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The Religious, Social, and Cultural Constraints on Adult Education Research and Practices in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: Progressive researchers face a number of challenges that are directly attributable to cultural differences in Saudi Arabia. Carrying out or interpreting research in any context or culture requires exploring and understanding the culture. This article describes the constraints that face adult education research and practice in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Cultural constraints, religious authority, gender segregation, social norms, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Researchers who study educational planning in Saudi Arabia operate in highly formalistic and formalized social structures, designed specifically to adhere to certain Islamic principles or interpretations of Islam, which are enforced by religious authorities. These Islamic laws and Islam interpretations are characterized by government structures in particular countries. For Middle Eastern countries, social, political and economic dynamics are the most important indicators showing the countries' gender equality (Ghimire & Acharya, 2005). The experiences of Saudi Women working in the country demonstrate the challenges they often encounter, many of which they tend to share with other women elsewhere. They also had to handle challenges unique to the Saudi society. This uniqueness is characterized by the legal system and constitution, which sanctions the superiority of men, and sexes' segregation in all spheres of life. Additionally, these contexts appear to affect their choices of specialty, their day jobs along male colleagues, their overseas practices, or their promotion chances. The Saudi education also comes into play whereby most of them had subscribed to the western culture coupled with overseas training.

Saudi Arabia is facing complexities in its school system, as far as gender equality is concerned. The Saudi government also makes attempts to bridge the existing gender gap, especially when education system reflects its society (Sakr, 2008). While the Saudi government has implemented some educational reforms, its change process is slower than that of the other Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC). However, the Saudi government has recently made efforts to address gender issues, for example, societal positional bias, unequal education, and responsibilities, raised by adult education researchers. Presently, there is a significant gap in adult education research in Saudi Arabia: the gap being religious, social, and cultural constraints. It is almost impossible to interpret Saudi research without understanding Saudi culture and, despite the increased rate of adult education research successes in the Saudi society, research involving female participants, fails to progress in the

adult education field in Saudi universities, especially they do not show significant social findings in their social and religious principles. Therefore, researchers who undertake adult education research, particularly on gender, in Saudi Arabia must produce socially meaningful results in a way that is respectful and acceptable to Saudi social and religious values. In other words, they must use their understanding of Saudi culture as a barometer to ascertain what is appropriate to discuss in their research and when it is suitable to examine these topics.

This paper explores the impact of religious and social norms on adult education and practices. Does it seek to answer the following questions: What are the constraints on researching women in Saudi Arabia? How do these limitations impact adult education research conducted in Saudi Arabia? And what are the possible paths to overcoming these constraints while conducting adult education research in Saudi Arabia?

Saudi Arabian Culture and Religion

To comprehend Saudi political and social structures, it is important to know Islam, which manages and stimulates every phase of a Muslim's life. As Alfassi (1979) states, "the truest culture of Arabia rests not in things, but in the words of the language, the Holy Book, the Qur'an" (p. 26). Saudi Arabia is home to some of the holiest sites in Islam, as well as the destination for the Hajj, which is the largest pilgrimage in the world. Vidyasagar and Rea (2004) noted that Saudi culture is also heavily influenced by tribal values more than other values.

Saudis consider Islam to be the correct belief, as well as a principle, a constitution, and an integrated approach to living. Indeed, Saudi Arabia is governed by Islamic law. The Islamic law has a form of an education system that combines educational theories with Islamic instructions. According to Vidyasagar and Rea (2004), while the place of women in both the Islam religion and in Islamic countries has been discussed in different publications, the social status of women in Saudi Arabia is rarely mentioned. The reason for not mentioning their (Saudi women) social status is because of the number of challenges peculiar to the Saudi society. In one study that analyzed the experiences of 28 women doctors working in Saudi Arabia, Vidrasagar and Rea (2004) identified common problems that professional women face in their career that could be directly attributable to their gender.

Some of the worlds, however, remain ignorant of the tremendous changes that have taken place in Saudi Arabia, as well as the incredible speed with which such changes have occurred. Many shifts in the Kingdom have been held over the past 30 years and have permeated various aspects of society, but gender segregation and inequalities have remained relatively static. Contemporary Saudi woman does not have equal opportunities for work or equal access to education and training. Nor is there currently much hope for reforms to social and cultural attitudes regarding gender in Saudi Arabia. There is also the case of segregation in Saudi's culture. Segregation, a practice less strictly followed before modernization, was gradually institutionalized until it became a new reality. Thus, the main challenges occupying conservatives in Saudi Arabia have been how to maintain and regulate the veil and how to prevent women from working alongside men (Alfassi, 2009).

