorded, kept securely on a password-protected laptop and were then ready to be transcribed.

Structured Interview

Due to the gender restrictions, it was not possible for me, as a Saudi female, to interview the male editors directly. I therefore had to find another way of collecting the required information from these participants. The compromise was to provide the participants with a set of written questions for them to answer.

Nine open questions were given and these questions were:

1. How do you hire journalists?
2. What are the most important characteristics of a good woman journalist?
3. Is there any advantage for women journalists to stay in Saudi Arabia or would it be better for them to move to Dubai, for instance?
4. What is your strategy to increase the number of women journalists?
5. Are there advantages to hiring women? What are these?
6. Have women changed the kind of news that is being presented?
7. In which area have women excelled the most?
8. What can women do better than men in journalism?
9. Are the obstacles facing male journalists different from those facing women? How?

Data Analysis

The sorting of the responses from the editors was reasonably straightforward as they had answered the questions in a logical order. However, all the responses were different and required an understanding and interpretation of what they were meaning. It would be naïve to think that the editors were revealing their real attitudes to women journalists, as they are professionals at highlighting a story to give it the focus they want.

With the semi-structured interviews, it was different as I had to analyse nineteen responses and the responses meant that coding of the data then had to take place for the women journalists' responses; this is a process for reducing and organising the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I grouped all the codes relating to a specific area together and, in this way, I began to see patterns in the data; I paid special attention to the patterns that I identified as relating to my research objectives and questions. Coding is often carried out with the help of computer software such as NVivo, but I found that this software did not cover Arabic transcriptions. Therefore, I worked manually on the data coding, as the next section explains.

The first stage of coding started after I had completed some initial interviews as I started to write down some of the content that seemed to be coming from these discussions. It was a way of organizing the data to some extent as I picked out what seemed interesting to me. This all had to be carried out manually and I was trying to identify aspects that might eventually be transformed into themes. By the time I had started on the next stage of interviewing, I had some idea of what patterns I should be listening for and it became slightly easier to identify familiar patterns that were beginning to appear. The actual task of manual coding entailed reading all the interview data and trying to find relationships. I started to use sub-coding, where there appeared to be a relationship with other content, by identifying similar phrases. In this way, I could organize the data with similar concepts into specific combinations to form codes. Charmaz (2006) describes coding as being a process whereby pieces of data are labeled in a way that categorizes and summarises them. This subsequently makes it easier to see the patterns and identify themes.

Once I had the themes identified, all the coded data were put into sub-themes that could be loosely connected with these themes. I then needed to review all the themes and to work out which had enough data to support them and which could be transferred to another theme. This was a way of ensuring that themes did not overlap to such an extent that they merged into each other. It was at this stage that I started to reformulate the themes and check if I had missed anything in the data. I went back to the original interview transcripts and looked very carefully at what had been said and how I was interpreting it.

Discussion:

This section discusses the perceptions of the women journalists and those of newspaper editors regarding the environment within which the women are working. There have been few studies on the position of these journalists and the available ones tend to have focused on how women are marginalized in the media; few women are working in this sector and its importance in understanding the role of women in Saudi Arabia may not have been fully recognized. It is not just the women journalists and their positions in a male-dominated society, but the messages they are conveying to other women through their writings. This has special significance in light of the government's focus on Vision 2030, which is to ensure all women have a role to play in developing the Saudi knowledge economy. Women make up half the potential working population in Saudi Arabia, therefore they must be included in contributing to the economy of the country. This goes against many of the cultural traditions, where women stayed within the family domain and were not expected to have a role outside the family home. Saudi women are therefore breaking away from cultural expectations as the government faces the challenge of preparing a workforce that meets the future needs of the country.

The study was developed within a feminist framework, specifically Islamic feminism. Although it is commonly believed in Western circles that women in Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, are defined by a religion that imposes strict codes on them, the women journalists in this study have shown this not to be the case. They have not in any way defied the rules of their religion, they have kept strictly to the codes and values they believe in. Islamic feminists tend to believe that the Islamic laws have been wrongly interpreted (Al-Rasheed, 2013) and the women in this study provide evidence that women journalists are as able as their male counterparts in producing quality work and holding down a responsible job. The women are not challenging Islam, they are challenging the social structures that have been established in a tradition where women are valued solely for their contribution to family life. There are signs that women such as these journalists are gradually changing the well-established traditions: for example, the criminalization of domestic abuse and the lifting of the ban on women driving. In the stories of these women

journalists, it can be seen that they are embracing the principles of Islamic feminism (Fawcett, 2013) by seeking an inclusive environment that recognizes the different roles of men and women.

