

# How can organisational culture influence the self-efficacy of female Saudi leaders in higher education? (Pilot study)

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## Abstract

This study focuses on female Saudi academic leaders in higher education and how organisational culture can affect their leadership self-efficacy. Self-efficacy leadership is a component that distinguishes leaders and enables them to set goals, make creative plans, motivate their employees and endure obstacles. This study investigates this issue by responding to the following research question: to what extent does the organisational culture impact leaders' performance? Organisational culture is defined as the adoption of beliefs and values in the workplace, as well as regular organisational practices. However, to find an answer to the above question, this study follows the qualitative approach, applying individual interviews as a tool to obtain the findings. The results show that 70% of the organisational culture of higher education is an unresponsive environment characterised as bureaucratic, demotivated and rigid, which impacts the performance of academic leaders. Most of the participants struggled to manage the high workload in the leadership role in terms of completing research alongside other responsibilities (teaching and administrative tasks). They also encountered challenges in terms of enacting change and triggering reward and punishment techniques.

**Keywords:** Women leadership; Higher education; Self-efficacy; Organisational culture

## Introduction

This study discusses women's leadership self-efficacy in higher education and how it is influenced by organisational culture. In Saudi Arabia, there are knowledge gaps in studies of women's leadership self-efficacy. Most research focused on the challenges that Saudi women face in higher education rather than self-efficacy as the primary factor. There are, however, few studies that are quantitative and that employ self-efficacy in higher education leadership (Al-Qahtani et al., 2021; Almutairi, 2020). Therefore, this study was carried out to understand more about Saudi women's leadership self-efficacy. Furthermore, the Saudi government

adopted a massive transformation plan known as Vision 2030; the strategy includes various reforms, particularly for Saudi women's empowerment in leadership positions. This change led to differences in Saudi women's leadership opportunities in higher education, as they have been appointed to high-ranking positions for the first time, such as university rector and deputy labour minister (Alotaibi, 2020). Therefore, it is increasingly important to conduct research in this area.

Saudi women face different difficulties in terms of management positions in higher education. Most Saudi universities have gender-segregated buildings that affect their authority and enhance genderism (Al-Qahtani, 2020). Consequently, these challenges might affect their self-efficacy either positively or negatively. The massive transition from stereotyped and underestimated women in lower managerial positions to being fully in control in leadership positions might affect their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy contains different factors such as personal belief, behaviour and organisation. However, this research focuses only on the relationship between organisational culture and women's leadership self-efficacy.

The following paragraphs discuss in detail leadership self-efficacy, women's leadership and organisational culture.

### **Leadership self-efficacy**

Before defining leadership efficacy, it is important to define leadership itself. Many scholars have defined leadership in various ways based on the characteristics of the individual. Some researchers explain it in terms of patterns of behaviour in organisations, while others define it by leadership styles (Sürücü & Yeşilada, 2017). Leadership is the ability to inspire others, have dominance over them and reform an organisation (Ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018). However, in this study, the focus is on the leaders' self-efficacy concerning organisational culture.

Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1989), is one's belief in one's own abilities to perform various tasks. Leadership self-efficacy is a leader's inner belief in being able to lead, change and motivate (Almutairi, 2020). Thus, it affects the leader's ability to make decisions, set goals, plan, motivate teams and make changes in the environment (Bergman et al., 2019). Leadership self-efficacy is influenced by a variety of factors. For example, one's beliefs, behaviour and environment (Almutairi, 2020). Nevertheless, this study discusses only the environmental factor as it represents the organisational culture.

Furthermore, Bandura (1977) stated that the type of environment could influence the interaction of self-efficacy (low-high). Leaders with high self-efficacy can perform well in their positions, in contrast to those with low self-efficacy. Furthermore, Bandura (1977) clarified how organisations can be divided into two types (responsive and unresponsive), which leads to four different individual outcomes:

### **The responsive environment**

The responsive environment is distinguished by a high level of response, quick development and employee motivation. (Kammerman & Kahn, 2010).

- Success: if an individual has high self-efficacy and has positive belief they will be successful and will be able to keep themselves self-motivated for long periods.
- Depression: if an individual has low self-efficacy, their beliefs may lead to an inability to succeed, leading to feelings of frustration.

### **The unresponsive environment**

An unresponsive environment is a workplace with limited development progressions, low responses to followers and an unmotivated environment (Kammerman & Kahn, 2010).

- Intensive efforts or change: an individual with high self-efficacy may decide to raise their efforts and level of activity to make a different choice or revert to another choice that changes their goals and plans.
- Carelessness and incapacity: an individual with low self-efficacy in this environment will feel useless for making an effort, which may lead them to take on a passive role.

According to existing studies, women in leadership face various challenges compared with men. This created a difficult environment that required them to have high self-efficacy (Lyness & Grotto, 2018; Zenger & Folkman, 2019). This will be illustrated in the following section.

