



Saudi Arabia's Female Teachers' Work Environment: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

A research reported that the ratio of engaged employees in Saudi Arabia is lesser than the world's average rate, which is only four out of ten male and female Saudis are engaged employees, compared to six in every ten as the average in the world. There have been very few research conducted in this area in Saudi Arabia. Thus, there was a need to investigate the female's current work engagement. This exploratory study confirmed that although the female teachers are not happy in their work, they will not leave their profession.

Keywords: Saudi, Teachers, Female.

1. Introduction

In the Global Competitiveness Report 2014 -2015, which is a yearly report from the World Economic Forum 2014, Saudi education is ranked at number 50. This ranking standard does not match the standards achieved by other oil countries in the region. Even though the budget allocated for education in Saudi is high (USD56 billion), they still did not meet the standards. The Global Competitiveness Report 2014 -2015 also recommends further emphasis should be placed on the management of schools as well as professional development for the teachers. In addition, a notable feature of female participation in the labour market in Saudi Arabia is the concentration of females in the education sector, wherein 77.6% of total working women pursue their careers and 84.8% of them hold a bachelor's degree (Saudi Arabia Ninth Development Plan, 2010). Baki (2004) suggested that although women may aspire to careers in non-traditional jobs, they often end up in the teaching profession. It is often presumed that Saudi women will be left with no choice but to teach in segregated girls' schools. Hence, in recent years, Saudi women have made the rational choice to specialize in education where the job opportunities are concentrated. This concentration of females in education rises out of the cultural justification of teaching as a "suitable" job for women.

However, Alharbi (2011) found that teaching is not a favoured job amongst Saudi women. He reported that many college students are not committed to stay in their teaching career. According to Darling-Hammond (2003) one of the reasons for novice teachers to quit is the lack of support from leaders. Therefore, it would seem that support from leaders is a critical factor for teachers to be committed. This study revealed that teachers found that teaching satisfies their financial needs, as the salary is very high (starting from 2,200 USD) and they get compensation (133 USD) every year.

Therefore, teachers stay in the job even though they do not like it and they do not enjoy teaching; which raises the question about their psychological situation and how happy they are in their job. In Saudi

Arabia, most female employees work in segregated schools for female students either in public or private schools. Baki (2004) found in her study that the teachers include graduates who are specialized in other fields, but due to culture bound they have to reluctantly become teachers (Baki, 2004). Thus, these female graduates who turn out to be teachers may lack interest in doing their jobs and as such this affects their work engagement. Kahn's (1990) definition of engagement was concurred by May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) who suggested that all three categories (physical, cognitive, and emotion) should be fully integrated to create engagement in playing their job roles. In addition, a research reported that in Saudi Arabia, the ratio of engaged employees in Saudi Arabia is lesser than the world's average rate, which is only four from ten Saudis are engaged, compared to six in every ten (Hewitt, 2013).

Thus, there is a need to investigate the current situation to uncover the female work engagement in Saudi. Females in Saudi Arabia who are culturally restricted to be teachers are considered financially satisfied with this job. Moreover, teaching in Saudi is an attractive job, because it pays a high salary, long holidays, and short working hours plus the segregated work place creates a relaxed and safe work environment for females. Although these Saudi female teachers may not love their job, they feel they have no choice but to be teachers. Thus, there is a need to investigate the psychological impact of these teachers as there has been very few researches conducted in this area.

1.1. Saudi Arabia Culture

Islam is the practiced religion in Saudi Arabia and the law of the country is based on the *shari'ah*, which relates to the teaching of the prophet. The Wahabi branch of the Islamic religion covers all aspects of life. There is strict segregation of the sexes. Women are not permitted to mix socially with men to whom they are not related, either in education or in the workplace. Saudi females were treated as dependent on male guardians until 2001. Before this Saudi women had no identity cards. Their identity appears in their fathers or husbands family cards and were expected to be subordinate to them (Hamdan, 2005). Saudi women have the responsibility of sustaining the family structure (Alireza, 1987).

In Saudi Arabia, traditional attitudes to the education of women came into being not due to the influence of Islam itself but because of the customs surrounding it (Alrawaf & Simmons, 1991). However, from the beginning, women's education has been generally highly valued among a large proportion of Saudi society (Zurbrigg, 1995). Infact more than 50% of the students at the universities in Saudi are females (Doumato, 2000). Despite this, there is only a handful of working women. The 1999 census revealed that only 5% of the working women were involved in the teaching and health sectors (Shukri, 1999). The number has increased in the 2012 census to 13.3% for working Saudi women. The government has recognised the need to improve the education system as well as increase women's participation in the work place in order to ensure the country's economic survival (Hamdan, 2005).