This study aimed to explore the position of women, with a focus on those working in the media. To gain a full perspective of the subject, the male editors were also surveyed, so that their perceptions of the women journalists working for them could be voiced. Furthermore, the policies in Saudi Arabia that related to women at work were also reviewed to provide some context to the working environment for females; this has been a gender-segregated environment, therefore there are several challenges, as this section discusses.

- **Gender and the Media**

In today's world, the visual impact of television has more power than the radio. The women, however, are not encouraged to present on television because the conservative Saudi society, as AG noted, preferred not to see women with uncovered faces. In addition, Saudi television is censored, especially about the portrayal of women, so any broadcast relating to women would be scrutinized. Nevertheless, progress is being made. In September 2018 the state-sponsored national channel Saudi TV broadcast their evening news bulletin with Weam Al Dakheel, a female anchor, presenting the news (The National, 2018). This was widely applauded by other broadcasters and shows that the opportunities for Saudi women in the media may be starting to expand. Much of this is due to the reforms being brought in by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has been instrumental in trying to improve the status of women to comply with international laws on human rights. He also sees the value of women in the workforce, who will be the driving force behind the success of Vision 2030.

At the same time, the anomaly is that a female TV presenter was being investigated for violating the dress code for women. Whilst reporting on the recent lifting of the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia, Shireen al-Rifaie's abaya blew open and revealed her clothes underneath (BBC, 2018). This was regarded as being against the Sharia laws that require women to wear clothing regarded as decent; in most cases, this would imply the abaya, which is a loose-fitting, full-length covering that hides a woman's shape from view. As soon as one victory is marked up, another

pitfall awaits; al-Rifaie was reporting on women being allowed to drive in the country for the first time, which was a remarkable landmark, yet an inadvertent malfunction in her otherwise respectable and respectful clothing allowed her report to be overshadowed. Women's clothing is defined by their gender, as their bodies must be covered from the view of unrelated males; they must always be completely circumspect when in public and ensure that no part of their body can be seen. Unfortunately for al-Rifaie, the clothing she was wearing under her abaya did not convey full coverage, and consequently there were accusations against her of being naked; in any other society the clothes that were revealed would have been regarded as perfectly normal.

That does not detract from the overall progress that is being made in the media sector. Although there are conservative groups with strongly held views, claiming that the West is trying to influence Saudi women with ideas of liberation, there are equally other groups that encourage the freedom of women from many of the restrictions placed on them. It is interesting that the women participants in this study did not consider restrictions as being limitations and indeed believed that both genders were treated equally. This may be due to the conditioning the women have had all their lives that makes them believe they hold a special place in their society. However, it resonates with Islamic feminism, which looks for a just society for both men and women, whose roles in life may be different. Islamic law makes it clear that men and women should be treated equally, but interpretations of the law have placed women in a position where they are seen as more vulnerable and in need of male protection. Women accept lower wages than men as they understand that a man needs to earn money to keep a family, for example, because a girl's duty in life was to be a good housewife and mother (Alireza, 1987).

The education of women has, consequently, been shaped by the precept that their role is to nurture, so any possible career choice would be directed to vocations such as teaching and nursing (Alireza, 1987). Until quite recently, there was a very limited choice of education and training for girls but in 2018 women accounted for over half the university places. Given this expansion in female students, there were also calls for more choice of programs and the number of university courses included media

and communication programs open for female applicants. The first media department that admitted female students was Al-Qura University in 2006 with a total of 99 enrolments; in 2018 there were 1025 undergraduates and 30 on a Master's program. Although the majority of women tend to opt for public relations, a significant number are now showing interest in journalism. This indicates that media is becoming more socially acceptable as a career choice for women, and Saudi education policies are aiding this growth.

