

# **How Saudi women researchers perceive their role at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University**

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**by**

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***“Education should enter every household in this country<sup>1</sup>, and citizens should feel the light of knowledge in their field and places of work”***

The First Minister in the Ministry of Knowledge  
King Fahd Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud  
1951

***“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”***

Nelson Mandela (Mandela, 2003, para. 15).

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<sup>1</sup> Saudi Arabia

## Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University



## **This thesis is dedicated to**

### **My parents**

who represent the values of love and tenderness

### **My husband, Saleh**

for the support and encouragement he gave me throughout my academic journey and the love and inspiration that I received from him while writing this thesis

### **My children, Abdulaziz, Deema and Danah**

for their understanding and for allowing me the time to conduct this study

### **Poem for my family**

أم ثمر دعم مستترا	أنجاحي فرحا منتظر
فهو نتيجة مدحهم المستمرا	أهدي نجاحي لعائلتي
ترأى تفوقي لهم مستنيرا	بقلوب خالصة وثقة بالغة
وكم من خطوة تعرقلت مرارا	كم من دمة همرت
دفع بي بالتقدم المتكررا	لكن حب عائلتي وثنائهم



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## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

**Full names of student:** Mona Saleh Alsudis

**Student number:** 11261201

- I understand what plagiarism is and am aware of the university's policy in this regard.
- I declare that this thesis is my own original work. Where other's people work has been used (either from a printed sources, internet or any other source), this has been properly acknowledged and referenced in accordance with departmental requirements.
- I have not used work previously produced by another student or any other person to hand in as my own.
- I have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own work.
- It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Pretoria. It has not previously been submitted for any other degree at any university.

Signature of student \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of supervisor \_\_\_\_\_

## ABSTRACT

This study discusses the way in which Saudi academic women perceive their role as academic researchers at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. My aim is to illustrate and explain the role of women academics who live in a conservative religious culture in Saudi Arabia, and how they fulfil their research obligations. Moreover, I aim to clarify and understand the challenges they face throughout their academic journeys. I have used the method of narrative inquiry in order to understand the perceptions of and career complexities faced by the participants in this study. This thesis discusses the improvement of education in Saudi Arabia and how women in the country have gained rights in terms of education. This study is built on discovering the effects of the conservative religious identity of a Saudi academic woman and how she copes with the various challenges that she faces throughout her academic journey to become a researcher. The four academic researchers involved in this study incorporate their identities and beliefs into their daily tasks. Three themes emerged from the findings and the interpretation of the data, which served as a guide to answering the research questions. These three themes are:

- Family and cultural role: a fine line between support and control
- Challenges through the academic journey
- The Saudi identity

I conclude the study by discussing the major finding that these Saudi academic women's conservative religious identities have shaped them not only as women of faith, but also as academic researchers.

**Key words:** Saudi women; researchers; academics; identity; culture; conservative; religious; Muslim; faith; challenges.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATION AND ACRONYMS

AMO	Afaq Al-Mustakbal Organization
AT	Activity Theory
Bin	Means the son of
Bint	Means the daughter of
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GEA	Gender and Education Association
GIS	Geography Information System
HEC	Hautes Études Commerciales
HRD	Human Resources Development
KAST	King Abdulaziz for Science and Technology
KFSH	King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre
MIL	the Management Institution Library
PWIs	Predominantly White Institutions
PWRIs	Predominantly White Research Institutions
SIUC	Southern Illinois University Carbondale
TESOL	Teaching English to Students of Other Languages
UAE	United Arab of Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United States of America

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

### Introducing the scenario

When I began my PhD studies, I thought back to twelve years earlier, when I was a Masters student in the United States of America. At that time, it was easy for me to study and conduct research, because both my husband and I were full-time students and we had no children. When I became a PhD student, however, my situation was different. I was a mother of three by that time, and I had to research, read, write, think, rethink, and spend many hours working on my studies. It was difficult to know how to manage my time as a full-time mother and a PhD student.

I decided that in the mornings, while my children were at school, I could be a full-time student. In the afternoons and evenings, I would be a mother taking care of my children. I separated myself into two parts – a student and a mother. My family is my first priority. This is a Saudi cultural norm to which I adhere. A Saudi woman often considers her family and children to be her first priority. My research plans were shaped by my own dilemma of being both a student and a mother. I wanted to understand how other Saudi women manage the challenge of being academics and mothers while living in an environment where they have many responsibilities, relationships and community commitments.

### Problem statement and motivation for the study

Saudi Arabia is a conservative community that is based on Islamic Shari'a<sup>2</sup>. Religious men run the country, and have a great influence in the Ministry of Education. Female education was only recently introduced in the country. It took almost 36 years after the introduction of education for boys before the government was convinced of the need for female education<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Islamic law.

<sup>3</sup> Boys' education started in 1924, but girls' education started only in 1959.

Co-education<sup>4</sup> does not exist in this culture and even the staff in girls' schools are required to be all female. Education in all levels is not yet compulsory, even though most Saudi citizens seek a good education. Given the short period of time that female education has been available in Saudi Arabia, the very existence of female educators and researchers is an accomplishment. In order for Saudi women educators to become researchers, they need to be ambitious and confident. Due to the fact that many Saudi women are conservative and are surrounded by a religious culture, they face many more challenges in their academic journey than women researchers from liberal countries where education for women is more freely available.

I conducted this research in order to understand and explain the role of women academics at Princess Nora Bint<sup>5</sup> Abdul Rahman University in Saudi Arabia. This study shows how the participants I interviewed have become successful in a conservative religious culture and how they manage to fulfil their research obligations. Moreover, I wanted to understand the challenges facing them throughout their academic journey, and, despite this not being a comparative study, the way in which these challenges differ from those facing western women. An example of such a challenge for Saudi women is that they are usually not allowed to travel alone or drive a car, which could be a barrier in completing their research activities.

## **Research questions**

The primary research question of this study is: **How do Saudi women researchers perceive their role at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?**

Andrews (2003) claims that "contributory questions work toward the answering of the main question and therefore should be answered before the answering of the main question" (p. 45). Therefore, in order to answer the primary research question, the following sub-questions were addressed:

1. What are the expectations of Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University regarding the role of women academics?
2. What do women academics want for themselves professionally at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?

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<sup>4</sup> The mixing of genders in schools.

<sup>5</sup> Bint means 'the daughter of'



3. What are the challenges that women academics experience at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?

The first of the sub-questions was answered by collecting documented information about Princess Nora University from the university's administration and its website. The second and third sub-questions were answered from the data that was collected from the four academic women who participated in this study, by means of interviewing them.

### **Aims and objectives of the study**

In order to answer the primary research question (How do Saudi women researchers perceive their role at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?), the study addresses the following objectives:

- Citing Princess Nora University's requirements from, and mandates for women academics working in the university;
- Investigating how women academics in Saudi Arabia who are women of faith living in a conservative environment fulfil their research obligations;
- Collecting and interpreting data about the challenges and obstacles that Saudi women academics experience through their academic journey.

I researched the phenomenon of Saudi women becoming academic researchers while living in a conservative culture.

### **Rationale for this study**

The American academic woman Fernea (1998) describes the common belief in the western world that "Middle Eastern women qualified as 'women of other lands'; it was well known, or at least believed by many, that Middle Eastern women, were in grave need our help" (p. xii). Western people often view Saudi society as a culture that oppresses women and denies them their rights, and are of the opinion that Saudi Arabia does not align itself with western civilization. Fernea, as an American woman, formerly believed that Saudi women are "prisoners of men" (p. 333). This was her personal (erroneous) opinion before visiting Saudi

Arabia. This western perception of Saudi Arabia is one of the reasons I wanted to conduct this study; I wanted to present an image of Saudi Arabia and the women in this study from an insider's perspective. I wanted to help correct the widespread misconceptions about Saudi women.

Researchers are driven to conduct studies or investigations because of a theory, passion, or purpose. My purpose is to explain that Saudi Arabia offers Saudi women similar academic career opportunities that many other women across the world enjoy. More opportunities are also becoming available through recent developments in education, including increased spending on the Saudi Arabian education system and the provision of scholarships for Saudi women to study abroad.

Education for females in Saudi Arabia has received much attention in recent years in an attempt to encourage Saudi women to be ambitious and confident enough to demonstrate excellence in various academic and professional fields. Saudi women have entered into academia and have become well known in a variety of research fields, not only at local level, but also globally. Many Saudi women are now recognised for their success in international scientific forums, which puts them on a par with their counterparts in other countries. The Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia saw fit to establish the Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University in order to improve and develop education for women in the country.

The establishment of the Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University has been of great importance to women students and academics in Saudi Arabia. It was established in 2006 and inaugurated on 15 May 2011 by King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz. It is the largest female university in the world (Alheidery, 2011). The women academics who work there need to be highly educated and experienced in order to effectively guide and educate the students. This is important because there are about 50 000 young women students, in this university, whose lives and academic futures may potentially be enhanced through education. The academics also have to be recognised globally for the extent and value of their research outputs. I chose to conduct my study at this university because it is a new university and one on which the Ministry of Higher Education places great emphasis in the hopes of developing it into a highly successful institution. This study is the first of its kind to be conducted at a university established primarily for Saudi women.

## **The research method**

This research study is situated within the interpretive paradigm of cultural epistemology and follows a qualitative approach. Based on a case study research design, data was collected through interviewing a small purposive sample of Saudi academic women. The interpretive paradigm involves understanding and investigating a particular phenomenon. The phenomenon investigated in this study is that of Saudi academic women being researchers, from the perspective of their own beliefs and points of view. Four Saudi women researchers with PhD degrees and working at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University were interviewed three times by asking open ended questions during informal conversations.

## **The contribution of this study**

Western women academics will benefit from this study by being able to better understand and identify with Muslim women academics and the challenges they face in a conservative society. As a result of this study, the western world will perhaps have a better understanding of the Saudi culture, something that many know little about. Moreover, western people will be able to understand the experiences of Saudi women academics in the Saudi community. This research will also showcase Saudi intellectual work in the international scholarly community. Furthermore, this study will benefit Muslim women academics by providing an insight into the participants' journeys in academia, and allowing readers to compare these stories with their own experiences. I hope it will also inspire Muslim women to greater academic heights.

My research into how Saudi women researchers perceive their role at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University is important because it will help other Saudi women academics to have a better understanding of their role as academics. Ideally, new Saudi women academic researchers will learn from the experiences of more experienced academic researchers, which will enable them to avoid mistakes and find ways to overcome the challenges encountered by their predecessors. In addition, new Saudi women academic researchers will be able to continue the work that the more experienced researchers have started within their fields, working to change the educational situation in the country in order to achieve the best education, and to reach the highest degree of advancement through scientific development and progress. Moreover, new Saudi women researchers will learn how the more experienced researchers were confident and ambitious enough to become successful researchers in spite of the challenges they faced.

## Outline of chapters

This study discusses Saudi academic women's perceptions of being academic researchers at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University. It sheds light on Saudi academic women who live in a conservative religious community and how they fulfil their obligations and face challenges as academic women within their Islamic belief system.

The chapters of this thesis are broken down in the following way:

**Chapter One:** This introductory chapter introduces the scenario of this research study, and provides the problem statement and motivation for the study. I identify the main research question and sub-questions and provide the intellectual rationale for conducting the study. I also describe the research method and the contribution of the study to the field of knowledge. I conclude this chapter by providing this outline of the thesis.

**Chapter Two:** Chapter Two provides a background to the Saudi Arabian culture, the education system and how it has improved over the years. The emergence of women's education and the establishment of Princess Nora University are also discussed.

**Chapter Three:** Chapter Three presents the literature review, which is divided into two main parts. The first part shows the importance of scientific research in the world and how it began, and then improved in Saudi Arabia. It also describes how Saudi women first became researchers and eventually became known globally for their academic work. The second part illustrates the challenges that women academics encounter, both in Saudi Arabia and in the western context.

The conceptual framework is also discussed in this chapter. Activity Theory (AT) was used to understand women academics' perceptions of their role as researchers, because AT does not separate the human mind from the actions that a person may undertake. AT incorporates six tools that are shaped by social and cultural context, both of which are particularly important in this study.

**Chapter Four:** Chapter Four gives details of the research methodology used by the study. It describes details of how this study was conducted and how data were collected and analysed. This chapter clarifies the research paradigm and my own situation and beliefs as the researcher.

**Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight:** These four chapters present a picture of my impressions and experiences in working with the four participants, by telling their stories in an individual narrative way. The stories of these four academic women are consistent that was derived from the experiences that they shared during the interview process. Along with describing their experiences, my intention in these chapters is to provide an overview of their personalities, histories and the particularities of their situations.

**Chapter Nine:** Chapter Nine analyses the research findings in relation to the conceptual framework of this study. In this chapter, I argue that the religious identity of the Saudi academic women is the main issue that affects their decisions and actions in the face of most of the challenges throughout their academic journeys. The findings show that their families and the people that surround them have a huge influence on all aspects of their lives. This community is one of the tools of AT. This chapter shows that the two most powerful tools of AT are the mediating artifacts and the community working together, which strongly affect the individual actions of the four participants in facing all the obstacles and challenges that represent the tool of rules in AT throughout their academic journey.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **From illiteracy to university: Education in Saudi Arabia and the emergence of Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I illustrate the history of Saudi Arabia by shedding light on the importance of the country in the Islamic world due to the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina. Moreover, the fact that Saudi Arabia is the biggest oil exporting country in the world makes it very important in the global economy.

In this chapter, I explain the history of the education system in Saudi Arabia, how it has improved and how women have been allowed to join the education system after being excluded for a long time. I then outline the history of Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University and the sequence of events that led to its establishment. This chapter gives the western reader a better understanding of the Saudi ideology, which is totally different to ideologies in the west. An American writer, Fernea (1998), captures the stereotype that westerners have about Saudis, by saying that “for many in the West, Saudi Arabia is synonymous with Islam” (p. 332). The Saudi community is very conservative and its culture is strongly influenced by the Islamic religion, which has created its own atmosphere of women’s education within this strong belief system. This chapter is important for my study about Saudi academic women because it demonstrates how Saudi women recently claimed their right to education and became academics.

#### **1. The History of Saudi Arabia**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia extends approximately 2 149 690 square kilometres (829 995 square miles) between the Arabian Gulf on the east and the Red Sea on the west. With the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain to the east, Saudi Arabia shares borders with Kuwait, Iraq and Jordan to the north, and Yemen and Oman to the south. The largest country in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia occupies four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula and is similar

in size to Western Europe. Saudi Arabia contains the world's largest continuous sand desert, the Rub Al-Khali (Empty Quarter), as well as the desert and semi-desert on its Red Sea coastline. Saudi Arabia has greener areas, with mountains and forests in its south-western corner. The population of Saudi Arabia is 29 207 277 (Statistics of 2010, 2012). Riyadh is the capital city, which is 1 554 square kilometres and located in the middle of the country (Facts & Figures, 2010).

The last and greatest prophet of Islam, Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him), was born in Mecca, on the Arabian Peninsula, in the year 570AD, and over the next 150 years Islam spread from the Arabian Peninsula throughout the world. Millions of pilgrims visit the Holy cities of Mecca and Medina each year as part of the Islamic religion to do Haj<sup>6</sup> or Umrah<sup>7</sup>. The Islamic religion is the foundation of the Saudi culture (Facts & Figures, 2010). Saudi Arabia has played a significant role in international trade for centuries because of its strategic location near sea trade routes which were used to transport goods between India, China and Europe.

In 1932, King Abdulaziz Al Saud unified the Najd (the Middle Region) and the Hejaz (the Eastern Region) into one kingdom, thereby founding modern Saudi Arabia. King Abdulaziz died in 1953, but his legacy lives on in his direct descendants who rule Saudi Arabia to this day. The country has made tremendous progress under their reign and today, travellers to Saudi Arabia can experience both new and old civilisations side by side. As a background to understanding the country of Saudi Arabia, Twal (2009) explains that:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an Arab, Islamic country, governed by a hereditary monarchy. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia assumes a distinguished role at the Arab, Islamic and international level. Moreover, the Kingdom, thanks to the wealth and resources bestowed by Allah, extends assistance to Arab and developing countries, and contributes to world economic stability through a continuous and secure supply of oil to international markets. (p. 69)

Oil was first discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1936, and by 1950 the country had become a major oil producer. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has at least 25% of the world's oil reserves and is the undisputed leader of the international oil industry. Its oil revenues have been used to diversify the economy, reclaim land from the desert and establish the infrastructure (roads, telephone systems, modern cities, hospitals, power stations) that is needed for further

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<sup>6</sup> Haj is the pilgrim to Mecca, which every adult Muslim is supposed to make at least once in his or her lifetime. Haj is the fifth of the Pillars of Islam.

<sup>7</sup> Umrah is a journey to the House of Allah in Mecca which can be undertaken at any time of the year.

development. In December 2005, Saudi Arabia became the 149th member of the World Trade Organisation, beginning the process of opening up its economy to the outside world (Facts & Figures, 2010).

## **2. Background of the Study**

Education is instrumental in developing a society and, as such, a country's education system is a reflection of its culture, knowledge, goals and missions. Many countries worldwide are seeking to develop high quality universities that are on par with those in countries such as the United States of America (USA) in terms of education and research. In recent years, because education has become a priority, Saudi Arabia strives for high standards of education, not only in universities but throughout the education system (Wildavsky, 2010, p. 4). Hence, the following section illustrates the efforts that Saudi Arabia is making in the education sector, according to the ideology of the country that is based on Islam.

### **2.1. Education in Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is a modern nation with an expansive schooling system. Although all Saudi citizens seek a good education, education is free and still not compulsory. Saudi Arabian society is based on the religion of Islam, its law is based on Islamic Shari'a, and the education system follows the Islamic creed. Shah (2010) states that "in Muslim societies, education and educational leadership are influenced by the religious teachings derived from the sacred texts, as is the case with many other belief systems" (p. 30). Jamjoom (2010) also points out that "religion in Saudi Arabia is regarded as the bedrock of all educational decisions" (p. 547). Hence, co-education (the mixing of genders in classrooms) does not exist in this culture; even the staff at girls' schools are all women.

The education offered in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is, and for a long time has, been of great interest to the rulers of the country. The development of education was started by King Abdulaziz Bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud, the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; his legacy was continued by his sons and education now has a high status in the country. Education in Saudi Arabia begins at kindergarten level and continues through to university.

Education had little impact on the community before the unification of the Kingdom by King Abdulaziz Al Saud. Education was restricted to certain types of educational institutions, such



as mosques and Quran schools. Moreover, the education programme was limited to reading, writing, numeracy, and teaching the Quran and some Islamic subjects (Abdaljawad & Metwaly, 1993, p. 166). After King Abdulaziz took control of Mecca in 1923, he summoned scientists and urged them to spread knowledge and education. Then, in 1924, he established the Directorate of Knowledge for the development of an education system in Saudi Arabia. He also issued a decree to regulate teaching<sup>8</sup> in the Sacred Mosque (Ebraheem, 1985, p. 34). This was the beginning of the spread of education in Saudi Arabia. In 1951, the Ministry of Knowledge was established and took over from the Directorate of Knowledge. This ministry administered only the male schools, as there were still no schools for girls. At the time, King Fahd was the head of the Ministry of Knowledge (Alhamed, Zeyada, Alotaiby and Metwaly, 2007, p. 38).

### 2.1.1. Increased financial allocation to raise levels of education

The allocation of finances in Saudi Arabia includes education as a priority area. Every year has seen an increase in funding for education, the biggest being 26.69% in 1999, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Education Financial Allocation Improvement (1970-2006) (Source: Alhamed, Zeyada, Alotaiby & Metwaly, 2007, p. 43) Amounts in Saudi Riyal million. 1USD = 3.75 SR

Year	General Financial Allocation	Education Sector Financial Allocation	Education Finance as a percentage of the General Finance allocation
1970	6 780	666	9.8%
1975	110 935	12 941	11.7%
1980	245 000	21 294	8.7%
1985	200 000	23 540	11.8%
1990	135 908	25 460	18.76%
1995	150 000	26 541	17.69%
1999	185 000	49 381	26.69%
2000	215 000	53 300	24.79%
2006	380 000	96 700	25.44%

<sup>8</sup> The regulation of teaching is done under government guidance by the education sector through the registration of students under certain criteria. It is done by allocating the male students to different classes according to age and teaching a standard curriculum. Before this, education was based on simple subjects such as reading and writing and there was no standard government curriculum.

Table 1 indicates that over 36 years, there has been a marked increase in funding for education, which has allowed for the development of schools for both boys and girls at primary and high school levels.

### 2.1.2 Increasing numbers in education

With the increased funding for education, Saudi Arabia has seen an increase in the number of schools, the number of classes, and consequently the number of students and teachers through the various levels of education. Tables 2 and 3 give some indication of these increases in public primary schools.

Table 2: Public Primary (G1-G6) Male Schools (Alhamed et al., 2007, p. 92).

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Classes	Number of Male Students	Number of Male Teachers
1967	1 278	10 034	242 499	10 983
1970	1 383	10 973	267 529	12 157
1980	3 638	26 607	517 069	28 156
1990	4 806	42 763	919 949	55 381
2000	5 881	57 734	1 138 847	85 743
2006	6 602	63159	1 257 277	104 171

Table 3: Public Primary (G1-G6) Female Schools (Alhamed et al., 2007, p. 93).

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Classes	Number of Female Students	Number of Female Teachers
1960	15	127	5180	113
1970	357	3 645	127 131	4 353
1980	1 810	14 666	344 363	18 885
1990	3 527	33 073	760 521	44 817
2006	6 714	58 191	1 175 783	111 851

During a similar period (1953 to 2006), there was also a marked increase in the number of public high schools. In 1963, for example, there were only eighteen high schools for boys and only one high school for girls. However, by 2006, this number had risen to 3 207 high schools

for boys and 2 189 high schools for girls. Tables 4 and 5 illustrate a vast increase in the number of both boys and girls attending high schools.

Table 4: Public High Schools (G10-G12) for Boys (Alhamed et al., 2007, p. 104)

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Male Students	Number of Male Teachers
1953	12	1 697	176
1963	18	3 856	160
1973	141	36 774	1 356
1983	355	66 701	4 608
1993	758	156 480	10 677
2006	3207	538 350	39 324

Table 5: Public High Schools (G10-G12) for Girls (Alhamed et al., 2007, p. 104).

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Female Students	Number of Female Teachers
1963	1	21	--
1973	13	5 795	239
1983	351	59 076	3 967
1993	797	165 329	13 578
2006	2 189	462 451	45 374

In comparing Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5, we can see that there has been a substantial increase in education institutions for both boys and girls, showing the development of both primary and high school education in Saudi Arabia.

As with primary and high school education, higher education in Saudi Arabia has witnessed major, unprecedented developments in record time. The development of higher education began in 1949 with the establishment of the College of Islamic Shari'a in Mecca, which opened with no more than fifteen male students. However, the real start of higher education for males in Saudi Arabia was in 1957 when King Saud University was established (Alghamdy & Abdaljawad, 2010, p. 251-252).

There is continuing support for higher education in Saudi Arabia. Those responsible for the development of this sector are very keen to achieve its goals and objectives, particularly as higher education deals with human rights and achieving the appropriate goals to serve society, and aspirations for the future. However, even though education has reached a remarkable

level of success in a reasonably short period of time, its development needs to be on-going. Alhamed, Zeyada, Alotaiby and Metwaly (2007, p. 106-109) clarify the importance of women receiving education, and Saudi Arabian society now understands that Saudi women have similar rights as males do to enter into higher education.

### **2.1.3. The emergence of higher education for women in Saudi Arabia**

Before discussing the emergence of higher education for women in Saudi Arabia, I shed light on a landmark in the history of education for women and how education for women started.

Between 1923 and 1959, there was no education system that specifically catered for women; however, through the sponsorship of some educated women, a few Quran schools taught girls reading, writing and the study of the Quran. At that time, many Saudi families refused to let their daughters go to school. Girls tended to be educated at home or left without education entirely. The Saudi community is based on a tribal society in which men often believed that if a girl went to school, she would bring shame on her family. In Saudi Arabia, perhaps because of the extreme levels of conservatism, accepting new changes within the society seems to be more difficult than it is in other societies. For example, when television entered Saudi homes, women used to cover themselves in front of it because they thought that the programme presenters could see them through this device.

The first private school was opened in Mecca in 1942 (Alageel, 2005, p. 109; Alhamed et al., 2007, p. 37), and others followed thereafter in Jeddah, Riyadh and Dammam. However, most Saudi families still refused education for girls and fought this transition. Only educated fathers or foreign people would send their girls to these private schools. The advent of private schools generated awareness, and education for women slowly spread among Saudi society, until the people of Saudi Arabia became convinced of its necessity. A royal order was promulgated on 22 October 1959, which allowed schools for girls to open after 36 years of opposition to the idea (since 1923). The government then established the General Presidency for Girls' Education in order to manage these schools and ensure royal control, particularly with regard to the education of religious subjects and other subjects associated with Islam, and to select appropriate programmes and monitor their progress (Alwashmy, 2009, p. 14).

Saudi society accepted the education system for girls, provided that it was controlled by the General Presidency for Girls' Education and was in line with the Islamic faith. The General Presidency for Girls' Education was administered<sup>9</sup> by religious men who are Shaikhs<sup>9</sup>. As can be seen from Table 6, when education for girls was allowed in 1960, only 15 schools were established. In the early years, the number of students at these schools was low, which was aggravated by the low budget available. There was not enough funding to support the development of education for girls or the improvement of the programmes available.

Table 6: Growth in the Number of Primary Schools for Girls in Saudi Arabia from 1960-2003 (Alageel, 2005, p. 121).

Year	Schools	Classes	Students	Teachers
1960	15	127	5 180	113
1970	357	3 645	127 131	4 353
1980	1 810	14 666	344 363	18 885
1990	3 527	33 073	760 521	44 817
2003	6 494	55 754	1 122 645	101 806

However, by 2003, more than 40 years later, there were 6 494 schools for girls. Education for girls has been supported by various Saudi leaders and the number of students is currently over two million girls spread over approximately twelve thousand schools.

As education for both boys and girls spread, the government wanted to manage resources between girls and boys schools by putting all schools under one administration. As a result, a royal decree was issued in 2002 to combine the General Presidency for Girls' Education and the Ministry of Knowledge for Boys, establishing instead the Ministry of Education for both boys and girls. The Ministry of Education aimed to improve education by using the experience and knowledge of the educated people who work in the Ministry. Despite this change happening just over a decade ago, the decision to combine the administration wasn't an easy one for the Saudi people. In the beginning, families thought that schools were going to be mixed of boys and girls. Later, Saudi people more easily accepted the idea when they were informed that the segregation of the sexes in education would continue.

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<sup>9</sup> A Shaikh is a scholar in Shari'a, the Islamic subjects.

Alwashmy (2009, p. 62-67) states that the Saudi government considered religion, customs and traditions when establishing education for girls. The Saudi Government believes that it is important to link education to Islam and to not deviate from its framework and content. This ideology is stipulated by Alwashmy (2009) who states that “educational policy in Saudi Arabia, stemming from Islam, which owes the nation the doctrine, worship, ethics and law, judgments, and an integrated system of life, is an essential part of the general policy of the state” (p. 63).

Hence, the privacy of education for girls means that there cannot be integration of males and females within educational institutions. The curricula and study plans outlined for the education of girls include preparing women for their special role in the community. Alwashmy (2009, p. 19-20) explains the Saudi woman’s role as identified in the document of education objectives. The aim is to create a true Muslim woman who is able to carry out her mission in life, namely to be a successful housewife, an ideal wife and a good mother who is prepared to do what is appropriate for Saudi society. Education for girls in Saudi Arabia is therefore conducted in an atmosphere of decency and dignity and is delivered through methods and goals that are in accordance with the provisions of Islam.

The development of primary, middle schools<sup>10</sup> and high schools for girls has been conducted in a comprehensive manner in all parts of the country, including in cities and villages. In 1968, a royal decree was issued for the formation of a committee at the highest level to establish higher education for Saudi women for the first time. Members included:

- The General Presidency for Girls’ Education;
- King Saud University in Riyadh;
- Higher Education Ministry;
- The Ministry of Education; and
- The Budget Management Department in the Ministry of Finance and National Economy (Alwashmy, 2009, p. 21).

The first higher education institution for women opened in Riyadh in 1970 with only 80 undergraduate female students. Thereafter, the female colleges of the General Presidency for Girls’ Education were opened, bringing the number to 102 colleges in 2004, which were attended by thousands of female students. These creation of female colleges resulted in the need to train women teachers and other professionals. These and other colleges were opened

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<sup>10</sup> Middle schools (G7-G9) in Saudi Arabia.

in the women's sections of universities in Saudi Arabia, such as King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, King Faisal University, the Islamic University of Imam Muhammad bin Saud, the University of Villages and at health colleges for females sponsored by the Ministry of Health (Alageel, 2005, p. 145). By 2005, there were 158 colleges with 248 281 women students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2005).

Figures released by the Ministry of Education in 2005 illustrate the increasing number of female students and female academic staff at Saudi Arabian universities (see Appendix A), in comparison to male students and male academic staff. These figures highlight the motivation of Saudi women in higher education and the government's role in promoting education for women, even though the entrance of women into education was relatively late.

The Saudi government entrusted the task of developing higher education for women to the General Presidency for Girls' Education. Initially, some Saudi universities had separate branches for women, but it was important for Saudi Arabia to develop higher education for women in line with the expectations and aspirations of its targets. Therefore, in 2004, the Ministry of Higher Education took on the responsibility of administering all women's higher education institutions, ranging from colleges to universities, with a view to improving them. Women may study a wide range of programmes available at universities and branches of women's educational institutions, all of which are administered and supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education (Alghamdy & Abdaljawad, 2010, p. 245). By 2005, the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia consisted of 251 colleges and universities for males and females offering diverse disciplines, spread across the country, with 248 281 enrolled female students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2005)<sup>11</sup>.

### ***2.1.3.1. The higher education policy for women in Saudi Arabia***

Proceeding from an understanding of the development of higher education for women, I now explore the education policy regarding benefits of a higher education sector that is grounded in a Saudi philosophy.

Alasmar (1997, p. 48), Alageel (2005, p. 44) and Alsunbol, Alkhateeb, Metwaly and Abdaljawad (2008, p. 185) clarify the philosophy of higher education for women. This is based

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix A

on the vision of the Islamic faith, the universe, humanity, and life in education programmes. Higher education for women in Saudi Arabia is linked to the Islamic faith – it pays attention to the development of citizenship and participation in public life in accordance with the teachings of Islam and notions of privacy in the Saudi society. It also emphasises the preparation of Muslim women to practice a particular profession, while maintaining their role as mothers and good citizens (Alageel, 2005, p. 114).

### ***2.1.3.2. The implementation of the goals of higher education for women***

Higher education emphasises the development of thinking skills, scientific research, knowledge, attitudes and values related to women's roles in Saudi society. It also teaches women how to deal with modern information processing systems and technologies such as computers. Alageel (2005, p. 272) claims that higher education focuses on the abandonment of traditional methods of education, and that it develops women's ability to deal with modern innovations, especially with regard to the processing and transfer of information.

However the most important focus of higher education for women in Saudi Arabia is the Islamic religion. Higher education for a Saudi woman should establish the Islamic concepts of the universe, humanity and life. It should teach women to be proud of Islam and their Islamic culture, to realise their social responsibilities towards both the local community and on a national level, and to participate in resolving issues and problems in accordance with nature and religion (Alasmar, 1997, p. 486; Saliba, 1967, p. 326; Alghamdy & Abdaljawad, 2010, p. 256; The National Report, 2005).

### ***2.1.3.3. Strengthening the Arabic language as well as learning English<sup>12</sup>***

The Arabic language is a key feature in the field of higher education in Saudi Arabia, because it is the language of the Quran. However, attention is also given to the English language by giving English classes to students because it is an international language, used particularly in academic studies (Alghamdy & Abdaljawad, 2010, p. 54).

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<sup>12</sup> Public schools in Saudi Arabia for girls and boys provide four lessons a week of English starting from grade 7.



Higher education must develop various competencies necessary for professional women. Therefore, an important goal of higher education is the development of language skills that enable women to master the Arabic language which is the language of Quran, and at least one foreign language besides Arabic, in order to allow students to investigate new developments in academic fields. This is the reason that language departments were opened in most universities in Saudi Arabia.

Arabic remains the main language for conducting research and accessing information in Saudi Arabia, but this does not mean that foreign languages are neglected; they are important in scientific communication with other communities globally.

## **2.2. Remarkable Changes in Higher Education and the Position of Women in Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is a developing country that introduced higher education for men in 1953. Higher education for women was only introduced in 1970 with a few departments at the small number of universities open to women at that time. With the annual increase in the population of the country and people becoming aware of the importance of higher education, more students were graduating from universities. However, women graduates were restricted to certain departments that were available in Saudi universities before the new universities were established in the 2000s.

Alhumaidy (1999, p. 134) states that 85% of higher education students in Saudi Arabia are enrolled in theoretical disciplines such as Islamic studies, Social Studies and Education; but few higher education institutions produce graduates in fields that are needed in the Saudi labour market such as marketing and nutrition. Almfleh (2002) suggests that there should be some coordination between government ministries and universities in order to increase the number of students studying fields that meet the needs of the labour market. The same author adds that, based on the number of girls graduating from high schools, Saudi Arabia needs to establish more universities for women.

Alhamed et al. (2007, p. 140) confirm that most Saudi universities focus on theoretical disciplines and not enough emphasis is put on practical disciplines such as engineering, especially in women's universities. Moreover, these universities do not have the space to

accommodate classes in more disciplines. Therefore, new universities are required, with sufficient space to cater for the new disciplines.

When he became king in 2005, King Abdullah, The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, sought to address this issue by directing the planning and establishment of new universities. King Abdullah is eager to develop education and improve the position of women in the country. He is aware of the necessity to establish new universities for women, offering disciplines that contribute to harmonisation between the outputs of education and the requirements of the labour market. In 2005, he announced a royal decree to establish new public universities<sup>13</sup> and new private universities<sup>14</sup> for both men and women, bringing the total numbers to 25 public and 9 private universities. The number of public universities increased from eleven in 2006 to 25 in 2011, which is a remarkable improvement. All these universities provide comparable opportunities for females and males to complete their higher education.

Appendix B and Appendix C present the demographics of each university, its location and the year that it was established. The King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST) is one of the new universities and, according to Krieger (2007), “King Abdullah has provided \$10 billion of his own money to establish a graduate-level science-and-technology university, instantly making it the sixth wealthiest university in the world” (p. 1). King Abdullah particularly supports excellence in the science research (Albrahim, 2010a).

After illustrating the history of higher education in Saudi Arabia and describing the path to women being given similar opportunities as men to receive a good education, I now describe the ways in which women are getting greater opportunity than they used to get, not only as students but also as part of the workforce.

### ***2.2.1. More Saudis in the faculty!***

Saudi universities are required to deal with the changing world around them and are faced with the task of preparing an educated Muslim citizen. Developing this kind of person is one of the main tasks that should be carried out in general school education, and in higher

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix B

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix C

education in particular. However, unless the curriculum is changed and improved and the staff are suitably equipped, this will not happen.

Devis (2000, p. 70-78) states that it is necessary to focus on the administrative and teaching staff in a university, particularly professors, taking into account their educational development and experience. They must be able to face changes and make appropriate decisions in a timely manner. Professors and supervisors should be prepared to act according to the culture in which they are working, and if they experience difficulties, universities should offer appropriate training. Devis (2000) therefore suggests that Saudi universities should avoid employing academics from foreign countries. The basis of this suggestion can be attributed to the possible negative effects of culture shock which might cause problems in Saudi universities. For example, some foreign supervisors might not understand the Saudi culture and may choose to work in Saudi Arabia only for the high salary, or the experience of living in a different country.

As a result of this approach, the Government of Saudi Arabia implemented a new policy called 'Saudisation'. The policy states that Saudi citizens should be given priority over foreign educators, those from Arab countries, when seeking employment in the education sector.

However, the number of Saudi citizens who work as academics at Saudi universities remains low (Almefleh, 2002). Khazendar (2012) points out that a recent report reveals that 20 Saudi academic women with PhDs and 1 300 Saudi academic women with Masters degrees are unemployed. She assumes that this unemployment rate can be explained by public universities having no available vacancies. The reason that private universities still hire foreign academics is because they are paid less than Saudis.