### **Women's leadership**

Leadership has been defined by Northouse (2018) as a procedure through which one person inspires a group of people to reach a common purpose (Fennell, 2021). Women's leadership has been extensively discussed and investigated for several decades as part of gender leadership. As an example, Eagly and Johnson (1990) argue that the difference between female and male leadership styles is that men's styles tend to be more autocratic and direct regarding the task, whilst women are more democratic and directed to the needs of people. Nevertheless, Lyness and Grotto (2018) support that women can perform equally to men and sometimes better than men in leadership positions.

The stereotype that women in leadership have endured is shown in these two distinct definitions from two separate decades. Stereotypes are the practice of prejudging behavioural traits of groups of people and applying the interpretation to group members (Al-Qahtani, 2020). Moreover, stereotypes are one of the main obstacles that women face in terms of their management practice. However, Zenger and Folkman (2019) investigated gender differences in leadership capabilities and found that women outperformed men. They were complimented for their initiative, adaptability, results-oriented mindset, personal growth and high levels of honesty and integrity. Men, however, were predicted to surpass women in two areas, i.e. strategic perspective development and technical skills. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that women are far more capable than they believe, whereas male leaders are overconfident and believe they are far more capable than they are (Zenger & Folkman, 2019).

This research is aimed primarily at Saudi women in academic leadership roles. According to a study on Saudi women's leadership at the top of the organisational hierarchy, professional females continue to be underrepresented in comparison with men (Alotaibi, 2020). According to the conclusions of the Alotaibi (2020) investigation, Saudi women encounter a variety of organisational impediments. For example, there is a lack of training and preparedness for a leadership role, a lack of decision-making power and insufficient communication with university senior management. Furthermore, due to the formation of silos, the organisational culture promotes male dominance in career pathways. Additionally, there are biased organisational practices in promotion procedures, and males can easily obtain promotion based on their relationships.

### **Organisational culture**

Organisational culture is defined as the shared values and beliefs that influence workplace and employee behaviour (Coe et al., 2019). Additionally, according to Akanji et al. (2020), the culture of the organisation is formed in large part by its leadership, and the culture of an organisation may play a decisive role in its leadership. For example, organisational cultures that are hierarchical, patriarchal, submissive and interdependent affect the leadership style of leaders. Furthermore, the organisational culture shapes a leader's interpersonal skills, ethical sense, cognitive style and leadership styles, including authoritarian, charismatic and transformational approaches.

However, Al-Qahtani (2020) explained that hierarchical organisational structures create an environment in which women find themselves marginalised owing to gender stereotypes, leading to many females resigning or quitting a position in a company where their competencies are being doubted. This leads to organisations offering many jobs to men, which maintains gender segregation in companies. As a result, this impacts women's career experiences, which compare poorly with those of men who have full authority.

Moreover, Lyness and Grotto (2018) revealed that male-dominated organisations influence women's self-efficacy. Men are more likely in these institutions to regard themselves as future leaders, which boosts their self-efficacy. They also receive assistance in preparing for leadership positions. Furthermore, the culture in those organisations promotes and responds positively to men's leadership behaviours, increasing their self-efficacy. Women with less power, however, face insecurity and less acceptance of their leadership behaviours in this setting. Several scholars have recommended that women develop their self-efficacy to combat this stereotype (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007).

Therefore, this study looks at how the organisational culture affects Saudi women's leadership self-efficacy in higher education.

### **Methodology**

This study follows a qualitative methodology in which the data focuses on a rich understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Punch, 2013). To have a deeper

understanding of the subject, a qualitative approach was adopted to respond to the research questions. This research employs a qualitative technique based on social theory, which may be used to understand why, what, and how experiences exist. This method is also known as "theory-driven" since theory is utilised to plan the study in order to better develop, test, or validate theory. In the study, it is a deductive one (Meyer and Ward, 2014). To comprehend and explain the organisational culture and its relationship to Saudi women's self-efficacy, researcher applied self-efficacy theory. The following data was analysed by coding the themes from the interviews. Finally, using the theory's categories, link those themes, which are the environments that may be characterised as responsive or unresponsive (Gale et al., 2013). The sample in this paper is considered a pilot study that is part of a PhD project; therefore, this data cannot be generalized. The snowball technique was used to collect the sample.

### The research instruments

The method adopted in this study was semi-structured interviews. Different research publications were used to construct and improve the interview questions (Alotaibi, 2020; Hagan, 2021; Versland, 2016).

*Tab. 1: Demographic characteristics of participants.*

No.	Positions	Qualifications	General Experience	Management\Leadership Experience
P1	Academic leader	PhD	8 years	0 years
P2	Academic leader	PhD	10 years	2 years
P3	Academic leader	PhD	17 years	4-5 years

### Interview procedures

#### 1) Pre-interview stage

The interview questions were translated into the Arabic language, which was the main language of the sample participants. The research followed the snowball technique to collect the primary sample (Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2020). Three out of nine academic leaders who were contacted approved and set a suitable time and date for online interviews using Microsoft Teams, and the consent forms and participant information sheets were sent by email.