Nevertheless, there are many challenges in trying to change social conditioning. One example of this is the case of Rania Al Baz, who was a well-known presenter on the state-run Channel One. After a trivial domestic argument, her husband attacked her, beating her up so badly that she was given just a 70% chance of survival (*BBC News*, 2004). Because of her high profile status, she was able to publicize her story and her beaten face was shown around the world, encouraging debate on domestic violence. Although she had much support, some suggested that a woman should not have been working on television and she should never have betrayed her husband by publicizing her story (*The Guardian*, 2005). When she wanted to return to her job, she found that public opinion was against her and she became a social outcast. Even though she had full justification for challenging the culture of violence, Saudi society found it hard to accept the way she had used her position to disclose an event regarded as being protected by family privacy boundaries. High expectations are placed on women to conform to social conventions (Naser, 2004). This may also be an indication of why there are mixed feelings about female family members working in the media. Families are aware of how even high-profile women working in the media can be marginalized by society if they are perceived as behaving in a way that contravenes social expectations.

The struggle to gain acceptance in the world of media is partly to blame for the underrepresentation of women journalists in Saudi Arabia. Despite the plethora of university degree courses now catering to the needs of women in media, the majority of female graduates choose to follow a career pathway in public relations and do not select the media route. Public relations means that the women will be able to hide behind someone else, not put themselves to the fore; they will be working behind

the scenes and their names will not be publicized. Participants in this study told of how their families did not want them to publish under their names. This was to protect the family name as some families were concerned it would disgrace them to have it known their daughter was working in a sector that did not avoid gender mixing.

The questions that AG asks are legitimate for a professional to ask, and it is clear that AG does have ambitions. However, there are already women in chief editor positions. In 2014 Somayya Jabarti was appointed chief editor of the Saudi Gazette, which was a significant achievement as she was the first female to be promoted to the position (The Guardian, 2014). To gain such recognition, Jabarti showed she was exceptional and deserved the approbation. She had over ten years of experience as a women journalist before being appointed, worked as a Deputy-in-Chief of English publications in Saudi Arabia and was the only Saudi reporter covering the 2011 revolution in Egypt (Debusmann, 2016). Furthermore, Jabarti states that women are making a difference in the media and her position indicates that women are not prevented from top positions. AG talks of women being locked in their offices, but it is clear that Jabarti did not get to her position from within an office environment; she went out to show she could compete on an equal basis with the male journalists. It is also noted that Saudi male journalists did not make the effort to report on the uprising in Egypt, despite it being a more typically male topic. Jabarti did not confine herself to a female domain, although the participants in this study tend to focus on areas they consider to be of interest to women. By breaking away from the reporting of feminine-related topics, Jabarti was able to get herself noticed and this placed herself where she could be recognized for her journalist abilities.

In September 2018 it was announced that the first all-female media and public relations company was being established in Makkah, to serve pilgrims; the role of the women journalists will be to provide journalistic content and communicate with women's media outlets (Al-Thaqafi, 2018). It indicates that the role of women in media is recognized and appreciated. Although it may be within the female domain, it resonates with the concept of Islamic feminism and highlights the empowerment of women that is occurring in unexpected places.

Furthermore, women can apply to work in other countries. When the male editors were asked whether they felt the women journalists should gain experience in Dubai or Saudi Arabia, they were equally divided. Although one suggested there may be more opportunities outside Saudi Arabia, another cautioned that it was a competitive world.

A further point that AG made was related to training and professional development. In all professions it is accepted that change means updating of skills and journalism is no exception. From AG's comments it seems that training is provided for new entrants but these are the ones who may well have benefited from access to the required skills in their university courses. The women needing their skills to be updated may be those like AG, who left university with an unrelated degree. Furthermore, there have been many advances in technology in the past few years and the speed of change makes it more necessary for the enhancement of existing skills; such professional development courses should involve areas such as IT and digital skills, quality control and fact-checking, time management and communication (Spilsbury, 2014). Although they may have basic journalist skills, which are regarded as the ability to write well, curiosity and skills to communicate effectively (Spilsbury, 2014), in the age of social media there are more expectations of a professional journalist. There is, therefore, a reason to believe that professional development training would raise the skills levels of the women journalists; the experience of women who have been working in the media is important and this may reduce the attrition rate of these journalists, as AG suggests.

If the Saudi government had the resolve to support women working in the media, the Ministry of Culture and Media and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs could initiate a campaign to try and change the negative stereotypes of women working in the media. If further supported by more religious leaders, this would facilitate the acceptance of families for their daughters and wives to work in this important profession. With the backing of Saudi leaders, families would begin to understand that women working in the media are role models who can make a very positive and significant contribution to society. The strategic positioning of women for the success of Vision 2030 has begun to take shape in the reforms permitting women to drive, laws criminalizing domestic violence and the

flexibility of some of the dress codes for women in the drive to increase women's participation in the workforce from twenty-two percent to thirty percent.