According to Appendix A, the total number of educators at public universities in 2005 was 21 918, with Saudis numbering only 13 403, and foreign educators numbering 8 515. Appendix D shows that, in 2011, the number of Saudi educators at public universities increased because the number of institutions increased. However, there has also been an increase in the number of foreign educators at public universities: Saudi educators now number 32 440 and foreign educators number 21 727. Appendix D shows that there are 6 610 Saudi males with PhDs working at public universities and only 2 901 Saudi females with

PhDs. However, Saudi females with Masters degrees outnumber their male counterparts by 623.

Hopefully, the new-found awareness of the importance of higher education for women in Saudi Arabia will continue and the number of women with PhDs will increase in public universities.

### ***2.2.2 'Flying with two wings': More opportunities for Saudi women***

The previous section describes the increasing number of Saudi educators and universities, but the question remains whether or not this increase is enough. The more people are educated, the more education they want. Saudi women now have access to more education and have similar opportunities as men, due to the establishment of women's institutions. However, Saudi women continue to search for more educational opportunities abroad. In this section, I explain how women now have more chances to travel and to participate in the Shoura Council, which is a consultative legislative body that advises the King on issues that are important to Saudi Arabia.

Researchers, educators and academics must be able to absorb new technologies such as computers and be trained to facilitate them in various areas of teaching and scientific research. Saudi Arabia is seeking better education for its citizens by offering scholarships for both Saudi males and females to study abroad. The number of Saudi students abroad increased because the Saudi government provided more scholarships abroad with monthly salaries. Since women are considered equal to men in Islam, Saudi women are given similar opportunities as men to seek better education. Almfleh (2002) points out that Saudi women have gained the right to complete their studies either inside or outside Saudi Arabia with the support of the Saudi government.

Alsalmán (2010) states that there are more than 100 000 male and female Saudi students with a government scholarship studying abroad, more than 6 000 of which are Saudi women studying in the USA (Hashim, 2010a). Appendix E shows that, in 2009, 123 051 Saudi students with a government scholarship graduated abroad. This number was made up of 52 925 males and 70 126 females. It is therefore evident that Saudi women have excellent opportunities to achieve higher education qualifications. An example of women's progress in

society is that in 2009, the first woman was appointed as Deputy Minister of Education for Girls in Saudi Arabia, a position which was previously reserved for men (Alrashed, 2010; Almfleleh, 2009).

Abdullah Omar Naseef is an elderly educated man in Saudi Arabia who supports education. He owns *Alnaseefiah*, one of the first private girls' schools in Jeddah. Naseef is a former deputy chairman of the Shoura Council. He was interviewed by Abdul Ghafour (2012), about The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah and his concern for education in Saudi Arabia:

The education and welfare of Saudis and world peace are his main concerns. He has sent about 100 000 young Saudi men and women on scholarships to foreign universities to pursue higher education. He opened universities in different parts of the Kingdom and there are now 24 government universities that will produce leaders of the future. He insisted that Saudi scholarship students go to universities in different countries such as Japan, China, India, the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea and come back with their distinct experiences, know-how and expertise to develop the country. King Abdullah is a charismatic leader who is liked by everybody. (p. 17)

Saudi Arabia is transitioning to become better in the future by giving women a more active role in Saudi society and within the Islamic religion. If Islam is followed correctly, women's rights and participation in society are ensured. Women and men shared roles in politics a long time ago when "the Prophet accepted the *baya* [pledge of allegiance] from a group of women who had come, on their own, to join the ranks of the first Muslims" (Hijab, 1988, p. 16). In 2003, Saudi women demanded to be allowed to participate in both the Shoura Council<sup>15</sup> and the Ministerial Council, as this does not conflict with Shari'a (BaShatah, 2003). However, they were not allowed to participate until 2011. The Shoura Council is a modern version of a traditional Islamic concept – an accessible leader consulting with learned and experienced citizens – which has always been practised by Saudi rulers.

Since King Abdullah became king in 2005, he has wanted to give Saudi women their rights and the opportunity to have their voices heard in Saudi society. He meets with educated Saudi women to discuss their opinions (Ahad, 2005). King Abdullah encourages women to participate in making decisions for the country because he realises that a society cannot 'fly with only one wing'. He wants to give women more roles in Saudi society so as to ensure the

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<sup>15</sup> The Shoura Council currently consists of 150 members appointed by the King for a four-year renewable term. Based on their experience, members are assigned to committees. There are 12 committees that deal with human rights, education, culture, information, health and social affairs, services and public utilities, foreign affairs, security, administration, Islamic affairs, economy and industry, and finance.  
[http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/government/Majlis\\_al\\_shura.aspx](http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/government/Majlis_al_shura.aspx)

strength of the other wing of society in order to raise a community that is educated and productive. As a result, King Abdullah announced that women would be able to join the Shoura Council as members for the first time in 2011. He stated:

Because we refuse to accept the marginalization of women in society and want to see them taking part in every role that does not contradict Islam, we decided after consulting with religious and other scholars to allow women to become members in the Shoura Council. (Alawwad, 2011, p. 64)

In 2011, a royal decision was made to increase the number of women in the Shoura Council from 6 to 12. Alheidery (2011) explains that King Abdullah did this in order to achieve the goal of having the benefit of the experiences and opinions of both genders.

Although allowing women to become members of the Shoura Council may not be considered to be a big change in other countries, it is considered a significant and substantial change in Saudi society.

### **2.3. The Dream Came True: Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University**

In this section, I explain the story behind the establishment of the Princess Nora University and the reason for its name.

#### ***2.3.1 The unification of higher education institutions for women and its benefits***

For women in Saudi society, meeting the needs of the labour market is important. Originally, the workforce was entirely male, and it was only in the late 1980s that women started working.

The expected role of women in the service of the community required reconsideration. Since women joined the workforce only a decade after the establishment of higher education for women, universities had to adjust to this change. Saudi women now require different skills than they did before, such as accounting, business and understanding of the law. The institutions have adapted appropriately and have established new departments to teach female students the skills they need to become active members in companies, to run businesses, work in the legal profession, the medical profession, the education sector, and the information technology sector.

Hence, the establishment of an independent university for women was considered important. Alamro (2011) explains that the establishment of a large university, such as Princess Nora University, would assist in improving women's education in a number of ways. By drawing all the female colleges that used to be controlled by the General Presidency for Girls' Education under one administration, all disciplines would fall under the jurisdiction of this university and the administrators themselves would be women, not men.

In 2008, King Abdullah embarked on a huge project to develop and improve women's education in Saudi Arabia. The project included establishing the massive Princess Nora University. The main aim of Princess Nora University is to appoint good educators who are also researchers and scholars equipped for conducting research in their fields.

### ***2.3.2 Who was Princess Nora?***

Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman Al Saud was the sister of King Abdulaziz Al Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia. She was born in 1875, a year before her brother. She was a great influence on King Abdulaziz and supported him in gaining control of Riyadh and unifying the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. She became one of his main advisors and he was famously known to say proudly on several occasions "I'm Nora's brother".

Princess Nora was one of the most important personalities of the Arabian Gulf and was very charismatic. She was known to be quite progressive and outspoken. Princess Nora passed away in 1950 (Saudiwoman's Weblog, 2008). The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah, honored his aunt's memory by naming the biggest women's university in the world 'Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University'.

### ***2.3.3 Background of Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University***

The first college affiliated with Princess Nora University was established in 1971 in Riyadh and was controlled by the General Presidency for Girls' Education. The existing colleges were known as the Girls' Education Colleges, and their numbers soon increased and spread to many cities in Saudi Arabia.



In 2004 it was announced that all the Girls' Education Colleges would be supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education instead of the General Presidency for Girls' Education; moreover, the name of these colleges was changed to Riyadh University. In 2006, under the guidance of King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, an enormous female university was established to administer all the colleges on one campus. This university was to be called the Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University instead of Riyadh University, and the foundation stone was laid by King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz on 29 October 2008 (Waas, 2012).

On 15 May 2011, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz inaugurated the Princess Nora University with 50 000 female students, fourteen unified colleges, 55 departments and 2 000 staff members. Alheidery (2011) confirms that Princess Nora University is the biggest female university in the world. The land area of the university is eight million square metres, and includes two gymnasiums, a dormitory that accommodates 12 000 students, a residence of 400 villas and 1 046 apartments for staff members. The government earmarked 5.3 billion US dollars to establish this university. Princess Nora University has twelve well-equipped libraries that are linked to international libraries, and 26 databases, providing students with a quiet atmosphere and a congenial place to study. Students are able to conduct research on the internet or using reference books, as well as use other facilities, such as printers.

The university offers a variety of disciplines based on the actual needs of the labour market such as nursing and computer science. It is also consistent with the ten year strategic plan to cooperate with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health in Saudi Arabia (Higher Education for Saudi women, 2011, p. 3). Appendix F shows all the colleges and departments that make up Princess Nora University. The university is planning to open a Medicine, Dentistry and Community Medicine College in 2013 (Alomran, 2012).

Princess Nora University is an enormous university that needs to hire more academic women. In 2012, the principal of the university stated that Princess Nora University is eager to employ Saudi academic women who have postgraduate degrees in order to ensure the quality of the education offered (Waas, 2012). Appendix G shows the number of faculty members in each college and the degrees that they hold. It shows that, of the 1 248 faculty members, only 143 of them are non-Saudis. However, of the 58 male educators at the university, only one is a Saudi.



In the past, the administration of Princess Nora University was managed by men in a separate building. However, in 2006 this changed, and all administration positions are now held by women. After the Minister of Higher Education, the Principal of the university is the highest authority for all university business. Female universities in Saudi Arabia hire male educators when they cannot find a suitable female educator. However, men are not allowed to enter female colleges, even if they are educators. A male educator delivers lectures to his female students from a room located in the college but in another building, by means of a camera, a projection screen and a microphone. In this situation, the female students can see and hear the male educator, but he cannot see them. The students and the lecturer can communicate with each other via microphones.

Princess Nora University is a pioneering university in the field of scientific research. It aligns itself with the Scientific Forum for Researchers in Saudi Arabia and urges women academics to contribute to scientific research in all areas of applications that serve the community. It also calls on the government and private institutions to provide adequate support to engage women in scientific research so that the country will benefit from the findings (Khuzaymah, 2006).

The organisational structure of the deanship of scientific research at Princess Nora University is outlined in Figure 1.

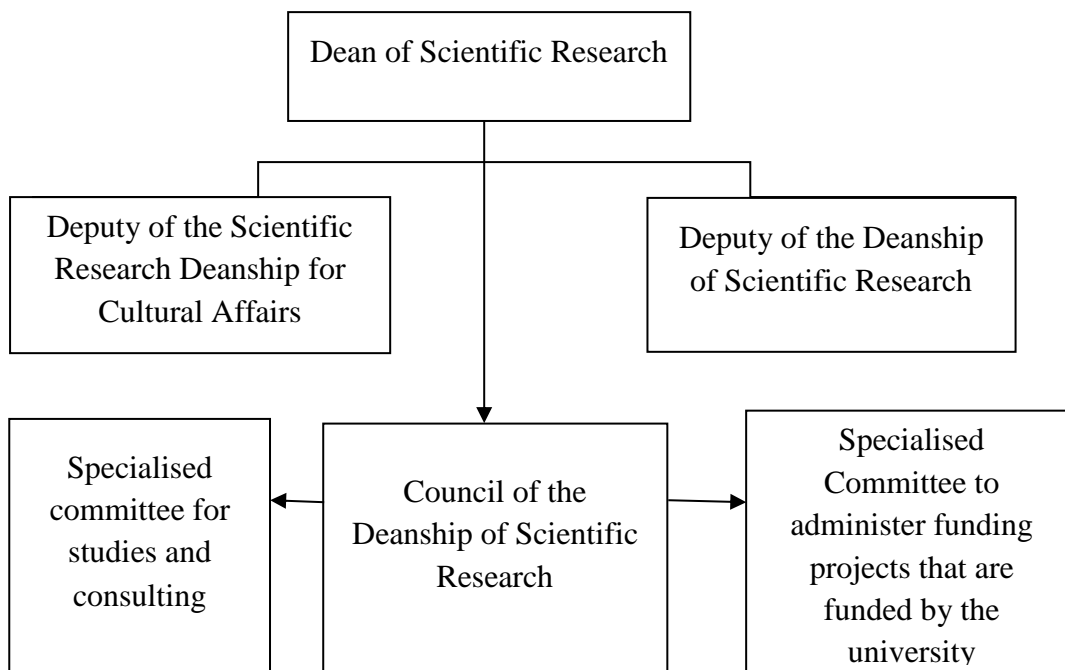


Figure 1: Organisational Structure of the Deanship of Scientific Research at Princess Nora University

Currently, Princess Nora University is encouraging its educators to move into a variety of research fields. The vision, mission, goals, trends and purposes of Princess Nora University are summarised below (Princess Nora University webpage, 2012). It is evident that the university places prime emphasis on research.

### ***Vision, Mission, Goals, Trends and Purposes***<sup>16</sup>

#### ***Vision***

Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University seeks to achieve excellence and leadership locally, regionally and globally in the field of higher education, scientific research, community service, sustainable environmental development, and building a society of knowledge within a framework of Islamic cultural and social values for the community.

#### ***Mission***

1. To base the role of the university on the acquisition of knowledge and its transformation, adaptation, dissemination and management in conformity with societal values and cultures;
2. To establish roots of scientific research;
3. To develop the personality of the student and provide her with skills enabling her to develop creativity, leadership, team-work and competition skills locally, regionally and internationally;
4. To positively affect societal progress and establish its constants and cultural privacies to support social coherence and citizenship principles;
5. To activate the role of academics to provide research and consultancy services for different institutions in society.

#### ***University Goals***

1. To promote the faith and loyalty to Allah and then to the country;
2. To build a generation that has a sense of belonging to the country and adheres to the Islamic identity and national system;

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<sup>16</sup> This whole section is paraphrased from the English version of the official website of the university.

3. To work on building a girl's personality fully in order to carry out her duty in life as a wife, mother, scientist and worker by providing her with the knowledge and the required skills to tackle whatever comes her way;
4. To prepare specialists in different fields of science and knowledge who are equipped with various skills that enable them to keep up with the requirements of technical development and progression so that they can contribute to building a knowledge-based economy;
5. To undertake a positive role in the field of scientific research which contributes to progress and to building a knowledge-based economy both locally and internationally, by conducting research and encouraging researches and establishing support centres;
6. To establish a culture of community participation and sustainable environmental development for all sectors and categories of the community;
7. To contribute to the development of mechanisms for activating community participation and disseminating the culture of participation in serving society and developing the environment.

### ***University Trends***

1. Upgrading the educational process through the development of teaching, learning and evaluation processes;
2. Developing the academic and administrative structure of the university;
3. Focusing on fields of scientific research and further studies;
4. Developing professional efficiency in both educational and administrative university personnel;
5. Achieving harmonisation between university outputs and development requirements;
6. Achieving the integration of resources and the exchange of experiences;
7. Enhancing quality and quality control.

### ***Purposes***

1. To become a distinguished scientific university and prepare staff members to become researchers by the application of comprehensive quality principles and continuous

development, along with focusing on courses and qualitative skills required for graduates and developing future visions in light of local and global changes in order to ensure the distinguished performance of its graduates in the labour market;

2. To ensure the climate of Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University is based on the principles and cultural and ethical values emerging from the instruction of the Islamic Shari'a;
3. To become a distinguished research centre in which cooperation with educational institutions, production sectors and services on a local, regional and international level is encouraged;
4. To contribute effectively to the process of sustainable development and community and environmental services through the best use of the research centres and various deanships available to it, so that the university becomes an institution that is referred to in terms of educational, research and applied aspects by other institutions both in and outside of the society.

## **Conclusion**

For a long time, the conservative Saudi culture put women at a disadvantage in terms of obtaining an education. Women were only granted the right to receive education in public schools 36 years after men. This was due to a misinterpretation about the Islamic religion, which actually encourages both men and women to seek education. The Saudi society worked within the Islamic religion and its conservative culture to find suitable ways of providing similar education for women and men. The Saudi Government is based on Shari'a, and it therefore established the segregation of the education system between men and women to ensure privacy for women in their institutions. The government went on to establish the Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University, which is the biggest women's university in the world. Saudi women have therefore joined academia and found a way to enjoy being academics while staying within the Islamic framework.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Narratives of academic women around the world: The literature review**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I present a review of the literature and focus on two main themes:

- the value and success of scientific research in academia, and how it started in Saudi Arabia and progressed until the names of women Saudi academic researchers appeared internationally;
- the challenges that women academics encounter both in Saudi Arabia and in the western context.

The first part of my literature review is about the importance of scientific research and its evolution in Saudi Arabia. It is important to clarify that this is a new focus for the academic community in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, although Saudi women entered into higher education only as recently as 1970, they quickly became researchers as well as educators. There is a distinction between educators and researchers. While women in Saudi Arabia have been educators (teachers) for a number of years, it is only recently that they are establishing themselves as researchers. This study focuses on the specific challenges that Saudi academic women researchers face.

The second part of the literature review looks at the challenges and obstacles that academic women experience during their academic journey, depending on the context, beliefs and systems of the countries in which they live. It is widely considered that Saudi Arabia has the most conservative culture, compared to other Arab countries and the rest of the world. Since the challenges faced in Saudi Arabia and the western context differ, I found it logical to divide this section into two parts:

- Women academics in Saudi Arabia, and
- Women academics in the western context.

### **3.1. The Importance of Scientific Research and its Evolution in Saudi Arabia**

This section focuses on the importance of scientific research and how it is a crucial aspect of academic work in universities around the world. In Chapter Two, I discussed the education system in Saudi Arabia and how higher education has developed so as to include Saudi women as educators. The purpose of this section is to highlight recent efforts at foregrounding research in Saudi Arabia and how it evolved until women became researchers. I also note that some Saudi women researchers are internationally known for their participation in scientific research.

#### ***The importance of scientific research in academia around the world***

In this section, I discuss the importance of scientific research in universities internationally and the positive effect it has on academics in achieving high levels of knowledge acquisition and education.

Scientific research specialises in the analysis and development of a holistic view of the findings of research contemporaries and the implications for social and economic development. Bridges, Juceviciene, Jucevicius, McLaughlin and Stankeviciute (2007) confirm that:

One of the major contributions which higher education makes to a community is its scientific research, teaching and development. There is increasing recognition by government and by the business community that this scientific resource is critical to business innovation and competitiveness. (p. 265)

However, the same authors add that to attain this goal, universities need to build critical and creative thinkers who can contribute to such development.

A Human Resources Development (HRD) perspective investigates the concept of “increasing the knowledge, skills and capacities of all people in a society”, which is the main goal of education (Tsegai, 1999, p. 216). Harrison and McKeon (2008) and Swennen, Jones and Volman (2010) agree that academics who start working in higher education have to develop the knowledge and skills required for their new roles. As this professional development is achieved through research, it seems that academics will develop new identities by changing from their role as educators into that of researchers in higher education. Therefore, academic

researchers can build knowledge through their research (Rex, 2010). Bullock (2009) concurs with this view, explaining that academic educators improve their knowledge and skills from their involvement in research. It is thus crucial to encourage academic educators in their new roles in universities, and for institutions to provide support in conducting research (Bailey, 1994).

Arnold (2010) states that good university educators must be innovative in their teaching methodologies, presentation skills, content analysis, and interpretation of ideas rather than simply transmitting information relying on a single textbook. For academic educators to continue with professional development and to keep up to date with teaching methods, they need to develop their knowledge base and improve their research skills. Academic researchers are inspired by the development of professional knowledge emanating from their research (Brown, 2010). However, Schoorman and Bogotch (2010) have identified critical aspects in higher education where professors are accepted at certain universities without either focusing on their research, or linking it to their professional functions and teaching. Professors are proud to challenge their students in a socially and culturally relevant manner in order to establish the students' knowledge systems. These professors, who challenge their students, have an agreement from their institutions to follow this method in teaching, particularly if the institution thinks that controversy is good for intellectual growth. However, this method considers a professor as a teacher and tends to forget the other role of a professor, which is to be a researcher.

Kember (1997) confirms that teaching philosophy is related to the quality of student achievement via the learning process, which means that teaching approaches are correlated with student learning outcomes. Therefore, educators in higher education affect their students' learning and outcomes by the quality of their teaching. While there is the challenge of designing learning activities such as problem solving, that students need to learn to perform to emulate their teacher, educators need to improve their way of teaching in order to be more effective. Hence, the concept of 'teaching and learning' has been replaced by 'learning and teaching' and universities are focusing on the effectiveness of educators by immersing them in field research to apply the concept and to improve their teaching abilities.

Over the past five to ten years, academic educators in universities in many countries have engaged in research that has improved their teaching and developed their identities within academia (Murray, Campbell, Hextall, Hulme, Jones & Mahony, 2009). Murray et al. (2009)

claim that universities are aware of the importance of academic research and that they therefore encourage academic educators to become involved in conducting research. Gewirtz, Shapiro, Maguire, Mahony and Cribb (2009) state that academic educators have the potential to change the world and improve not only their own knowledge base, but that of their students as well. Gewirtz et al. (2009) state that benefits of conducting research are that academic researchers become better able to read, think and discuss academic issues, which in turn leads to personal benefits and academic professional development.

MacLure (1996) conducted a study by interviewing academics about their own experiences in their transition from being educators to researchers and describing the limitations they faced in higher education institutions in Britain. The study confirms that academics face limitations in their professional lives, but undergo a transition within themselves and develop new identities with an alternative vision of the future. As stated by MacLure (1996), “academic or intellectual pursuits represented a kind of freedom or liberation for several of the narrators or at least an escape from other mundane concerns” (p. 227). One woman in MacLure’s (1996) study described her situation as if she was on an island and was isolated from the rest of the world when she was only an educator, but when she became an academic researcher, she saw that her world was different. While she was doing action research, she felt that she was part of a very “contained world”, real life. In the end, many western women academics in higher education institutions become successful. By increasing their knowledge, skills and experience they feel that they are more accepted than before, and tend to feel more like an insider in the world of academic research.

Scientific research started in universities to improve education, but in fact reflects multiple benefits for the academics themselves in building their identities to become better educators.

### ***From Shari’a<sup>17</sup> scholars to scientific researchers: Scientific research in Saudi Arabia***

In this section I explain how Saudi Arabia has progressed from having only male scholars in Shari’a to including women scientific researchers, by explaining the first steps of encouraging scientific research, to then establishing scientific research centres. I identify some Saudi

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<sup>17</sup> Islamic subjects.



academic women researchers who are honoured in their own country and who have accomplished impressive academic success internationally.

As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, everything in Saudi Arabia is based on Islam. Muslim male scholars are well known in Saudi Arabia and are as referenced widely in many Muslim countries. They are called Shaikh and are scholars in Shari'a, well educated in all Islamic subjects. Since women are considered *oura*<sup>18</sup>, and kept away from public sight, they do not have the same opportunities as men to become well known as scholars in Shari'a. Women's voices are also *oura* – to be segregated from men – so it is not common to give a speech in front of men in such a conservative society. Recently, Saudi Arabia became more open to the rest of the world and to fields not directly related to Islamic subjects, and started to give women the chance to participate more by demonstrating and gaining more knowledge.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Saudi Arabia has been connected to the Islamic world throughout history. However, it is not well connected to the western world. Scientific research centres are an avenue that can connect Saudi Arabia to the western world.

Alrashead (2000, p. 209) clarified that the call for greater attention to scientific research has been on-going for many years and it continues to be promoted in many countries around the world. Scientific research is recognised for its philosophies, theories, methods, rules and consequences; all of which are known in the industrialised countries surrounding Saudi Arabia. Industrialised countries are so concerned with scientific research that they spend 2.5% of their national income on it. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia spends only 0.11% of its national income on scientific research. When talking about Saudi Arabia, Krieger (2007) claims that “less than 0.25% of the country's gross domestic product is spent on research, and universities do not have strong links with the private sector” (p. 1). I believe that Saudi Arabia has not yet reached the level of awareness of the importance of scientific research that is necessary for a higher proportion of its income to be spent on the field. However, there are indicators that Saudi Arabia is progressing in the right direction by raising the allocation and proportion of spending on education and sending missions abroad, as mentioned in Chapter Two. Hopefully, this will lead to a rise in funds dedicated to scientific research in the future.

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<sup>18</sup> A term to designate something extremely private. The female body is considered to be *oura* and must be covered in the presence of men.

Saudi writers and thinkers began to highlight the importance of research in academia through their writing. Alsunbol and Abdaljawad (1994, p. 40) state that research is a crucial aspect of academic work at universities, which aims to develop knowledge by immersing academics in conducting research and also training their students to conduct research. Research and the quality of teaching are strongly connected because conducting research gives education value and vitality.

The Saudi Government recently started taking decisive action to promote research in Saudi Arabia. In 1999, the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia established the Centre for Higher Education Research and Studies. This was the first research centre in Saudi Arabia, and it had much to achieve. The purpose of this centre was to search for and find solutions to problems in the education system (Centre for Higher Education Research and Studies, 2011, p. 9). Unfortunately, this research centre was run by men only. Women were excluded, despite the fact that the Centre was dealing with all issues in higher education, in both men's and women's institutions<sup>19</sup>.

Other research centres were set up recently and are supported financially by the Saudi Government. Some of the new research centres have separate sections for women only. The Ministry of Higher Education went on to open fourteen research centres in different cities in Saudi Arabia. The first five of these were established in February 2007. The success of the research centres depends on developing a creative and innovative scientific environment and having a cadre of researchers and assistants working at a high level of innovation and efficiency. To this end, the research centres have developed excellent relations with other local and global research centres to cooperate and collaborate with each other (Saudi Centres of Research Excellence, 2011, p. 13<sup>20</sup>). Saudi Centres of Research Excellence cooperate internationally with the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) in the Netherlands, the National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN) in Malaysia and the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) in the United Kingdom. The Higher Education Research Institute of Hiroshima University, Japan, has also been approached (Centre for Higher Education Research and Studies, 2011).

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<sup>19</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Two, there is a men's academic administration that holds more power than the women's administration.

<sup>20</sup> Summary of my translation.

As a result of this massive movement to support scientific research in Saudi Arabia and gradually give women opportunities to participate by contributing their knowledge, Saudi women, who were previously marginalised by rigid traditions and restricted by misinterpretation of Islamic law, have recently been adopting new roles in academia. Saudi women academic researchers are making names for themselves and new names are emerging every year. In order to illustrate the increasing presence of women researchers, I focus on three women researchers in Saudi Arabia and tell the story of their growing international reputations. When the Saudi media reports on successful Saudi women researchers in the scientific field, the same three names are always mentioned due to their success both nationally and internationally. They are Khawla Alkuraya, Ghada Almutairi and Hayat Sindi. These three researchers are scientists and scholars in their fields and are honoured for this in Saudi Arabia (Alsudairy, 2010; Hashim, 2010b; Hashim, 2009; Attalah, 2010; Alheidery, 2011). They have progressed ahead of men in their scientific research laboratories (Alrashed, 2010; Alsalman, 2010).

I would like to give each of these Saudi women academic researchers the attention they deserve by investigating their academic journey and the ways in which they succeeded, especially given that higher education for women started as late as 1970 and that the first scientific research centre that included women was established in 2007. These three academic researchers are role models for other Saudi academic women. They represent the first Saudi women who have made their presence felt in the field of research after a long time of absence. The three women come from different regions in Saudi Arabia and had the opportunity to accomplish notable success in scientific research in this conservative culture. The three Saudi women academic researchers whom I discuss are a sample of the women who are hopefully going to contribute to and improve the field of scientific research, both in Saudi Arabia and internationally.

Khawla Alkuraya is a young Saudi woman scientist from the Middle Region of Saudi Arabia. She graduated from the Medical College of King Saud University in Riyadh. In 1996, she joined George Town Hospital in the United States of America to complete her postgraduate studies. In 2000, she received her American Board Certification in Pathology, and in 2001 she received a fellowship in Genetic Diagnosis of Tumours (Alheider, 2005). In 2004, Alkuraya received a prize for the best scientific research at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre (KFSH). In 2005, she was distinguished as a physician-scientist. She is the

director of the research centre at King Fahd National Centre for Children's Cancer at King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre in Riyadh (KFSH), Saudi Arabia (Alheider, 2009). In 2007, Alkuraya won the Harvard prize for excellence in her scientific medical research for her work in identifying the DNA of people who are diagnosed with cancer. She became well known globally in the field of medicine and scientific research (Alnashery, 2010).

Alkuraya is a founding member of the Saudi Association of Alzheimer's Disease. She is a leader in the field of genomic cancer research. She has focused on identifying the molecular signature of common tumours utilising recent technologies in the field of genetic cancer. Under Alkuraya's leadership, the research centre at KFSH has become a member of the International Cancer Genome Consortium (ICGC) which aims to identify the molecular abnormalities of more than 50 types of cancers (Alomran, 2010a). Alkuraya is the author of over 100 original research articles, editorials, review articles and book chapters. She has published scientific research through various American journals (Alomran, 2010b). In January 2010, Alkuraya met the King of Saudi Arabia, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah Al Saud, and was honoured by him by receiving the 'First Rank King Abdulaziz Medal' for her pioneering initiatives. She was the first Saudi woman to receive this medal (Waas, 2010; Alnashery, 2010; Alomran, 2010a; Alomran, 2010b; Albrahim, 2010a; Alheidery, 2011). She attends many research conferences at Saudi universities to share her experiences with young scholars. Jazan University, in the Southern Region of Saudi Arabia, rewarded her for her scientific efforts by inviting her to be the guest speaker at a reception in her honor (Alsuhali, 2010). In a speech at one particular conference, she clarified that she is not calling for equality between women and men, but simply for women to be given the opportunity to participate on the strength of their knowledge and experience. Alkuraya is proud of being a Saudi woman. She mentioned that having her son Nawaf during the first year of her undergraduate studies was a challenge and she has struggled to find a balance between being a mother, her long years of study, and her work in hospitals.

Alkuraya was heartbroken to see people affected with cancer, suffering pain. This guided her to work in laboratories instead of being a physician. She wanted to find a cure for this disease by terminating affected cells without affecting healthy cells. She ended her speech by saying:

I want to whisper to every Saudi woman who aspires to success. Be always a fighter, your faith has to be your weapon, and always put your trust in God, then your abilities, intelligence and creativity. Do not let the bright picture, which journalists trying to draw

about a successful woman that she is a woman there with all the circumstances, possibilities and with no obstacles. This is not true. In my opinion, that any human being, whether man or woman, can succeed if he or she has the factors for success, especially the faith in God, faith and sincerity of a noble goal and then work, diligence and perseverance. (Mustafa, 2010)<sup>21</sup>

Alkuraya stated that anyone can succeed if she has the faith and the patience to overcome the obstacles through her academic journey.

Ghada Almutairi is another successful Saudi woman researcher and scientist. She is from a big tribe in Saudi Arabia called the ‘Mutair’. She graduated from high school in Saudi Arabia (Alqublan, 2010) and then went to the USA to complete her undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Almutairi is a professor and the head of a department at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) in the field of Nano-Scale Medicine (Alqublan, 2010; Alheider, 2010). The university awarded her 3 million US dollars to conduct research in her field (Alrashed, 2009). Moreover, the State of California awarded her a million dollar private laboratory in which to conduct her research. She does research on several modern nanotechnologies that target utilising the transformation of hydrophilic and hydrophobic molecules for medical treatment applications, particularly cardiac tissue prosthetics (Alqublan, 2010). Although Almutairi is only 32 years old, she is already a professor because she published ten successful research projects and a book entitled *“The Art of Falling Apart: Exploiting Nanomaterial Disassembly for Health Science”*, which has been translated into various languages in the USA, Germany and Japan (Almefleh, 2009).

Almutairi was awarded the Scientific Innovation Prize from the National Institute of Health (NIH), the biggest scientific support institution in America (Alheraby, 2009; Alrubaish, 2010; Alfozan, 2010; Alshamlan, 2009). She beat over 10 000 researchers from different countries around the world to win the award (Hashim, 2009).

Almutairi worked hard to achieve this brilliant success. After she graduated from high school, she applied for a Saudi scholarship to study in the USA. Unfortunately, her application was not successful so she studied in the USA at her own expense until she was eventually awarded the Saudi scholarship (Alsudairy, 2010). She pointed out that Saudi Arabia is heading in the right direction with regards to education and scientific research, but “we need financial funds to create a suitable environment for scientific research” (Alheider, 2010). Almutairi

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<sup>21</sup> Translated from Alkuraya’s Arabic speech that she gave at a conference held at Jazan University.

confirmed that the courage to make and embrace tough decisions is the basis of success (Alomran, 2012).

Hayat Sindi is another example of a most successful Saudi woman researcher. She earned her PhD from Cambridge University, where she was appointed as senior lecturer at the International School of Medicine, specialising in Pre-Clinical Education and Public Affairs in the Cambridge Overseas Medical Programme (Alriyadh, 2012). Sindi is the co-founder and director of 'Diagnostics for All', a non-profit organisation fusing biotechnology and microfluidics, dedicated to creating low cost and easy to use point of care diagnostics designed specifically for the 60% of the developing world that lives beyond the reach of urban hospitals and medical infrastructures. Currently, she is a visiting scholar at Harvard University (Mandoob, 2011). Sindi has established a non-profit scientific institution in Saudi Arabia called the 'Palm and Patent Institution'. Her primary objective is to develop and deploy technology to developing areas of the world to improve health care (Alansari, 2012b).

Sindi is the first Arab woman to receive a PhD in Biotechnology, and she and her team received the first prize from Harvard University in the Action Plans Competition (Alansari, 2012a). Moreover, the American organisation 'Tech Pop' has selected Sindi as one of the fifteen best researchers in the world, the first woman from the Middle East to gain such recognition (Almefleh, 2009; Alqublan, 2010).

In 2010, Sindi was the winner of the Mecca Al Mukaram prize for scientific innovation, awarded by Prince Khaled Al-Faisal (Alrwais, 2010). In 2011, she was the first Saudi person, male or female, to be named an 'Emerging Explorer' by the American National Geographic Society<sup>22</sup>, which is considered to be the biggest scientific institution in the world. The Emerging Explorer programme supports talented scientists with their research at the beginning of their careers (Mandoob, 2011). In 2012, the American magazines *News Week* and *Daily Best* announced that Sindi had been selected as one of the 150 successful women role models in the world for that year. Also in 2012, *CEO* magazine ranked Sindi ninth out of the Arabic countries and third in Saudi Arabia in the list of the 100 bravest women around the world for that year (Mahleyat, 2012).

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<sup>22</sup> The American National Geographic Society was established in 1888 in Washington DC to gather geographical information from around the world. It has ten million members from almost 185 countries and has supported more than 4 000 scientific research projects (Mandoob, 2011).

Sindi submitted a brief about Medical Biotechnology, a very important subject in Medical Science, in the first international conference of Science in Taif, Saudi Arabia (Alharthi, 2012). She called for traders and investors in Saudi Arabia to support scientific research for community service (Alansari, 2012b).

Sindi is from Mecca and mentioned that her father was a supportive man in her life. He was one of the reasons behind her success. He supported her in her efforts to gain more education. She wishes he were still alive to share in her achievements. She said, “I wish he is with me while I am receiving these prizes. He just died four months ago” (Alrwais, 2010).

In her lecture at the second Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) youth leadership forum, Sindi explained that after graduating from high school in Saudi Arabia, she tried her best to convince her family to move to the United Kingdom in order for her to study a Bachelors degree in Biotechnology that wasn't available at Saudi universities. When she went to the UK, she had to do two extra years of study before she was accepted for the Bachelors degree, as her Saudi high school certificate wasn't recognised. She struggled with English and the cultural shock. Some British people avoided her because of her religion and Hijab<sup>23</sup>. She said that “determination and challenge with faith in God” gave her a strong incentive to continue with her academic life (Alansari, 2012b).

Sindi was tremendously shocked when she applied for her Bachelors degree and Steve Hopkins, the Mathematics scientist at Cambridge University, told her that she would fail and would probably leave the university within three months because she is a Muslim woman wearing a Hijab (Alhaza, 2012). However, Sindi did not give up and she accomplished huge successes when most people around her expected her to fail.