#### 2) During the interview stage

The researchers started a pleasant conversation (with greetings and a self-introduction), which included nonverbal communication, such as eye contact

and facial expressions. To achieve a more natural response, it was critical to establish a good rapport with the respondents before asking the interview questions (Abbe & Brandon, 2014). The interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams, and they lasted 45–55 minutes. Finally, the interviewees were asked for feedback and recommendations on the interview questions by the researcher.

### 3) Post-interview stage

At this point, the data from the interview were transcribed by hand and then read several times. Afterwards, coding techniques and themes were developed in accordance with the study questions (Chen et al., 2020). The researcher then translated the data, which is shown in the report.

## Findings and discussion

As it has been explained above, this approach is theory-driven, and the themes that have been derived from the participants' responses are linked to the theory's categories. According to Bandura's (1989) self-efficacy theory, the organisational cultures of female Saudi academic leaders can be classified as responsive or unresponsive based on their flexibility and ability to change. As a result, the workplace distinguished by being highly challenged is linked to the unresponsive workplace, whereas the workplace distinguished by being supported and friendly is linked to the responsive workplace.

- **Unresponsive environment**

A total of 2 out of the 3 participants' comments considered their environment unresponsive. According to them, the climate at work is an 'alienated and demotivating environment, and there was intangible emotional pressure'. Furthermore, they all agreed that administration duties and research were incompatible. Of the participants, P3 ceased conducting research, while P1 found herself working an extra day on the weekend (Saturday) to complete research as one of her duties. However, they all agreed that work required extra hours, and communication continued even on weekends (day and night).

In terms of change and development, P1 stated that she created a development strategy for her department and attempted to implement it, but she was unable to do so because of toxic staff who understood exactly how to complain while failing to do their tasks. In addition, P1 and P3 expressed that it was very difficult to suggest or implement a new plan. As a result, they decided to resign from their positions. According to the theory, an individual with low self-efficacy and an unresponsive environment is more likely to feel powerless and believe all attempts are futile, resulting in utter passivity. Contrastingly, in an unresponsive environment, a person with high self-efficacy would either intensify their efforts towards change or determine they needed to adjust their technique or goals (Ismayilova & Klassen, 2019).

Furthermore, all of them believed that the university's policy did not include any authority for leaders to use incentives and punishments as instruments to govern their environments. P1 said that she struggled with the inability to regulate teamwork, whereas P3 claimed that she

established an incentive by giving the employees a day off if they completed their tasks. According to the theory, among the signs of high self-efficacy in leaders are creativity and the ability to create solutions (McCormick et al., 2002).

Moving on to experiences, P1 confirmed that her previous experience had no relation to her current position; she considered her leadership role a 'big jump' between her previous role and this one. This can be explained by her inability to manage her departments due to a lack of experience. Experience is considered the most important influence on self-efficacy; when an individual goes through a fixed period of experience and succeeds, their degree of self-efficacy improves (Bandura, 1997). P3 answered that there was no need for experience at all and that leadership depended more on your personality than on your experience. This can be related to her greater level of experience, which enhances her self-perception and self-efficacy.

Furthermore, gender segregation is one of the environmental challenges that academic female leaders face, according to Alotaibi (2020). As a result, this study investigates how it may impair their ability to perform. P1 noted that the men's section occasionally made decisions without consulting female leaders. She stated that several factors, including the number of students, academic staff and building conditions, should be considered in the women's section, but decisions were made by men without regard for these factors. Women's self-efficacy may be harmed by stereotypes, and imbalanced authority acts as a barrier (Robinson, 2016).

To summarise, all these barriers hindered the capacity of most participants to make changes in their employment, which indicated inflexible and unresponsive organisations. Working in a barrier-filled environment necessitated a high level of self-efficacy to overcome these problems (Hill & Wheat, 2017).

- **Responsive environment**

In contrast, P2 stated that it was easy to make suggestions and changes, and she confirmed that the inner environment in her department was positive, and colleagues had friendly and trouble-free relationships. Moreover, P2 answered that she had previous experience and that it benefitted her in some tasks, although she still thought she needed more knowledge on leadership.

Despite her environment being responsive, she faced some difficulties, such as high workloads and too much communication, that she described as 'annoying and distracting'. In contrast to participants P1 and P3, she was going to stay in her position, and she added that the support and friendly atmosphere were the reason for that.

The responsive environment influenced her leadership style as a democratic leader. Moreover, it influenced her beliefs positively when managing her departments.

## Conclusion

Female Saudi academic leaders are becoming more empowered. However, the purpose of this research was to understand how organisational culture affects women's self-efficacy. In leadership, self-efficacy is a key characteristic that improves performance, particularly in the current period of transition and change. When women are expected to manage male and female sections in gender-segregated buildings, it has been shown that strong self-efficacy is required for women to function in this type of organisation. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that organisational culture influences women's leadership performance. There are two types of environments: unresponsive environments, which are difficult to change and manage, and responsive environments, which are simple to lead and change. The former demands that female leaders have high self-efficacy to be able to deal with the challenges. A responsive environment, however, will improve one's perceptions, confidence and efficacy.

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