This indicates that women play a vital role in the future economy of Saudi Arabia but there is still some way to go before they are fully integrated into the workforce. To be productive, they must benefit from the lifelong training that is proposed in the vision. Attending training courses and workshops would open up new opportunities for women as it would enable them to exchange ideas and network with other women. Although some of the participants have expressed concern about other women being jealous and competitive, it would be more beneficial for women, in general, to work together to support each other, recognizing the strengths of other women. Studies have suggested that ways of moderating these feelings of envy and jealousy involve women not comparing themselves to colleagues and not feeling threatened by loss (Buunk et al, 2012). It appears from participants' responses that many have a sense that they need to get stories before their colleagues to validate their position. They feel a need to compete, which may be an indication of their lack of confidence in their value, although MS acknowledged that women should be more cooperative and share information with colleagues. However, it does show the challenges that are facing some women, as GM advises keeping a distance between oneself and colleagues as she believes it is extremely rare to find friendship in the media workplace.

Whereas there may be excellent reasons for wanting to get women contributing to the workforce, there is also concern that many women may be undermined by the position they have held in Saudi society for so long; as RX admits, they are not used to a mixed duties environment. Confidence in their abilities may be compared with the success of males, especially when it was noted by many participants that all the chief editor positions were reserved for men. They are aware of their predicament as HN suggests that women are mostly misunderstood in the media domain and QW states that women need to be strong to protect themselves in a masculine society. Yet there is still a call for women to be valued for the work they do, for their skills, their mind and personality, rather than, as LR says, for the fact that they are women.

Gender clearly defines the roles that women have in the media, although there are some breaking the mold. It is not going to be easy for women to claim their place alongside men, as males may also object to having women working in their domain. One participant noted that some men were not willing to work with women because they were very strict in their observances and did not feel that women should be working outside the home. Despite Vision 2030 and the reforms that are taking place in Saudi Arabia, the deeply entrenched traditions and customs are likely to take many years to be moderated into acceptance.

- **Regulating the Female Work Environment**

It is commonly accepted, particularly in Western contexts, that Saudi women are not permitted certain freedoms because of religious constraints. However, this is not so as the Islamic religion does not discriminate in any way against women. Indeed it encourages equality, as mentioned above. There is no reason for women not to work in the media or in other work domains, and it is anticipated that more women will be seen in the workplace in the future, given the objectives of Vision 2030. It may be that the workplaces will continue to be limited to sectors considered suitable for women, because of cultural constraints.

From the interviews with participants in this study, it was seen that there was much initial objection from families when they were embarking on a career in the media. Such objections came not from Islamic laws but from cultural understandings of traditions believed to be immersed in Islamic laws. This influence came from the patriarchal Saudi social culture that a woman's place was in the home and that all decisions inside that household were made by the dominant male and endorsed by others living there. Elamin and Omair (2010) report that Saudi males hold very traditional views on women working outside the home, although this may be mediated by age; younger males had a more flexible attitude, though not if they were married.

Married men do not like their wives being exposed to male contact outside the home, especially when they have no control over such contact. This is especially prevalent when working in the media, where women are working in a mixed-gender sector, in addition to the long hours the wife may be expected to work. It was illuminating that participants described the job as being very difficult and exhausting. This

may also be because the women tend to work harder to prove themselves, as many spoke that they are given work because of their commitment; for example, IO reported that she and her female colleagues were asked to cover important events as they attended them rather than pick up emails, like the men. In addition, AG felt that, however hard women worked, they would not be given the same opportunities for promotion as males.

Surprisingly, many of the participants stated that they preferred working with male editors at work as they found they were not as competitive as the women. This may be because it is clear the women journalists contribute much to the profits of the newspapers as they reach a target readership that cannot be achieved by male journalists. The male editors are secure in their positions as they know that women are not able to compete, but it may well be different for the women, who see their jobs at risk unless they do better than the others. In addition, the women have had to be extremely competitive to reach higher positions as they are judged not just on their own merits but have to prove they are better than their male colleagues. Working in the media is a very competitive world as individuals must always show they can write stories that sell papers, as well as work to strict deadlines. Research has shown that the practices journalists employ in the workplace are defined by the values from their socio-cultural background (Deuze, 2002; O'Sullivan & Heinonen, 2008). It has also been found that journalists from non-Western contexts are more flexible in their ethical views and more interventionist in the perception of their role (Hanitzsch et al., 2011: 284). Because they are so eager to meet deadlines and produce interesting stories, some journalists may not check the accuracy of their sources, and IO alludes to this when she speaks of the male journalists working based on information on emails, whereas the women go and attend events. Furthermore, FL confirms that whilst men may perform the task quickly, they may write only three lines about the topic, whereas women are not so fast but are more accurate and professional, and will write six pages on the same topic.