1.2. Saudi Arabia Education System

The Education system in Saudi Arabia is structured to the following levels: Preschool, Primary, Intermediate & Secondary, and Higher Education Level. Firstly, Preschool Level includes education before school entry. Saudi Arabia has seen a number of developments to its competitiveness in recent years that have resulted in an increased in powerful markets and sophisticated businesses and it was ranked 24th in the latest Global Competitiveness Report (World Economic Forum, 2014). This report also revealed that its ranking in the labour market efficiency is as low as 70. Improvement in this area (labour market efficiency) will have great consequence to the young graduates of the future. Although Saudi Arabia is a rich country, with highly educated women, it is ranked 141 out of 148 countries as one with the least number of working women. Better education results will increase in importance as global talent shortages appear on the horizon as the country attempts to diversify its economy, in which it will require more skilled and educated workforce. According to the Global Competitiveness Index, Saudi women's participation in the labour market is ranked at 141 from 148 among the world, with value of 0.25 of 7 scales. The Saudi government has invested heavily in education and training of female citizens, such as opening of the world's only largest female university in the country, and has provided funding for scholarships for women to study abroad. As a result, in 2013 Saudi has produced highly qualified female labour force, who are finding difficulty in getting employed after graduating. Despite these measures, Saudi Arabia's female employment rate is set to decline to 13.3% of the working age.

It is clear that the education in Saudi Arabia is not doing well. In the latest publication of The Global Competitiveness Report 2014- 2015, the quality of the education system in Saudi was ranked 47th; while for the quality of primary education it ranked 69th. Despite the huge budget for education from the

government, Saudi Arabia is still not on the right path. Especially when compared to the quality of the education system in Saudi Arabia to countries in the same income level and same cultural background like Qatar (3rd) and United Arab Emirates (9th). As for the quality of primary education Qatar was ranked 9th and United Arab Emirates 13th.

2. Procedures and Findings

Structured interviews were used for this study. The first set of samples were taken from teachers who are currently working in public schools. The second set of interviews was with nine supervisors from the Ministry of Education, who are responsible for teacher assessment. The interviews took place in Jeddah, with teachers working in different public schools. Ten teachers were interviewed who are currently working in public schools. The results showed that 70% of these teachers never wished to teach, and only three teachers (30%) had the ambition to become a teacher. In response to a question about their reason for choosing this career, two teachers had positive responses, such as “I enjoy it” and “because I like teaching.” The rest of the responses varied from cultural reasons— “it’s the only socially accepted job for a Saudi woman”; “[it’s] a suitable job for women”; “other job has mixed gender, and I couldn’t be a doctor for that reason”—to personal reasons: “there is no job available but teaching”; “[it was] the only choice I had.” In order to obtain insight into their emotional relations with their current jobs, the participants were asked hypothetically if they would accept a job offer in a field other than teaching. Eight out of ten teachers said “yes” for different reasons: “the teacher has no rights”; “the school administration makes it a miserable job”; “teaching consumes energy and causes psychological pressure”; “I don’t like teaching”; “the rules and policies in the school object [to] my personality.” Only two teachers said they would not accept a different offer because “I love teaching” and “it’s a suitable job for women,” as well as “the beauty of teaching is dealing with students.”

The second set of interviews was with nine supervisors from the Ministry of Education, who were responsible for teacher assessment. First, each supervisor was asked why she had chosen teaching as a career. Four of them reported the main reason was that a school is an attractive work place for Saudi women and all four included the word “segregated.” Likewise, four commented that “short working hours and long holidays.” was an attraction. In addition, social and cultural acceptance appeared four times in the answers, whereas only three answers mentioned “the high salary.” The questions then shifted towards the process of teaching itself. The supervisors were asked about teachers’ performance on how they teach, and whether or not they specifically showed enthusiasm in their teaching. Most of the supervisors said that only a few teachers did, and one said “no” because there are no distinct motivations to teach. This is because in the schools, the worst teachers are treated equally as the best ones, and in some cases, they even get higher salaries. Regarding the enjoyment of teaching, the responses were mostly the same; supervisors said that few teachers enjoy teaching, and only one said that it is an honorable job and the teachers definitely enjoy it. The results of the preliminary study clearly indicated a major problem, even though the majority of Saudi females who work (77.6%) are in education, it is not their preferred profession. They would not want to leave the job because the job satisfies their financial needs, long holiday, short working hours, and it is strictly segregated which is considered an ideal work environment for conservative society.

3. Implications

This study focused on the perception of Saudi female teachers towards their work. The culture of Saudi Arabia is conservative towards women at work. This study aims to discover the psychological status of the Saudi female teachers. The findings will help Saudi Arabia’s education system to continue develop possible workable methods to improve education outcomes. It is important for decision makers represented by the ministry of education in Saudi Arabia to know what could hinder female teachers’ engagement and then help to build it to ensure higher performance. In addition, the findings will also add on current knowledge of the management and employee factors that can further the understanding of work engagement. As for the Saudi teachers, the findings could endow them with positive encouragement to continue building their career as teachers. It is important to bring to their attention, what they can achieve in the teaching field, rather than wishing to move to another job. Whilst Smith’s (2012) study focuses on what organizations can do to create employee commitment, this study reveals that every person in schools must play his or her role in applying appropriate knowledge and skills.

4. Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's education ranks lower than the other gulf countries which share the same income level and culture. Also, Saudi females are found concentrated in teaching fields because it is the accepted job in Saudi culture and the teachers find it a good job due to its high salary and long holidays, short working hours, and is strictly segregated, which is thus considered an ideal work environment for a conservative society. However, the true fact of the matter is that they do not like being teachers. The exploratory study confirmed that the female teachers are not happy in their job and they will not leave. This would result in female Saudi teachers not being engaged in their profession. Therefore, Leadership in school can play a pivotal role in influencing teachers to be engaged in their teaching profession.

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