Saudi Arabia is becoming increasingly attentive to the importance of scientific research. Saudi women researchers such as Alkuraya, Almutairi and Sindi are not only applauded for their work, but also for retaining their Islamic religion and Saudi culture (Alkuilit, 2009). However, the question remains as to whether or not Saudi women are able to be researchers and scholars. The evidence would suggest that they are, despite the country's late entry into the scientific world. Academic women in Saudi Arabia also face other difficulties, which are discussed later in this chapter. This may be the reason why most of the well-known researchers sought to better their education outside of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, researchers in

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<sup>23</sup> Hijab is covering the head with a scarf for women, which is part of the Islamic religion.



other countries receive more encouragement and funding for their research than in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia lacks the funds to support research. Almutairi previously stated that Saudi Arabia needs “financial funds to create a suitable environment” (Alheider, 2010); even Sindi is asking traders and investors in Saudi Arabia to support scientific research for their community service.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia has now realised the importance of scientific research in academia. Saudi Arabia is a developing country, and it is believed that industrialised countries such as the USA provide better research centres and are better able to help researchers to succeed in their fields. Educational support in Saudi Arabia is improving, but more effort is still needed to support researchers. Saudi Arabia is encouraging Saudi academics to receive their education both in Saudi Arabia and abroad in order to ensure diversity. New knowledge and experience gained from academics who have graduated from different countries helps to enhance both the academic research in Saudi Arabia as well as the whole Saudi nation.

### **3.2. Challenges Facing Women Academics in Higher Education**

Many women academics have become successful in universities but, as Devos (2004) states, they have had to fight through many challenges and barriers to become successful. In this section, I have divided the challenges into two sections: academic women in Saudi Arabia, and academic women in a western context. I will start by discussing the challenges that academic women face in Saudi Arabia. Because of the limited extent of studies published in English about Saudi academic women, much of the literature in this section is taken from Arabic publications.

#### **3.2.1. Women academics in Saudi Arabia**

As mentioned in Chapter Two, education in Saudi Arabia is based on the separation of females and males in institutions, but both men and women have the opportunity to hold jobs in higher education. So, marginalisation and inequality in hiring women in the education sector does not exist in Saudi Arabia, because women are needed to teach and work in the



female schools, colleges and universities<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, salaries for academics are standard for both men and women in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, Saudi women academics have other problems within the conservative culture.

Little research has been done on the everyday experiences of women academics in Saudi Arabia, so this account is necessarily exploratory. As Jamjoom (2010) states, few studies have been conducted on Saudi females because “research on Saudi women is scarce and often lacks meticulous description” (p. 548). I found it difficult to find as much information on Saudi women as was available about women in the western context. Social research is difficult to conduct on the Saudi community because it is very conservative, women are *ourra* and prefer to hide personal opinions from the public. Moreover, the government does not allow the publishing of information that affects the privacy of Saudi people, even if it is intended to solve a problem within the society itself. This is unhelpful when attempting to eradicate the roots of social problems that appear in the Saudi community. As a Saudi academic researcher, it is a hindrance to have so few sources of social research on the Saudi community. I hope that Saudi society will be more aware of the importance of social research in the future.

Although few studies and articles have focused on academic women and the challenges and obstacles they face in the education sector, academic women share almost the same challenges in Saudi Arabia. In order to offer an in depth description of the challenges faced by women researchers in Saudi Arabia, I draw upon the following discussions as well as my own personal experiences. This section is divided into different sub-sections that deal with Saudi people and their conservative culture, family roles within the Saudi culture, academia and motherhood, unequal rights compared to men, the difficulties of conducting research, the challenges of finding information, the obstacles faced when using facilities such as libraries or laboratories, and the additional challenges faced by postgraduate students and junior academics.

### ***Saudi people and their conservative culture***

One crucial question is whether or not the challenges that Saudi academic women face are directly due to their conservative culture. Hence, instead of revealing only the challenges that

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<sup>24</sup> I discuss their marginalisation in research on p. 45.

the Saudi women encounter as academics, I also have to consider the question of how Saudi women's culture affects them as academic women. In order to answer this question, I present a general picture of the conservative nature of Saudi culture.

“Culture is defined as the ritual, behaviour and organisations that distinguish particular groups of people and are handed down from generation to generation” (Gregory, 2006, p. 349). Culture can also be defined as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 21). Saudi people have their own distinct culture that affects every aspect of life, including academia.

In Chapter Two, I stated that any new development or transition in Saudi society seems to be difficult to accept at first. Saudi people initially believed that girls going to school would bring shame on the family. However, the development of girls' education has gradually been accepted. The conservative nature of Saudi culture guided the government to prevent women from progressing, sometimes in order to satisfy the majority of Saudi society, ironically including some women. As a result, even some women still refuse to accept the changes. For example, there is a large number of women who are opposed to women driving in Saudi Arabia. This issue has caused countless problems, both for working and non-working women. As a result, the issue of driving is still being debated, while women's education has been established for forty years. Women driving cars does not conflict with the Islamic religion, but is rather an ideology of the Saudi society. Furthermore, millions of Saudi Riyals are being spent on foreign drivers who work for most Saudi families.

Recent studies have mentioned that many Saudi women suffer injustice or abuse within their families and want a better life, but cannot find justice in the courts and have no place to turn to for help or assistance. Hanan Attallah wrote an article for the *Alriyadh* newspaper about the injustice of Mahram<sup>25</sup>. She mentioned a young Saudi woman who accused her uncle of preventing her from travelling abroad to complete her postgraduate studies. She was an excellent student and had an educated father. Her father completed the application for a scholarship from the Saudi Government that would allow her to study in the USA, but unfortunately he died before they could travel. Suddenly, all her decisions were transferred to her conservative, oppressive uncle. He robbed her of her rights and her dream of following an

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<sup>25</sup> Mahram means any adult man related to a woman, such as a brother, father, husband, father-in-law, nephew, uncle or son-in-law only not cousins or brothers in law.

academic path. She even wished that her father had not been educated and had not taught her to seek education herself (Attalah, 2010).

*Aleqtisadiah* is an electronic journal that published an article entitled “*The Saudi woman researcher is frustrated and her scientific effort is excluded*” (Aleqt, 2007). This article discusses a study that was conducted on Saudi academic women and the challenges they face as researchers. Although statistics reveal that the number of Saudi women researchers is comparable to their male counterparts, academic studies reveal a lack of Saudi academic women in the field of scientific and academic research, and the lack of participation of women in major research projects. The article mentions Samirah Ebrahim, a professor of Pharmacology in the Medicine and Medical Science College and the head of the Pharmaceutical Measurement Unit at King Fahd Centre for Medical Research in King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah. She stated that women are excluded from group research. In the last 20 years, the Centre supported 166 research projects, but only 17 of those were headed by women researchers. This may be due to the fact that they suffer job discrimination and a lack of trust because they are women; women have only recently joined the work force and are still considered to have less experience than men in places that have men and women working together such as research laboratories in hospitals.

The same article mentions Omaina Almaghraby, a professor at the Art College in Dammam, who revealed that the most significant obstacle to women researchers in Saudi Arabia is accessing reference materials due to the lack of resources available. This stems not only from the non-availability of libraries, only but also from the fact that many libraries do not welcome women researchers. All public libraries open only one day a week for women, and so many women researchers are forced to buy their reference materials at great cost to themselves. Almaghraby also added that:

There are social conditions linked to the ability of a researcher to move around and gain access to the outside world. It is natural for a researcher to search and survey to achieve the best results and to identify all the existing research. However, the problem is that the Saudi woman researcher is mostly not capable of movement without her *Mahram* who might be busy or lack the sense of importance of what the researcher is doing, and therefore does not encourage her. Hence the Saudi woman researcher may be unable to conduct her research, or be restricted to conducting it in a limited way. (Aleqt, 2007)

Finding information is a major problem for Saudi academic women, not only due to the travel restrictions they face, but also due to the lack of availability of resources. I discuss this in detail later in this section.

In the electronic newspaper *Najran*, the Saudi academic Hesah Al Alsheikh spoke about her experience as a woman academic. She accused some laws and government regulations of causing her failure and restricting her movement. Al Alsheikh mentioned that some of the most prominent obstacles in her professional life as an academic are that she cannot travel without being accompanied by her Mahram, a man from her family. In her opinion, this issue is only her family's concern and the government should not interfere in such a decision. She stated that if this issue continues, it will limit the future and cripple the success of women academics. However, she also recognised that there has been remarkable improvement and development over the last ten years (*Najran9*, 2010).

On the other hand, Qamra Alsubaiey is a Saudi academic woman and writer who noted in an interview conducted by Alabdulatif (2010) that the Saudi community is in no way against a woman's right to education and employment, or their contribution to various other aspects of development, as long as it is consistent with the Islamic Shari'a. Alsubaiey rejects the western model as a solution to 'save' women. She stated that Saudi women are not persecuted or tyrannised as the western media portrays. Alsubaiey is an active woman academic who attends international conferences, seminars and discussions, promoting the Islamic viewpoint that advocates complementarity between women and men; not similarity, as is suggested in the western view (Alabdulatif, 2010). Alhusain (2011) claims that Saudi women can be successful in their commitment to the Islamic religion without imitating other cultures.

Saudi culture can therefore be seen to either help or hinder the success of women in academia.

### ***Family roles within the Saudi culture***

I argue here that a male, whether he is a father or a husband, has an unavoidable impact on a Saudi academic woman's life. Some Saudi academic women struggle because of their husband's reaction to their work, and whether or not their family supports them. This impact is not only academic, but also psychological and in terms of making life decisions.

Alfawaz (2005) conducted a study to uncover the problems that Saudi academic women face at work. She divided academic women into two groups: women working in public institutions and women working in private institutions. She found that some academic women do not conduct research or they may transfer from the higher education sector to the general

education sector in order to satisfy their husbands by working less hours and spending more time with their children. However, Areej Mazen, an assistant professor in Childhood Studies who participated in Alfawaz's (2005) study, has her own opinion. She believes that when it comes to raising children, it is the quality of time spent with them, not the quantity that matters. So, an academic mother can invest her time with her children effectively after work by listening to them and participating in their daily problems.

On the other hand, academic women who work in private institutions may not get support from their family because most private institutions, especially higher education institutions, have longer working hours and lower salaries than public institutions. Most Saudi families who are not in need of extra income do not encourage their daughters or wives to work long hours that exhausts them and keeps them away from home for relatively little money. Most Saudi families are still of the opinion that a woman's job is only necessary as a source of extra income, and few people think that a woman's work plays an integral part in the process of developing her identity.

Albrahim (2010b) conducted an investigation into the status of Saudi women in the community. She explains that the status of Saudi women is like stagnant water that needs some movement. She points out that a woman is able to give a lot; however, she is surrounded by barriers such as society's perception that she is less capable than men. Naemah Alzamel was interviewed in that study. She believes that Saudi women could be suffering because of the society's perception that men are superior to women, especially in poor families. A woman's rights, such as education and work, could be denied in such situations. Most members of Saudi society believe that women's work is in the home as a housewife. Alzamel stated that the unequal relationship between men and women in the social system could be because some men subconsciously consider a woman as a wife who plays the role of a housekeeper and a nanny for the children., They do not support her in other aspects of life, such as her work as an academic, which is the most accepted type of work in the Saudi community. As a result, the woman may suffer from depression that causes her to fail as an academic researcher.

Alsanad is a male Saudi attorney who wrote an article about women's rights (Alsanad, 2007). In the article, he asks the community to consider women's rights in terms of various issues, such as a father preventing his daughter from getting married. This is quite common, especially in poor families where a father takes his daughter's salary every month, which he

would lose if his daughter gets married. Islam does not justify such an action because no one, not even her father, can take a woman's money without her consent.

Alhwaity wrote an article about a conference that was held in 2008 (Alhwaity, 2008). The conference was a campaign that had been organised by Princess Seitanah Bint Abdullah, the daughter of King Abdullah. The purpose of the conference was to support Saudi academic women and discuss the challenges they face. The aim of this conference was to launch a media campaign to support women in general. The conference highlighted some incorrect cultural habits that allow men to infringe on women's rights, and then tried to find a mechanism to address this issue through the Islamic religion, which accords women full rights. Some academic women who attended the conference mentioned that they are under pressure when conducting their research, because their families do not support them or cooperate with them.

Alnajy wrote an article about working Saudi women and how they are challenged by their unsupportive husbands (Alnajy, 2006). Some husbands believe that women's work is only to go out and socialise, without a higher goal. Abeer Alabdulaziz is an academic woman featured in this article who believes that a husband has a significant role to play in supporting his wife and providing her with psychological stability. If a husband criticises his wife's role with regards to himself and their children, she will end up feeling guilty. As a result, the wife will feel more pressure, on top of waking up early, preparing meals, teaching her children and visiting her husband's family.

Alhusain wrote about the causes of frustration amongst working women and men in the Saudi community (Alhusain, 2011). She discovered that women are more affected by frustration than men are, because a woman has more roles at home in addition to her work than a man does. Therefore, a husband has a big role in his wife's success in the Saudi culture. A man may be a traditionalist who is unable to accept his wife being more successful than he is. However, it is also possible that a man may view his wife's success as something positive.

Elyani (2011) clarifies family roles within the Saudi culture. Sarah Edreas, who is featured in this article and is unmarried, explained that her family played a big role in her academic life. Edreas is a lecturer at her university but did not apply for her PhD because her family does not want her to exhaust herself between studying and working, especially since she is supported financially and does not need to earn more money by increasing her qualifications.

Her family wants her to be with them when they gather. On the other hand, her colleague Fozia Alyami, who is also unmarried, is supported by her family in her aspirations to achieve higher positions and certificates in academia. Elyani found that transportation can sometimes be an obstacle for a Saudi academic woman if she did not have a driver or a male member of her family to accompany her. This difficulty may delay her work or reduce her determination towards her research. She also states that children, especially young ones, can be a distraction for academic women conducting research, as they require a lot of attention.

Indeed, the success of a Saudi academic woman is strongly linked to the role her family plays in her academic life. A supportive family can make a positive impact on a woman's academic achievements.

### *Academia and motherhood*

Being an academic and a mother is a challenge throughout the world, but in this section I focus on the way that Saudi academic women deal with this challenge as well as the maternity leave regulations in Saudi Arabia.

While work gives a woman a sense of self-fulfilment and psychological stability that can reflect positively on her performance in her home and her cooperation with her husband and children, Menyawi (2008) points out that 76% of academic women who participated in this report believe that they do not spend enough time with their children. Menyawi suggests that women should decrease their working hours and give other women the opportunity to share the same job. In other words, every position could be shared by two women working for half the hours and half the salary. This idea was, however, not accepted by the Saudi community. Noha Alsaid, an academic woman with five children, stated in this report that she believes she is capable of reconciling her responsibilities at work with her responsibilities to her children, especially because of the fact that she has the right to take a long period of maternity leave. Menyawi (2008) states that although sharing a job could help to employ women currently without jobs, it might imply that academic mothers are considered unable to balance the demands of both their home and work lives. Most of the academic women in Menyawi's report suggested establishing a nursery in every institution so that academic mothers can bring their children with them to work.



According to Alremlawi (2012), “the workforce law acknowledges that any institution with more than fifty members of faculty, has to establish a nursery within the institution or beside it.” However, many institutions have not implemented this policy, due to either budget or space constraints. Alremlawi (2012) conducted this study by interviewing some academic women in order to gauge their opinions about establishing nurseries in academic institutions in order for children to be close to their mothers. Munirah Almarshad, one of the women interviewed, is the head of the faculty members’ affairs in the women’s section of the Institute of Public Administration. She pointed out that an academic woman in Saudi Arabia is not allowed to take her child with her to the institution that she is working at if there is no nursery there. There is currently no nursery in her institution but, since there are 127 women employees, one will be established when they move to a new building. She insists on establishing this nursery as soon as possible, or otherwise extending the maternity leave period to one year of paid leave instead of the current two months paid leave.

In an interview done by Alme fleh (2010), the Saudi academic Seham Aleisa, director of the Scholarship Department at Princess Nora University, agrees with Menyawi’s (2008) idea of sharing one job between two women. She mentioned that the greatest challenge facing Saudi women academics is balancing their home and work lives. She therefore believes that institutions must accommodate Saudi women by allowing job sharing and reducing working hours. She pointed out that working in academia is new for Saudi women and it does not easily fit in with the culture and traditions of Saudi society. However, these jobs in academia are important in the Saudi community and women must overcome all obstacles that stand in their way. Progress could occur through communities developing a greater awareness of women working in different jobs until the changes are accepted as normal. Furthermore, it would be better for the country’s economy to spend its budget on local, as opposed to foreign, educators. Saudi women must become aware of the opportunities to work in private institutions, and know their rights, such as equal employment, social security and job security.

According to Meshkhes (2006), the Ministry of Civil Service implemented protected maternity leave<sup>26</sup> in 1969. In public institutions maternity leave is two months fully paid leave after a child is born and is counted in the woman’s duration of service before retirement. According to System Number 151 of the Leave Law, private institutions must give six weeks of fully paid maternity leave after a baby’s birth (Alrakad, 2010). However, Nudah Alotaiby,

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<sup>26</sup> Protected job leave means that the academic woman can take leave without the risk of losing her job.



who was interviewed in Alremlawi's (2012) report, said: "Systems are not always implemented", meaning that although the law says one thing, it does not always happen in real life. She is an academic woman in a private institution and so is entitled to six weeks paid maternity leave. However, her institution allowed her only two weeks paid leave, which led to both physical and emotional complications for her. She suggests establishing a nursery in her institution, especially since there are more than 50 employees, which means that the institution meets the legal requirements for establishing a nursery in or beside it. Iman Almfleh is an academic woman who works in a public institution and was also interviewed in Alremlawi's (2012) report. She stated that she and her colleagues had no problem taking the two months fully paid leave that they are entitled to after giving birth. However, when she wanted to extend her maternity leave on a quarter of her salary, as is legally allowed, the institution refused her request because they did not have a substitute educator to take over her work. Moreover, she noted that although her institution has more than 50 employees, they do not have a nursery.

Two months of maternity leave seems to be too little for an academic woman, especially as many families complain about young babies being left at home. As a result of these complaints, Alghadeer (2007) reports that the Saudi law has been extended to allow a total of three years extra maternity leave throughout the duration of service for academic women in public institutions. The three year period can be taken all at once (after the birth of one child) or split into different periods for academic mothers who have a child under the age of seven years. This maternity leave should be protected and counted in the service duration on the basis of a quarter of the salary, that cannot be less than 400 US dollars monthly. The period of maternity leave could be covered by the temporary appointment of another academic woman (Alghadeer, 2007). On the other hand, if the institution does not hire another academic woman, this means that the workload of the other academics in the institution would increase (Almanee, 2007).

From my experience as a Saudi woman, I know that many Saudi families have a child who is younger than seven years old, so many academic women have had a chance to benefit from maternity leave which is counted in their period of service. Many institutions had a lack of educators, as I experienced as an academic in 2007. As the result, only a year after the first decision was made, the maternity leave allowed was changed again to 60 days fully paid leave after the birth and a further three years throughout the service at a quarter of the salary for a

mother who has a child under the age of three instead of seven as it was (Alfayez, 2008). An academic woman on maternity leave can resume her work before the end of her allowed maternity leave if she chooses to (Alsakran, 2006).

In August 2012, Mram Aljubail wrote an article in the *Alriyadh* newspaper recommending instating paternity leave. She recommends following the lead of many other countries and giving fathers at least three days fully paid paternity leave. She claims that paternity leave is also for the sake of the mother and the baby, not just for the father himself. Paternity leave gives new fathers the opportunity not only to bond with their new born baby, but also to take care of the mother. A new mother may need the support of her husband both emotionally and practically with tasks such as completing the baby's birth certificate and other hospital paperwork (Aljubail, 2012).

The challenges of being an academic mother differ from one woman to another. Some are able to find balance in their lives and some believe that the quality of time spent with their children is more important than the quantity of it. I believe that the current protected maternity leave – three years in the service with a quarter of the salary for a mother who has a child under the age of three years – appears to be reasonable time to take care of a child.

### ***Not getting the same rights as men***

In this section I discuss the fact that although Saudi academic women are getting more opportunities to attend and participate in conferences, there are still fewer women than men in the field of research.

While Saudi women have joined the workforce relatively recently, academic studies reveal a lack of Saudi academic women in the field of scientific and academic research, and a lack of participation of women as researchers in major research projects. Women feel excluded when conducting group research projects with men; a man is always the leader of the group, even if a woman is just as capable.

Al Alsheikh in Aleqt, (2007) found that the employment of women in research centres is almost non-existent. There are many research institutions, such as the King Abdulaziz City for

Science and Technology (KACST)<sup>27</sup>; however, women do not have the same opportunities as men do for conducting research. Since men dominate all fields of work in Saudi Arabia, women have been absent or excluded from decision-making, and as a result, have had little experience in academic research.

In her article entitled “*Why are educated women absent in conferences?*”, BaShatah (2003) points out that academic women before 2003 are excluded from attending the same conferences as men. An academic woman may be allowed only to present a poster, or else her male research partner, if she has one, can attend the conference in her stead.

Although academic women have been allowed to attend mixed gender conferences since 2006, they are still given very little support in their participation. Gazan (2008) refers to women’s rights to better opportunities in achieving higher levels of knowledge and education. Gazan (2008) suggests that academic women should, in future, be given special attention in their role as researchers, because allowing women to contribute their knowledge to men’s knowledge enriches the entire nation.

Even though academic women are now allowed to attend and participate in conferences, there are still fewer women who do so, compared to men. Alzahrani and Ibrahim (2012) published an article entitled “*Discharging the first international conference and its application in Taif*”, which mentions that out of a total of 181 Saudi researchers at the first international conference of Science in Taif City, Saudi Arabia, 142 were men and only 39 were women, which suggests that academic women are not given the support that they need as researchers.

Indeed, Saudi academic women are still excluded from group research with men. Men still represent women in a forum and publish more research papers than women. This means that academic women experience a ‘glass ceiling’ as researchers, which is not the case for them as educators within female dominated institutions.

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<sup>27</sup> The King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) is an independent scientific organisation reporting administratively to the prime minister. KACST includes the Saudi Arabian National Science Agency and its national laboratories. The National Science Agency’s function involves Science and Technology policy making, data collection, funding of external research, and services such as the patent office (KACST, 2012).

### *The difficulties of conducting research*

Saudi academic women find it difficult to conduct research for various reasons, such as heavy workloads and a lack of support, many of which are linked to the lack of awareness of the importance of scientific research among institutions. Hesah Al Alsheikh in (Aleqt, 2007) confirms that researchers face many difficulties in general, but the main concern is that most educational institutions are not aware of the importance of scientific research. Moreover, many educators are not taught skills such as basic research methods, scientific thinking, methods of analysis and linking conclusions to data.

Not only are institutions not fully aware of the importance of conducting research, they also do not support research as well as their counterparts in western countries do, which leads to many Saudi researchers, especially women, travelling to western countries to conduct their research. Norah Alsaad, a Sociology professor at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, pointed out that Saudi academic women are given very full workloads by their institutions (Aleqt 2007). They are required to lecture, mark exams and participate in extra activities in the institution, rather than conducting research.

Alabdulatif (2007) conducted a descriptive study of social and analytical research and also concluded that women have a high workload. The aim of that study was to understand the obstacles that Saudi academic women face in conducting research at King Saud University and Al-Imam Mohammad Bin Saud Islamic University. The study identified the major obstacles that academic women face when conducting research. Alabdulatif (2007) reveals that more than 50% of the participants in the study believe that their universities are not interested in conducting research because they are not aware of its importance. These universities only care about teaching and administration work. They do not support researchers, either financially or by decreasing their workload in order to allow educators the time to conduct research. The majority of the participants in the study have administrative duties as well as teaching work. As a result, they have very little time to attend conferences or participate in seminars which would help them to conduct research.

Alsanad (2007) investigated women's rights in both public and private institutions. He found that academic women who work in private institutions work longer hours than academic women in public institutions and often end up going home exhausted. Public universities end the working day at 3 pm. Women in private institutions who are mothers and wives should

have the right to work fewer hours, and the same hours as women in public institutions. However, this is not possible in private institutions as the workload is too heavy. The demand for the provision of lectures in private institutions is higher in the evenings than it is in the mornings as most of the students, especially the postgraduate students, have jobs in the mornings.

One of the academic women featured in a study done by Almfleh (2002), entitled “*Saudi academic women and researchers talk about education in Saudi Arabia and offer suggestions to develop it*”, pointed out that most public and private higher education institutions are neglecting the necessity for research. She stated that, compared to industrialised countries, Saudi educational institutions have limited interest in scientific research. She also claimed that there is no cooperation between different universities in Saudi Arabia in terms of conducting scientific research. Moreover, the pressures of teaching and administrative tasks reduce the time available to conduct research. Researchers need to take a sabbatical in order to conduct their research, which is something that neither public nor private institutions in Saudi Arabia offer.

Alsakran (2007) identifies some of the challenges that academic women face in their institutions. The article is entitled “*The dean of Riyadh University meets 700 postgraduate students and academic researchers to solve their problems as researchers*”. One such challenge is financial – many Saudi academic women need financial support during the research process, not after it. Moreover, they demand full time leave while conducting research. They also wish to have a system of collaboration with foreign universities. Recently, King Saud University has started to address these issues by providing opportunities such as trips abroad for researchers to conduct field experiments or share experiences with other researchers.

Albus (2007) suggests that Saudi institutions should attract foreign expertise for the benefit of local researchers, because Saudi researchers are still relatively new to the field of research while other countries have already achieved a higher level of research. In her article titled “*Saudi researcher women: our experience in Nano is little and other countries forego us 15 years ago*”, Albus (2007) discusses some of the challenges that academic women face as researchers, such as support and guidance. Maha Alahmad is one of the academic women featured in the article. She is an associate professor in the Science College at King Saud University and also found that one of the obstacles that she faces as a researcher in Saudi

Arabia is the lack of awareness of the importance of scientific research. She stated that most researchers are conducting research only in order to obtain better qualifications or jobs for themselves, and not in order to benefit the community. She likes the KACST<sup>28</sup> initiative in which academics are offered research projects that address the needs of the Saudi community. She calls for more attention to research and for researchers to be granted leave from the university in order to have time to focus on research only, instead of being loaded with teaching work

Another academic woman mentioned in the study by Albus (2007), Layla Aljohiman, mentioned similar issues. She is an assistant professor in the Chemistry department at King Saud University. She spends 12 to 10 hours a week giving lectures, which is an obstacle to her experimental research. Amal Fatany is an academic researcher in the Pharmacy College at King Saud University, who agrees with Aljohiman that the academic researcher should be given less teaching work than other educators in order to have time for research: *“It is important to regulate the distribution of the workloads so as not to focus only on active members and ignore the rest of the faculty”*. Moreover, she highlights the need for cooperation between universities to swap experiences. She stated that “women’s competencies match those of men”, but feels that Saudi women are used to being patient and not demanding. They are used to working with limited availability of resources and not asking for anything more. She believes that academic women have to break these barriers and demand changes that will provide for their needs. She also believes that if the research conducted includes groups from different departments it will be stronger, both in terms of the information collected and the available financial support.

Ibtesam Alolian is also featured in the study by Albus (2007). She is a professor in the Science College at King Saud University and believes that one of the obstacles that she faces as a researcher is the lack of financial support. She hopes that this will not be a problem for much longer, as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah, recently provided three universities, of which King Saud University is one, with SR36 million<sup>29</sup> in financial support. This budget will be used to improve the field of scientific research by establishing research centres and prepared laboratories of an international standard.

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<sup>28</sup> See page 53.

<sup>29</sup> SR 36 million equals USD 9.6 million.

Despite some positive developments, institutions in Saudi Arabia still do not give scientific research as much attention as institutions in other countries do. Moreover, they do not provide sabbatical leave or financial support to academics during the research process, and public universities do not cooperate with each other in order to produce better research.

### ***The challenges of finding information***

In this section, I identify the difficulties that Saudi academic women experience in obtaining information for their research.

Alabdulatif (2007) found that seeking information is the biggest challenge that academic women face as researchers. In particular, 70.3% of the academic women in that study stated that references are not available in libraries, and if they are, they are out of date and often in English rather than in Arabic. Moreover, most libraries do not cooperate with other national or international information centres, which results in limited resources.

Badreiah Algarny, an academic researcher in Almfleleh's (2002) study, stated that scientific research sources are not readily available, and most of those that are available are old or written in English, which is a challenge to Saudi academic women whose English language skills are generally weak. Therefore, most Saudi academic women wish to have translation services in the libraries. In 2010 Princess Nora University held a seminar to discuss the challenges that postgraduate women experience at the university. In discussing this seminar, Alsharidy (2010) reveals that Saudi academic women face the challenge of translating information from English to Arabic, particularly finding the Arab equivalent of foreign terms.

Aleqt (2007) also identifies the challenge for Saudi academic women in finding information. Nidal Alahmadi is an academic woman in that study. She is a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at King Saud University. She confirms that most Saudi women academics have limited access to suitable sources and have difficulty in understanding sources written in English. Moreover, many academic women blame their institutions for the lack of databases and gaining access to them. Also, according to Aleqt (2007), many Saudi researchers obtain their information from books because articles are not available. Most of the 700 postgraduate students and academic researchers in Alsakran's (2007) study claimed that



their institutions are not connected to databases that are necessary for research and many libraries are not even connected to the internet at all.

Susan Ahmed, an academic woman at Umm Al Qura University who features in Aleqt's (2007) study, pointed out that another obstacle researchers face is that some information centres and institutions do not release information or prevent people from obtaining it. She stated:

Scientific research depends on information and ideas produced by human brains and accumulated in various forms. Therefore, scientific institutions or similar stakeholders should provide such information to researchers, whether men or women. However, it is known that many institutions and companies do not allow researchers to enter their premises for research purposes or to find information they need for intellectual activities. Thus, the lack of such documented information means that researchers will not be able to contribute significantly and directly to solving problems or serving the scientific community in general. (Aleqt, 2007)

While scientific research institutions should provide services to researchers, they often prohibit researchers from the benefit of services such as the release of information. Although some institutions allocate limited hours a day to helping researchers, researchers are not allowed to get all of the information they need and are not provided with timely service. Therefore, a large number of researchers are forced to abandon some of the information they would have like to have access to, which affects the credibility of their research.

It is widely known that researchers do not get access to information from the Interior Ministry<sup>30</sup>. Seventy five per cent of the participants in Aleqt's (2007) study indicated that there are no institutions that provide services to researchers, whether they are students, faculty members or even independent women researchers such as King Fahd National Library, and the Library of the Ministry of Education.

To summarise, Saudi academic women are challenged by finding information they need for their research, because most institutions are not connected to databases. Some information centres prevent the release of particular information that might be needed by a researcher. Moreover, there is a lack of Arabic resources, and most recent information is in English. This causes difficulties for researchers because of their weakness in using English.

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<sup>30</sup> The Interior Ministry in Saudi Arabia deals with national security and has control over all forms of information about Saudi Arabia.



### *The obstacles faced when using facilities*

In this section, I identify the challenges that most Saudi academic women experience in using various facilities such as visiting libraries and using equipment in laboratories.

Alhwaity (2008) discusses a campaign that suggests that academic women should have the same right to visit all public libraries as men do, since they are researchers and have to be supported. Alhwaity (2008) reveals that, because of their sex, academic women are not allowed to visit some organisations, one of which is the library of the Ministry of Education.

Most of the academic women in Aleqt's (2007) study agree that preventing women from visiting some libraries is an obstacle for academic women as researchers. Women are allowed to visit some libraries, but often they are only allowed to visit some of those libraries on one specific day a week. Omaima Almaghreby, a Saudi woman academic researcher with an interest in feminist studies, stated that one of the greatest challenges she has as a woman academic is that she is only allowed to go to some libraries once a week on 'women's day'. As a result, she is forced to buy almost all of the reference sources she needs, which are very expensive. Nidal Alahmadi, also a participant in Aleqt's (2007) study, confirms that women researchers are limited to only one day of visiting both public libraries and men's campuses, such as the King Saud University library. This is a huge obstacle for academic women as researchers and prohibits them from obtaining enough information from different resources.

Alsalem (2006) published an article titled "*Not hiring women contributes to the regulation of women's access to the services of King Fahd National Library*". Alsalem is an academic woman who suggests hiring women in the women's section of the King Fahd National Library, which is the biggest library in Riyadh and offers different sources of information in different fields. She also suggests enlarging the women's section in this library. She clarified that, according to a statistical study conducted in 2004, women researchers account for 44.36% of the visitors to this library. Fatimah Aljarallah, an academic woman at Imam University who participated in Alsalem's (2006) study, stated that she cannot roam King Fahd Library easily because of the number of men around her and, as is known in Saudi culture, Saudi women do not feel comfortable in the presence of men. She has suggested that women be employed to serve the female visitors to the library. Maha is another woman researcher who finds it difficult to ask the men who work there to help her find feminist information.

Najwa Abdullah, an academic researcher featured in Alsalem's (2006) study, highlighted the importance of having women's sections in King Fahd Library by saying that currently the library only has one small section for women, which is not enough for all the women who visit every day. Moreover, there are many unemployed women who need work and would accept the role if given the opportunity to work in this library (Alsalem, 2006).

Alabdulatif's (2007) study claims that the limited days and times that public libraries are open for women do not suit two thirds of the academic women who participated in the study. They stated various reasons for this, including that the allotted days for women are not enough, Thursdays<sup>31</sup> are family day and many face difficulties with transportation. The participants in Alme fleh's (2002) article reported that academic women face difficulties with transportation, especially during the daytime. They suggested that university libraries should remain open at night in order to allow women more time to conduct research.

The participants in Abdulatif's (2007) study stated that they have a limited number of computers at their universities and that they do not have access to important databases at their universities. Therefore, despite the difficulties in accessibility, they have to visit public libraries in order to gain access to these databases.

Saudi academic women also face challenges when using laboratories. One third of the participants in Alabdulatif's (2007) study need laboratories for their research. They emphasised that one of the major obstacles is the lack of necessary equipment. Albus (2007) also identified the lack of important equipment in laboratories as an issue.

According to Waas (2006), KACST and the Ministry of Education recently worked together to establish a specialised centre for scientific research. The president of KACST stated that women researchers have fewer opportunities than men to conduct research due to the limited number of places for women offered by KACST. KACST therefore plans to establish a separate research centre for women. This centre will contain improved laboratories in strategic technologies such as nanotechnology and will provide women researchers with the opportunity to conduct their scientific research with adequate materials, resources and laboratories. Maha, an academic researcher and professor in the Science College at King Saud University, reported that the principal of the university has recently offered a bigger budget to equip the university laboratories. The university provides the laboratories with the newest

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<sup>31</sup> Weekends in Saudi Arabia are Thursdays and Fridays.

devices, which are very expensive, once they have been requested by researchers (Mission of the University, 2008).

Alrasheed (2003) highlighted the remarkable changes that have taken place in the Science College at the Girls' Colleges because of a donation of five million<sup>32</sup> Saudi Riyal received from King Fahd's wife, Princess Aljoharah. In 2003, Almobark, the Dean of the Science College (which is now part of Princess Nora University), formed executive committees to follow up on the use of the different devices that had been purchased with the donation. The college worked hard to equip the laboratories with new devices, especially the Central Lab in which most of the postgraduate students do their experiments. This laboratory was established in 1990 and was equipped with old devices. Most of the postgraduate students and academic researchers had difficulty dealing with the old equipment that they had in their laboratories. They also appealed for a specialist technician to maintain the devices.

Indeed, Saudi academic women find it difficult to conduct research because they are not allowed to visit some libraries or institutions, and other libraries have only one day a week when women are allowed to visit, which is not enough. On the other hand, some libraries open every day for women, such as King Fahd National Library. Academic women would like to have bigger sections for women with women workers to help them. Moreover, academic women experience difficulties due to their institution's not having the funds to buy and fix the equipment they need in the laboratories.

### ***The challenges faced by postgraduate students and junior academics***

In this section, I identify some of the challenges faced by women postgraduate students and junior academics, such as the way they are treated by other faculty members and supervisors.

At a seminar held at Princess Nora University in 2010, it was revealed that one of the problems postgraduate students face is if her supervisor's contract with the institution ends before the student's research is completed and there is no alternative supervisor available (Alsharidy, 2010). Almfleh (2002) stated that a postgraduate student may have difficulty completing her studies on time if she has a foreign supervisor whose contract ends. Moreover, the student may get depressed if she was enthusiastic about an idea for a research project that,

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<sup>32</sup> SR5 million equals USD1.3 million. USD 1= SR 3.75

although compatible with the Islamic religion and Saudi culture, does not get approved. In some cases, a study could be denied simply because it did not get full support and interest from the faculty members. Some postgraduate students have the energy, ability and desire to conduct a research study, but the lack of guidance and support from the institution frustrates them. Krieger (2007) stated in his article *“Saudi Arabia Puts Its Billions Behind Western-Style Higher Education”* that even though Saudi Arabia spends billions on higher education, postgraduate students may still face some challenges. Krieger (2007) clarified some of the challenges that postgraduate students may face in universities in Saudi Arabia, which include the fact that some educators “are just not capable enough and are not enthusiastic about teaching” (p. 1). Moreover, “faculty promotions usually have more to do with seniority and political connections than with the quality of a professor’s teaching or research” (Krieger, 2007, p. 1).