The impact of Religious and social on Adult Education Research and Practices

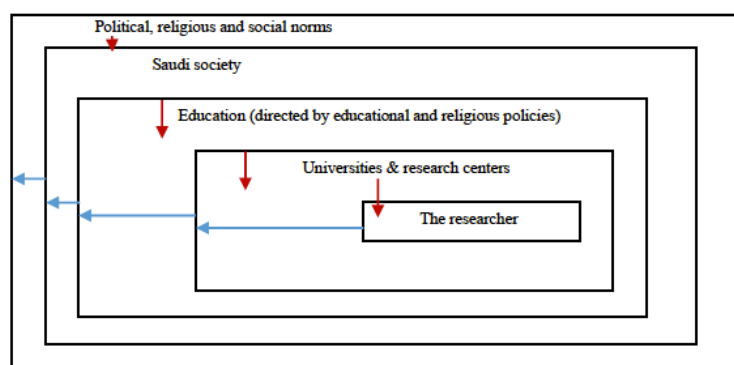
This section of the paper will focus on the Religious, Social, and Cultural Constraints on Adult Education Research and Practices in Saudi Arabia. To begin with, Saudi society is

determined to develop further its citizens' lives in all areas, especially on humanitarianism and social aspects. The pursuit of social development can be strengthened by a population that expresses homogeneity, richness in its Arabic and Islamic heritage, its history and cultural foundation, and its distinct family and social characteristics by strengthening the Saudi's social fabric and placing more relevance on the country's rich social history. Saudi Arabia has a rich history and desire to advance social institutions, however, it is limited to a few cultural forces when high-quality adult education research is considered, more so in gender relations to ensure balance is achieved. Saudi Arabia has been experiencing a significant expansion of both public and private education, for example, from primary to tertiary level of education (Alhareth & Al Dighrir, 2015; Jamjoom, 2012), and this renaissance has driven for a better understanding of social interest. Article 155 of the Saudi Arabia Education Policy requires a strict separation of males and females at all levels of education, with some exceptions. In short, advancing education contributes to better understanding of the society's pertinent issues. Adult education is also precious because it helps society monitor new phenomena, analyze emerging social challenges, and determine the best solutions for complex social problems, by being at the forefront informing the adults about the need to be good examples in the society.

Islamic philosophy has a significant influence on adult education research and practices in Saudi Arabia (Alajlan & Peterson, 2013). This philosophy includes values and norms derived from the primary sources of knowledge about Islam, the Qur'an, the divinely revealed word of God, referred to a Supreme Being, and Sunnah referred to as verbally transmitted teachings, sayings, and silent permissions of Prophet Muhammad. Alternatively, they are the illustrations, case or point of references of the Prophet Muhammad (i.e., what he said, did affirm, disliked, brought on, requested, or permitted to happen).

Adult education research in Saudi Arabia has grown to emphasize more social and gender issues in the last decade, due to some factors. According to the Ministry of Education (2015), there has been a sharp increase since 2005 in the total number of universities in Saudi Arabia—from eight to 53 public and private institutions. This expansion has also driven an increase in the number of academic researchers—from 25,000 in 2005 to 60,000 today. Another telling statistic is the growth in graduate programs at major Saudi universities, which now have 45,000 male and female students. The number of students traveling to study abroad at Western universities has also increased drastically. Altogether, these factors have caused a shift in focus towards the investigation of adult education research and practices that emphasize on social and cultural issues. Despite the notable growth in university-level research in Saudi Arabia, that increase has been mitigated by influential cultural forces, such as religion, that generate constraints on research, such as problematic social and political norms. The Saudi government has admitted that "some of them are things we can change, and some things, even if we want to change, we cannot do that" (Al-Bakr, 2015). The consequences of these constraints have affected many sectors of the Saudi society,

Figure 1. Power dynamics in Saudi higher education and research centers



particularly education and research, higher education institutions as a whole, and their members. Additionally, despite the challenges and constraints the Saudi women face, most of these women have achieved unprecedented success in their research centers.

Figure 1 shows adult education researchers in Saudi Arabia are surrounded by society's norms, their education systems, and educational and research organizations' policies. Saudi society is driven by political, religious, and social norms, which in turn impact the education system and focus its policies on Islamic ideals and gender segregation. The education system also influences educational and research organizations, which are monitored by religious and educational systems. Ultimately, this system impacts researchers and their projects. Therefore, if someone undertakes adult education research in Saudi Arabia, especially if it addresses gender issues, he or she must produce socially significant findings in a way that is respectful of Saudi social values and takes into account the context in which the arguments are made.

The following section considers two primary constraints to advancing research in Saudi Arabia: religious-monitored culture and their restrictions on cross-gender communication.

Religious-Monitored Culture

Religious authority and Islamic law have unyielding influence in all realms of Saudi society (Alajlan & Peterson, 2013). Most Saudi researchers have personally faced the challenges that Saudi Arabian culture place on educational research. For example, the culture's religious principles actively limit methodologies where male researchers communicate with female participants and female researchers communicate with male participants. Western professors are often shocked to realize that routinely accepted. Western methodologies are forbidden in Saudi Arabia because no concrete boundary in Saudi Arabia separates religion and state. Thus, research topics, methodologies, and data-collection methods cannot question religious values (Hussain, Wallace, & Cornelius, 2007).