Nevertheless, media outputs tend to be influenced by political constraints according to their geographic location (Mellado & Humanes, 2012). O'Sullivan and Henionen (2008) argue that an interconnected media

environment, due to the internet, means that the principles and standards for journalism have changed from traditional views. However, where the media is dependent on government funding, the autonomy of editors and journalists is limited, yet their output is being broadcast globally. It was found by Garcia-Aviles et al. (2014) that the public stopped buying newspapers when it was seen that editors were succumbing to political pressure and printing what the government wanted; they had lost their independence. The situation in Saudi Arabia appears to indicate that editors keep women journalists in roles where they can cover socially acceptable stories, which appeases the political masters as well as the conservative society. It is more difficult to change societal attitudes and the male editors are aware that their own positions are due to state approval. They would therefore not be likely to provide avenues for women journalists to defy social constrictions.

When working with male journalists, there was a certain amount of conflict on the part of the women. Oni-Ojo et al. (2014) suggest that conflict can be exacerbated by diversity in the workplace and argue that the introduction of ethnic minorities, women and individuals from different backgrounds into the workplace means that conflicts are likely to increase. This may account for the women and men feeling a certain amount of discomfort when working together. It is against their social structure and there has not yet been a way to resolve the issue of segregation in the workplace; this has clearly resulted in the segregation of tasks and this appears to be a bone of contention with some of the women. They see the distribution of tasks as being an evaluation of their ability and they resent not being asked to cover stories of interest that they know they can deal with more effectively than their male colleagues. areas the women cover show that they are very much focused on local news, culture, feminine issues, and humanitarian causes. Until they are given the stories that involve politics, finance, business and international issues, they are unlikely to feel they are being treated in a way that enables them to showcase their skills and abilities.

In a study by Alkameis (2015), it was found that Saudi policies played a role in inhibiting women from working in the media; this was mainly because they did not provide a working environment that complied with social traditions. In addition, Alkameis (2015) also found that the Ministry

of Culture and Information did not advertise the media as being a career choice suited to women; consequently, there was little information about possible jobs available in the sector, and this may have contributed to females not giving a high preference rating to working in the television sector in full view of others, although they would not be averse to working behind the scenes. However, the editors in this study were more focused on the training that women could have to prepare them for working in the industry. They welcomed the new journalism and communication courses now on offer from the universities and one editor proposed that women should gain international experience to raise their profile and to raise the quality of their outputs. This may suggest that the editor believes the women journalists are just as good as the men but it is easier to employ men; by suggesting the women sharpen their skills in another country almost intimates that he does not wish to have the women in his domain.

With the Saudi university courses for women studying journalism are now relatively well-established, there would seem to be no reason for them needing more training or international experience. There may once have been an argument that women were not offered opportunities for training and were less experienced than males but since 2004 there has been a flow of women graduating from media studies. It may also be wondered if the women, who gained international experience, would be allowed to use that experience to its full potential when they returned to Saudi Arabia. The women journalists, as well as the editors, talk about the areas they specialize in, and these are mainly feminine areas, where they are drawing in female readers. The women are not given the big, important stories that they may have earned when working in an international environment. The Saudi context is more limited and, no matter what experience they have gained while working abroad, the women may never be permitted to put that experience to its best use. The results of this study are aligned with Makki (2005) and Alkameis (2015), who both found that the role of women was defined by their culture; the decisions made by family and the male editors are accordingly shaped by the prevailing socio-cultural context and any resultant changes are likely to be cumulative. This has been shown in the way that journalism has been gradually opened up to women over the past decade with the introduction of university courses for female applicants.