Bias also affects postgraduate students in the processes of promotion in the faculty. Alsharidy (2010) found that the work distribution for postgraduate students is unequal and is affected by bias. Fatoon, a postgraduate student in the Information Technology Department at the Computer and Information Sciences College, had a classmate who was treated differently by one of the junior educators after her father became a minister in one of the Saudi Arabian ministries. The junior educator would allow this student more leeway than the other students<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, there was a well-known senior associate professor who treated all postgraduate students, even Princess Abeer, the daughter of King Fahd, the same<sup>34</sup>.

One challenge that junior academics may face in higher education in Saudi Arabia, although it seldom happens, is related to temporary jobs at public institutions. Academic women with temporary jobs are called ‘collaborator educators’ and Alhussainy (2011) reported that these ‘collaborator educators’ feel unstable because they have a contract like educators who work in private institutions. Since they have all the necessary qualifications, they have appealed to be given permanent jobs like other educators in public institutions. Nakh is an educator who has been working for King Saud University for five years but, despite having a Masters degree and a computer diploma, she still has not been offered a permanent job. The ‘collaborator educators’ also experience a heavy workload, are paid less and receive their salaries a month later than educators who have permanent jobs. In 2012, approximately ten thousand academic women of ‘collaborator educators’ were given permanent jobs (Alsuhaly, 2012). The Ministry

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<sup>33</sup> A story I was told by my friend in 2006.

<sup>34</sup> A story I was told by one of Princess Abeer’s classmates.

of Civil Service announced that they had offered permanent jobs to all academic women in all public institutions who had been working there from 2008 to 2011.

Postgraduate students face problems such as a supervisor's contract ending before the student finishes her studies and having a heavy workload due to biased faculty members. However, there are positives, such as 'collaborator educators' being offered permanent jobs in their institutions after serving for a certain number of years.

### **3.2.2. Women academics in the western context**

While there is a plethora of literature on the challenges that women academics in the western context face, I focus only on the following challenges: being academic mothers, family roles, gender inequality, leadership positions and minority women in academia. I chose to focus on these challenges because they appear to be common concerns for women across the world, although their experiences of such challenges may differ.

#### ***Academic mothers***

In this section, I discuss the ways in which being a mother and an academic is a challenge, how academic mothers attempt to balance their dual roles and how motherhood affects academic careers in the western context.

I believe that one of the main problems that western women, and indeed women around the world, face as academics is that of being a mother and having a family. A woman's role as a wife and a mother may, at times, be compromised by the time she has to dedicate to her work. As an academic researcher, she may have to work long hours and on weekends. Acker and Armenti (2004) state that stress, lack of sleep and fatigue is a problem that academic mothers face daily.

Over 25 years ago, Sagaria and Johnsrud (1985) found that women in higher education experience a conflict between progressing with their careers and taking care of their children. Just over a decade later, Nobbe and Manning (1997) observed that women in a professional position in higher education change their career goals once they have children. Tomàs, Lavie,

Duran and Guillamon (2010) found that academic women experience a conflict between giving priority to either the professional demands of their job or to their family life. Levtov (2001) is of the opinion that women are convinced that it is a challenge to have a family in conjunction with a successful career. This belief may guide women to choose between either having a career or having a family.

Hartley and Dobeles (2009) conducted a study on women academics at Queensland University in Sydney, Australia. The purpose of the study was to understand the barriers that lower the productivity of academic women in research. They note that “past explanations for the lower productivity of female researchers, compared with their male counterparts, include factors such as the multiple roles adapted by women (mother, partner, friend, care-giver, colleague, academic)” (Hartley & Dobeles, 2009, p. 43). They discovered that divorced or widowed women are more involved in research and writing than women who have dual role obligations in their lives because they are committed to a partner who may not support or understand the time they need to spend on research. They clarified that women in higher education who have children experience a conflict between being a good mother and a successful academic. They also found that some academic mothers believe that if they enjoy their career as an academic researcher, they will pass on their passion to their children who will then be able to find pleasure in their own work.

Thanacoody, Bartram, Barker and Jacobs (2006) discovered that academic women from different cultures face the same challenges and role conflicts. Their research was a comparative investigation of the career experiences of academic women in a western context and in an Indian context in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors contributing to their career progression. The research also examines factors such as national culture, gender stereotypes and leadership, work and family conflict, mentoring and informal networks that impact on the career progression of women academics in two different cultural settings, namely Mauritius and Australia. Although the participants of this study are from two different cultures, they share very similar experiences as academic mothers. This is clear from the responses of two of the participants, one from Australia and one from Mauritius.

The participant from Australia stated:

I find it hard to find time for myself. My main challenge is being a researcher and staying away from my family. (Lecturer, Australia, cited by Thanacoody et al., 2006, p. 549)

The participant from Mauritius, an associate professor, stated:

I find it hard to find time for myself. I am faced with role conflict and role-overload when the children are sick. (Associate professor, Mauritius, cited by Thanacoody et al., 2006, p. 549)

The main findings of this study illustrate that the barriers to career progression are remarkably similar for women from both universities, despite the differences in their cultural background.

Maternity leave helps academic mothers retain their career and balance their dual life, although the amount of maternity leave available differs in various countries. France and Spain offer 300 weeks of protected maternity leave for a two parent family, 9% of which is paid (Vahratian & Johnson, 2009). Sweden allows 18 months of protected maternity leave, while the United Kingdom allows only seven months (Berger & Waldfogel, 2004). In Germany, maternity leave covers six weeks before the birth of the baby and eight weeks after the birth at full pay (Kuhlenkasper & Kauermann, 2010). However, in October 2010, the European Parliament proposed offering all women in the European Union (EU) a minimum of 20 weeks fully paid maternity leave and two weeks fully paid paternity leave (Robeyns, 2012). In New Zealand, women are allowed up to 26 weeks unpaid leave if they have been in continuous employment of at least fifteen hours per week for eighteen months (Ravenswood & Kennedy 2012).

According to Charlesworth (2007), Australia does not have a national plan for paid maternity leave because only women who have been employed for twelve months or more are eligible for unpaid maternity leave which seems discriminatory towards women, especially those who work part time or are new employees. According to Vahratian and Johnson (2009), the USA and Australia are the only industrialised countries that do not routinely provide paid maternity leave to women after the birth of a child. Berger and Waldfogel (2004) state that women in the USA have a shorter period of protected leave than women in other industrialised countries. Since 1993, US employers with 50 or more employees are required to provide twelve weeks of unpaid maternity leave to women who have been employed for at least twelve months. However, Berger and Waldfogel (2004) point out that most American women take less than twelve weeks maternity leave, as taking any more unpaid leave is not a financially viable option. It seems that maternity leave for academic women in the USA is an institutional matter and differs from institution to institution.



Since there are good maternity leave policies in Europe, academic women there are more likely to use their allotted leave, which postpones the progress of their careers. On the other hand, women often take shorter periods of maternity leave in the USA and, as a result, they must try to find different ways to take care of their children.

The pressure for American women to balance their home and work lives is very intense. Kathryn Jacobs is an American academic mother who gave birth to premature twins in 1987, when she was an assistant professor (Jacobs, 2005). Since the babies needed special care, no day care centre would take responsibility for them, and she had no family near her who could help her look after them. As her husband was temporarily unemployed, she had to return to work after only one semester of unpaid maternity leave; as she said “we simply could not pay the bills without it” (p. 74). She continued, saying that “child care was impossible for medical reasons, yet I could not afford to stay at home...research was out of the question” (p. 72). She would leave the twins and her four-year-old daughter with her husband during the day, but since the twins needed special care, she would try to get back to them as soon as she could. She had no choice but to postpone her research and publishing until her twins were older.

Donna Nelson is another American academic mother (Nelson, 2005). Nelson is a professor of Chemistry at the University of Oklahoma. Her son Christopher was born in 1982 while she was doing her post-doctorate studies at Purdue University. When her water broke, she first went into the laboratory to check that nothing needed her attention before going to the hospital. Standard maternity leave was six months of unpaid leave, but she decided to go back to work only a week after her child was born, as she did not want to be away from her work. She put her son in a day care centre and took him to work with her when he was sick. She used to take him with her to the laboratory and put him in a playpen in the middle of the room. She kept baby food, milk and juice in her office fridge. She recalls that one of her colleagues told her that she was a bad mother for putting her son in a day care centre one week after he was born. However, she states: “I still believe each woman must make the decisions that are right for her” (Nelson, 2005, p. 53). Shortly after being tenured, she was told by one of the tenure committee that the chairperson had said that they did not want people like her in the department and she should have stayed at home with her baby. However, Nelson believes that she did the right thing and that she was a positive role model for her female students, who saw her handling both her career and her family successfully. Her son is now a Chemistry major in college.



Lucille Louis is an American assistant professor who also had to balance her dual role as an academic and as a mother. In her article *“Life as a mother-scientist”*, Louis (2006) describes how she balanced being both a mother and a scientist. In some disciplines, research and writing can be done from home, but working in laboratories and being a scientist is different. Working in laboratories requires a lot of concentration and Louis felt that taking her children with her to the laboratory would have been too much of a distraction. She was also careful not to put her children in danger. She sometimes took them to her office, but never to the laboratory. She loves her children and would give up her life for them. At the same time, she also wanted her career. She went through three different day care centres for her children within three months because the first one, which was initially close to her, changed location, and the second one had a bad reputation, which she discovered only after sending her children there. She believes that most academic mothers face the same challenges that she did, saying “my experience may seem extreme, but it is fairly common”. She suggests that academic institutions should provide better child care for academic mothers in order to encourage women to be successful in their academic careers. For example, some universities provide child care only for children older than 24 months. She believes that when an academic mother is confident about the quality of care that her children are receiving, she will concentrate on her research and produce better research results.

Louis and Nelson are both American academic mothers working in laboratories; however, each of them managed her life in her own way. Nelson took her child with her to the laboratory but Louis chose not to. There is no right or wrong decision and they both managed their lives as academic mothers successfully.

Sally Galman is another academic mother who chose her own way to manage her life. Galman is a member of the Gender and Education Association (GEA) and wrote an article in the GEA newsletter comparing herself to Sarah Palin, the US politician. Both women have babies of the same age and demanding jobs. A picture of Palin in 2008 buying diapers for her son during the campaign trail reminds Galman of herself in that she sometimes took her son to her office. Galman had a bassinet and a case of formula in her office and took her baby with her to meetings. She feels that having a baby is a huge challenge (Galman, 2011). Galman believes that most women around the world, even successful woman such as Palin, live with the same challenge that she does.

Ward and Wendel (2004) conducted a study entitled “*Academic Motherhood: Managing Complex Roles in Research Universities*”, in order to understand how academic women who are tenure-track faculty members at research universities and mothers manage their dual roles. The participants in their study enjoy their dual roles as mothers and researchers. One of the woman researchers in their study commented that she enjoys “doing research and making meaning of people’s words” (p. 242). However, many academic women feel guilty and have no time for their personal needs because they devote all their time to their children and their research. One of the academic women featured in the study explained that:

Even though most of the women used day care in some form or another, they usually felt that they, not their husbands, were expected to get the children ready in the morning, take them to day care, pick them up, feed them, play with them and put them to bed. (Ward & Wendel, 2004, p. 247)

This experience is similar to the experience of the academic mothers in Marshall’s (2009) study. Sarah Marshall is an assistant professor at the Central Michigan University. She conducted a study in 2009 entitled “*Women higher education administrators with children: Negotiating personal and professional lives*” in order to understand how women higher education administrators with children make sense of and negotiate their multiple roles and commitments as professionals and as mothers. Professional women with children were interviewed to determine how they negotiate their personal and professional lives. Marshall (2009) found that, because women put such pressure on themselves to perform well in their positions in higher education and as mothers, they tend to sacrifice sleep and neglect themselves in order to spend all their free time with their children and husbands. This neglect extends to other aspects of their lives. Mallory, one of the academic mothers interviewed in Marshall’s (2009) study, said that she does not have time for exercise because it is difficult to fit such activity into her full schedule. Most of the women in this study who have senior positions in higher education admitted that their successes at work are due to the support of their children, partners and work colleagues.

Marshall (2009) found that mothers in senior positions within higher education feel guilty because they do not have enough time to spend with their children and partners. She suggests, however, that this guilt has pushed them to develop professional confidence and states that “motherhood helped them to become more sensitive to the individual needs of other colleagues” (p. 211). One example of this is Brenda, an administrator who believes that every all her female employees have their own story as an academic woman with a family. She

manages her colleagues in a flexible way, because she also has her own personal life as an academic mother.

The children of academic mothers have powerful role models to follow and have the opportunity to go to college and university themselves. The academic women in Marshall's (2009) study consider their marriages to be their third priority after their children and careers, because they do not have time "to devote to their relationships" (p. 202). This, however, may lead to marital problems. Laurel is a vice president at her institution and has many responsibilities both in her work and as a mother. She notes that "her husband simply did not like being in the shadow of her career" (p. 202). Marshall (2009) also found that women believe that they earn less money when they have children because they choose to be mothers, rather than aiming for higher positions and more money. Their children's needs come first. Megan believes that she earns less money because she simply did not accept positions that would take more time away from her family. She said:

I feel like I could be making a lot more money, but I've made the personal decision that I don't want to work for some big company. That's not where I want to be, but that's a trade-off. I don't think I would have made that decision if I didn't have [my daughter]. (Marshall, 2009, p. 199)

Marshall (2009) also sheds light on the positive points raised by mothers in higher education; she found that most of these academic mothers believe that being a professional and a parent has made their lives better and more enriching. One of the academic mothers thinks that "having children does put things in perspective and helps you to develop priorities" (Marshall, 2009, p. 208). Ruth, another one of the women interviewed in the study, did not want her academic life to compete with her family time, so she chose to postpone her PhD studies. Academic mothers in Marshall's (2009) study emphasised that by believing in themselves and their abilities, and embracing their love for their careers and families, they have been able to successfully negotiate and enjoy their complex lives.

While it is widely acknowledged that women are under-represented in leadership positions in higher education institutions, such an achievement is even more difficult if the woman in question is also a mother. Dominici, Fried and Zeger (2009) found that most academic leadership positions in the USA are occupied by men and women are still under-represented. The aim of their study was to identify the causes of the under-representation of women in leadership positions in higher education in the USA. They found that the path to leadership

for academic women is often blocked and their progress is very slow because women are “less likely to move up the academic job ladder after their early post doctorate years if they have children” (Dominici et al., 2009, p. 25). The academic mothers who participated in that study mentioned that the current positions of leadership are occupied by men because, they believe, academic leaders are expected to be available for work at any time, which is difficult for academic mothers because it conflicts with their duties as mothers. As a consequence, academic mothers lose out on developing the expertise necessary for them to compete for leadership positions.

Women are still in the lower ranks of academic faculty members because they are loaded with work that leaves them with no time to conduct research (Hall, Christerson & Cunningham, 2010). Barbara Bagilhole is an academic woman in the Department of Social Science at Loughborough University in the United Kingdom. She conducted a study in 1993 that consisted of semi-structured interviews with 43 academic women. The purpose of her study was to identify and illuminate the discrimination that academic women face in universities which keeps them in lower positions. The study revealed the academic women’s experiences and perceptions of themselves. A senior academic woman who participated in the study considered being a successful academic woman and a devoted mother and a wife a challenge because as an academic a woman is expected to move around, but “men won’t pack up and come with you” (Bagilhole, 1993, p. 264). Many academic women in the study commented that they are loaded with work within their institutions and they do not have time for research. One of the participants said: “I spend 100% of my time during the day on teaching and administration. It’s difficult to carve out chunks of time for research. It gets squeezed out” (Bagilhole, 1993, p. 268). Another participant added that “women do all the teaching and caring for students whilst the men do the research” (Bagilhole, 1993, p. 269). Women academics are loaded with more and more administration and greater numbers of students, possibly following the perception that it is in a woman’s nature to care for students. On the other hand, men have more free time to conduct research. Academic women are expected to ‘mother’ their students while male academics play a much smaller role in nurturing students. As a result, women find it difficult to publish research, which is a very important factor in achieving promotions.

Rosser (2004) found that some academic women have difficulty conducting research because they are loaded with work on top of their families’ demands. Sue Rosser is the dean at a

research institution and a scholar who has spent more than 25 years working on theoretical and applied problems of attracting and retaining women in Science and Engineering. Rosser (2004) explores the different stories of academic women scientists describing their path as academic researchers. She interviewed 40 academic women by telephone and sent a questionnaire to 450 women scientists. In the introduction of her book *“The Science Glass Ceiling: Academic Women Scientists and the struggle to succeed”*, she mentions Sharon, a research scientist at a university on the West Coast of the America. Sharon discussed her academic path after getting her PhD and completing two postdoctoral studies in immunology. She was loaded with work because of her gender and therefore had no time to conduct research. She said:

I still enjoy teaching, although preparing my own labs, the large number of contact hours semester after semester and all the committee work I get because I’m a woman have left me pretty burnt out. Still, I notice that most of my male colleagues have managed to keep their research going, at least at some low level, but mine went by the way several years ago when my kids were little. (Rosser, 2004, p. xii)

Forster (2001) interviewed a senior English lecturer who believes that men are better than women when it comes to their careers as researchers in British universities because they can devote more time to their research than women, who have responsibilities towards their families. One university featured in the study has formal equal opportunity policies and gender monitoring systems in place; however, women are still under-represented in senior positions. The purpose of Forster’s (2001) study was to understand the challenges that women experience as academic mothers by interviewing 30 academic mothers with young children. One of them, a lecturer in Economics, mentioned that she took leave for the sake of her children when they were very young. She remarked that her husband’s job comes first, and she does not regret the long period of leave that she took. Another lecturer stated that she would choose her family, husband and children over her career if things were to get complicated in terms of her job demands (Forster, 2001).

In the same study, a senior lecturer in Law stated that she has very little personal time. Her schedule is full of different tasks such as taking care of her children and domestic work as well as the demands of her job, and she has no time for herself. Another lecturer in Business Studies feels that the university she works for is not welcoming to academic mothers. She said:

I would say that the university, as an institution, is not child-friendly enough because, despite some cultural changes, there is still the expectation that you forget about your home life when you come to the workplace. There is simply too little awareness that, in spite of all this talk about greater equality, it is still women who get lumbered with most of the domestic stuff. For example, if a man in an organisation says, "I've got to go home early tonight because I have got to pick the children up from nursery", or "I have got to go and get some shopping on my way home", everyone thinks "Oh, he's a new man, isn't that nice, seeing him taking responsibility". If a woman does it, everyone thinks, "Oh god, she's off again - taking time off because of the children". I always feel slightly guilty if I take time off to be with my children or go home early for something for them and I can't shed that guilt. But I have a perception that men don't. I'm constantly trying to be as committed as the men here, but I am not able to because I do have a family and I do want to take responsibility for my family. I don't think there are any simple solutions to this. It is a juggling act because you always have got to sacrifice something because you can't be a full-time mother and a full-time academic. You are always trying to tread the middle of the road. I think it's very unfair that men can be seen as successful fathers and successful in their careers. It's not a question of the time they spend with the children, it's what's going on in their heads. Women have always got part of their brain organising the child-care or the shopping and I think the men just switch off when they leave the house. I think they can come into work and just give 100% because they still have someone at home who is doing the family organisation. (Forster, 2001, p. 34)

Forster (2001) concludes that the university in the case study offers few positions for women. The university is still dominated by men, and academic mothers are minorities in high positions because they have family responsibilities.

Even if academic women are not loaded with work in their jobs, they are loaded with tasks in their role as mothers and wives. Acker (1980) states that married women in British universities are lower in rank than other academics:

Discrimination is one obvious explanation, but one might also suggest that such women, while keeping up with family, teaching and research, have less time and energy left for committee work and image-enhancing departmental activities. Similarly, they may be unable to contribute to political action (such as a campaign for a university creche) to change the very situation that creates such pressure. (Acker, 1980, p. 83)

Wilson (2001) conducted a study on female professors with tenure and families in the USA in order to understand the difficulties these academic mothers face in moving up in ranks while having a family. Wilson explains that, even though academic researchers may have some flexibility in their work lives in that they can sometimes work at home, academic mothers often struggle with the pressure of taking care of children, conducting research and writing all at the same time. Moran is one of the professors featured in the study who used to take her son to work with her when he was sick because her husband does little at home to help her.

However, she excused his behaviour because, in order to give his family a better life, he earns more money, which justifies his long working hours and his absence from home. She stated that “it doesn’t make any sense as a family for him to work less and do more child care” (Wilson, 2001, p. 6).

Iverson (2009) conducted a study on academic women who moved into new career roles. The purpose of her study was to identify the boundaries that women face when advancing into professional positions in one particular public research university in New England by interviewing 22 academic women. She found that gender is a factor in any academic woman’s career path. Being an academic mother is one of the boundaries they face in their careers that keeps them working in lower ranks. Corrin is an academic mother featured in the study who stressed the challenges of juggling work with family and children. She got married young and did not receive her PhD until later in her career. She said, “I feel like there is a glass ceiling above my head” because the fact that she did not have a PhD kept her in a lower position. She had to wait until her children got older before she could earn her PhD and move on to higher positions.

Academic women are loaded with work such as teaching, caring for students and administration. They are loaded with this kind of work more than men are because institutions assume that it is in their nature to care about others. They end up with many work responsibilities on top of their role as mothers. As a result, they do not have as much time to conduct research as men do, which keeps them in the lower ranks of the university faculty.

Many academic women find it difficult to decide when is the right time to have children. Having children early in their careers may make getting tenure more difficult. On the other hand, waiting to have a child after getting tenure increases the risk of not being able to conceive due to age. Academic mothers therefore struggle with the issue of how to combine motherhood with a tenure-track job. Junior academic mothers are torn between marital responsibilities and the pressure of achieving tenure, which puts them under a lot of stress (Faulconer, Atkinson, Griffith, Matusevich & Swaggerty, 2010). Faulconer, Atkinson, Griffith, Matusevich and Swaggerty are four assistant professors and one associate professor in the College of Education at the East Carolina University. They are academic mothers and writers at different points in their tenure journey. The purpose of their article was to provide other academic women with a possible model in writing productivity and offers the possibility



of producing unanticipated outcomes, including support and encouragement, that could lead to greater professional and personal balance.

González (2010) agrees that because of the multiple roles academic women have, it appears that they get tenured late in their careers. Therefore few women reap the benefits of being in tenured positions. As a result, although an academic woman in Australia may be a good researcher, she may be unemployed, and if she does not achieve the required research output, she will not be “considered for another contract or tenure” (Devos, 2004, p. 601).

Pillay’s study (2007) shows similar challenges as discussed above for South African academic mothers. She tracks the lives of three South African academic mothers over eighteen months and argues that academic mothers have agency to set new paths for women academics.

Eversole, Harvey and Zimmerman (2007) conducted a study called *“Mothering and professing in the ivory tower: A review of the literature and a call for a research agenda”* which focused on Colorado State University and aimed to both uncover the causes of academic mothers not achieving tenure and find solutions to the problem. They acknowledged that families in general seem to be unwelcome at the university. Eversole et al. (2007) suggest that the institutional support is crucial in order for academic women to succeed. This support can come from department heads, deans and policies by giving the academic mothers more space to participate in scholarly work and having their voices heard. They concluded that women with children who devote themselves to their academic careers are successful, but not as successful as men with children (Eversole et al., 2007).

Academic women struggle to get tenured due to the demands of being a mother and the demands of their work. They experience difficulties in achieving tenure which interfere with the time they need to give birth and raise children (Dominici et al., 2009). On deciding on the right time to have a baby, one of the participants in Ward and Wendel (2004) said, “I was turning 30 and I wasn’t going to be one of these women who waits for tenure and then faces infertility. There wasn’t really going to be a better time” (Ward & Wendel, 2004, p. 247). Sandra, an American academic woman who has been married for ten years and did not want to have a baby before she earned her tenure, found that when she did finally decide to get pregnant, she could not conceive<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, academic mothers face challenges in postponing their pregnancy until they get tenured for fear of being too old to conceive by the time they

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<sup>35</sup> Sandra was my classmate during my Masters studies in the USA in 2000.



achieve tenure; however, institutions are more likely to hire women with no children because they can devote more of their time and attention to their work.

In conclusion, academic women live dual roles as academics and mothers that require hard work and sacrifice. Most academic mothers struggle with prioritising their professional demands and their families' needs. Maternity leave could help academic women by allowing them to dedicate more time to their babies, but it is not ideal in all cases, as maternity leave may postpone the academic mother's career progression. Not all academic women are the same or have the same experiences as academic mothers, but they all try to balance their lives and find the best ways to succeed as academics. Most academic mothers are underrepresented in leadership positions because they are expected to dedicate more time to work, which conflicts with their duties as mothers. Moreover, they are more likely to be loaded with more work than their male counterparts, which leaves them with little time to conduct research. As a result, women are relegated to the lower ranks and it is difficult for them to get tenure. Although academic mothers are all different, there are substantial similarities between them.

### ***Receiving support: Family role and support***

As a mother, wife or partner, an academic woman finds her work and family life more manageable with the support of her partner or other members of her family. However, as the stories below show, support can take various forms.

Rosser (2004, p. 16-17) points out that the support that academic women receive from their family members, whether it be from a husband or from parents, is very important. Marina Titelinska, a computer scientist, valued her husband's support. She got married at a young age when she was an undergraduate student in Poland. She and her husband immigrated to Canada when he was awarded his PhD. Later, they moved to the USA and had two sons. Titelinska thinks that coping with children in the USA while having an academic career is a challenge and a barrier for women. However, she had a supportive, educated husband who helped her to complete her studies. Although they are both scientists, they did not research together, but he is supportive of her work.

Colleen Ivy, Pat Vague, Jessica Kimble and Jan Van Hoek also participated in Rosser's (2004, p. 91-101) study and stated that they received remarkable support from their parents.

While parents' support is evident in most cases, the support that academic women got from their educated parents pushed them to be more successful in their academic careers (Rosser 2004).

Ivy is a mathematician who received support from her scientist parents. Her father has a PhD in Physics and her mother has a PhD in Biochemistry. Moreover, while she was a PhD student, Ivy got married to a man with a PhD in Mathematics. He was supportive and he moved with her to the West Coast where she was offered an excellent postdoctoral position. Her husband changed his career from Mathematics to Computer Science when he could not find a job in his original field. They used to work full time but when they had young children, her husband stayed at home to look after them and they lived on her salary only.

Vague, a biologist who participated in the same study, received support from her parents. When discussing Vague, Rosser (2004) states:

Her father, a physicist, gave her substantial attention and encouraged her interest in Science. Her mother, who believed strongly in women's liberation, assumed that Vague would have a career. Both parents gave her considerable freedom, such as allowing her to have animals in her room, to nurture her interest in biology. (Rosser, 2004, p. 91)

Kimble is a biologist who believes that her mother's support contributed to her becoming a scientist. Her mother was a Science teacher who allowed Kimble to be in the laboratory and encouraged her interest in Science, especially Biology.

Van Hoek is a computer scientist with supportive parents. Her father enjoyed Mathematics and used to spend time with her solving problems until she became a very good Mathematics student, and her mother was a strong, independent career woman who taught her perseverance. Her parents let her do anything she wanted to so that she would not lose interest in Mathematics. However, according to Rosser (2004) such parental support for second generation academics is generally only possible in highly developed countries.

In a similar vein, most of the academic women in Forster's (2001) study were successful in their research because they had supportive partners. Forster (2001) identified particular influences on research productivity that can affect the progress of academic women at a British university. These influences included the researcher's age, cultural background and personal characteristics. One of the 30 academic mothers in this study is a senior lecturer in Chemistry. She clarified that most academic women have a problem with the conflict between their academic and family lives. However, she was lucky to have a supportive husband who

helped to take care of their children when they were young; he went so far as to take a sabbatical after their second child was born. Another academic woman who participated in the same study raised a different problem, namely when a woman makes more money than her partner. She experienced this problem when, after putting a lot of effort into her career, her husband was unhappy that she was making more money and had a better job than he did. Culturally, a man is expected to be the breadwinner. He was so jealous of her recent promotion and successes that he did not support her. However, he is coming to terms with her success now.

Forster (2001) concluded that one-third of the 30 academic women who participated in the study made some career sacrifices because of their partners. On the other hand, three-quarters of them noted that they received support from their partners, which suggests some level of mutual support in their relationships.

Iverson (2009) conducted a study in order to understand the way in which women perceive boundaries and advance to professional positions at a public research university in New England. Most of the academic women in the study attributed their success to support from their supervisors or directors, and not from family members or partners. Stacy, a participant in the study, stated that she received information and guidance from two older supervisors which helped her to get promoted. Mimi also received support from her supervisor. She said, “My immediate supervisor and the director were very supportive and very encouraging, a moving force in getting it [a promotion] done” (Iverson, 2009, p. 152).

On the other hand, Janet, a participant in Iverson’s (2009) study, worked as a departmental secretary to help her husband financially while he was going to college. Later, she had children and wanted to follow her husband’s career path, which meant that she had to go back to school at a later age. She held various positions over the years; then, the dean promoted her to administrative associate, which was the highest level she could achieve. As Janet was the one who supported her husband through his college education, the findings about partner support in this study are different to the findings from Forster (2001), even though both of the studies were conducted in the UK. Academic women received support from their partners in Forster’s (2001) study, but academic women in Iverson’s (2009) study did not. This tells us that academic women receive different levels of support from their husbands or partners even if they are from the same culture.

According to Valdata (2006), women leaders in higher education have to overcome unique challenges, because being the president of a university or college is the toughest job on campus. Valdata (2006) clarified that Beverly Daniel Tamm, an African American academic woman who participated in the study, has a supportive husband. He is a professor at a university in Massachusetts, and encouraged her to accept the offer of president of Spellman College in Atlanta. He decided to take early retirement and planned to join his wife in Atlanta after their son finished high school in Massachusetts in 2008. Her husband supported her building her career, even if it meant she was away from him for a period of time. He is behind her success as a president of a higher education institution.

Rey (1999) conducted a study on 25 women professors from a number of South African universities. The purpose of the study was to examine the subjective career experiences among women academics in South Africa and to understand the discrimination against the advancement of women in academia. Rey's (1999) study shows husbands' support within the black community. Nosizwe is a black South African academic woman who thought that her career was over when her house burnt down, injuring her husband on the same day of her father's death. However, she eventually managed to change her situation and succeed in her academic career because of her husband's support. She was a PhD student in the USA when this incident happened. She said:

I thought I was finished, it was done! But my husband said: "I will be okay. You go back". So I returned to the States and it was really okay. It<sup>36</sup> brought a few things out and I just focused on my work and on my daughter and both of us actually succeeded very well". (Rey, 1999, p. 122)

While it is arguable that women are concerned about their families, Caribbean women feel that such commitment can have negative consequences on their careers. Gregory (2006) conducted a study to recognise the impact of race, gender and class on the personal and professional choices of black Caribbean academic women. According to Gregory (2006), a black Caribbean woman prefers "to form very strong bonds with her children, rather than serving to weaken the family unit as often occurs in western society" (p. 351). Although I do not agree with her generalisation about western women, it is important to note that black Caribbean women consider family and taking care of older parents as a priority. Therefore, "a woman constantly faces role conflict when making decisions because the decisions could directly affect her family" (Gregory, 2006, p. 351). So, their own choices may limit their

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<sup>36</sup> 'It' refers to her being back in the USA.

career success. Black Caribbean academic women often refer to their husbands' and children's support throughout their academic life.

While the nature and extent of support experienced by women academics across the world differs, there is agreement that family support is very important and could be the key to success for academic women.

### ***Being a woman: Gender inequality***

In this section, I intend to clarify the challenges that women encounter in academia because of their gender. They tend to experience discrimination when applying for positions and do not have the same opportunities as men do. Women academics earn less money than their male colleagues; moreover, they feel isolated from their male colleagues in higher education institutions. These claims are supported by literature and research that has been conducted in the western context.

Academic women around the world face problems related to gender expectations. Hartley and Dobeles (2009) explain that some jobs are considered gendered, for example jobs such as mining and construction work are considered to suit men more than women while jobs such as nursing and primary school teaching are considered to suite women more than men. However, there are some professions, such as academia, that are suited to both genders (Enoch, 2008).

Even so, many studies have reported that gender inequality does exist in academia (Heward, 1996; Martin, 2003; Drury, 2011; Dean, Bracken & Allen, 2011). Gendering is taken into consideration when institutions hire staff members. It seems that academic women do not have the same opportunities as men do in the organisations because of their gender, which can be considered as discrimination towards academic women.

Gregory (2001) agrees with the other researchers that women have fewer opportunities in academia than men do. She stated that "many studies have suggested that employers sometimes hesitate before hiring a married woman because they expect the commitment to her family to take priority over her career" (p. 128). This does not do justice to women as there is no such concern about married men.

Bagilhole (1993) conducted a study entitled *“How to Keep a Good Woman Down: an investigation of the role of institutional factors in the process of discrimination”*, which consisted of semi-structured interviews with over 43 academic women at British universities. The purpose of her study was to identify and illuminate the discrimination that is facing academic women in universities and keeping them from being promoted to the higher levels. She stated that academic women are unequivocally the minority of full time academic staff in British universities. It appears that some institutions do not want to employ academic women who have children, despite the fact that there are many successful academic men who have children. This gender inequality and discrimination guided many academic women to choose not to have children. The fact that academic women are in the minority in academia is not publicised. Three quarters of the 43 academic women in the study experienced discrimination towards women, such as a lack of support for gender research and the fact that women are loaded with work more than men are. One senior lecturer supports the claim by saying, “There is discrimination but it’s subterranean” (Bagilhole, 1993, p. 264). Another lecturer who participated in the study said that, “It helps if you’re male. Being a woman is a disadvantage” (Bagilhole, 1993, p. 264). Moreover, women are less likely to be hired in some departments because the majority of staff members are men and the committee promotes males instead of females.

The discrimination that academic women experience goes farther than having fewer opportunities than men when it comes to being hired. Academic women also do not get equal salaries to men (Edwards, Clark & Bryant, 2012). Due to gender discrimination, women academics tend to be paid less than men (Bagilhole, 1993; Luna, 2007; Masunaga & Hitchcock, 2011). According to Luna (2007) women’s average salaries are often less than men academics. One woman academic remarked that “after all these years and all of the changes, my current salary is still less than other [male] directors” (Iverson, 2009, p. 156). Hartley and Dobele (2009) stated that “women advance more slowly up the academic ranks than men, are paid less than their male counterparts and experience higher levels of job dissatisfaction” (Hartley & Dobele, 2009, p. 46).

According to Forster (2001), “on average, women academics also earn less than men”. Henry and Closson (2010) stated that many women academics in higher education “are disproportionately over-represented at the lower faculty ranks, and continue to earn less than men in comparable roles” (p. 238). According to Hall et al. (2010), “the American

Association of University Professors recently issued a report on the state of gender equity in the academy” (p. 181) which showed that women earned less than men because women are less likely hold full time positions. Hall et al. (2010) study explores gender harassment in the context of Christian higher education among men and women faculty members in the USA.

While there have been many changes with respect to the positions and treatment of women in academia, many forms of discrimination between men and women academics still prevail within universities.

Collegiality can be defined as “working well with colleagues” (Haag, 2005, p. 59). However, men in academia often do not cooperate with their female colleagues. Haag (2005) clarified that prejudicial collegiality negatively affects ethnic and female faculty members when applying for tenure. She used the example of a Biology professor at a Midwestern university who was the only woman in her department. Despite an exemplary record of research and publications, she was denied tenure because her department objected to her handling of a letter of recommendation for an undergraduate and took offense at her criticism of a colleague’s work. Finding her collegiality wanting, they voted to deny her tenure. Dominici et al. (2009) claim in their article “*So Few Women Leaders*” that academic women tend to be marginalised from their male colleagues: “[male] faculty members are more likely to build substantive collegial relationships with other men than with women, often leaving newly appointed women to fend for themselves because the majority of senior faculty are men” (p. 26). Because newly appointed faculty members rely on senior faculty members for their transition to the collegial culture of academia, building collegial relationships with men would be very useful, especially since men have more power and authority than women (Dominici et al., 2009).