Religious influences are found in many other parts of the Saudi academic research environment, as well. To start, religious police monitor social institutions to ensure that they properly enforce the values of Islamic law. Thus, academic institutions are expected to develop and implement policies that are strongly aligned with Islamic law. Religious authorities perpetuate their significances in the Saudi Arabian educational environment that limit investigation. All research plans must comply with ethical policies, and if a research program does not align with religious policies, the study will be stopped immediately. To build on the research taking place in Saudi Arabia, researchers must find ways to work alongside Islamic philosophy, modifying their study frameworks to fit cultural expectations while still pushing the boundaries of acceptable practice to further their research.

There are far-reaching consequences for researchers and participants that ignore the religious authorities that regulated academic research in Saudi Arabia. Many researchers have proposed excellent studies to the religious authorities only to be rejected for not meeting ethical standards. In such cases, the rejected researchers are expected not to engage in any appeal or argue with the decision because the religious authority has the final judgment in the decision-making process.

To avoid rejection, researchers can base their work on the four different Sunni's schools of jurisprudence: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafiai, and Hanbali (Hussain, Wallace, & Cornelius, 2007). Although Saudi universities explore all four Sunni schools of jurisprudence in their programs, many focus on the Hanbali School. Consequently, most research frameworks in Saudi Arabia concentrate on its searchers' traditional interpretation (Report on International Religious Freedom, 2011). The differences existing between these four Sunni's schools of thought are evidenced in some philosophical and practical differences. While many Saudi researchers do identify each other with a specific one school of jurisprudence, by just terming themselves either "Sunnis" or "Muslims," but individuals in some parts of Saudi Arabia often follow—whether willingly or unwillingly—follow the responses of one particular school, while valuing others. Progressive researchers have successfully worked to expand adult education research and practices by introducing concepts, such as Islamic feminism, that encourages religious authorities to broaden their definitions of acceptable subjects.

Cross-Gender Communication

In my dissertation, I plan to study how faculty members in Saudi Arabia engage in program planning, using a development instrument for measuring Adult Educators' Power and Influence Tactics in Program Planning Practice that was developed by Yang, Cervero, Valentine, and Benson in 1998. My adviser and I have had considered this topic for eight months before he realized that during faculty planning meetings in Saudi Arabia, men and women are not in the same room but in separate buildings and on different campuses.

The social constraints placed on females in the Saudi culture further act as a barrier to cross-gender communication in research, because cross-gender interaction outside of the immediate family is strictly forbidden in Saudi Arabia. This can be defined as gender segregation, in which a man and a woman cannot be alone with each other unless they are related. Specific rules also dictate that men cannot look women in the face, although women are allowed to look at men. This further limits effort to engage in any research that necessitates cross-gender communication, for example, interview-based research.

The gender segregation that is mandated in Saudi educational institutions significantly influences the structure of these systems (Alfassi, 2009; Alhareth, 2015; Al-Munajjed, 1997). Conventional and Islamic individuals in Saudi Arabia tend to confront the philosophical foundation in between activist movement (Albakr, 2015) through articulating the Qur'an's position on harmonization of sexes and toughly limiting and excluding the natural interactions and communication that take place among unmarried and unrelated males and females. These restrictions are continually implemented even within education and research sectors where researchers—specifically female researchers—have fewer chances of making an impact on participating in research. The reason for this is because female researchers are less empowered to carry out research tasks as male researchers. Although statistics have indicated that women researchers are well represented at many Saudi institutions, there are still pervasive feelings that they lack any power to drive aspects of educational research. This is because gender administratively separates higher education institutions and research centers into male institutions and female sub-institutions. Institutions managed by male faculties have more influence over decision-making processes than those controlled by female faculties (Alfassi, 2009).

There are severe consequences for researchers and participants that ignore the religious authorities that regulated academic research. First, it is possible that researchers can be fired for such transgressions. Additionally, there can be serious consequences for breaking the patriarchy which can lead to serious family issues, for example, separation, divorce, or abuse. Patriarchy for that matter means a sense of power and control given to father or brothers or husbands or sons take care of women whom are largely excluded or ignored.

Fortunately, some methods can help researchers overcome such constraints. Some technologies, for example, allow female participants to be involved in research studies without allowing men to see them. Interviews can also be conducted using alternative platforms, such as telephones. Technology also provides the traditional Saudi community with ways to solve some of its social equity problems (Albahr, 1997; Alfassi, 2000, 2009). To preserve women's privacy and separation from men without preventing them from studying or working, Saudi Arabia has adopted closed-circuit television (CCTV) and other modern communication facilities. According to North and Tripp (2009), "while the clerics' interpretation of the Qur'an prohibits face-to-face communication between opposite genders, nothing in the Qur'an bans video conferencing" (p. 66). Video conferencing allows women to observe male faculty members and instructors on television without reciprocal observation, and internal telephones make communication possible between the two sides.

Conclusion

In Saudi Arabia, adult education research is influenced by religious and social factors, especially when the research involves women. These social structures impact the methodologies and means by which adult education researchers may produce socially significant changes. On the role of women in society, Saudi Arabia's deputy crown prince once said: "This has its own social criteria and religious criteria. Some of them are things we can change, and some things, even if we want to change, we cannot do that". Saudi Arabia has rolled out initiatives to broaden the political and social role of women in the educational sector, however, which will lessen these cultural and social factors and expand the scope of adult education research and practices overall.

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