- In terms of the inclusivity that is embedded within Islamic feminism, women journalists have succeeded to a certain extent by gaining the opportunity to work in the media, which has traditionally been a male-dominated sector. It can also be seen that the women are accepting of the differences in their roles and that society expects that they will work within a gender-defined environment. The women found valid reasons for not being sent on certain assignments, understanding that this was society's way of protecting them as women, who were valued within that society. Although there may be some resentment at men being given more interesting stories to cover, this is likely in any media environment and is not especially limited to the Saudi context. The women are asserting their right to question whether the best person for the job is being allocated the assignment. They can show they can make a judgment on the quality of their work is superior to male colleagues, and this in itself embodies how deeply Islamic feminism is now embedded in how women perceive the value of their work.

- **Evaluation of the Challenges**

Saudi traditions are perhaps the main challenge for women journalists. Saudi women, in general, are not able to act without the approval of a father, husband or brother. There must always be a male permitting her to act in a certain way. This accounts for the Saudi women journalists not recognizing that they were severely restricted in their role, certainly from the perspective of other female journalists operating in international domains; their perceptions are shaped by a culture that does not recognize women as autonomous individuals. The empowerment of women in a Saudi context is still overseen by men. In the home, the women need to have approval from husbands or fathers, whilst in the workplace, they must have the approval of male editors; they then seek to endorse this approval by producing work that meets the expectations of the males. In IO's case, her father did not fully approve of her working as a journalist until she became better known for her stories, then he wanted his name to be put alongside hers. Her success would therefore be attributed to him as well, as he was the one who had decided to allow her to work for the newspaper.

Family life is regarded as private and is deep-rooted in many Arab cultures, consequently, individuals are expected to conform to behavior patterns that do not bring attention to the family; high expectations are placed on individuals to conduct themselves appropriately (Naser, 2004). Behavior that contravenes expectations is punished, as was shown in the instance where a Saudi woman appeared in a mini dress in a video and was consequently arrested; this caused much international debate (O'Neill & Gallagher, 2017). It was interesting to note that many of the comments were related to issues of gender, sexism and societal issues in general, upholding the right of a nation-state to determine its laws. Although many may not have agreed that the woman should be arrested because she dressed in a certain way, they did defend the Saudi Arabian government's right to apply its laws in this case. The expectations of the dress code laws were known and the woman broke the law. Nevertheless, Quamar (2016) points out that societal attitudes towards the dress code are changing and enforcement of the wearing of a veil is more flexible than previously; this in part may be due to women's economic value in the workplace.

Within the family structure, women have always held a special place and the home has been seen as their responsibility and their domain; although decisions may be seen to be made by males in the household, it is often the women who have made these decisions in the first place. This is noted in the way that some of the participants in this study described how their families were against them entering the media world; LR explained how, 30 years ago, her parents were fiercely opposed to her choice, but she still went ahead against their wishes and over time they accepted her decision, especially when she started to become famous. It was a similar situation with OU, who described herself as 'confused and lost' as she struggled to ensure her choice to become a journalist would be vindicated. In addition, FL says she was from a conservative tribe and her husband refused to allow her to become a journalist but *in the end I made my decision*. If the decisions had been solely based on male domination, these women would have submitted to that disapproval and would never have embarked on a journalist career. The strength of the women is clear and indicates that there are Saudi women empowered to make their own decisions about their choice of

career, overriding negativity emanating from male members of the household.

Many of the challenges that Saudi women journalists are facing are very similar to those faced by women in other contexts. Every society has its cultural limitations, within which women must operate, yet it has been seen that reforms are happening in Saudi Arabia and these reforms are gradually opening up opportunities for women. The traditions in Saudi Arabia are not necessarily Islamic principles and the reforms are in recognition of this. For social acceptance, these reforms are being implemented gradually and are on the understanding that women are an economic force and can contribute to society outside the home as well as within the family domain. A new generation that has benefited from opportunities to study abroad may help Vision 2030 be achieved; as has been mentioned earlier, over 50 percent of Saudi university graduates are female and many of these have been encouraged to participate in scholarship programs to study for higher qualifications outside Saudi Arabia.

This indicates that a new generation of women and men educated abroad will have different aspirations and attitudes to the more conservative values in the traditional society. Young people have the chance to develop a more flexible society, still within Islamic principles, but helping to modernise the nation and comply with international standards. In this way the women of Saudi Arabia may find their country needs their contribution in areas that have not been predominantly feminine domains. It is likely that women will take on a more significant role in the media as their voice will become more representative of a changing society; they will be defined by the way in which they are contributing to their society.