Acker (2010) conducted a study titled “*Gendered games in academic leadership*”, in which she interviewed 31 academic women in order to understand their efforts to construct an academic leadership career in their managerial positions in universities in Canada, Australia and the UK. Yvonne, a Canadian professor, experienced a negative attitude from academic men. After successfully chairing a university-wide committee, she was unexpectedly asked to take a middle-management leadership position in the university. This offer flattered her; she said, “*I was kind of proud but so surprised; I thought, ‘Am I dreaming and will I wake up in a few minutes?’*” (Acker, 2010, p. 140). However, her experience in her new role was not a positive one. Her boss was working 85 hours a week, including on Saturdays from eight



o'clock in the morning until eleven o'clock at night. She admired him, but found that working with him was a problem because he could not understand that spending that many hours at work was too much for her. Moreover, he treated her differently than he would treat a man because she is a woman. She said:

...it appeared that gender played a role: He was talking to me like a little girl. For me, this was really a signal of what my place was...I now think he was scared of my strength and I realise he had that very macho [style] and you know it was too much for him, and I think he was maybe jealous.....We had a very difficult committee meeting, where my [supervisor] was screaming at me and suddenly I said you know, no, nobody will talk to me this way and I walked out of the meeting...really, ah, I would say shocked ... it won't pass, never, ever. So I went out of the meeting, and I stayed at home for two days. I didn't appear, didn't phone. I stayed at home for two days, thinking do I stay, do I leave? I wrote a letter that could be my resignation, thinking I won't send it maybe but I wrote it and finally I decided to quit. (Acker, 2010, p. 140)

Acker (2010) used words in her article that gave the impression of women being outsiders working in an isolated environment with men. "Old boys", "gentleman's club", "male dominated" and "a world of men" were common phrases describing the isolation of women academics in a male dominated world. Drury (2011) interviewed three academic women in leadership roles who considered themselves outsiders in a male dominated environment.

Drury (2011) conducted a study entitled "*Women Technology Leaders: Gender Issues in Higher Education Information Technology*" by interviewing three academic women in the position of chief information officer (CIOs). They provided their perspectives and experiences of the challenges they faced in being in leadership positions in the male dominated environment of higher education in American universities. Grace was one of the women in the study who found that men are more accepted than women in leadership positions; she considered herself to be an outsider and not really part of the hierarchy of leadership. She found that the male dominated groups were the ones who were given most of the training opportunities. Women did not get the training they needed. The access to training is one element that leads to the perpetuation of gendered IT organisations. In addition, Grace observed that the male academics took more advantage of the technical training opportunities than women did.

The other two women included in Drury's study, Helen and Alice, also considered themselves as outsiders. Both Alice and Helen stated that their Computer Science departments hardly had any women students anymore. Alice believes that because fewer women are studying



Computer Science, fewer women will be working in IT. Women are therefore in the minority in IT, which makes them outsiders in their male dominated environment.

Academic women in Iverson's (2009) study believe that "their experiences would have been different if they were men" (p. 156). In their experience, men are treated better than women are. Carey, one of the participants in the study, shared an office with a male colleague when she moved to a new position. Her desk was facing his desk and there was a partition between them. She always thought if she were a man, this detachment between her and her colleague would not exist. Sarah, who participated in the study and worked in Athletics, experienced the same isolation. She said, "I was a woman coming and changing things...I was a threat to the good old boys...I think if this position had a man in it, there probably wouldn't have been the same issues" (Iverson, 2009, p. 156). Sarah felt as if she were joining an 'old boys club' that did not fit her. She was rejected by them without a word. It was really painful to work in a place feeling isolated and rejected by the others because of her gender.

Thanacoody et al. (2006) explain that "academic women experience greater isolation, higher levels of stress, a lower sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence, more difficulty in establishing relationships with colleagues, and the feeling of being an outsider in masculine cultures" (p.3). Moreover, one of the academic women in the study, a senior lecturer at a university, mentioned that she felt a lot of resistance from her male colleagues. Sometimes, she did not speak out, which is too hard for her not to be involved in decision making because she is a woman (Thanacoody et al., 2006).

In conclusion, academic women do experience gender inequality. They do not have same opportunities as men do and they are often isolated or not treated equally. Moreover, their ideas are not taken seriously by their male colleagues. Academic women also earn less than men because of their gender.

### ***Breaking barriers: Leadership positions***

Academic women are not welcomed in leadership positions in the same way as men are. In this section, I raise the argument of academic women being excluded from leadership positions in higher education, and clarify the difficulties they face in their path to leadership

positions. Moreover, I present examples of the experiences of academic women who have reached leadership positions.

Women are excluded from leadership positions and “continue to be a minority in positions of power” (Tomàs, Lavie, Duran & Guillaumon, 2010, p. 496). Tomàs et al. (2010) conducted a study that aimed at understanding both the internal and external barriers that may explain the absence of women in university administrations. The study focused on the experiences of academic women in four British universities. Tomàs et al. (2010) state that institutions often consider leadership positions as more suitable for men than for women. Academic women are excluded from management because of various factors, which include:

Attention to family and the home, the rules of the game in our society that relegate women to an inferior position, socialization processes as an important conditioning factor, female stereotypes, the possibility of getting pregnant and lack of self-confidence. (Tomàs et al., 2010, p. 492)

Gender stereotypes play a role in evaluation, position or leadership among academics. Therefore, women academics experience difficulty in establishing trust in the workplace due to the stereotypical beliefs held by others.

González (2010) agrees that women are often excluded from leadership positions within their institutions. She discusses the idea that women should be able to move back and forth between academic and managerial jobs. She also claims that promotions in institutions for either men or women are based on trust and not on academic performance. Hence, due to the stereotypes that men are better than women and are more stable in their careers, institutions often hire men rather than women in leadership positions in order to satisfy students, parents, donors and journalists and to keep up a good reputation for the institution. González (2010) states that “unfortunately, women and minorities are not considered excellent by nature. No matter how distinguished, they are seldom perceived as ‘the best’. They are generally not seen as bringing the same kind of prestige to an institution as white males bring. Women and minorities are simply not trusted the way white males are” (p. 5). Marier (1999) claims that the reason for this is that institutions often consider men’s experiences and qualifications to be better than women’s without considering women’s capabilities when hiring for leadership positions.

In the United States, all the leadership positions in the Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) are occupied by men (Ly, 2008). There is no diversity of women and

men, illustrating a particular absence of women in leadership positions in education. Wilson, Marks, Noone and Hamilton-Mackenzie (2010) also highlight the low number of academic women in leadership positions. They focus on discrimination towards women in Australian universities, although this has lessened somewhat in the last two decades. Their paper examines indirect discrimination in Australian universities that tends to obstruct and delay women's academic careers. Blackmore (2006) emphasises that the culture of academic leadership will only be changed if more women are included in academic leadership positions.

Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest that a woman's path to leadership positions in higher education is a complicated journey. It seems that "there is no single barrier or 'glass ceiling' that can be shattered. Rather the deeply institutionalised values of the hegemonic masculinities dominant in higher education accumulate in the careers of women and men to increasingly privilege men and disadvantage women" (Heward, 1996, p. 17). Flood, Johnson, Ross and Wilder (2010) point out that the path to leadership for women is still narrow, "the glass ceiling still exists" (p. 135) and the model of leadership is still biased towards males. Men in higher education feel that an academic woman "just doesn't fit in" as most of the departments are male dominated and they "hadn't tenured a woman in a long time, or ever" (Haag, 2005, p. 59). Acker (2010) suggests that "women leaders in male dominated contexts need to moderate aspects of their self-presentation such as dress and language so as to be feminine enough not to meet with rejection as women but not so feminine that they will be rejected as leaders" (p. 135). Because academic women find themselves in a male dominated environment, they develop some changes in their identities when they became leaders so as to be accepted by men.

Haake (2009) conducted a study titled "*Doing leadership in higher education: The gendering process of leader identity development*" in order to shed light on the gendering processes of leadership identity development in higher education. A longitudinal study, with the purpose of studying the discourse of academic leadership amongst department heads, it shows that over time, leadership has been conducted in a gendered way. The study included men and women heads of departments in Swedish universities and aimed to understand their identities as leaders and whether or not they would be different as academics. Haake (2009) goes on to interpret the identity of women academics as leaders:

In this study, the most interesting finding was that women and men share the same leader identities at the beginning, with the same worries, goals and leader philosophies,

and that the discourse seems to push and shape men and women into different subject positions over time. (p. 301)

At the end of her study, when the heads of departments were more experienced, Haake (2009) found that:

It was only women who expressed the collegial leader identity, while many men expressed positive and natural manager identities. At the same time, the discourse on academic leadership strengthened rather than weakened traditional gender roles in an analysis of the identity development processes in this study. (p. 301)

Academic women in leadership positions are not as well known or well rewarded as men in the same institutions. Since the majority of the faculty are men in high positions, women are usually left to find their way without any support from their male colleagues. Also, they are not as highly respected as leaders by their colleagues and are not supported or encouraged by their departments (Dominici et al., 2009).

As higher education leaders, academic women face challenges such as work pressure. Valdata (2006) discusses issues that relate to women in leadership positions in higher education institutions in the USA. Denise D. Denton was the chancellor of Santa Cruz University in California and suffered from depression due to her leadership position at the university. As a result, she committed suicide, which is a rare and extreme case. This concern is reflected in the responses of most of the academic women's in the study by Tomàs et al. (2010) – they reported that “nobody wanted top-level positions” (p. 492).

Acker (2010) states that “it is possible for some women, in the right place at the right time, to build a satisfying academic leadership career” (p. 130). Moreover, academic women who are in senior leadership positions are more confident and more positive than other academic women. Denise, a Canadian academic woman, wanted to “make a difference” through achieving a leadership position as well as publishing and teaching. She held four different leadership positions at three different universities throughout her academic career. She described her first leadership position as a challenging one; she stated, “I learned a lot of hard knocks and hard lessons pretty fast, and then...I guess I moved straight from that” (p. 137). She managed “to jump onto a bigger stage” and higher positions. She described herself by saying, “I think of myself as a very strategic leader, like I do things deliberately” (p. 138). She had some clashes with colleagues, especially because most of them were males. She also went through a time of feeling less powerful when she tried to avoid administration in order to concentrate on her research. She had negative experiences in her first leadership position

because “I had no help, like no support, no secretarial support, nothing...It felt like abuse...I was left sitting out in the hallway...stuff like that that totally devalued me and really hurt” (p. 143). However, she did not give up. Instead, she just changed places and different institutions. In the end, Denise became more confident, standing up to people and negotiating well with colleagues. Denise is a good role model for academic women because she believed in herself and managed to change positions in higher education and improve herself.

Alison, who participated in the same study, is similar to Denise in that she has worked at several different universities, although the way that the two women deal with challenges differs. Alison, an Australian academic woman, described being in leadership positions as ‘tough’ because she was unprepared for the games that were played. She wanted to make a difference in academia by holding a leadership position. She knew that leadership positions are usually for men, so she would be different to many of the other leaders. Alison was tired of being pushed around by people. So, before she achieved a leadership position, she had high expectations that she would be able to change the pattern of management and make it better. However, when she was put in a leadership position, she realised that she was in an “untenable situation” and “it was a nightmare” (Acker, 2010, p. 139). She became physically ill, her marriage was breaking up and a colleague usurped her place. She said:

I had none of my belongings and when this guy moved into my office as head of department, he put all my things that were in my office in black plastic bags – it was just a nightmare. (Acker, 2010, p. 139)

Alison despised her desperate circumstances. She applied for unpaid leave in order to take up a temporary position out of academia to restore her confidence. Although she continues to have leadership responsibilities, she has subsequently kept a lower profile in her career and is concentrating on doing research. Alison said:

I’m hard to work with because I challenge them at every turn. If I think they’re saying something stupid, I tell them so. I’ve no respect for these men who call themselves professors, deans, vice-chancellors, wherever they are, I can’t possibly respect them for the way they treat people. (Acker, 2010, p. 142)

She believes that she was rejected when in her leadership position because she is a woman whose assertiveness was seen as harmful to the careers of the men in her faculty. She considered the leadership position to be an impossible job. Unlike Denise, she gave up and left the leadership position, changing both the city she lived in and the university she worked for.

Indeed, some academic women can be successful leaders in high positions when they have the opportunity. They face some challenges but they can overcome them when they prepare themselves and gather their strength because there is no ‘glass ceiling’ standing in their way.

### ***Being different: Minority women***

In this section, I discuss how race plays a role in the persecution of minorities in academia. While minorities on the whole may be disadvantaged and discriminated against, women within these minority groups suffer further disadvantage and discrimination.

While black women outside academia may be familiar with omissions and distortions, black women researchers are working hard to move their voices to the centre of the analysis of social studies. Patricia Collins is a black academic woman who wrote an article entitled “*Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminist thought*” (Collins, 1986). In that article, she shows that black women have long occupied marginal positions in academic settings. She argues that many black female intellectuals have made creative use of their marginality, or their ‘outsider within’ status, to produce black feminist thought that reflects a special standpoint on self, family and society. She points out that African American women scholars feel invisible in academia, as most research is conducted on white people (Collins, 1986), which makes African American academic women absent in the available sociological data. Hence, African American women have put some effort into creating a picture about themselves and their culture through their growing research.

Racial discrimination in academic institutions in the west is especially a challenge for non-white women. Black academic women in higher education deal with the barriers and challenges of both race and gender (Harris, 2007; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). Academic women of colour “are more likely to be hired as non-tenured or part-time employees” because of their race (Dean et al., 2011, p. 126). Dean et al. (2011) published an edited collection of essays, narratives, and qualitative and quantitative research that presents a critique of the ongoing androcentric climate throughout higher education. The theme of the book is awareness and action regarding the continued under-representation of women leaders.

Gregory (2006) attempts to recognise and understand the impact of race, gender and class on the personal and professional choices of black Caribbean academic women who consider their

race to be a challenge and an issue when they join academia in the USA or the UK. Gregory (2001) points out that black women faculty members experience difficulties in obtaining tenure and endure emotional and psychological abuse during the tenure review process. Her article, “*Black faculty women in the academy*”, discusses the history and status of black faculty women, describing strategies that they have used to overcome internal and external challenges. It addresses critical issues such as managing career and family, establishing support systems and negotiating tenure and promotion. Gregory (2001) found that minorities, especially women, are loaded with work such as mentoring students and serving on committees, although it is not rewarded by tenure or recognised in promotions decisions.

According to Griffin, Bennett and Harris (2011) and Sulè (2009), black academics, especially black women academics, feel under much pressure in the tenure process at predominately white institutions (PWIs) because they are loaded with more work than their white colleagues. Harris (2007) explores the identity negotiation by women of colour working in predominantly white academic institutions (PWIs). She describes PWIs by saying that “their academic environments are not always pure” (Harris, 2007, p. 56) because black academics, especially black academic women, feel under much pressure in the tenure process. Not only are black academic women under pressure to publish research as are all academics, they are also marginalised by gender and race.

Sulè (2009) conducted a study on black academic women in order to understand how they perceive their role as academic researchers at predominately white research institutions (PWRIs) in Michigan, USA. According to Sulè (2009), even though their research is not being taken seriously, black academic women believe that their research and jobs are important, not only for the work itself, but also in improving the lives of poor children, analysing gender or exploring racial identity.

Although minorities experience racism in academia in the west, some minority academic women have succeeded and are considered to be positive role models to other academic minorities. Valdata (2006), “*Lonely at the top?*”, discusses the issues faced by minority academic women presidents in American universities and colleges. She found that the perception of women in leadership is different to that of men in leadership, and that women are more willing to take risks. Valdata (2006) maintains that being the president of an academic institution is a demanding job, even when everything goes well. However, when the president is from a minority group, the challenges will be even greater.



The minority academic women featured in Valdata's (2006) study had unique, positive experiences. They are from American Indian, African American, Asian American and Hispanic minorities. The first positive role model mentioned is Karen Gayton Swisher, who was the first woman president of the Haskell Indian Nations University in the USA. She has grown up as a strong female in the American Indian culture. She believes that the leadership she experienced in her tribe made her a successful female president, by giving people around her a voice and participating in their ideas.

Zerrie D. Campbell is another woman president featured in Valdata's (2006) study. She is a young black academic woman who does not hold a doctorate. Campbell began her career as an assistant dean and then held other administrative positions within the Chicago City College system. She is the president of Malcolm X College, which is one of seven community colleges in the Chicago City College system. She considers that being a young, black woman is a challenge in her leadership position. Nevertheless, she believes in herself, her experience and her "strong religious faith" (Valdata, 2006, p. 32), all of which helped her to become a successful leader at her college.

The third academic woman discussed by Valdata (2006) is Ding-Jo Hisa Currie, one of only thirteen Asian American college presidents in the USA. She holds a doctorate and is very self-confident. When she interacts with local CEOs, who are primarily male, she often finds herself as both the only woman and the only person from a minority group. As a confident leader, she remarked on being "herself". She does not have to interact with men in subjects such as sports, but instead tries to change the subject and bring attention to herself.

The final academic woman mentioned by Valdata (2006) is Patricia Granados, who faced similar challenges in her academic career. She was first the vice president and then the president of Triton College in Chicago, Illinois. When she was elected president, she wasn't welcomed by the faculty. She did not take this rejection personally, however. She considered her new leadership position to be a challenge for her as a Hispanic woman. She encourages academic women to accomplish their goals by making the best decisions for students and the institution by following their own beliefs.

While African American women experience racism in academia because of their colour, they also talk of being isolated because of their strong spiritual beliefs. African American academic women face greater challenges in academia than their white counterparts – Edwards



et al. (2012) “suggest the feeling of marginalization, isolation and invisibility shared by African American women in academe” (p. 92).

Women in academia encounter more harassment at work because of their Christian beliefs and spirituality than women in the private sector (Hall et al., 2010). Spirituality can be defined as “the part of life through which individuals make meaning of and understand the world. It includes the esoteric exercise of personal critical reflection and forms the basis for values and principles that inform individual, personal and professional behaviour” (Dantley, 2003b, p. 273). Most of the time, “the definition of spirituality is associated with an attitude or way of life that may or may not be connected to Christian, Buddhist, Hindi, Jewish or Muslim religions” (Hendrix, 2009, p. 68).

“Spirituality is not separated from other aspects of one’s life in the African culture” (Belgrave & Allison, 2006, p. 35); moreover, it is because of their spiritual beliefs that “African Americans have shaped their consciousness and understanding of themselves as well as who they are in relation to others” (Dantley, 2003a, p. 6). Black women in academia experience spiritual challenges because they do not separate their spirituality from the decisions they make in academia (Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). Black researchers are sometimes forced to ignore their spiritual beliefs when conducting research because those in power find this kind of data irrelevant or inappropriate. As a result, black academic women “are often afraid to explore spirituality” (Milner, 2006, p. 373) in their work because “the spirituality of people has been silenced and put at the margins of the academy, where people cannot express it, and can only practice it outside its walls” (Shahjahan, 2005, p. 687). African American academics are challenged by the philosophy of the political correctness of leaving their religion outside their institutions, especially when they are academics in a PWI that encourages the separation of church and state (Allison & Broadus, 2009). The culture of western institutions considers “belief in something that is invisible and unprovable as ‘the spirit’ could have very dangerous consequences, especially to an academic career” (Dillard, 2006a, p. 67). However, African American women do not separate the person from the spirit, but rather “view the spirit as essential to one’s existence and survival, both inside and outside academe” (Allison & Broadus, 2009, p. 85).

Dillard (2006a), an African American academic woman, states that to “render a meaningful conversation about spirituality silenced is unwelcome in the everyday interactions in the university setting and marked as illegitimate in our scholarly discussions” (p. 65-66). The

dilemma often faced by African American women academics is how to embrace the resonance of their souls that arises from spirituality that is fundamental in their lives, and how to do so within academic contexts that demonstrate little spirituality.

Hendrix (2009) is an African American professor who was raised by Christian parents in California. She says faith sustains her through good and bad times. She also believes in “the role of prayer and a relationship with God as a foundation in handling the joy and demands of academia” (p. 68). She added that, “My religious background provides the strength I need to address the challenges of being a black female professor in a still predominantly white profession and discipline” (p.69). Every day, she prays about “the known and unknown” (p. 70) in her life; Hendrix prayed a lot and became stronger in academia because of her spiritual beliefs. She said that “the holy spirit [is] within me and the Word of God inform[s] me” (p. 74). Hendrix found it challenging to join a group of white academic women who shared only her gender and never talked about their spiritual feelings like other groups of black academic women. Instead, she received spiritual support from her husband and family (Hendrix, 2009).

Audrey and Patreece are religious African American academic women who participated in a study conducted by Allison and Broadus (2009). They pray before making academic decisions because they believe that God is directing them in their lives. They also believe their academic success is God’s plan. Audrey said, “I believe it was my destiny” (p. 79), and Patreece said, “Faith is an undeniable trust in things hoped for and certainty of things yet to be seen”. Toni, another black academic woman, said, “I don’t make decisions in my personal life without following the Word” (Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009, p. 660).

In many western countries, Muslim women academics experience alienation because of race, culture and religion. Linked to that is the discrimination that Muslim women experience in the western world because they wear a Hijab, which is an outward expression of religious convictions. Shaikh (2011), a male Muslim researcher who writes about Muslim women, describes how the conservative outfits of Muslim women create obstacles for them in British society. They experience negative attitudes because of their religious dress. Even if they are British themselves, other British people reject them because of their religion and culture.

Alajhoury (2007) states that Muslim academic women also suffer persecution in Germany because of their religious dress. One example is Nesreen Fares, a German woman with Arabic Muslim ancestors. She has a Masters degree from a German university but she could not get a

job at any university in Germany because of her Hijab. Fares applied for 130 jobs but was not successful in any of her applications. In the end, she worked as an assistant to an Arab medical doctor and earned a very low salary.

Serfy Artejoon had a similar experience. Serfy is 26 years old and has an Economic Science degree from a university in Berlin. However, after thirty job applications to many universities and companies in Germany, she still could not find a job. She believes that it is because she was Muslim. Monica Houseman, an economic scientist in Germany, confirmed that Arabic Islamic names are also barriers to the Muslim German people when applying for a decent job in Germany. These kinds of names get refused, excluded and eliminated from the very beginning of the selection process (Alajhoury, 2007).

In conclusion, minorities, especially women, experience discrimination in academia. While Muslim and Christian women speak of marginalisation because of their religion and race, the women in the studies quoted here show a common resilience. They are determined to succeed and are not overwhelmed by the challenges they encounter.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have identified and discussed some of challenges that academic women face, both in Saudi Arabia and in the western context. Although Saudi academic women have only recently become academics and researchers in higher education, they encounter both similar and different challenges compared to academic women in the western context. As Saudi Arabia is a developing country, Saudi academic women face the challenges of finding information and using facilities, which academic women in industrialised countries do not. Moving around or traveling is more of a challenge for Saudi academic women than it is for western women because they live in a very conservative religious culture that sometimes forbids women to travel alone. However, despite the various challenges, many academic women around the world become successful due to the support they receive from their husbands or parents. Academic women in general have a dual role as mothers and academics, but many cases have recorded mothers as successful academic women.

## Conceptual framework

The main research question that this study aims to answer is: **How do Saudi women researchers perceive their role at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?**

The sub-research questions are:

1. What are the expectations of Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University regarding the role of women researchers?
2. What do women academics want for themselves professionally at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?
3. What are the challenges that women academics experience at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?

While religion and spirituality play a big role in many people's lives around the world, it appears that they play a central role in the lives of Saudi people. Spirituality and beliefs that are derived from the Islamic religion affect the decisions and daily actions of Saudi people and form a very conservative religious culture. Emmons (1999) argues that spiritual goals direct an individual's life path in a most profound way, more so than any other goal in life. This is so because spirituality occupies a higher level within the construction of the individual's identity. Moreover, he clarifies that "a goal account of subjective well-being will be painfully incomplete if it fails to deal with the issue of unity, coherence, and integration (or lack thereof) between goals and other aspects of personality" (Emmons, 1999, p. 113). According to the same author, a "goal account" is the goal or purpose the individual sets for her life. In the Saudi context this goal is defined by spirituality, and if one does not live up to these goals then one's life is incomplete and painful. Therefore, in order to build my conceptual framework, I had to conduct my research and base my assumptions on a theory that takes into account the individuals' identity as well as how social forces, including spirituality, shape such identity. This therefore was the framework that guided my search for an appropriate theory.

Western perceptions of Saudi women are incomplete, like puzzles with missing pieces. The complexity of the Saudi woman's beliefs, challenges and victories are best told by a Saudi woman. Hence, my attempt to understand Saudi academic women researchers in a conservative religious culture had to pay attention to both the internal activities (spirituality and belief) as well as the external activities (various other challenges) that affect an individual. An individual is not isolated from his or her own culture; therefore, I explore how

culture affects an individual's personality and identity and I argue that, in addition to their religious identity, Saudi academic women living in a religious culture formulate various solutions to all the challenges they face throughout their academic journey.

I use Activity Theory (AT) as the conceptual framework in this study in an attempt to understand women academics' perceptions of their roles as academic researchers. Activity Theory is used in this study because it does not separate the human mind from the actions that take place during an activity: "Activity Theory does not accept this divide, but provides accounts where both individual and collective activities can be seen to flow into one another, by operating with a number of different units and levels of analysis" (Kaptelinin, Kuutti, & Bannon, 1995, p. 189).

Developed over the years by researchers such as Leont'Ve, Vygotsky, and Engeström, Activity Theory is a descriptive framework that considers the entire work situation. The framework takes into account the environment, culture, motivations, history of the agent, the role of artifacts, and even the complexity of real life action, which makes it perfectly suited to understanding the phenomena investigated in this study. It is impossible to isolate the individual mind from culture and society, and "humans are controlled either from the outside by society or from the inside by themselves" (Engeström, 1999, p. 29). Engeström, Mietinen and Punamaki (1999) developed a model for Activity Theory and explain that "Activity theory has the conceptual and methodological potential to be a pathbreaker in studies that help humans gain control over their own artifacts and thus over their future" (Engeström, 1999, p. 29).

The unit of analysis in Activity Theory is a motivated activity directed at a particular goal or outcome. Engeström's (1999) model is useful in understanding how a wide range of factors can work together to affect an activity. In Activity Theory, the basic unit of analysis is human activity (work), which is driven by certain needs where people wish to achieve a certain purpose. This activity is usually mediated by one or more instruments or tools. Engeström (1999) describes the mediating artifact as the "auxiliary stimulus" (p. 29). Kaptelinin et al. (1995) point out that "the concept of mediation" (p. 190) is central to Activity Theory.

Activity Theory emphasises social factors and the interaction between agents and their environments. The basic principles of Activity Theory include object-orientation, internalisation/externalisation, mediation, development and the integration of all these

principles. Over the years, Activity Theory became more focused on the interaction between internalisations (individual actions) and externalisations (activities around humans), until internalisations became the dominant form of the outcome of an activity (Engeström, 1999, p. 34). Kaptelinin et al. (1995) state that

Activity Theory emphasizes that internal activities cannot be understood if they are analysed separately, in isolation from external activities, because there are mutual transformations between these two kinds of activities: *internalization and externalizations*. It is general context of activity (which includes both external and internal components) that determines when and why external activities become internal and *vice versa*. (p. 192)

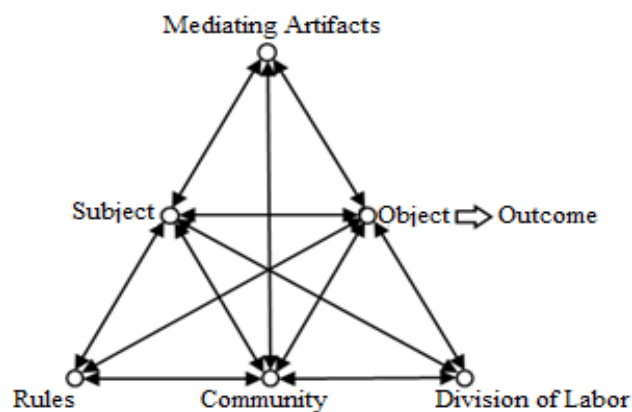


Figure 3.1: Engeström's (1999) Activity Theory model

From Figure 3.1, we can see that Activity Theory has six main instruments or tools. The subject is an agent and could be the person or people engaged in the activity that is the focus of a study. The mediating artifact could be anything that the agent uses to accomplish the activity, such as language, writing or ability. Rules could be agreements that people adhere to while engaging in the activity. Community could be the people and groups whose goals or knowledge shape the activity. Division of labour is how the work in the activity is divided among the participants. The object refers to the things or the space in which the study correlates with other tools in the study. Finally, the outcome is the desired goals of the activity.

“According to the Activity Theory terminology, activity mediates interaction between subjects (agents) and objects (things)” (Kaptelinin et al., 1995, p. 191). I adapted Engeström’s (1999) model to fit my study because “tools are never used in a vacuum, but have been shaped by the social and cultural context where the use is taking place” (Kaptelinin et al., 1995, p. 192). (See figure 3.2 below).

Since the four Saudi academic women who participated in this study are controlled by themselves and their society in shaping their identity, I incorporated the element of ‘identity’ into my Activity Theory (AT) model. Engeström’s (1999) model shows that an individual’s actions are shaped by the tools of Activity Theory, but he has neglected the power of identity in determining an individual’s action. I have added identity to the model of AT because in the Saudi case, religion and culture are an inextricable and intimate part of that identity which becomes the most dominant determinant of action. I do not consider only individual actions as internalisations, but I also take into account the identity of the agents in an activity.

The six tools of Activity Theory are all used in this study: the subjects are the four Saudi academic women at Princess Nora University. The rules are the obstacles and challenges that the subjects have faced throughout their academic journey to become researchers within the ideology of their culture. The mediating artifacts are their personality, motivation, ambition, as well as the qualifications and professional development that influence the accomplishment of their goals. The community is their personal status, family role, and how their families affect them professionally, as well as personal support and help they get from the people around them. The division of labour describes how these academic women either work on their own or collaborate with colleagues. The object is academia, which is the space in which the tools of Activity Theory correlate with each other. The outcome of this investigation is the perceptions of these academic women and how they perceive themselves in the role of academic researchers at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University. Since the tools of Activity Theory overlap, I decided not to include the conservative Islamic culture in only one of them. It is more logical to have all six tools correlating and overlapping within the conservative Islamic culture that surrounds all the actions of the subjects in this study.



Figure 3.2 shows the model that I adapted from Engeström's (1999) model.

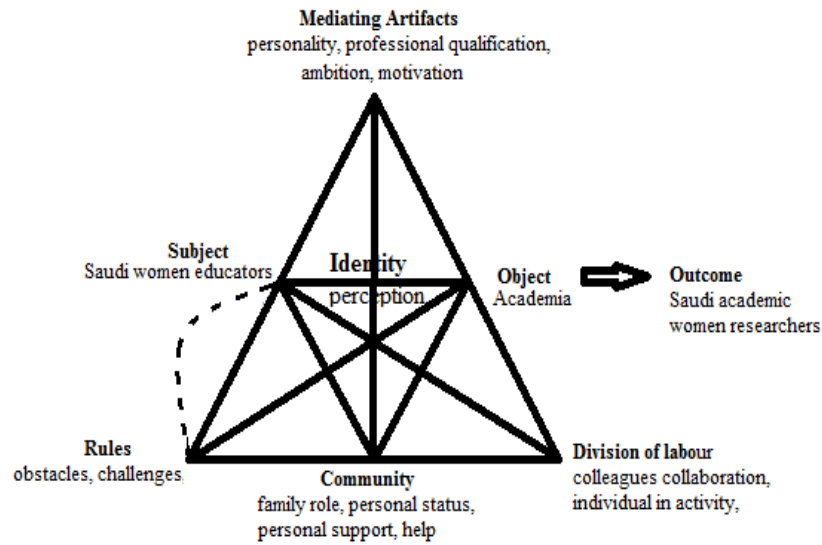


Figure 3.2: Adapted from Engeström's (1999) Activity Theory model

In the interviews with the participants, I focused on the internal and external activities that affect their personalities as academic researchers in a conservative religious culture. These internal and external activities are described by Kaptelinin et al. (1995, p. 192) in their explanation of Activity Theory.

The tools in Activity Theory should correlate with each other or provide tension between each other in an attempt to change the women's perceptions of themselves in order to become academic researchers. However, as a Saudi woman, I built my conceptual framework around the assumption that the tensions which emerge from the tools of Activity Theory do not necessarily affect the identity of the agents. Sometimes, the tensions emerge from the opposite direction; tension could start from the inside and affect the outside. Hence, the internal activities of the participants that are influenced by their religious beliefs interact strongly with the external activities. The women therefore have to consistently find ways of dealing with the external challenges in ways that support their religious beliefs, but simultaneously strengthen their personal development of identity. The four Saudi academic women must find their own way to solve the challenges they face.



Although all the elements of the six tools are linked and interact to produce identity, Jones (1978) claims that identity is not simply measured, but is revealed through social performance. He argues that “identity as a concept must be empirically grounded in social interaction. It is manifested in overt behaviour within a social framework”. He also clarifies that “every society contains a repertoire of identities that is part of the objective knowledge of its members” which together form a culture (Jones, 1978, p. 65).

Hence, I had to explore the field of *culture* that is based on *religion* and how this religious culture would affect the identity of an individual. To do so, I had to define *culture* first and consider how it builds identities. Williams (1993) defines culture as follows: “every human society has its own shape, its own purposes and its own meaning in every individual mind” (p. 6).

Williams’ (1993) definition of culture is rather general. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) also discuss culture, stating that “Every person carries within him- or herself patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting that were learned throughout a person’s lifetime” (p. 4). The same authors define culture more deeply by saying:

*Culture* is a catchword for all those patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. Not only activities supposed to refine the mind are included, but also the ordinary and menial things in life: greeting, eating, showing or not showing feelings, keeping a certain physical distance from others, making love, and maintaining body hygiene. Culture is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. It is *the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.* (2010, p. 5-6)

Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 12) claim that it is difficult for some individuals or groups to escape culture because children are born into particular groups or communities, and that is how culture reproduces itself. Hence, members of every group inherit the existing values of their group.

According to Hofstede et al. (2010), “Philosophy, spirituality and religion are ways of sorting out the differences between good and bad” (p. 13) in every culture. They argue that “*Regional, ethnic, and religious* cultures account for differences within countries; ethnic and religious groups often transcend political country borders” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 45). They point out that culture and identity are often confused. They argue that even though countries may have the same basic cultural values, such as religion for instance, they may not

necessarily have the same *cultural identity*. I build my assumption on their argument about *cultural identity*: Saudi Arabia has the same language (Arabic) and the same religion (Islam) as other Arab countries nearby in the Middle East; however, Saudi Arabia has the most conservative Islamic culture in the region, which makes its *cultural identity* different from that in the neighbouring countries.

Smith (2001) defines culture as “the intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development of an individual, group, or society” (p. 2). He also points out that culture constructs the motivation and identity of an individual living within a certain community. Thus, from these various explanations and definitions of culture, we see that forming identity descends from the culture that a person lives in, whether this culture is religious or not.

To understand the meaning of *religious culture*, Ammerman (2003, p. 216) claims that *religious identity* forms culture. This culture is shaped by the beliefs and practices of people living in that culture. So, according to him, *religious identity* is demonstrated by actions, such as praying for instance, or telling people about experiences they have had.

Since religion is a significant source of an individual’s sense of belonging that shapes his or her identity since childhood, “in culture where the religious mode of action is pervasive, people are unlikely to conceive of other ways of organizing for change” (McGuire, 1992, p. 233). McGuire’s (1992) argument emphasises the notion that religious people form a culture that finds its own ways of adapting and changing because broader forms of transformation are not always acceptable to religious people. So, “religion reinforces ethnic identity to a varying extent depending on the particular ethnic group” (Lewins, 1978, p. 20).

Williams (2003) notes that some religious communities form natural bases for social movements and activism. He argues that religious people may fight and defeat “movement culture”<sup>37</sup> which is new and against their belief. He states that:

Religious ideas and beliefs can reveal aspects of the world to be unjust or immoral, can provide the identity that people draw on when they are urged to get active on an issue, and can give them a sense of agency because it convinces them that their action matters. (2003, p. 317)

Saudi Arabia is a homogenous culture based on Islam. The majority of Saudis are religious; they form a religious culture and fight against ‘movement culture’ if it is not grounded on Islamic values. Saudi culture always tries to find ways for any ‘movement culture’ that suits

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<sup>37</sup> Changing cultural practices in different aspects of people’s lives.

the community within the Islamic framework. In this study, I argue that the religious identity of Saudi academic women who are living in a conservative religious culture affects them strongly, not only in their private lives, but even through their journey as academic researchers. Yet their academic journeys provide evidence of a slow, quiet, yet determined ‘movement culture’ that is gaining momentum in the country.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **From the shadow to the light: Research methodology**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter Three, I discussed the epistemological issues that underpin this study. In this chapter, I explain the design of my research and clarify how the narrative research method is a suitable tool for my case study. Ellis and Bochner (2003) describe narrative inquiry as “stories that create the effect of reality and [show] characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle” (p. 217).