The issue of technology was also raised by some of the women; AG regarded it as an invasion of privacy but it was also seen as a tool for checking the validity of interviewee opinions. There is no doubt that social media has an important role to play in the lives of Saudi women and women journalists need to be able to use this to their advantage. It is likely that they need to have training in digital skills to be able to use social networking to its best effect. They would then be comfortable with issues of privacy, which are very important in Saudi society. There are

strict laws that determine the content allowed and making a mistake and posting the wrong kind of content through social media is now considered a cybercrime (Barnes, 2018). This may deter some women journalists from using social media effectively unless they have the confidence of knowing what they are able to post. Ongoing training courses would enable the journalists to keep up-to-date with changes in the law that may affect them and prepare them for a future that is influenced by the power of social media. In this way, the women journalists may find their voice.

- **Research Limitations**

There were certain limitations associated with this study. These have been identified as follows:

1. The sample interviewed women journalists on the basis that their editors allowed them the time to take out for this purpose. As permissions needed to be obtained from the editors, this was a purposive sample but also one of convenience and depended on my father contacting the editors to be able to initiate this. Despite trying to make contact with women journalists through social media, there was no response, therefore the study was limited to Jeddah. If the study had included more women journalists from regional areas, the responses may have differed as opportunities may have been shaped by the regional context.

2. The interviews were conducted to gain in-depth understanding of the problem; if these interviews were supported by a quantitative survey, it may have revealed more challenges and potential issues experienced by a wider range of women journalists and thus contributed more areas for investigating.

3. Because the editors were contacted personally to allow access to their employees, it limited the representation of different kinds of media and focused mainly on newspapers and journals. Further investigation of female journalists working in television and online may have provided a more comprehensive perspective across the industry sector.

4. A limited number of male editors were surveyed and their views and attitudes may have been probed more by conducting interviews as some of their statements required further

explanation that was not possible through responding to a questionnaire.

Conclusion:

The desired change will not be achieved immediately, as it needs time for society to accept this idea, just as it will not be achieved individually. This will not come without the support and strong desire of the journalists themselves to present a realistic picture and the living reality of the status of women; it is the journalists who have a vital role in advancing development at all social, political and economic levels, and thus shape the culture of the position of women in Saudi Arabia.

In my perception, there is no difference between a female pen and a male pen. However, the best person to express the concerns, hopes and aspirations of a woman is the woman herself. Female writings highlight the most important health, social and cultural issues and concerns facing women in the workplace, home and media. It can be considered one of the most effective tools for changing the behaviour and beliefs of individuals, thus correcting misconceptions about women and their effective role in society.

The research process was not always easy, especially the selection of interviewees and arranging to meet them. These Saudi journalists were always very busy and many times interviews had to be rescheduled, thus taking much longer than originally anticipated. It was rather daunting as I felt they were sometimes trying to interview me, rather than the other way round; this was of course their journalist training coming to the fore. Upon reflection, I would perhaps have probed a little more to get a deeper insight into some of the responses they gave, although I am unsure how much they would have told me. Interviewing requires trust and I would have liked to develop the relationship a little more beforehand in order to gain their trust. However, this reflection is in hindsight and I hope it makes me a better researcher in the future.

Recommendations:

This study highlighted the experiences of female journalists working in a Saudi context and was conducted within a certain time and financial constraints. There are more opportunities for further studies within this field and the following suggestions are made for other researchers to continue exploring the phenomenon.

Although this study has been focusing on the role of women journalists, there has been no male voice to balance the perceptions. A study that enabled comparisons to be made between the roles of male and female journalists in Saudi Arabia would be useful. Some of the participants in this study stated they were treated the same as the males, whilst others felt the males were given preference for the best stories. It is therefore necessary that both sides are heard before making judgements on whether there is any discrimination against women journalists in Saudi Arabia.

The women journalists in this study were working at lower levels of employment in the media. Even the women who had more managerial roles were working in a female domain. A study of women working in environments that are not wholly female and where they have more of a management role, which has been gained through their abilities, would offer inspiration to the many young journalists who may be entering the profession.

This study was limited to one city. Another researcher may wish to explore the experiences of women journalists in more regional or rural communities.

 A study that investigated the opportunities available for journalists and the professional development courses available for both new and experienced women in the media would be able to identify any gaps in the provision, and then make recommendations for these to be improved.

For further research to be carried out on how male editors perceive the position of women in the workplace and how they envision women journalists having equal status with male journalists.

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