I explain how I selected and contacted the participants in the study and clarify my own situation and beliefs. While conducting this study, I gained a deeper understanding of myself, and with that came a deeper understanding of others, because “as communicating humans studying humans communicating, we are inside what we are studying” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 216).

I describe the procedures that I followed in collecting data from interviews with the participants. I present the questions that I asked them, the duration of each meeting, and the location of our meetings.

#### **1. Research design**

The aim of this research study is to discover how Saudi women researchers perceive their role at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University. I wanted to understand and explain the role of women academics in Saudi Arabia and how they fulfil their research obligations in a conservative Islamic community. Moreover, I wanted to understand the challenges facing them throughout their journey as academic women.

Leedy and Ormrod (2001) define research as:

The systematic collecting and analysing of information (data) in order to increase understanding of the phenomenon about which we are concerned or interested. People often use a systematic approach when they collect and interpret information to solve the small problems of daily living. (p. 4)

I researched the phenomenon of Saudi women becoming academic researchers while living in a conservative culture. I used an intrinsic case study design because a case study is “a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 8-9). Case studies clearly illustrate a particular phenomenon. The implementation of a case study necessitates a small sample group. Case study methods are frequently criticised because they use a single case and thus cannot provide a general conclusion. However, generalisation is not its purpose or intent; case study research is intended to obtain greater insight and understanding of the dynamics of a specific phenomenon (Maree, 2007, p. 76).

My research goal was to investigate the phenomenon of Saudi women academics and how they perceive their role as academic researchers. This type of case study can be defined as a “systematic enquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest” (Maree, 2007, p. 75). Moreover, Yin (2003, p. 1) defines case studies as that “which is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organisational, social, political, and related phenomena”. Yin (2003, p. 2) further explains that “the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events-such as individual life cycles”. Using a case study therefore enabled me to get very close to the participants, which in turn enabled me to understand and interpret not only their perception of themselves in their role as academic researchers, but also their experiences as academic women in a conservative religious culture.

A case study uses examples to explain a phenomenon, which makes it easier to understand and therefore more accessible to more people. By using a case study research design, I was able to employ qualitative methods. From a pragmatic perspective, using an intrinsic case study design allowed me to focus clearly on the desired outcome: How can the phenomenon be understood (how Saudi women academics perceive their roles as academic researchers)?

## 2. Research approach

Qualitative research is concerned with human understanding and self-interpretation. I believe that when conducting qualitative research, one should consider emotions, opinions, feelings and thoughts. This kind of research was necessary in order to gain a complete picture of the participants' beliefs about themselves as Saudi women academic researchers. Moreover, my perspective as the researcher is fundamental and is therefore addressed as a component of this study.

My research is situated within the interpretive paradigm of cultural epistemology and followed a qualitative approach. Using a case study research design, I collected data through interviews. The interpretive paradigm involves understanding and investigating the phenomenon of Saudi academic women being researchers, from their own beliefs and points of view.

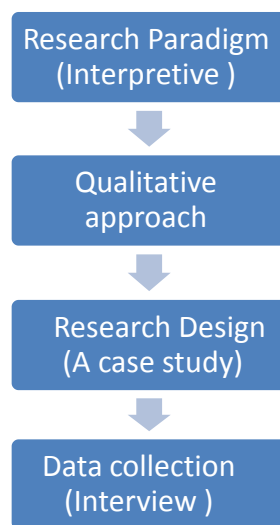


Figure 4.1 Methodological framework

### 2.1 Approaching the participants: Describing the sample

My research used a sample of Saudi academic women at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University, the biggest female university in the world<sup>38</sup>, located in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. My sample was a purposive sample as I utilised specific criteria to select

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<sup>38</sup> As described in Chapter Two.

doctoral educators<sup>39</sup> who work at the university as both educators<sup>40</sup> and researchers. Creswell (2007, p. 125) suggests that the researcher should select the participants purposefully rather than randomly, because the purposeful selection of participants will help the researcher to answer the research questions and understand the research problem. I wanted the participants to be women who had already obtained a Doctorate, so as to ensure that they perform highly as educators and have more experience than educators who hold only Masters degrees. Moreover, I wanted them to be actively involved in conducting research, so as to answer my research question.

Another criterion that I used for the selection of the participants was age. I wanted to collect data from two generations in academia. I wanted to interview the first generation of academic women to hold Doctorates in Saudi Arabia, and another generation (ten years younger) of academic women, in order to ensure different experiences and diversity in the data. The interviewees included women of different ages and different levels of experience (such as length of service). Those interviewed had different backgrounds, but they all share a similar role in their professional lives as women academics and researchers in higher education. Since case studies do not require large sample sizes, I choose to interview only four academic women: two ‘old’/‘established’ academic women and two ‘young’/‘new’ academic women. I wanted an equal number of ‘established’ and ‘new’ academic researchers, so I settled on four participants. A sample size of four allowed me to have in-depth discussions with them, as is required by a narrative case study.

After obtaining ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria, I began the process of selecting the sample for my interviews. I am a Saudi woman from Riyadh and I know many people working at Princess Nora University, both as educators and as administrators. Although I could reach some academic women personally, I wanted to reach them professionally. The University of Pretoria is one of the universities acknowledged by the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. I had a letter from the Ministry of Higher Education acknowledging that I am a PhD student at the University of Pretoria. This letter was sent to the principal of Princess Nora University with a request for permission to conduct my study at that institution. When I applied for permission from Princess Nora University to conduct the research study, I did not reveal the names of the academic researchers that I knew there. On 29 September 2011, after a long time of waiting, calling and sending many emails, I

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<sup>39</sup> Teachers with a PhD.

<sup>40</sup> Teachers.

received a written letter of approval (Appendix J) from the principal of Princess Nora University that enabled me to conduct my study by interviewing academic researchers at the university. The principal sent a letter to all colleges stating that I should be allowed to collect data from them regarding the number of educators in each department and any other information that may help my study.

I attached this approval letter to an email that I sent to the dean of scientific research at the university, asking them to provide me with the names of the researchers with PhDs in their colleges. They informed me that they were unable to reveal the names of the researchers, and I had to contact each college separately. I sent emails to all fourteen colleges that make up Princess Nora University asking them to send my protocol letter of invitation to participate in my study (Appendix H) to all doctoral researchers in their colleges. The protocol letter was in Arabic and in English. It explained the research project and contained all my contact details, so that researchers could contact me if they were willing to participate in the study.

Each of Princess Nora University's fourteen colleges provided me with the number of educators they have (Appendix G). Only eight academic researchers from the different colleges sent me emails saying that they were willing to participate in the study. One academic researcher sent me an SMS message on my cell phone saying that she was sorry, but she could not participate.

I received four further SMSs and two emails from academic researchers at the Science College because my friend, who is an educator in that college but not a researcher, encouraged her colleagues to participate in my study. Appendix G shows that there are 144 Saudi women with PhDs in the four departments in the Science College. I wanted to interview any two 'new' and any two 'established' academic researchers from this college, specifically because I thought that, being scientific researchers, they would have faced the most challenges and obstacles throughout their academic journey. This would be due to the need to conduct laboratory experiments and having to keep up to date with international scientific developments which are usually available only in English and not in Arabic.

I chose four academic researchers from the Science College and tried to get to know them before starting the interviews, because "making initial contact with research participants is an important process in conducting qualitative research" (Egharevba, 2001, p. 229). I also sent an email to each one with a letter of informed consent (Appendix I) in both English and Arabic



that outlined everything that she should know about the study. This included the length of the interviews, the type of data that they may like to share with me, and the potential venues for the interviews. I attached most of the questions that I intended to ask them during the interviews and clarified that they would remain anonymous. I assured them that all the information collected during the research would be stored safely, even after the research is completed and that they may withdraw from the research process at any stage without any reprisals. Potential participants had a week to consider the invitation, and when they agreed to participate, I set dates and locations to meet them, and gave them a consent form to sign, which outlined the aim of the study and what was expected of the participants.

Salma, the first participant, is the Deputy Dean of Scientific Research, which means that she is an administrator, not an educator<sup>41</sup>. However, she was enthusiastic about the study and appeared to have a lot to contribute. She told me that she has many things to share with me and that she has the time to dedicate to participating in the study. Due to her enthusiasm and the fact that she is one of the best academic researchers at the university, I felt very positive about interviewing her. Despite the fact that she did not meet my selection criterion of being an educator, she was an active researcher and had been an educator for a long time in the past. The year in which I interviewed her was only her second year as the Deputy Dean of Scientific Research.

On Sunday 11 December 2011, which is the second working day of a week in Saudi Arabia, I visited Salma in her office at the new campus of the university, as she requested, for our first interview. I had told her that we could meet outside the university so as to ensure her privacy, but she told me she has nothing to hide from her colleagues and most of her stories are already known to them. After she signed the consent form, we spent almost two hours talking about her academic journey and she shared much valuable information with me.

On Tuesday of the same week, I interviewed the second participant, Asir, for the first time. Asir also welcomed being interviewed in her office. She told me over the telephone that she has five children to take care of and has no time after work. Asir was very helpful and tried her best to find the time in her busy schedule to talk to me. For the last two visits, she sacrificed her break time in order to allow me a long, uninterrupted session with her.

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<sup>41</sup> Not a teacher at the time of interviewing her.

Salma and Asir are the two new academic researchers who participated in this study. Salma is in the Chemistry Department and Asir in the Physics Department. I interviewed Salma over five hours during three interviews in her office. I interviewed Asir over four hours during three interviews in her office. During this period, I decided to find other academic researchers from other colleges. I wanted to hear different stories and challenges because I realised that Salma and Asir had similar experiences. I apologised to the third participant who I had not interviewed yet, and said that I no longer needed her to participate in the study. I went back to the email responses from other academic women who were willing to participate and chose two established academic researchers to interview.

The first established academic woman I chose was Najd, who is known for her standing and research, and has a good academic reputation at the university. Najd is in the Geography Department in the Arts College. The Arts College is a big college with seven departments and 229 Saudi women with PhDs<sup>42</sup>.

Although I was nervous about interviewing Najd because she is much older than me and she is such a well-known researcher, I felt comfortable visiting her at her house because my mother knows her through her sister-in-law. The first time I interviewed Najd was at her house and the interview lasted for two and a half hours. On two other occasions, we went to a café and had a more informal chat, rather than an interview. These two café meetings lasted for a total of three hours. I had been informed by my mother that Najd does not speak with people very much, but I discovered that the reason for this is because she is very well educated and intelligent, and has little interest in many of the topics that the women around her talk about. I found Najd very willing to share much more information than my interview required. I did not have to ask many questions because she told me very detailed stories. By our last meeting, I felt that we had become close, and I gave her my contact details in South Africa so that she can contact me if she visits the country.

I struggled to find a second established academic woman to interview. I tried to contact one of the academic women who emailed me, but she did not reply. She is in the History Department, in the Arts College. I asked Najd about her and Najd told me that she is a new academic, which I was not searching for at that stage. I then contacted another established educator who is known for her publishing record. She welcomed the chance to participate in my research, but unfortunately she had moved to another university and I did not want to

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<sup>42</sup> See Appendix G.

interview someone in a different university. I contacted another established academic in the Arabic Language and Literature Department in the Arts College, but from the first time I spoke to her, I could tell that interviewing her would not help me. She agreed to only a single interview. She also started asking me many questions about my study, my family, my husband's job and other irrelevant questions which made me feel uncomfortable. Rather than trying to convince her to participate in three interviews, I simply apologised to her and said that unfortunately she does not fit the research criteria.

I started looking for an established academic woman who had studied abroad and would therefore have different experiences. I made contact with Hejaz, an established academic researcher who had spent most of her academic life outside Saudi Arabia. Hejaz is in the Curriculum Department in the Education College, which has 87 Saudi women with PhDs<sup>43</sup>. I was initially hesitant to interview Hejaz because she had spent almost twenty years abroad; however, I really wanted to hear about the experiences and challenges she had faced as I was sure they would be different to those that Salma, Asir and Najd had faced. Hejaz was on sick leave, so I visited her at her house twice to interview her.

Saudi women academics were the conceptual group in my case study. I did not know Salma, Asir, Najd or Hejaz personally before interviewing them. I obtained all my data from these participants, who are all women academic researchers at Princess Nora University in Riyadh. Since my study aims to discover how Saudi women researchers perceive their role at their university, interviewing them provided me with a deeper insight into their perceptions of their roles in higher education. Confidentiality was assured and was important for this group of people, especially because the case study deals with their private lives. I did not include anything in this study that they did not want published. Despite not wanting their real names to be used in this study, they allowed me to write things that describe aspects of their personalities and could possibly reveal their identities.

### ***Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz: the pseudonyms***

I achieved diversity in my sample by including women of various ages from different departments and different regional backgrounds. I did not plan to have the four academic women come from different regions in Saudi Arabia – it just happened accidentally. All names

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<sup>43</sup> See Appendix G.

used in the study are pseudonyms. I often name the children and family members of the participants. I do this in order to build their ‘realness’. The names are pseudonyms and do not divulge the true identity of the participants. I refer to each of the participants by the name of a mountain in her region.

Although mountains face many different atmospheric conditions and natural factors, they are known for their stability and glory. Moreover, they produce elements, minerals and useful materials. The academic women who participated in this study are similar to this, in that they produce research and have made useful contributions to their fields, despite the many obstacles and challenges they have faced throughout their academic lives.

In the Northern Region of Saudi Arabia lie the famous twin mountains, Aja and Salma. I choose the name Salma because it is an internationally feminine name. I gave it to my first new participant, because she is from the Northern Region and has twin daughters. In the Southern Region, the Asir Mountain is known for its height and greenery that covers it all the year round. I named the second new participant, who is from the south, Asir due to her forgiving personality and modesty.

The Arabic word ‘*Najd*’ literally means ‘upland’ or ‘plateau’, and was once applied to a variety of regions within the Arabian Peninsula. The most famous of these is the central region of the peninsula in the middle of Saudi Arabia. I gave my third participant, an established academic woman, the name Najd because she is from the Middle Region of Saudi Arabia.

I named the fourth participant, an established academic woman from the Western Region of Saudi Arabia, Hejaz after the biggest mountain in the Western Region. The Hejaz Mountain extends from the north to the south on the west side of Saudi Arabia.

## **2.2 Sampling, data collection and ethical considerations**

I collected some documented information from the administration of Princess Nora University and the official website of the university that answered my first research sub-question. Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz, all academic researchers at Princess Nora University, were my interviewee group and the direct source of my data. I did not have an existing personal relationship with any of the selected participants and I did not interview any woman academic

that I knew in any other capacity. These four women were completely willing to participate in the study and had time to consider the possible consequences of their participation.

The interview method is fundamental to qualitative research. A crucial part of a qualitative interview is to elicit the interviewee's point of view, as the participant is the only source of data when using this method (Maree, 2007, p. 87). Moreover, the participant's point of view must be from her own perspective; the researcher must avoid influencing the interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 144) in order to "establish how participants make meaning of a specific phenomenon by analysing their perceptions, attitudes, understanding, knowledge, values, feelings and experiences in an attempt to approximate their construction of the phenomenon" (Maree, 2007, p. 99).

The participants were provided with consent letters that guaranteed that their rights, confidentiality and privacy would be protected. I also ensured that the participants were from different departments, thereby limiting the possibility of them knowing each other.

Conducting interviews was the primary source of data collection. A series of semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with the participants and the core interview questions can be found in Section 4. Three interviews were conducted with each of Salma, Asir and Najd, and two interviews with Hejaz. Interviews lasted for one to two hours and were typically followed up with additional phone calls and conversations via WhatsApp<sup>44</sup>.

Initially, I had planned to hold all the interviews outside the university, so as to ensure privacy and confidentiality. But at the request of participants, some interviews were held in their office. Table 1 indicates the times and locations that the interviews occurred.

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<sup>44</sup> WhatsApp is a smartphone messaging program.

Table 1: Interview schedule with participants

Participant	Department	Date	Time	Location
Salma	Chemistry	11/12/2011	8:00-10:00 am	In her office
		18/12/2011	8:00-10:00 am	In her office
		19/12/2011	12:00-1:00 pm	In her office
		19/12/2011	5:30-5:45 pm	By phone
Asir	Physics	13/12/2011	9:00-11:00 am	In her office
		14/12/2011	12:00-1:00 pm	In her office
		15/12/2011	12:00-1:00 pm	In her office
Najd	Geography	17/12/2011	7:00-9:30 pm	In her house
		20/12/2011	3:00-5:00 pm	In a café
		21/12/2011	7:30-8:30 pm	In a café
Hejaz	Curriculum	24/12/2011	7:00-8:00 pm	In her house
		1/1/2012	7:00-9:30 pm	In her house

I pre-planned the questions I wanted to ask the participants, but as the interviews were semi-structured, each one was different. The questions were not always asked in sequence, and sometimes the interviews were mostly narratives told by the participants, which I would comment on or ask them to clarify their experiences. I tried not to talk too much or share similar stories of mine or of people that I know. I tried to let the participants talk as much as they wanted to and simply absorb as much as I could from their stories. Sometimes I did not need to ask them to explain further details; I already understood them because of our shared cultural perspective. For example, when a participant referred to the weekend, I knew that she meant Thursdays and Fridays, not Saturdays and Sundays, because the weekends in Saudi Arabia are different to the weekends in western countries.

Salma and Najd talked about their academic journeys and remembered details as if they were still living it, or as if it had happened just yesterday. Both of them wanted to talk to me about their academic lives in great detail. On the other hand, Asir and Hejaz did not talk freely. I sometimes felt that I had to work very hard to get answers from them.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic. The participants and I feel more comfortable talking in our mother tongue, which is Arabic, so conducting the interviews in that language removed any potential language problems. I transcribed all the interviews into Arabic and then translated them into English. The participants expressed themselves very clearly; however, translating the transcript from Arabic to English was sometimes problematic. I had to translate informal or slang Arabic expressions into formal Arabic because some of the informal words do not have a direct translation in English. Rather than literally translating everything, some

words and the structure of some sentences had to be changed in order to give them meaning. I was careful not to change the meaning and expression and not to betray the trust of the participants. I only changed things in order to make the interview coherent and understandable in English.

The Islamic religion has a huge influence on the Saudi people, and as a result, it should be mentioned in this study. Islamic religious words are frequently found in direct speech. The participants used words such as *Insha Allah*, which means ‘if God will’, *Alhamdole Allah*, which means ‘thank God’, and *Masha Allah* which means ‘God’s will’. Muslim people say *Insha Allah* when they intend to do something in the future. Moreover, the Saudi culture and system is totally different to that in most other cultures and countries. For example, December is not a holiday and Saudi people do not celebrate New Year in January.

The participants were most generous with their time. They were wonderful hosts and treated me very well at their offices or at their homes. At each interview, they offered me pastries, sweets, coffee and tea. It is common for Saudi people to be kind to their visitors and to be generous hosts. Visitors also usually take a gift the first time they enter someone’s house, so the first time I visited Hejaz I took her chocolate, and the first time I visited Najd I took her traditional food made from dates.

I really enjoyed hearing the stories the participants shared with me. The new academic women, Salma and Asir, did not want their interviews to be tape recorded. This is due to cultural beliefs and is especially common among conservative and very religious women who consider recording their voices to be *oura*. *Oura* is a term that is used to designate something extremely private. The established academic women allowed me to tape record their interviews as they are not as conservative as Salma and Asir. When I asked Hejaz if she would allow me to record her interviews, she laughed and said, “I don’t mind as long as you don’t publish them on CNN”.

I therefore only tape recorded the interviews with Najd and Hejaz. When I transcribed the interviews, I played the tapes in slow motion, which really helped me with the transcription. Although I did not tape record the interviews with Salma and Asir, I did not have difficulty documenting their interviews, because I took notes while they were talking to me and I transcribed each interview directly after it took place. This helped me to remember all the

details, such as voice tones, body language and reactions. Copies of the transcripts were shared with the participants so that they could verify the content.

### **3. Methodological norms**

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, certain aspects, such as validity, conformability, triangulation and credibility, need to be considered (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I ensured the trustworthiness of this study by describing in detail the processes that I followed in collecting the data. In giving the participants the transcribed interviews for comment, I further strengthened the trustworthiness of the data.

Conformability is the degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study were shaped by the respondents, and not the researcher's bias, motivation or interest. Schwandt (2007, p. 299) suggests that, in order to ensure conformability in findings, data and interpretations, the inquiry must be objective. While objectivity is not a goal of qualitative research, Golafshani (2003) explains that "qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as a real world setting where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest" (p. 600). To this end, I interviewed participants in places where they were most comfortable and provided the space to speak freely.

The data was triangulated through an iterative process between the interviewer and the participants in order to review the translating process. In addition to reviews by my supervisor and co-supervisor, I asked my husband, who is fluent in Arabic and English, to read and comment on my translation of the transcripts from Arabic to English. He did not know any of the participants and could not have identified them through the data.

The methods described above ensured the credibility of the collected data and confidence in the 'truth' of the findings. Schwandt (2007) defines credibility as "the issue of the inquirer providing assurance of the fit between respondents' views of their life ways and the inquirer's reconstruction and representation of same" (p. 299). I further ensured the credibility of the data since it was collected over multiple meetings, and some information was repeated in different interviews. "Credibility [will be gained] by thoroughly triangulating the descriptions



and interpretations, not just in a single step but continuously throughout the period of study” (Stake, 2005, p. 443-444).

Validity means “having confidence in one’s statements of knowledge claims” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 309). Marshall and Rossman (2011) note the importance of “involving participants in the research project to validate themes, interpretations and/or findings” (p. 41). In this study, the four participants were interviewed and data from the interviews were coded and categorised. I referred back to the participants to discuss my interpretation of the data, so as to ensure that the findings are valid. I ensured validity in this study through the accuracy of the findings. Creswell (2007) considers “validation in qualitative research to be an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (p. 206).

In order to draw conclusions from this study and answer the research questions, the data collected from the participants was analysed. Crystallisation was considered in the data because, according to Silverman (2010), “crystallization is [the use of] clear language to describe the research. Thus a non-specialist may comprehend” (p. 181).

To this end, I referred back to the participants after the interviews in order to ensure the quality of the information that was gathered. I asked them to clarify any points that were not clear, to explain ambiguous data, and to verify the information. Interview transcripts were coded and categorised into themes for interpretation. Participants were given drafts of chapters related to their interviews and asked to comment. Their corrections were implemented before the chapter was finalised and published in English. Salma and Najd were satisfied with what I wrote and only asked for minor things to be removed. Asir trusted me and did not want to read her chapter and Hejaz did not have time to comment on her chapter.

#### **4. Core questions that guided me in the series of interviews:**

In this section, I present the questions that I used in the interviews with the participants. Travers (2001, p. 3) suggests that an interviewer can learn a lot from minimal data by asking open-ended questions and giving interviewees the opportunity to make comments on the interpretation of their answers. The areas of questioning included family attitudes and support

throughout their academic journey, obstacles and challenges they faced, ambition to be an academic, research experiences, career development, and personal beliefs.

The purpose of the following interview questions was to get to know the interviewees' personalities and family histories in order to establish a relationship, and encourage them to talk about themselves more.

- What is your name, age, marital status and the number of years you have been an academic?
- Who supported you in your family?
- What was your motivation to be a researcher?
- In what way were you trained to do what you are doing now?
- Who helped you to become a successful researcher?

The following questions helped me to understand all the obstacles and challenges the participants had faced throughout their academic journey and the university's role and support for them as academic researchers.

- What obstacles did you face in your journey to becoming an academic?
- What problems do you encounter when you conduct research (for example, money, time, finding information, support, access to the internet, transportation, collaborating with colleagues)?
- Is it easy to find all the information that you want in Arabic? If not, and especially if your English is weak, what do you do?
- How does the university support you as an academic?
- What is your colleagues' role in your research?
- Do you work in groups or individually?
- Do you publish your research nationally or internationally?

The purpose of this last set of questions was to uncover the subjective experiences of the participants in establishing a new perception of themselves as researchers within their conservative culture.

- What kind of conferences do you attend and how many times a year?
- How do you feel as an academic researcher now? How do you see yourself in the future as an academic researcher?
- Are you happy being an academic in Saudi Arabia?
- Would you prefer to be an academic in a western country?
- If you could change one thing about your academic life, what would it be?
- Is there anything you would like to share or tell me about that I have not asked?

I believe that by asking all these various questions I collected sufficient data to answer the research questions posed by this study.

## **5. Qualitative data collection and analysis**

I followed an iterative data collection and analysis approach. I interpreted my findings based on data collected from the participants through the interviews and conversations. Sometimes the data collected the first time was incomplete, so I went back to some of the participants to collect additional data. For example, I called Salma and Najd by telephone to clarify some points when I was writing up the data collected during our meetings. After gathering all the information that I needed from the participants, transcribing, and translating it, I interpreted it by writing their stories as a sequence of readable events. I combined all the information from the three meetings with each participant, in order to present a coherent narrative, especially for a western reader who is not familiar with the Saudi culture.

In chapters five, six, seven and eight, I present stories which are the products of the interview contexts with the four selected Saudi academic women, using a narrative research method. I know that as the researcher, I am in charge of the resulting stories, through the process of writing them. Although I was aware that I was dealing with people's lives and their points of view, I found it difficult to separate my point of view from theirs. Therefore, I cite my values,

culture and experiences in interpreting the data as a narrative, because “narrative is a way of understanding one’s own and others’ actions, of organising events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time” (Chase, 2008, p. 64). Moreover, they “express emotions, thoughts and interpretations” (Chase, 2008, p. 65).

In my study I used narrative inquiry to help to understand the perceptions of the Saudi academic women as researchers in their conservative culture. “What is shared across both event-and experience-centred narrative research, is that there are assumed to be individual, internal representations of phenomena-events, thoughts and feelings- to which narrative gives external *expression*” (Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou, 2008, p. 5). Narrative inquiry offers the best way to examine particular identities and a society, based upon an individual’s narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 4). Because any narratives about Saudi academic women appear to be absent in academia, I hope that my narratives of four Saudi academic women, and the analysis of their experiences through their journeys as academics, will provide a holistic view of other Saudi academic women and the challenges they face. I believe that the narrative format about the participants provides a readable and interesting reference point for them within the Saudi culture.

However, I experienced various challenges myself in writing the stories, such as being careful to differentiate between my voice and those of the participants as Pillay (2005) points out in her article about the inseparability of narrative and self. Chase (2008) describes a similar dilemma:

For researchers who collect narratives through intensive interviews, a central question is how to treat the interviewee as a narrator, both during interviews and while interpreting them. For all narrative researchers, a central question revolves around which voice or voices researchers should use as they interpret and represent the voices of those they study. (2008, p. 58)

I interpreted their points of view within the culture that they live in, which I am familiar with, and which cannot be separated from their life stories. Plummer (n.d.) refers to the value of life stories:

Life stories may also be seen as ways of ‘reading cultures’. This value may lie in the ways in which they come to reflect the culture but also display how the culture talks about itself, how it allows certain kinds of life stories to be told – and by implication, not others. And often, as we shall see, this takes us into moral worlds. The life story is in and of the culture. (p. 401)

Avoiding or muting the participants' culture in writing their stories would contaminate the strength of their stories. I was deeply aware that my task was to represent the culture of the 'field' that I was researching (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 4). I thought it would be easy to write the stories of Saudi academic women, since I am one myself. Yet it was not easy, because "culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 3). My writing was such representation.

The Saudi culture is completely and totally different from the western culture. Thus, I have been challenged to represent the Saudi culture clearly through my writing, because writing is intended as a form of communication between me, as the author of this thesis, and the western reader. So, as a Saudi writer in a western culture, I had to find ways of being accountable to the Saudi women whose stories I tell, while being intelligible to my potential readers in the western world. As Van Maanen (1988) explains:

Culture is not strictly speaking a scientific object, but is created, as is the reader's view of it, by the active construction of text. (p. 7)

The Saudi cultural epistemology, along with the Islamic framework, served as the basis for interpreting my data. It is only through examination and knowledge of the Saudi culture, traditions and Islamic religion, that we can truly understand and appreciate the lives and success of the Saudi academic women who participated in this study.

At first, I hesitated to use narrative inquiry in writing the participants' stories. However, later when I experienced that this method involves emotions, feelings and beliefs, I implemented it. It fitted me. I tell the stories of Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz in as much detail as possible to give a full picture of their lives and to respect the confidence and commitment they have shown by sharing their stories with me. I believe that narrative inquiry is an effective and powerful method of writing; it not only provides readers with what they expect and like to read, but it is also a particularly appropriate research method to address the research questions in this study.

I used the qualitative data analysis programme ATLAS.ti to code the data, analyse the data, and organise it into relevant themes. After investigating Activity Theory (AT), I decided to use it as a framework to categorise the data and seek themes in an attempt to understand Saudi women academics' perceptions of their roles as academic researchers. I classified, categorised, and coded all the data that I collected, viewing it through the lens of the Activity

Theory model. In using the tools defined in Activity Theory (mediating artifacts, subject, rules, community, division of labor, and object) to organise the data, I sought to maintain coherence between my theory, methods and findings.

I analysed the data in a table using the six tools of the Activity Theory model, with a percentage at the end of every aspect, indicating the influence that it had over the educator becoming a researcher. It appears that the Saudi academic women in this study are highly affected by their internal beliefs and spirituality as religious Muslim women, which in turn, influences all their actions and decisions. I used three themes that emerged from my transcript analysis: family and cultural role: support or control?; and challenges through the academic journey. In Chapter Nine, I discuss my findings in the light of the literature review that highlighted published findings from expert researchers that may support or contradict my own findings.

From reading all the transcripts of the four participants thoughtfully many times and analysing the data that I gathered through interviews, the findings emerged, as Patton (2002) states: “Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings” (p. 432).

### **6. I, Mona, the researcher**

In the course of my study, I was always aware of the expressions and emotions, the sadness and happiness of the participants. I was also aware that we share a common cultural and professional background as Saudi women academics. This awareness formed part of the ‘data’ of my study because “as narrative inquirers we work within the space not only with our participants but also with ourselves. Working in this space means that we become visible with our own lived and told stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 61-62). As Dillard (2006b, p. xi) mentions, every time we conduct research, we are researching ourselves besides researching others. I feel that I need to reveal the duality of my personality as a researcher in this project by writing about myself.

I am a Saudi woman in my late thirties. I have been married for 17 years to a supportive Saudi husband, and I have three children. I was born and raised in Jeddah on the west coast of Saudi Arabia, to a military father just like Najd’s father. I was lucky to receive my education in Jeddah at that time, like Hejaz who was also educated there, because the Western Region had the best schools at a time when education was weak in the rest of the country. I attended a

private school called “*Alnaseefiah*” that teaches English from grade one, something that was also uncommon at the time.

When I was seven years old, I started colouring in very prettily. My mother noticed this hobby and supported me by buying colouring books. I remember that when I travelled to Europe, I asked my mother to buy me different colouring books that attracted me, the likes of which I could not find back home in Saudi Arabia. All I wanted was to colour without limits. I would colour in for many hours, with beautiful colour harmonies, particularly at that young age. When I became older, I became obsessed with oil colours. Although oil colours and canvas boards are expensive, my mother used to buy me all that I needed to paint. At the age of 14, I had my own small studio at home with oil paints and all the other equipment that a real artist needs. For the first time, I felt free, independent, and completely able to control my thoughts through drawing and painting pictures from my imagination. I felt that by painting I could live adventures and stories, as I wished. I used to take my sketch book and pencil with me on every trip. One summer, I joined a painting class and learnt a lot about mixing paints and various gradients of colours. At the age of 16, I started presenting my pieces in art galleries, as a young artist. My self-esteem soared and I became more confident about my ability as an artist; that is when a new chapter began in my life.

After graduating from high school with high scores, I wanted to register in the fine art department and become an artist because I loved working with my hands, just as Salma did. My father wanted me to study mathematics, especially since I was an excellent student in that subject, although that wasn't my dream. At that critical time for me to decide, I found my mother standing beside me and encouraging me to study and improve my skills in fine art, which she had encouraged in me from a young age. I felt challenged and afraid to disappoint my parents' belief in me to make a success of my life.

That crossroads in my life taught me that boundaries and obstacles can either hold us in a particular track, or force us to be creative and become stronger. It forced me to rely on my imagination and to believe in my ability to be a creative artist. From that point on, I believed that my imagination is a tool to break boundaries. By believing in my dreams and my skilful hands, I could be an artist, as I wanted. Facing my fears in disappointing my father, yet believing in my abilities, helped me to follow my dream. So, facing challenges can be good for us, as a starting point of a story, rather than as an end or a limitation in a particular

situation. I studied fine art and learned how to do sculpture, metal work, and mix colours – skills that taught me patience and creativity.

### ***The torch that lit up my life: my husband***

In 1997 I graduated from the Fine Art College and became a teacher in a public high school. That same year I got married to my husband, Saleh. We did not get married after a love story or seeing each other in a public area, but rather through an arranged marriage (as most Saudi marriages are), with a blessing from our parents. After only six months of marriage, Saleh was awarded a scholarship from the Saudi Government to do his Masters degree in the USA. We went to the USA, where we spent four years. I also joined the university to further my studies. I did not neglect my husband throughout my postgraduate studies. He was really a supportive husband and used to help me at home. He is the eldest son in his family and they wanted to see a child for him soon; however, he postponed having a child until I completed my Masters qualification in TESOL<sup>45</sup>.

We were living in New Jersey Estate, and area that is known for minorities. We used to buy our needs from different grocery stores in an area for the Arab community, called Paterson. I decided to conduct my study on this minority. My mini dissertation was “*Cognitive development of bilingual students living in the USA*”. I did my field work in one of the public schools in Paterson, with a class of Arab children. My aim was to assess their achievement in English language through one term. My study progressed well, particularly with my husband’s support in everything, even giving me a lift to any place that I needed to go.

I was just like Hejaz – a new bride who had recently left Saudi Arabia. There are several similarities between Hejaz and me, in that both of us had an easy life and a good experience while we were in the USA. We ensured that we defended our culture and country by giving an accurate picture to people around us. I used to invite Americans to my house and host them with Saudi cuisine. I wanted them to experience Saudi culture and be informed about it from me as a Saudi, in order to amend the prejudiced information that Americans get from their media.

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<sup>45</sup> TESOL: Teaching English to Students of Other Languages



At the beginning of the new millennium, I gave birth to my first child, a boy called Abdulaziz. In the delivery room the nurse asked me if I wanted to hold the baby and breastfeed him. I replied with unequivocal answer: ‘No’. I had been in labour for almost a day, from 6:00 am till 11:00 pm, and I just wanted to rest. I also thought at that time, that this baby had prevented me from attending my Masters graduation ceremony which took place on the same day that he was delivered. I wanted to attend that celebration with my fellow postgraduate students, on the university campus. I wanted to take photographs of myself while receiving the certificate, to frame it and hang it later on my wall, to admire that moment. However, the next morning when I held my baby in my arms, I felt terribly guilty, especially when I saw his smile with two strong dimples in his cheeks. He was a courageous little boy. He was very tiny and weighed only six pounds. While writing this, I feel that I want to hide even from myself as a selfish mother, who thought only of resting rather than holding her first baby. I should have felt happy that day because I had two major celebrations in my life: being a new mother, and having a higher degree. I promised myself that with the next baby I would hold him or her immediately after giving birth. Two years later, I had my daughter Deema, and I did hold her.

I thought I would like to have five children, three boys and two girls; however, after I had a boy and a girl, I changed my mind – I believed that I could not handle many children. However, three years after giving birth to my daughter Deema, I had an unplanned pregnancy with my second daughter, Danah. I believe that this is what God wanted for me and it must be the best for me and my family. Danah is a smart girl who is loved by everyone around her.

I became very busy taking care of my three children and trying to balance my life as an academic mother. My children were very young and they needed me. Nevertheless, a part of me wanted to continue with my doctoral study. Saudi Arabia had achieved improvement and development in higher education, and established many new universities – such as the Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University. I felt the time was right to concentrate on my career in higher education by grasping the opportunity to participate in improving education in my country. I wanted to continue my work in education, not only because I love my country and want to contribute to its progress, but also because I believe in Nelson Mandela's words: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (Mandela, 2003, para. 15). I believe that women in any community should be highly educated – they need to be informed enough to realise that they have the right to grasp any opportunity offered to pursue their own personal and professional development.

In 2010, I came to South Africa with my husband who is working for the Saudi embassy for four years. Thus, I have the opportunity that I was waiting for, to improve education in my country. I am lucky in that my children are now at school and I have plenty of time to read, research and write. I decided to conduct my study on the topic of Saudi academic women who are covered under their veils. I wanted the west to know that under these veils, academic women are just like their peers in other parts of the world. Saudi academic women have made progress in terms of academic thinking and succeeding in their journey as researchers, even though they face many obstacles and challenges.

### ***Back to a study chair***

I applied to be accepted as a PhD student at the University of Pretoria. I submitted my proposal, and they called me for an interview the same day. Three examiners asked many questions, and I was honest and answered everything. Later, I was surprised when I heard that the university had turned down my application without mentioning anything to me. I felt that at least I had the right to know. Was it my race, my religion or my gender? I am not accusing the university, but I wondered if it was discrimination because I am Muslim or Arab? Was it because I am a foreigner, or because of my religion or outfit? But the university is full of international students, including Muslim women wearing the Hijab. Perhaps I am too sensitive to think about racism. So this rejection remained a mystery to me. However, I really wanted to be accepted, so I did not give up. I contacted all three examiners who interviewed me, seeking an answer, but without success. I tried to find a supervisor to accept my proposal, but again, I did not succeed.

Finally, Professor Fraser accepted me in the doctoral programme when he sensed my enthusiasm. He believed in me and guided me. Professor Fraser became my co-supervisor, and Professor Pillay became my supervisor. I am glad I became one of her students. I have always felt as if I am the only student she has – the minute I enter her office, she leaves everything and talks with me, not only about my study, but also about my feelings as a PhD student.

My mother taught me since I was young that I should be patient in everything in my life. Everything requires effort, even eating and putting a morsel of food into one's mouth requires action with the hand. She built my self-esteem by encouraging me. My aunt once said to me

that I was a stubborn young girl, but my mother told her that I am ambitious, not stubborn. Her words encouraged me to reach my goals. I won a medal in a swimming competition and three prizes in drawing competitions. I believe that if other people can do something, then so can I. I always confess any of my faults to myself and the other people who may be involved with me in a certain situation. This might be one of my reasons for my success in my life as a wife, before being an academic or a mother.

I am an artist. I draw pictures and express myself through drawing. I have always loved to read stories and poems. I started writing my own poems in my twenties, but I have never thought of publishing them. I love reading and writing in Arabic and have a smooth style of writing and expressing myself. As a postgraduate student, I had to do research to find information and I found that I enjoy researching and writing. Although it was challenging for me to write in English in a way that makes it readable and attractive for English people, I started enjoying my studies, my writing, and even expressing myself in English. It is difficult for a person to express themselves in a second language, but if we persevere, then nothing in life is impossible.

The problem that faced me in writing in English was not only translating words from Arabic to English, but expressing everything in English which has a different sentence construction compared to Arabic, which is a Semitic language. Writing in Arabic, the sentence would flow in a certain way, with lilting words; however, translating it to English would not yield the same qualities. I experienced difficulty in writing the last chapter of this thesis in particular. Thinking and writing in Arabic and then translating in English may have diluted the strength of the argumentation; therefore I had to think theoretically in English, although this was not easy for me. Moreover, as a Muslim Saudi person, we are used to writing and speaking according to religious concepts. I was taught in school to support my writing with quotes from the Quran and Sunnah. The Islamic religion affects me not only spiritually, but also in the way I express myself. If I were to leave my Islamic beliefs and spirit out of this work, then how would I be able to interpret all the details around me? How would I connect with my study with an emptiness of soul? So, I decided to embrace my intuition and invite the reader into my world.

Although I enjoyed writing my thesis and felt very creative with my words, I was apprehensive about this big task. Was I going to be able to present my study thoughtfully enough? This feeling of fear pushed me to persevere and make better progress. Although my

writing in English wasn't at a level that satisfies me, my goal wasn't to be an excellent writer in English, because I know I am an excellent writer in my own language, Arabic. My goal throughout this thesis was not to show a sophisticated level of writing, but rather to share my thoughts, beliefs and experiences that cannot be found in other sources due to the lack of Saudi feminist writing.

I started keeping my laptop with me always and everywhere, even in bed. I used to walk around my house holding my laptop. If the furniture could talk, every corner of the house would testify that I visited it with my laptop. My laptop became my 'fourth baby' and another part of my family to take care of. Never a day passed without turning my laptop on to read or write for my PhD thesis. I was writing in Arabic and English every idea or thought that came to my mind in a notebook or on pieces of papers that I gathered and rewrote later on my laptop. I established a file on my laptop that consisted of all my thesis chapters, and recorded all my ideas in it. Later I arranged all the points and ideas into separate parts of the text. I even used to talk to myself and my laptop became my best friend.

The PhD sessions that I attended were very helpful to me psychologically because they supported me in moving towards my goal. I went through times when I felt I was stepping backwards and unable to continue with this journey. However, when I looked at the other postgraduate students and perceived what they were going through, I realised that I was not the only one who appeared to be losing strength from time to time.

I was living in a golfing complex at that time, so I was lucky to be able to walk every afternoon for an hour to refresh my mind and body. My husband, Saleh, used to accompany me every day on these walks. I used to talk to him about my writing and my study, in order to relieve some of my stress. He supported me a lot during that time by listening to me. He used to encourage me and support me by offering some advice, which I really needed at that stage of my life.

In the second year of my PhD study, I went through a tremendously painful time when my husband, Saleh, got sick. I remember the day – 23 May 2012 – that I waited for him to return home from his office. He called and said: "*Mona, I have been hospitalised and will be a few hours late*". Although his voice came through the telephone low and calm, his words shocked me like a thunderbolt and I became very worried. He was hospitalised to be given intravenous antibiotics.

During that period of time, I could not write or do my research very well. I became psychologically sick because I was taking care of my husband without showing him my weakness or fear. I had to always be strong in front of him. I kept my tears inside me, which tore me apart since I am very sensitive, and I lost my appetite. That period of time was very difficult for me because of my husband's condition and I was a long way from my country and my family. I really needed someone to talk to. Although I have friends in South Africa, they are formal relationships and I felt that I could not unmask myself in front of them. I kept praying and asking God to support me during this challenging time.

I write this thesis conscious of my identity as a wife, a mother, a woman, a student, an academic, and an artist. I found time to write my work in between teaching my children, attending receptions, and hosting people as the wife of the Saudi military attaché in South Africa. This PhD study has provided me with a better ability to look at everything in my life in detail and analyse every situation to give me better insight and understanding. Through writing my thesis, I felt that I have grown up. I became more confident that I can deal with people, I can talk with people, and I can even facilitate meetings with people. Although I went through times when I thought it was the end of my study and I could not continue, I had to collect my strength and realise that writing a book cannot be accomplished in a day and a night. God gave people the example of being patient, by building the skies and the earth in six days, although He could have done it in seconds.

I feel that these years that I have spent in doing my PhD have made me a mature woman who can handle problems better than the person I was before. I have learnt to think deeply, not only in my study, but even in my daily life, about the needs of every member in my family. This study took me from my husband and children at times, but returned me to them stronger and as a more considerate wife and mother.

## **7. Limitations and challenges of the study**

I was afraid that the participants in this study might hide or misrepresent information about some aspects of their lives, such as some of their challenges or their success as academic researchers. As the interviewer, I informed all interviewees that their confidentiality would be maintained and their names will not be revealed. Therefore, they did not mind me writing

personal details about their lives, such as their biographical details and information about the departments that they work in, without mentioning their real names.

I was worried that different backgrounds and personality characteristics may become barriers in the interview process. I thought that some participants may find it difficult to represent themselves and may not want to talk about themselves. Fortunately this did not happen, although I had to work harder with Hejaz to encourage answers from her. This was not because she was unhelpful, but because she did not have to face so many obstacles through her academic life compared to Salma, Asir and Najd.

I was very shy in the beginning, to conduct interviews with these highly educated women, especially the older ones. In the Saudi culture it can sometimes be difficult to hold a conversation with a person who is older than oneself because young people have a special respect for older people. I was afraid that I would be controlled by cultural reaction and be restricted from delving beyond it. However, once I started the first interview, I found that it wasn't that difficult to talk to highly educated people in high positions without knowing them before. All the four academic women that I interviewed took the interviews seriously and tried to answer my questions as best as they could because they respected me as an academic woman pursuing my PhD study, and this transcended any cultural barriers which there might have been. Thus all the boundaries between me and the participants, the academic researchers, disappeared from the first interview with each one of them.

The four participants are all Saudi academic women, like me. Since we share the same cultural life and background, I found it easy to encourage their responses and to understand their body language and other signs that I tried to be fully aware of. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) call this the "absent presence" (p. 17), and they recommend that the researcher should keep a watchful eye and ear on all the details throughout an interview in order not to miss anything. Nevertheless, I did not always ask much about some of the things they were telling me, since I know and understand the culture. As a result, I may have neglected to mention in my writing simple things that passed over me that I think are normal in every culture, while it may not be so.

I was aware that I had limited time to collect data. Since I was going to spend only six weeks in Saudi Arabia and then had to return to South Africa, I had to make sure that all the data I needed was collected in this time frame. Given the time limitations, I also arranged with each

participant that I could email or call them with further questions and clarifications, should the need arise. I spent more than an hour in each conversational interview. The participants and I felt very comfortable with each other from the beginning, which enabled me to collect this worthy data. I was lucky that I held certain 'keys' which allowed me to easily connect with the participants. Since I am a Saudi woman as they are, from a known family in Saudi Arabia, and in my middle age, they were encouraged to talk to me and give me their time.

I tried not to push the participants into times that did not suit them. I did not take more time than they were able to spend with me. I did not try to pursue things that they appeared reluctant to talk about. I felt that they really wanted to talk to me and engage me in the stories of their academic journeys. I became friends with Salma after the interview period was over.

One of the positive aspects of conducting the interviews in a limited period of time was that I was able to remember everything they said to me, and was able to compare them with each other, knowing the responses they had each given to every question. Moreover, between sessions, the participants were able to remember what they had already told me, so they did not repeat the same information or stories.

I thought that geographic distance might have caused problems in conducting the case studies. However, all four participants were very helpful in arranging time for me to meet them in the limited period of six weeks that I was in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, they agreed that I could contact them later via telephone or e-mail if I needed more details from them. Indeed, when I returned to South Africa, I had to call Najd to clarify certain points. I called her one day after her lecture had finished and she was very helpful in providing the missing details.

## **Conclusion**

This study does not claim to provide solutions to the challenges that Saudi academic women face. It also does not speak for all Saudi women academics. Instead, it offers a general understanding of the phenomenological situation of Saudi academic women, by shedding light on and providing insight into their journeys, in the form of a narrative. Studies have seldom been done on this topic, or been presented in the western academic world.

Throughout this study, my goal has been to validate the experiences and stories of these four Saudi academic women who live and work in their conservative culture every day. Within their academic and personal environments, I wanted their voices to be heard by the rest of the world, rather than being muted, as they fulfil their obligations in academia to succeed as women academic researchers by overcoming all the challenges they have had to face throughout their academic lives. I have attempted to present the subjective reality of Saudi academic women, hoping to shed light on what it means to be a woman academic researcher in a conservative religious culture, such as in Saudi Arabia.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Salma: A special woman

*I wanted to graduate with something special.....They believed in me that one day I will be something special (Salma)*

On one of the coldest mornings in December, I went to the new campus of Princess Nora University to meet Salma in her office for the first time. I waited for her in the lobby of the big university Administration building. The lobby was really wide with a high ceiling, a big picture of King Abdullah in a gold frame hanging on the wall, and a circular fountain in the middle. There were women security guards inside the building. I sat on a velvet seat in the corner of the lobby, in front of the entrance. I was waiting for Salma in the lobby since she had told me that her office is far from the entrance and I might get lost in this big building. Our appointment was at eight in the morning, but I arrived fifteen minutes early. While I was waiting for Salma, the entrance gate did not stop going back and forth with women coming into the building. No one looked at me in particular, except some women who passed me on the way to their offices with a smile and a morning greeting, or the Islamic greeting<sup>46</sup>.

Five minutes before eight, a woman approached me, and before she asked, I knew that she would be Salma because it appeared that she was looking for someone. I smiled, stood up and asked her if she was Salma. My intuition was right and we shook hands and greeted each other. She was carrying two large plastic bags. I offered to help her carry them, but she refused. It emerged later that the bags contained trays of pastries and sweets that she served to me. She was generous in serving me Arabic coffee with different kinds of sweets, or tea with various pastries, every time I visited her. Generosity in serving guests is a common thing in the Saudi culture – it is expected that guests should be served well.

Salma is an associate professor and academic researcher in Analytic Chemistry, and I had assumed that she would be old. However, she appeared younger than I imagined, although she is strongly built and tall. To picture Salma, imagine a beautiful woman of 41 years of age,

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<sup>46</sup> Alsalam Olaikom

with full lips and large sharp eyes. Salma graduated almost 21 years ago, and she is married with twin daughters and a son. She has a mannerism of raising one eyebrow when she talks about something that oppresses her. She is full of energy and loves life. She is an active speaker, speaking fast and in great detail. At first I wasn't encouraged to interview her because she works in the administration department and is not an educator. Later when I discovered that she is the deputy Dean of Scientific Research, I became enthusiastic to interview her because she is one of the best researchers in the university.

We went up to her office and on the way we saw male workers working in the building. The building is still new and the staff had just moved to it, even though some parts were still under construction. When she saw these workers, she covered herself completely with her veil (Hijab). I knew from that moment that she is very conservative, particularly in wearing her Hijab, since she covered even her hands and face. Furthermore, Islam affects her actions and decisions in all aspects of her life. She is veiled even aboard, out of Saudi Arabia. She asked me once if she were to visit South Africa as a tourist, whether she would be able to wear her veil without harassment or discrimination like she had experienced in some other countries she visited. She is conservative because she has been raised in a religious house, as she said:

I am from a conservative family. My father and my uncles are judges.....My father is a professor in Shari'a<sup>47</sup>, the Islamic religion. He is a judge.

Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world whose legal system follows Islamic rules according to the Quran and the Prophet Mohammad's teachings hold sway in all cases in all the courts. So, a judge like Salma's father has to be very religious and educated in the Islamic religion by studying Shari'a.

## **Standing on a mountain of ambitions**

We entered her office, and I took a seat while she took off her Abaia<sup>48</sup> and started unpacking the plastic bags. I noticed that Salma's office was very organised. Usually, people's office desks are full of papers spread everywhere. Salma's desk was organised and her papers were in standing files on a side desk. Her hosting cups were set out nice and neatly. This level of organisation has affected Salma's personality and decisions throughout her life. She was even

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<sup>47</sup> A professor in Shari'a is a scholar in all Islamic subjects.

<sup>48</sup> An Abaia is the black gown that women wear in Saudi Arabia to cover themselves when they are in the presence of men, for example in streets and public places.

highly organised during our conversations with each other. Salma told her story in sequence as it happened throughout her life. She told me that she had read my interview questions and would like to talk about her academic journey as a story. She gave me plenty of her valuable time to interview her. Each time I left her and thanked her for her time, she thanked *me* instead, telling me that she liked talking to me. She found it relaxing and she enjoyed being able to talk about all the stress and pressures that she had experienced throughout her academic journey.

Salma is a perfectionist in her life, and even when she writes a business letter she wants it to be perfect. She likes to know and learn everything. She wants to do everything by herself, even things like changing a plug or a light bulb in her house. She likes to be the best in every role in her life, the best mother, daughter, wife, boss and student. She has always had responsibility in her life – when she was a child she was tasked with caring for her younger sister and brother. She enjoyed being in charge and helping her mother. She likes to be successful in her life and in anything that she does; even when making a sandwich or baking a cake, she wants it to be the best she can do.

Salma's family is from the Northern Region in Saudi Arabia, but she was born and grew up in Riyadh. She is from a middle class, conservative family. Salma did not want to be a medical doctor because she is afraid of blood and anatomy. Moreover, she did not want to work in a hospital or other places that are of mixed genders. If she worked in hospitals with men, she would be fully covered all the time and this would not be convenient for her, so she decided to work in schools. She wanted to study something that would allow her work in schools after she graduated. As mentioned in Chapter Two, schools are not mixed in terms of gender.

Salma was an excellent student in high school, and she achieved a high percentage in her high school degree:

I had a high percentage in my high school degree. So, I wanted to graduate from something *special*. Hhh.... You will not believe me if I say that I wanted to enrol in the Art and Design College in the fine art department or the Domestic Economy College in the clothing department. I loved these majors because there you learn everything *by hand*. I loved knitting with wool. I learned knitting when I was only seven years old.

Salma has been ambitious since she was a little girl. She learned sewing and knitting while she was only seven years old. She loved working with her hands. However, her family had high expectations for her, as she said:

My family's expectations of me were very high. They believed in me and that one day I would be something *special*. My mom wanted me to enrol in the science college.

Salma loves working with her hands and could have been an Art teacher, but she believes that students consider art and sewing lessons as a break from formal subjects. In her subconscious mind, people around her affect her decisions. She wanted to learn something '*special*' because she wanted to satisfy the people around her. She thinks about people's reactions and their judgments as she said:

Honestly, the community guides you sometimes to choose your future under their expectations.

So, Salma respected her mother's wish and enrolled in the Science College. Obeying one's parents is part of the Islamic religion. Salma is a religious person and she would not ignore her mother's request. At that time, 25 years ago, the Science College offered only Mathematics, Physics, Biology and Chemistry. So Salma had very few choices. She decided to study Chemistry because she "*loved working in labs*" when she was a student in high school.

Although Salma wanted to study pharmacology at King Saud University, she did not, because at that time their system measured studying by hours not years, and the hours were not guaranteed each semester. She therefore decided to enrol at an institution where she would be guaranteed to graduate within a specific timeframe. She decided to study at the Science College for Girls, which was part of the General Presidency for Girls' Education at the time (it is now part of Princess Nora University), where she knew she would graduate in four years.

In 1992, after four years of studying, Salma graduated with a degree in Chemistry and was ranked number one in her year group. She was very ambitious and wanted to be a university demonstrator<sup>49</sup> and study for her Masters degree. Unfortunately, the college was not hiring anyone at the time. She received an offer to work as a teacher in a high school in Oyainah, but unfortunately that is sixty kilometres away from Riyadh, where Salma's family lived. At that time she was not married and her father did not want her to travel that far every day, so she did not accept the job offer and instead stayed at home for a year in respect of her father's wishes. In the Saudi culture, a girl is expected to respect her father's wishes, so Salma obeyed her father's decision without resentment.

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<sup>49</sup> Tutor or teaching assistant, often a Masters student educator in a university.

A year later, she received an offer to work at the Science College as a university demonstrator and study for her Masters degree at the same time. She was delighted with the offer. She initially wanted to do her Masters degree in Analytic Chemistry, but the college refused because there was another student already registered for that subject. Salma was very upset when the college registered her in a major that she did not want. Luckily, however, Salma's father worked in the General Presidency for Girls' Education<sup>50</sup> at that time, so he spoke to someone in a senior position in the men's administration, which has more authority than the women's administration, and Salma was eventually able to register in the subject that she preferred.

Another problem that Salma had to face that year was that the college had implemented a new rule: first year Masters students were allowed to work only in the laboratories, and had to wait until their second year before starting on their own studies. At first, she was upset as this rule was very new and she had not anticipated it. However, she realised later that it was very good for her to have spent the first year working only in the laboratories, as she was able to gain much more experience and ended up being much better prepared for her Masters degree.

Twenty years ago, the laboratories at the Science College were not well equipped. So, if Salma needed any equipment that was not available in the laboratory, she had two options: she could apply for the equipment through the college, but it would take a very long time for her to receive it – there was no guarantee that it would even arrive before her graduation! The other option was to buy the equipment herself with her own money. Salma is ambitious and did not want to delay her studies at all, so she chose the shorter, guaranteed route and bought the equipment herself. She did not mind using her own money to get what she needed, as she said:

I did not think of money. I just focused on my study and wanted to finish as soon as possible...So, I bought everything. I had limited time to graduate from the Masters degree...It was not all about money.

The college allowed her to use the under-equipped Central Lab, and provided her with only simple things such as glass tubes. Salma borrowed large items of equipment from the students' laboratory but had to buy other things, like different sizes of glasses and any chemical products she needed for her chemical experiments. This cost her almost 4000 US

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<sup>50</sup> As it is mentioned in chapter two that the Girls Education Colleges before being under the control of the Ministry of Higher Education, were under the General Presidency for Girls' Education that has been under the leadership of religious men and scholars in Islamic religion such as Salma's father.

dollars, which was quite a large amount, considering that her salary was 1300 US dollars per month.

Salma faced many difficulties throughout her postgraduate studies. Sometimes, she would have to take her sample from the Central Lab and measure it in another laboratory, because she did not have a scale and could not borrow the other lab's scale because another student was using it. It was very inconvenient to have to go between laboratories, which were sometimes quite far away and on different floors, holding her sample.

There was only one distillation device in the college, which she needed for her chemical experiments, but she could not move it because it was very big and heavy. This device was on the third floor in a different building. Salma was so determined that she bought many huge jugs and spent many hours getting distilled water from this device. She had to borrow the laboratory key from the student who was responsible for the laboratory, but that was not easy, as the other student was not always very cooperative. When Salma did manage to get the key, she would go into the laboratory late in the day, when no one else was around to allow her driver or her brother to get in and help her move the heavy jugs to her Central Lab. The college is for girls only, and men are not allowed to enter the college while the female students are there because they are unveiled. So a man is only allowed to enter the college if there are no female students around. Salma even used to bring in a male technician and pay him, with her own money, to fix one of the devices that often stopped working because it was very old. If she had relied on the college to fix this device, she would have lost much of her precious time. Not only would this have been frustrating, but she could not wait long because she had a specific timeframe in which to obtain the results from her experiments.

### **Strong as an arrow**

Salma tackled all the obstacles and challenges she faced with energy. According to her, she is "*like an arrow in a bow*". All the challenges she has faced throughout her academic life kept holding her back, but this only give her more strength to achieve her goals.

Salma is very determined. She does not give up and does whatever it takes in order to accomplish her goals. She is a strong and patient woman. When she was a Masters student, she sometimes used to stay at the college from seven in the morning until six in the evening to

work in the laboratory to finish her research experiments. She always works hard to use her time as best as she can. When she was studying, she was not married and her father allowed her to stay at college that late because he worked in the General Presidency for Girls' Education and knew that it was safe for his daughter to stay late at the college because being a girls only college, there were no men around. Salma used to teach other students and work with them as a university demonstrator in the mornings, and in the afternoons she would work on her own research in the laboratory.

Unfortunately, despite all her hard work, at the end of her first year when she had finished her research experiments and showed the results to her supervisor, the supervisor told Salma that these results were not what was expected, and that she had to start all her work from the beginning again.

Undoubtedly, this setback upset Salma very much. She had to work throughout the two month long summer vacation to complete her work within the specified time. She could not work at home because she had to use the laboratory to get new results from new experiments. As a Saudi woman, she is not allowed to drive, and her Indian driver had gone back to his country for the summer vacation. So Salma's brother would drive her to college every day except Fridays, because Friday is a day of prayer for Muslim people and the men have to go to the Mosque<sup>51</sup>.

After the summer vacation ended and the new academic year started, Salma showed her supervisor the new results. The supervisor was satisfied and told Salma that she would be able to finish her fieldwork within a month. However, the head of the department did not want Salma to graduate after only three years. Salma was given sixteen hours a week to teach Bachelor students in the laboratory, as opposed to the other Masters students who were given only four hours of teaching a week. Salma was put under a lot of pressure, as she said:

I remember that I had a lab class with students on the same day of my oral exam for the Masters degree....When I was so tired and felt depressed, I went to her and asked her. She told me that the department needs me and I don't have to study so hard to finish in three years, because I am allowed to take four years to complete my Masters study.

Nevertheless, Salma finished her Masters degree in three years and applied for the PhD programme straight away. At the end of the same year she was told that the departmental committee had refused her PhD application, but they did not tell her the reasons why. Salma

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<sup>51</sup> A Mosque is a place where Muslim people worship God and pray.



was very despondent and spent that summer vacation crying and praying to God that she would be accepted as a PhD student.

The new academic year started and Salma was very surprised and relieved to hear that the department had changed their minds and had agreed to allow her to start her PhD study. Later, she found out that the head of the department was the one who had earlier refused her application. However, it so happened that during the summer vacation, the head of the department's husband became very sick and she had to take care of him. This tired her out and weakened her, and she lost the resolve to fight with people. She wanted to be kind to everyone and to pray for her husband to get well. Salma insisted that she did not know anything about this, but later she heard that her supervisor had tried to convince the committee to accept Salma, especially the head of the department who strongly refused to accept her as a PhD student. Although Salma truly wanted to be accepted as a PhD student and had spent the whole summer vacation very upset and sad, she is a religious person and would not like people to come to harm in order for her to gain an advantage.

Salma started her PhD study, and received marriage proposals many times; however, she refused to marry because she did not want anything to limit her success, even marriage, as she said:

I did not want anything to keep me busy from my study or interrupt me. I received a proposal at the beginning of the second year of my PhD study. I accepted under one condition – that I get married after a year to enable me to finish my fieldwork, so that I would have the third year for writing my thesis.

Marriages are arranged in the Saudi culture. A girl may receive many proposals from young men that she knows nothing about. Usually her father enquires about the young man that he prefers. If it appears to the father that this groom is qualified to be a good husband to his daughter, then he will tell her to think about this young man's proposal. A girl has the right to accept or refuse marriage to this man. Although some families force their girls to accept a fixed marriage, this has recently become very rare in the Saudi culture. Some girls want to complete their studies like Salma, so they postpone their marriages. Salma finished her field work in one year as she had planned. So when she got married in the third year, she could concentrate on writing her thesis. She made it clear that it was not difficult for her to finish her postgraduate study while she was married, because she did not yet have children and had plenty of time to write. She admitted that her PhD study was much easier than her Masters because she had much more experience. Nevertheless, it did present some obstacles.



At the start of her PhD study, Salma needed someone to guide her to a suitable starting point. At that time in the Science College, none of the doctors had experience in her field of Analytical Chemistry. She called many doctors in different universities but without any result. She called a male doctor in a male university, who had experience in her field, but unfortunately he did not help her at all, as she said:

He told me that I have to find the starting point of my study by myself. I searched very hard to find something interesting and new to base my study on. In the end, God helped me and I came up with a topic that I wrote my proposal about.

Salma always finds solutions to her problems, and she believes that whatever she receives in her life is from God. She has a close relationship with God and always prays and asks for God's help.

Salma was so happy that she was able to start with her PhD research, but finding information was difficult fifteen years ago. She used to go every weekend<sup>52</sup> from eight in the morning to two thirty in the afternoon to a male university in Diriyah which is almost 75 kilometres from Riyadh. It was the only university that had the database she needed to access. The University's library has a separate area for women only. She would photocopy many papers that she took back home with her, which cost her a lot of money.

Salma continued with her PhD research pretty well, until her supervisor's contract with the college came to an end and was not renewed. So the supervisor went back to her country, Egypt. This is a common problem for many postgraduate students because fifteen years ago most of the educators were foreigners, and there were no Saudi doctors in the Science College. So Salma had to continue her work with the Egyptian supervisor at a distance. She had to send everything to her supervisor by mail because internet access from home was difficult at that time. It also took a long time to receive the supervisor's responses by mail. The supervisor had another PhD student in Riyadh besides Salma, and they had the right for their foreign supervisor to visit and spend two weeks with each student to oversee their progress. So, Salma and her friend, the other PhD student, arranged their time to spend two consecutive weeks each with the supervisor.

The supervisor came and stayed for a month in a hotel, and her air ticket and accommodation were fully paid for by the college. Salma had to work hard during that time with her supervisor to finish as much of her work as possible. She planned to go and meet the

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<sup>52</sup> Weekends in Saudi Arabia are Thursdays and Fridays.

supervisor in the hotel after she finished work in the college, although the college has a regulation that a postgraduate student is entitled to leave from the laboratories for the two weeks that she has with her supervisor. However, the head of department refused to allow more than two days off a week from laboratory duty, in spite of Salma's request for two weeks leave according to the college rules. However, Salma asked her father to use his relationships with senior men in the administration to call the head of department and convince her to give Salma the two weeks off from laboratory duty.

Salma was happy that her problem had been solved and she would have more time to meet with her supervisor. If she had had to work in the laboratories, she would finish at five in the afternoon, and then it would be difficult to her to go home and do the reading or writing work before meeting the supervisor at night in the hotel. On the other hand, when she had time off from the laboratories, she finished at the college at twelve noon, thus allowing enough time to spend with her supervisor and for her other responsibilities. However, her assistant who worked with her in the laboratories upset her when she became very angry that Salma would be away for two weeks. She told Salma that she is "*selfish*" to take time off from the laboratories and to leave her alone for two weeks. Salma appeared to be offended by her assistant's words, but she gathered her strength without paying her any attention, as she said:

Some people think only about themselves. Anyway, I finished my study and I was an assistant professor in this college for nine years.

Salma is sensitive to the jealousy of women around her, but she tries her best to ignore bad reactions from people and simply focus on her research. She completed her PhD study in three years, as she had done with her Masters degree. In the beginning the departmental committee refused to allow her to graduate in three years, but later they agreed when they became convinced of the value of her work.

## **I decided to build my own lab**

In 1995 Salma graduated with her PhD and became an assistant professor. She still wanted to conduct scientific experiments and work in the laboratories. However, since she was now a member of staff and no longer a postgraduate student, she was not allowed to do any experiments in the college laboratories. Salma asked the head of department to give her permission to use the laboratories for her own study, but she refused and told Salma "*Enough*

*Salma. Haven't you had enough of your experiments?!*" This was the third head of department who did not cooperate with Salma or encourage her through her academic journey.

Salma wanted to continue her research, so she decided to establish her own laboratory, which was a big and bold step. She asked her father to establish a laboratory for her in his house because at that time she and her husband were living in a small apartment. Her family house was too small and there was no room to establish a laboratory for her, but they were about to move to a new house. Her father established a chemistry laboratory for her in the garden of his new house, which suited her requirements very well. She furnished the laboratory with cabinets in the walls to store the samples and the glass equipment, and she bought small devices that she needed. She felt happy that she could continue to be a scholar and do chemical experiments.

Salma conducted many chemical experiments and obtained good results. She sought prior research in her field and found many useful results that helped her significantly. She also bought expensive devices, such as a sensitive scale that cost her 2400 US dollars and another device that cost her 16000 US dollars. At one time she borrowed a device that she needed in a certain experiment from a clinic near to her family's home. She did not mind spending a lot of money, but unfortunately she had no-one to guide her in the beginning, which was a big problem. She spent nine years doing good experiments, but without final results because she had not found guidance and direction.

### **New doors were opened; I was 'in a coma' for nine years**

When Salma was an assistant professor, Salma went through a difficult period when her mother died. She became very sad and missed her mother. Her mother had helped her throughout her life; she used to encourage Salma with her research, and she would bring food to her daughter while she was working in the laboratory<sup>53</sup>. Salma used to talk to her mother and tell her everything that was going on in her life.

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<sup>53</sup> Salma's laboratory that was in the family home.

Salma needed some changes in her life in order to feel better. She was lucky in that she was unexpectedly promoted to the position of head of department. This promotion changed her academic life, as she said:

This position was a real start for me to complete my work.

It happened that Salma was a co-supervisor for a Masters student, Wafa<sup>54</sup>. Since Salma was an assistant professor, she could not be Wafa's direct supervisor – it was a condition that the supervisor had to be an associate professor or a professor. However, there were no associate professors or professors in the Analytic Chemistry Department at that time, so they had to search for one outside their department. Wafa contacted many universities to find a supervisor, but it wasn't easy. Eventually she found a male associate professor at the male's university. He became Wafa's supervisor, but he did not read anything for her and did not help her at all. He wasn't committed to supervising her, and just wasted her time. Salma was working with Wafa and supported her from the beginning. Salma considered that she was Wafa's real supervisor. The student felt lost in some areas, and so they tried again to find someone to collaborate with them. Fortunately Wafa found an Egyptian male professor at a university outside of Riyadh. This professor helped Wafa a lot by guiding her through her Masters research. After overcoming many difficulties, Wafa completed her research. Salma and Wafa finished writing the dissertation and sent it to her official supervisor. It was obvious to them that he did not read it. He did not respond at all on the day of Wafa's oral exam. Nevertheless, Wafa successfully completed her Masters degree and graduated.

One day Salma received a call from the Egyptian professor who wanted to enquire about Wafa's progress. Salma realised that this professor would be able to help her with her own experiments that she had been doing for the last nine years, without results. She did not hesitate to talk to him about her research. He asked her if she had published any results. When it was clear that she did not, he offered to help her and see her work. She said:

He came to me one weekend from his city. I took him with my husband from the airport, and he stayed in my family's house. I paid for his ticket. I showed him my work, and he suggested some minor changes that I needed.

Salma's enthusiasm to work with this professor was very clear. Not only did she pay for his air ticket, but she asked her husband to take her to the airport to pick him up. Moreover, she involved her father in offering accommodation in his house for this stranger guest that his

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<sup>54</sup> Pseudonym.

daughter brought him. In fact, within Saudi culture, Salma wouldn't be able to arrange a meeting with this professor without the support of the male members in her family. A female wouldn't be able to do what she did on her own, without the presence of male family members. It is not impossible to do alone, but it is definitely not acceptable within Saudi culture.

New doors had opened for Salma to become a creditable academic researcher and publish her work. This professor taught her the right way to be a researcher, as she said:

As I told you, if I hadn't met the Egyptian professor and received his help, I wouldn't be a successful researcher today. He guided me. He put me on the right track. I can't ignore his help.

The professor helped Salma to contact various journals to publish her articles. He also helped her publish two articles, so she knew later how to publish for herself. He helped her significantly, after she *"was in a coma for nine years"* as she described herself. Salma published seven research articles, four as a single author and three as a co-author with the professor. Two years after publishing her work, she had the right to be promoted and become an associate professor.

Although Salma is a strong person, she did not feel comfortable in the administration when she was promoted to head of department, as she said:

It was difficult to satisfy all the people around you. Some of the educators complained and requested fewer lectures when they didn't even have much work. They just don't want to teach.

Salma preferred to step aside and not become involved with people who were complaining. She did not enjoy the leadership role and wanted to go back to being a lecturer again. She *"used to go to a therapist to relax"* and found that treatment by a physical therapist helped her to relieve stress and relax.

## **Salma as an academic mother**

Becoming pregnant wasn't easy for Salma, and she miscarried many times. As a result, when she became pregnant with her twin girls and started bleeding, she had to rest on her back. After giving birth to them, she stayed at home to take care of them. She said:

I took six months unpaid leave to take care of my twins. I was very organised for my girls and meticulous about everything for them. I liked to take care of them myself. I couldn't depend on anyone else. I had a very good nanny who was from the Philippines. She was very neat and clean. However, I couldn't depend on her when my girls were babies.

As an academic and a mother, Salma devoted much time to her role as a mother and took care of her daughters herself. She could not leave the nanny to take care of them, although she was very good. Salma described herself as “*very organised and meticulous*” as a mother about how she looked after her children and did not trust others to do the best for them in all duties such as feeding and changing them. She used to read books about motherhood and how to take care of her babies, especially since she was a new mother. She did not forget that she is an academic besides a mother, so she continued reading about research in her field while caring for her daughters. It was difficult for her to do any research herself during that time, due to the demands of her child care duties. Moreover, this was earlier in her career, before she had learnt how to go about publishing her own work.

It is a common issue among academic women all around the world, in trying to meet the demands of children and a career. Salma took many periods of unpaid leave from the college, even during her second pregnancy with her son, whom she delivered in the eighth month of pregnancy. She said:

It amounts to almost three years if I collect all the leave periods together. These three years postponed my academic journey. I would be now a professor.

Although Salam regrets that these three years delayed her progression in her academic life, when it came to being a mother, she made her children her priority ahead of her academic career, as she said:

Having my children in my life is a blessing even if they postponed my academic life for a few years.

Salma's twin daughters, Sara and Soha are now eleven years old, and her son, Saud<sup>55</sup>, is nine years old. Salma takes good care of her children even when she travels to attend conferences. She takes them with her because her mother passed away and she cannot leave them alone or with anyone else besides her mother. So she prefers taking them with her, as she said:

They are my husband's and my responsibility. My husband wouldn't mind if I travel alone and leave him with the children at home, but my father doesn't want me to travel by myself, and I respect his wish.

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<sup>55</sup> Sara, Soha and Saud are pseudonyms.

I feel that Salma is very attached to her father and continues to respect his thoughts and wishes even after her marriage. Usually in Saudi culture, a father has domination and authority over his daughter's life before her marriage, not necessarily afterwards. After marriage, a woman becomes independent from her father and is free to conduct herself as she wishes, subject to her husband's agreement. Salma is an obedient daughter and avoids upsetting her father who does not want her to travel alone. He is a religious man and considers that a woman traveling alone may be subjected to innuendo or danger. From a religious perspective, a woman has to travel with a Mahram<sup>56</sup>. So Salma implements her father's desire by traveling with her husband, as she said:

When I travel to any conference, I don't go alone. I go with my children and my husband. My husband likes to go to have a change of atmosphere and see another country and new places to visit. I go to the conference and he roams around in the city that we are visiting.

Salma made it clear that her husband neither encourages her, nor objects to her work. He goes to conferences with her, not to support her or attend the conference with her, but to have an opportunity to see new countries and discover new places. I felt that her husband's attitude bothers Salma because she talked about it on the telephone even before I meet her, when I commented that her husband must be following her academic success, which she denied. Her husband's only role in traveling with her is to serve as a Mahram for her, although the reason he gives when taking a week's leave from his work is to be with his researcher wife to attend a conference. He does not take care of the children, even while she is busy at the conference. When she went to attend a conference in Tabuk, her city that she came from in the Northern Region, and she took her children with her as usual, she said:

They came with me to the conference. Their father left the hotel to meet someone. I couldn't leave them alone in their room. They are old enough and I know that they will not disturb anybody. I asked permission for them to attend the conference, and they did.

I sensed anger in Salma's voice and face when she talked about her husband's role in this journey. His role is one of absence. He left the hotel without taking the children with him. He probably went to see someone that he knows from a long time ago because Tabuk is their hometown and they have many relatives there. It is obvious that Salma's husband is used to leaving the responsibilities of the children to her. She does not like this, but she accepts it. Salma has a mannerism of raising an eyebrow when she talks about something she is not

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<sup>56</sup> Mahram means any adult man related to the woman such as a brother, father, husband, father-in-law, nephew, uncle or son-in-law.



happy about, which she did when she talked about her husband's responsibility towards her and the children.

I felt confident in Salma's words that she knows that her children are polite and would not embarrass her in front of people, as she said: "*they are old enough and I know that they will not disturb anybody*". So they attended the conference with her. Salma is very eager to look after her children, even when she is busy. She did not like to leave them alone in the hotel room, nor did she leave the responsibility to her husband. Many Saudi women depend on their husbands, but Salma is an independent woman who does not count on him in everything. He used to make hospital appointments for her because he works in the administration at King Fahd Hospital; moreover, before she had a driver, her husband used to drive her to the hospital, but she said:

I wished that he didn't make the appointments for me. He always used to make me late. I am always on time but he is not.

Fortunately she later acquired a driver, so she can now go everywhere by herself and not with her husband who causes her to be late.

Salma mentioned that sometimes her children do not tell her about their experiences during their school day because they know that she is busy, as she said:

They know that when I am writing, I will not be able to hear what they say. I believe that when I am busy, my body is with them but not my mind.

Salma knows that she does not give her children enough quality time when she is busy with her work. She is with them physically only. It hurts her when she goes through times like this, but this is the demanding nature of her work – to work hard even at home around her children. As a result, the children are used to their mother's work and they give her own space to finish writing. Salma remembers that her son, Saud, told her after he attended that conference with her in Tabuk that her job is "*boring and nothing funny in it*" because all the people talked in English and he could not understand the topic. Saud's negative opinion about his mother's work is similar to that of his sister Sara, who is an excellent student. She was very upset with her mother who caused her to be absent from school when she had to travel with the rest of the family to Oman for her mother to attend a conference there. Salma said:

She told me that I only think of myself and that hurt my feelings actually.

Salma is trying to balance her two roles as a mother and as an academic.



## **I publish nationally and internationally**

Salma collects most of her data from English resources because she needs to find information that is new and up to date in order for her to create something new in turn. Arabic research data is not updated enough to be current. Searching and reading in Arabic is easier for Salma; however, searching in English is not difficult for her, and she has no problem reading English. She has always loved the English language and was excellent in English classes throughout her undergraduate study. She had always considered English classes to be a waste of time because they were very easy to her, as she said:

I don't remember that I studied for any English examination through my studies.

Although reading and doing research in English is easy for Salma, it is not so easy for her to write in English. In the beginning she could not find a specialist in chemistry to edit her work, so she used to write in English by herself, which would take a long time. She has an Arabian (non-Saudi) friend who majored in chemistry and whose husband's major was English. Salma paid for them to edit her work. They returned it to her with slight edits and claimed that it would be accepted immediately for publication. No one would find any errors in writing, structure or grammar. Salma was very happy and sent it to the publisher, but it came back to her with a mass of red text that had been corrected. The publishers edited her article carefully and professionally. After that, Salma sent all her work to that editor whom she knew through the publisher.

Salma publishes nationally and internationally in both languages, and in a Saudi journal that publishes in English. She also publishes on two websites and is a member of a British online research site. Salma is a successful researcher who is confident about her work. However, on one occasion she became depressed when one particular journal did not publish her article because of a prejudiced opinion towards her personally and not her work. Salma sent her article to an international journal which sent it to three referees. Two of them consented to accept her article, but the third referee refused her article on the grounds that she could not have written it herself. She said:

He considered me as an old fashioned Arab woman and claimed that I couldn't be so educated as to write the article.

Because Salma is a confident woman, she did not allow herself to be offended by this discriminatory judgment for very long, although she was shocked that the journal would risk

its reputation by allowing such prejudice. Later, she published the same article in a different journal; moreover, she had another article accepted by the first journal when they made use of different referees.

Salma collects data from the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST)<sup>57</sup> which is an independent scientific organisation for science and technology in Riyadh. KACST is the best source of scientific data in Saudi Arabia. Because Salma is a woman she is not allowed to enter the KACST building; however, she has a password to access the KACST database from the library of her college (it does not work from her home). The database is very helpful and she can usually find all the data that she needs. She sends KACST an email with details of all the sources that she needs, and within days they send her the required publications.

In the past, Salma used to buy books and some published research articles from the British Cultural Council, which cost her around forty thousand US dollars. Now she tries to buy everything from the Amazon internet site because it is cheaper. More recently she has been able to access many databases from different universities around the world and to find most of her requirements via the Google search engine.

As a scientific researcher, Salma has to conduct experiments in a science laboratory. There are very well equipped laboratories at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre, but although she went there several times, she could not work there easily. She said:

I wasn't comfortable while I was in the lab. There were many men around me. I am a very conservative person. I can't take off my veil, and I don't feel comfortable working while I am wearing it. I wish they had a separate section for women.

As mentioned previously, Salma always covers herself completely in the presence of men, because as she said, "*I am a very conservative person*", which means that she cannot take off her veil. She had decided when she was young not to work in hospitals to avoid contact and working with men. All Saudi women who are raised in a religious family are very

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<sup>57</sup> King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) is an independent scientific organisation reporting administratively to the Prime Minister. KACST includes both the Saudi Arabian national science agency and its national laboratories. The science agency function involves science and technology policy making, data collection, funding of external research, and services such as the patent office. KACST (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.kacst.edu.sa/en/about/Pages/default.aspx>. Accessed on 6 June 2012.

conservative about their outfit and wear the Hijab (veil) so as not to bring shame on their families or attract gossip. Salma wished that the laboratory had a separate section for women in order to be able to work without her veil.

Salma is an active academic woman who has participated many times in work activities in different countries. Salma became more mature and independent and was recognised as a successful researcher at a young age. On one occasion, she was the official spokeswoman for her delegation which consisted of both men and women in Kuwait and in Masqat, Oman. She went to both places because, being two of the six Gulf countries<sup>58</sup>, any resident can travel between them without requiring a passport. This was considered an accomplishment for her to lead a group which included men, since that is not common in the Saudi academic world.

Later, Salma became more active internationally as a researcher. She received an invitation to participate in a conference in the USA that she badly wanted to attend. However she wasn't able to obtain the visa in time since the invitation arrived only a month before the conference. She submitted a poster to a conference in Canada, although she did not attend the event. She said:

It was participation from a distance, and I received a certificate from this conference.

Salma is enthusiastic about participating in conferences around the world, but because of visa problems and long trips, her attendance at conferences in western countries is limited. She contacted a university in Bangkok that is planning a conference, as she said:

I sent an enquiry to a university in Bangkok that is going to have a conference later this year<sup>59</sup>, but I haven't received a reply from them yet.

She seemed eager to attend that conference, and fortunately she was able to, as she told me later in WhatsApp conversations. It was a new experience for her in East Asia and she enjoyed it. On that occasion her brother agreed to go with her and she left her children at home with her husband.

Salma believes that men are better than women in management positions because they are more flexible, and they can carry the responsibility better than women. They are also more convinced about the importance of the scientific research, as she said:

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<sup>58</sup> Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

<sup>59</sup> She was referring to the academic year 2011-2012.

Unfortunately some of the academic women who are in high positions are not educated enough or do not have the right certificate or major to qualify them for their positions. They achieved their positions because they served many years before young people like us appeared. As a result, they don't understand the benefit of scientific research. Women can be the enemy of women.

Salma is a direct person in terms of her work ethic. She does not like postponing tasks. She is a researcher and understands the importance of scientific research, unlike most of the senior academics around her. As a result, she is of the opinion that less qualified women want to prevent her from being a researcher. "*Women are the enemy of women*" is an Arabic idiom which means that a woman may be jealous of other women and not want them to be better than her. As a result, some women do not help the others to progress in the workplace.

Princess Nora University supports postgraduate students by paying for what they need for their research, and repaying what they might have already spent. But Salma said:

This is what the regulation of the university says, but it doesn't always happen. However, the university doesn't support or encourage any research that the staff are doing or planning to do.

Although the university regulation stands in terms of repaying graduate students for what they spend on their research, the procedures are complex and take a long time. In the end the student may or may not receive payment. So, most students avoid this route, unless they know someone who can make it easier. The middleman is important always in getting things done. However, some Saudi people do not think of money as an issue. They spend a lot of money without regret, as Salma said:

I did not think of money.... I didn't mind that I spent too much money.

There is a stereotype in Saudi Arabia that people from the Northern Region are very generous and spend too much money.

The university does not support staff research at all. Although there are three associate professors in the department, they do not have any right to use the university's laboratories for their own research. The laboratories are for the use of graduate and undergraduate students only. Salma uses her own laboratory in her family's house, and sends any sample that she needs analysed to Egypt or to the laboratories at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre. Although this is not very convenient and also takes time, it helps her to progress with her research. The difficulty with her major (Analytic Chemistry) is that all her

research must be done in a laboratory; it is not possible to rely only on papers or other sources of information as with other major subjects.

Salma had hoped that the university would introduce support for staff researchers after they moved to the new campus and the Deanship of Scientific Research was established in 2011. At present, Salma is the deputy Dean of Scientific Research; however, after she makes some changes in terms of supporting staff research projects, she would like to go back to lecturing students and working with them doing chemical research, because that is her preference.

Salma made it clear that the new building motivates them as academics to dedicate themselves to work because now they can work better than before. Salma used to have to carry her bag around with her in the old Science College because she was without an office. Even when she became the head of department, she shared a small office with the secretary and the deputy. She likes this new campus, as she said: *“Actually, this new campus is stunning”*.

Salma needs an assistant laboratory technician to help her conduct chemical experiments. She is doing research about pharmaceuticals and chemical analysis that she hopes will contribute to fighting disease, but it requires a substantial budget that she cannot afford, and as mentioned, the university does not support her financially. On one occasion, she began a research project to seek solutions to water and soil pollution, but unfortunately she had to discontinue it because she needed very expensive equipment. I believe that if the university had provided her with the equipment that she needed, she might have produced good research results.

Salma is eager to improve the situation of her country, which is an admirable ambition. She wishes the university would establish contact with scientists and researchers from abroad who could help Saudi researchers and they could learn from each other's experiences. However, in order to do this, the university would need a good system and a big budget, which it does not have. It is difficult to contact researchers and scientists via the internet and to establish contact with leading universities in the world. Salma said:

However, even if we could contact other universities abroad to learn from their experiences, I still can't conduct some experiments without specific devices and assistants.

The university has a large budget; however, it is divided amongst different colleges and departments, and unfortunately, research ranks low in the university's priorities.

## **I am an academic researcher; I am independent already; I have more energy to give**

Salma would like to achieve more, but her surroundings are not helpful. Unfortunately, she has not found collaboration amongst her colleagues either. When Salma needed help in the early stage of her career, the dean of the college had established relationships with certain people, which helped in getting Salma's papers published. Salma spent nine years of her academic life seeking assistance, but later when she met the Egyptian professor who helped her, she succeeded in publishing all her articles without any cooperation with her colleagues.

Salma had a colleague who graduated with her PhD three years earlier than Salma. Salma tried to convince her to do some joint research with her, but she wasn't enthusiastic to do so. Salma approached many colleagues around her, even those in other fields of specialization, but no one wanted to cooperate. Most of them gave the reason that they do not have time and they have responsibilities toward their husbands and homes. Even after Salma had succeeded in writing and publishing independently, she approached some of her colleagues to share her research, but everyone had an excuse. Some of them do not want to write and publish, nor do experiments or analyse data.

Salma believes that a research group would help her a lot. Alternatively, working with scientific researchers from other universities or from abroad would also help. Salma has spent almost twenty years between administration and doing research in laboratories, but she prefers laboratory work and doing research. She had no special training, but due to all her work in laboratories, she built up experience. Even when she started to publish, it was difficult for her because she had no training in writing and publishing articles. She believes that experience and ambition are basic goals in life, as she said:

I had the ambition to be a scientific researcher. Working in labs has been my success. But success does not come without stress or fatigue. Success didn't come from a first experiment. Failure can happen to anyone through their academic journey. Alhamdulillah<sup>60</sup> I have succeeded after a big effort, and I achieved good results in the end and I still do.

Salma does not give up, and she is very grateful to God for what she has accomplished so far. She is enthusiastic about what she has done and what she plans to do in the future. I got the feeling that she is enjoying the sweet taste of success because it came after difficult times of

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<sup>60</sup> "Thank God".

stress and failure. Experiencing success after a strong effort yields a special feeling. Salma is not a researcher by coincidence – she worked very hard to be an academic researcher. She is happy at this stage to be an academic researcher, but she would be more comfortable and satisfied to go back to working in the laboratories, as she said: *“I see myself working in labs and teaching, more than in administration”*. Moreover, she would like to move to King Saud University<sup>61</sup>.

She would like to move because she has been in the same university for almost twenty years studying and working with the same people. The senior staff, in particular, still regard her as a young girl and a student, not a researcher, and this bothers her. She said:

I am not a student anymore as some senior staff still regard me. I am an academic researcher. I am independent already. I have more energy to give.

Salma would like to have more respect from the senior staff. She wants them to admire her work as a researcher and a colleague. She told me a story of what happened to her to emphasise what she means.

Salma went to an excellent female Saudi gynaecologist doctor who was able to stabilise her pregnancy when she was pregnant with her twins, after having experienced many miscarriages. So she continued to consult this doctor. One day, one of Salma’s colleagues, who was a senior professor, mentioned that she must have an excellent doctor because the pregnancy was going well. Salma replied that her doctor understood the problem and gave her the medication that she needed. She continues the story of how she told the professor about her doctor:

She is young and a Saudi female. She is Lila<sup>62</sup>. My colleague who is a senior professor and well educated replied to me: *“Ya, I know her, she is the daughter of my neighbour”*. I didn’t like her reaction or answer. She talked about the doctor as if she were still the baby girl that she knew a long time ago. Youth get older and they change. We become educated. We want some respect, encouragement and support.

Salma felt annoyed and irritated by the reaction of her professor colleague. She wants education to affect peoples’ behaviour towards each other by showing respect and not offending the youth. The youth are having their chance to be educated just as well as senior people, or perhaps even better. They deserve support, not insulting reaction such as *“Ya, I*

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<sup>61</sup> The female campus.

<sup>62</sup> Pseudonym.



*know her*". This terse response has many negative connotations that could cause young people not to believe in themselves if people keep regarding them as students or children.

Salma believes in herself and that one day soon she will be a professor. She is working now on research to gain promotion as a professor. She has to submit six publication units to be a professor, three single outputs and three with a co-author. When she deserved to be an associate professor, it took a year and two months before she got that promotion. As a result, this caused a delay in pursuing a professorship, since there must be a minimum of four years between the two promotions. Salma will not stop doing research, even after she gets her position as a professor.

Salma is proud to be a Saudi female researcher. She cannot live out of Saudi Arabia, but as an academic researcher, she would prefer if Saudi Arabia had the western environment of conducting research without the practical difficulties of accessing libraries. She is happy to be an academic researcher in Analytic Chemistry, but if she had to change her major, she would have studied in the Computer and Information Sciences College which is newly established, and computer science is a new major for female students in Saudi Arabia. Salma enjoys working with computers and she believes that we live in a world where everything around us deals with computers. She improved her skills by taking nineteen training courses on computer maintenance and software. She thought of taking a diploma in English Translation at a language centre at night over two years using her own money, but she has no time.

Salma is grateful to everyone who has helped her through her academic journey. She is blessed to have children and a husband. She appreciates having an educated father who helped her to buy things that she needed for her research and spent almost 160000 US dollars on books, tools, devices, equipment and other things.

In June 2012 Salma became a professor, and I learned this by coincidence through Twitter after two months. I was so happy for her because she deserves this position. I wanted to call her to congratulate her, but I decided to visit her instead when I go to Saudi Arabia. In September of the same year, it happened that I was in Riyadh. So, I went with a bouquet of flowers to visit Salma in her office to congratulate her in person. Although she was so busy, she appreciated my visit and thanked me to for keeping in touch. She seemed to me so smart and neat by changing the flowers in her vase with the new flowers that I brought with me, and giving me a compliment as well. I could see she was very proud to be a professor even though she was modest. She thanked God of her new position and did not consider it an achievement



of her hard work but a blessing from God. She wished me luck and higher achievements in my future. So, at the end, Salma really became *something special* as her family believed in her.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Asir: Living my dream, no one else's**

*My dream was to be a doctor. To accomplish this dream and be in this position, I had to do research and be a researcher. Now I find that I enjoy doing research. (Asir)*

I visited Asir three times in her office in the old building of the Science College. The staff were moving to the new campus of the University, so they were very busy packing. She was really busy when I visited her the first time. I spent two hours with her but this was not enough, especially because there were several interruptions. She sacrificed her break time on the next two visits to give me some time without interruptions. She told me not to hesitate to contact her later if I needed more information.

The first time I visited her was in the early morning. The streets were very crowded and cars were rushing in every direction. I could not find the college easily because it was in an old neighbourhood where most of the buildings are old. I called Asir to give me directions again. I stopped many times on my way with the driver to get directions from people on the street. Finally I reached the place. The college is a very old building with more than one entrance. I went in through one entrance and tried to find her office, which is in building number 4 on the first floor. Unfortunately, I got lost and had to call her again and she gave me directions to her office. Actually, I felt rather upset that she did not offer to meet me near her building or in some spot that would be easy for me to find. As a result, I did not have a good feeling about her; even though her voice on the telephone had given me a better impression. Once I found her office and entered it, I saw Asir sitting behind her desk. She stood up and shook my hand from behind her desk. She did not try to come closer. I felt offended because she did not welcome me as was expected of a Saudi person. She apologised for her simple office in the old building. She told me that they had renovated the building many times but it is still old. She was very happy that her department was due to move to a new campus. She seemed to me very enthusiastic about the transition.

We spent a long time just greeting each other and talking about me, her Southern Region in Saudi Arabia, and South Africa. She hosted me with Arabic coffee, and sweets and dates. She

apologised for the plastic cups that she used to serve the coffee. I think they use disposable plastic cups because the building does not have the facilities to wash cups. Asir seemed to me to be a very kind and modest woman; contrary to my first impression of her. She is very shy, which is why she did not meet me outside her office and is the reason behind her distant greeting to me when we first met.

Asir attracted me with her smiling face. It seemed to me that she is not arrogant as I had suspected, even with her work and accomplishments. In later interviews, she revealed her modest personality. She does not have relationships with many people. She told me more than once that she feels happy to chat with me because her relationships are otherwise limited to her family, her students, and those she works with in the college. She is shy but did not hesitate in agreeing to do the interview with me, even before reading the questions. She wanted to help me because it is in her loving personality to help the people around her. Asir is 38 years old. She is very tall and thin, even though she has five children.

## **Who is Asir?**

Asir is a woman who was born and raised in a simple family in a small town in the Southern Region of Saudi Arabia. She came from a big family with eleven siblings. One of her brothers died eighteen years ago in a car accident and her father died a long time ago when she was in Grade 11, so sadness has entered her home twice. After she finished high school, she wanted to complete her Bachelors degree. However, the nearest college to her town was in Abha – almost 65 kilometres away – and she did not have transport to travel this distance every day.

Since she was a child, Asir has liked the title of ‘doctor’. She wanted to be a medical doctor, but her family refused her permission to enrol in the medical college and to go on to work in hospitals as a doctor. In Saudi culture, it is common for young girls to want to be doctors, but if her family is conservative, they won’t allow her to work in a hospital because it is a place of mixed genders. Usually the girl accepts her family’s wishes and does not feel that they are denying her an opportunity. I believe that Asir’s personality wouldn’t fit with being a medical doctor because she is very shy, cannot work with males and conservative about wearing her

full Hijab<sup>63</sup>. She comes from a simple family and has been raised very strictly to be isolated from men, so working with males would not be acceptable for her.

Asir did not abandon her dream of completing her studies so she had to convince her family, especially her brothers (who had the right to lead the family after the father's death) to let her go to Jeddah<sup>64</sup>, where her eldest brother lived, to study for her Bachelors degree. She went to Jeddah and enrolled in the Science College. Her brother did not want her to stay in the girls' dormitory, so she lived with him in his house. He was married, and he and his wife had two boys at that time, and a third boy was born while Asir was living with them. They have six children now. Asir was used to living in a big family in her town, so living with her brother's family did not bother her. People from the Southern Region in Saudi Arabia are used to living in big families with the grandparents, aunts, uncles and children all living together.

She had a good relationship with her sister-in-law, Maha<sup>65</sup>. Her brother's family did not have a housekeeper at that time, and Maha was not employed outside the home. Maha managed the home and her children without Asir's help. Asir used to take care of everything that belonged to her, such as her room and laundry, and she also helped Maha from time to time.

Asir was shy towards her elder brother, which is common among people who live in towns; they have a special respect for their brothers, especially the eldest. Asir wanted to minimise asking for things and bothering her brother because she believed he had many responsibilities. Maha wasn't a student or worker so she did not need her husband to visit bookstores. Her children were toddlers and did not need bookstores either. Asir did not want her brother to do anything for her specifically. She tried to attend to her own needs without asking him for help. There is no public transportation, and women are not allowed to drive, so she travelled to the college on the college bus. She used to ask her friend to buy her the things that she needed for her studies, and would ask her classmates to copy papers for her, or buy books or other simple things, as she said:

I tried to meet my needs without asking him. I feel shy to ask my elder brother.

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<sup>63</sup> Women cover the body with long clothes and wear a scarf over the head; more conservative women will also cover their face with a veil.

<sup>64</sup> Jeddah is in the Western Region and is 502.37 km from Abha. Retrieved from, [www.mapcrow.info](http://www.mapcrow.info), accessed on 1 June 2012.

<sup>65</sup> Pseudonym.

Asir's respect for her brother was rather exaggerated. I felt that she did not want to ask him for any help that was relevant to her study for fear that he might send her back to her town before finishing her degree.

## **Ambition drives me to my goal**

Asir graduated with her Bachelors degree. She was an excellent student, as she said:

After the college nominated me to be a university demonstrator and study my Masters, I decided to complete my postgraduate study and become a PhD doctor. *Ambition* drives me to my goal.

The college nominated her to be a university demonstrator and begin her postgraduate studies. This was the first step for Asir in believing in herself and dreaming of being a PhD doctor. However, her brother sent her home, and she could not start her postgraduate studies. She went back home to wait for her kismet<sup>66</sup> to get married as the rest of the girls in her town had done. She did not apply for a job. She became engaged within a year as an arranged marriage, and married a man from her tribe who works as a pilot in Riyadh. She went to live in Riyadh with her husband, Naser<sup>67</sup>.

Asir started her drive to accomplish a dream that is not easy for a woman who comes from a town where the tribe believes that a woman's place is at home; and that for women, higher education is not important – high school is enough, and a job is not important either. Living in a city is already an accomplishment for a small-town girl. Asir tried her best to finish her postgraduate studies as it is going to be shown later without neglecting her role as a wife and mother.

Asir had the opportunity to finish her postgraduate studies in the Science College and become an academic doctor, as she had dreamed. She has been working in the Princess Nora University for 17 years now. She is an assistant professor in physics, a young academic woman, married with five children now, yet still young. She has four girls and a boy, as she said:

I had two girls during my Masters study and another two girls during my PhD study. After I graduated with my PhD, God blessed me with a boy. He is two and a half years

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<sup>66</sup> In Saudi culture, "kismet" refers to a girl's destiny to get married.

<sup>67</sup> Pseudonym.

old. My eldest daughter is fifteen years old. I have been a PhD graduate for four years now. It took ten years from starting my Masters degree until I finished my PhD. I am now an assistant professor in physics in the Science College.

In the Southern Region of Saudi Arabia a man must have a son. Asir tried five times for a boy. She did not even postpone her pregnancies until she finished her postgraduate studies. She had her four daughters during her postgraduate studies. She seemed very happy to finally have this boy, saying: “*God blessed me with the boy*”. She said these words with joy shining in her eyes.

Asir believed that she succeeded without any help, as she said: “*No one supported me*”. She used to do everything for everyone in her family. She took care of her husband, Naser, and even her mother-in-law, who was living with them and needed some care. She took care of all family responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, and raising the children. She did not even annoy Naser with the problems that she had at work. She did not sound angry about doing all this for every member of her family because she was raised in a simple family in the Southern Region where people are used to living in big families, and the woman’s role is to take care of the family and home. This is the duty of a good wife, and she did not have a problem with that.

In the beginning of her marriage, she did not have a driver, so Naser went to bookstores to make copies for her and buy things that she needed for the laboratory. Since the law in Saudi Arabia states that women aren’t allowed to drive, her husband felt that this was his duty. Naser also took her papers to a translator and helped by bringing information that she needed from the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology library (KACST). Asir said that no one supported her, although she also mentioned that her husband drove her where she needed to go and helped her to complete her papers.

### **The first mile on the road**

Asir made it clear that although the programme of postgraduate studies and research allows students to use the laboratories and the college library, postgraduate students are loaded with work. Asir had to give many lectures and conduct many laboratory sessions for students. Moreover, she had between twelve and fourteen hours of teaching and lecturing undergraduate students a week in addition to committee activities, and had to find time to buy

the things that she needed for her research. In addition to teaching in laboratories and doing her own experiments, Asir had to work as an assistant laboratory technician because she did not have an assistant, and she even had to clean the laboratory herself.

During her Masters study, Asir would work hard from the morning until eight at night. She used to take her little girls and her housekeeper with her to the laboratory. She needed her housekeeper to help and clean up after her and she could not leave her girls at home because she had only one housekeeper at that time. I believe that she took the children with her to avoid her husband criticising her if she had left them at home with him. It is the wife's responsibility to look after the children, not the husband's. Laboratories are not healthy places for children; however, she took the risk and put her girls into this environment surrounded by chemical products. She had to spend long hours standing in laboratories – even when she was nine months pregnant. She would pick up heavy devices and move them around from one laboratory to another, even though she knew that this wasn't healthy for her or her baby.

On one occasion, while she was busy in the laboratory and her housekeeper was busy cleaning too, Asir left her three-month-old daughter on a table. The blanket under her moved and the baby fell on the floor, as Asir said:

She fell down onto the floor from the table, on her face. Her forehead was marked from the line between the ceramic tiles that she fell on. Alhamdulillah<sup>68</sup> nothing bad happened to her.

Asir was very calm and smiling when telling me this story. She believes that whatever happened in the past is done and she cannot change it. Luckily her daughter was not affected from the fall, and that is all that's important to her: the result.

Asir finished her Masters degree in the four years she was allowed, but it wasn't easy at all. She worked for three years in laboratories for her field work and had a problem with her supervisor during this time. She spent time running after the supervisor who did not help her with her field research and made her life "*miserable*" when the results of her experiments were rejected and could not be analysed. The supervisor was not sufficiently qualified to instruct and guide Asir, and as a result was avoiding involvement with Asir's work. The supervisor disappeared for four months when her husband was diagnosed with kidney failure, at which time she took unpaid leave without telling her postgraduate students or transferring them to another supervisor.

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<sup>68</sup> Thank God

Asir did her best to find a substitute supervisor to enable her to graduate within the restricted time period; the college could have rejected her as a postgraduate student if she did not finish within four years. She tried hard, but found no one. Later, her supervisor came back but was not psychologically stable enough to supervise students. The supervisor was an Egyptian woman. She told Asir that she knew an Egyptian male professor in the Eastern Region who could help her to analyse her data and supervise her. Asir had no choice so she worked with this professor at a distance.

Perhaps Asir had little choice and was afraid that she would run out of time, so she accepted the offer to work with this man, who took advantage of her by charging her a lot of money to guide her privately. Asir felt that both supervisors had used her for financial gain.

Asir started writing her dissertation in the limited time she had left, and then she took her oral exam. Two male professors, a Saudi and an Egyptian, attended her oral exam, and she graduated just in time. She missed out on much of the developments that were happening in the field of physics because she spent four years of her academic life researching only her topic and nothing else. She focused on her study; as a result, she lost contact with other developments in her field. It was a pity that this was the nature of her study at that time.

After Asir graduated with her Masters degree, she took one year to rest and be with her two young daughters before going on to do her PhD.

## **Going on with the dream**

After a year of rest, Asir started her PhD study. It was easier for her than the Masters degree because she had much more experience than before; and her mother-in-law was no longer living with them, having gone to her other son in a different city. She visited them once in a while, but Asir's responsibility towards her mother-in-law was reduced. It is common in Saudi Arabian culture that a mother will move to live with her sons, or with the eldest son, instead of living alone in her house. Sometimes the youngest son will live with his mother in her house after he gets married.

Asir had an Egyptian male professor as her supervisor. Saudi female students are taught by female teachers from kindergarten through to high school. Saudi females are not used to being taught by men. However, higher education facilities sometimes hire male supervisors for



postgraduate female students when it is difficult to find a female supervisor in a certain field. Asir and the other female PhD students would meet him for two hours a week and communicate through a screen. Asir said:

We didn't meet him during our lab research and experiments because he was not allowed to enter the college.

Men are not allowed to enter a female college even if they are educators. Male professors stay in a room in an extension that is located in the college but in another building, with a camera and a microphone. In this situation the female students can see and hear the professor through a screen in their classroom. They have a microphone if they want to talk to him. This situation was really difficult for Asir as a PhD student who works in a laboratory and needed her supervisor's advice. However, the professor was allowed to meet his postgraduate students in the laboratory once a week after 4:00 pm when the college was empty of undergraduate students. Having a male supervisor was not convenient for Asir because, if she had an appointment with him, she would meet him in an office that has two sides with a glass window to separate them. This supervisor wasted her time in an indirect way; according to Asir:

This supervisor was very smart. He never offended any of us. He was always busy and he kept us busy with him. He used to tell all his students to change things in their work, not because it was wrong but because he wanted to keep us busy so that he had more time to read our work. As a result, I spent two and a half years on my field work.

It was not beneficial that he kept his students busy changing things that he had not even read. Asir realised only after her PhD graduation that her supervisor wasn't really busy, but simply neglected his duties as a supervisor. Asir told me this story with a big smile. She amazed me with the way she forgives people. She was not angry with this professor who made her take five years to finish her PhD, which is a long time. She referred to him as "*very smart*".

## **I had to teach myself and depend on myself**

Asir faced many challenges during her studies, such as the need to use the English language, and finding information and transportation, among other things. However, she overcame them all and accomplished her dream of being a doctor.

One of the problems was that her English language is very weak and it is difficult to find research studies in Arabic. She used to give English research papers to a translator who charged her 5 US dollars a page for translation, which is very expensive. Sometimes she tried to translate papers herself to save money, but it was waste of her time because she spent a long time translating each page.

Another problem during her postgraduate studies was the cost of the devices she required. She needed a special device that cost 80 000 US dollars and was not available in the college at that time. She had to buy a cheaper substitute with her own money. It was still quite expensive, costing 10 600 US dollars. However, she was lucky enough to have the college repay her later, which is not common. I am sure that her husband must have called many men in high positions at the university to get her money back. People from the Southern Region have a reputation for having great determination. They can wait a long time to get what they want and accomplish their goals, unlike people from other regions who are known for taking the fastest route and spending money without waiting or asking to be paid later.

Asir often had problems with the devices in the laboratories; most weeks one of the devices would stop working and, as a student, she had to wait until a technician came to fix it; this could take some time because the college does not have a resident technician (unlike many other laboratories). On one occasion, the Cyclic Voltammetry device she was using stopped working; the repair agency is located in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (not in Saudi Arabia) and she had to wait three months for it to be fixed. Moreover, the college did not have a research assistant, so on one occasion Asir had to personally contact a German company to send her some tools that she needed for her research.

When Asir started her postgraduate studies, she did not use the internet for her research because the college did not teach her how, and she did not have a guide, as she said: *“I had to teach myself and depend on myself”*.

When Asir was a postgraduate student, the Science College was under the control of the General Presidency for Girls' Education rather than the Ministry of Higher Education, like most other universities. The leaders of the General Presidency for Girl's Education were religious men whose concept of education for women was limited; they were against female education and not educated enough to understand the students' scientific education needs. As a result, the articles and journals that were kept in the library were very old, with the latest articles dated 1988. Searching for information was very difficult. However, Asir always found

a way to solve her problems. Every postgraduate student has a card with a password that they can use in the library of the college to access the KACST<sup>69</sup> library. Asir emailed the KACST library to obtain more recent articles, but they could only send three research papers or articles for Masters students, and six for PhD students. However, Asir found a solution by asking all the postgraduate students around her to use their numbers to get more articles for her at the same time as their own requests. Asir was determined to learn as much as she could from the research articles. Finding the information in Arabic remained a problem because most Arabic research is old and has not been updated. She wasn't easily able to find research that had been translated from English to Arabic, and when she did, it would be out of date.

## **I believe in destiny**

Asir follows the rules of the Islamic religion. She is not willing to be alone in a place with a strange man, such as riding in a car. It is not allowed in the Islamic religion for a Muslim woman to be alone with a strange man because it is said that evil will be the third entity. In other words, evil thoughts may encourage the man to sexually harass the woman. Asir is very religious so she never rides in a car with a male driver without a third person being present.

In the first year of Asir's marriage, her husband, Naser, worked as a pilot and flew 16 hours each week. She did not have a private driver at that time because she lived in a small apartment and did not have the space for one. Moreover, her family does not live in Riyadh, so her brothers were not available to give her a ride to the college. So she had a contract with a driver who would come with his wife to give Asir a ride to and from the college when Naser was on duty. It is common for a driver to bring his wife or sister when driving conservative women, to ensure their safety. The driver often had problems that made him late; for example, sometimes the car would break down or another customer would need a ride. Naser would drive Asir when he was available. One day, Naser had a flight, so he left her at the college at 7:00 am and told her that he would come as soon as his flight landed, but he was delayed. At that time – 16 years ago – there were no cell phones and Asir did not have family in Riyadh to contact. Moreover, it was very hot and Asir did not know what was keeping her husband so late. She panicked and did not know what to do. Naser arrived later to fetch her from the college, as she described:

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<sup>69</sup> King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology

His flight was delayed and he picked me up very late that day. I remember that the college was almost empty of students. I was still young and afraid so I cried that day.

Asir is very sensitive. However, she does not harbour hate or spite for what people may have done to her. She is a forgiving person; she forgave the assistant professor who humiliated her when she was a university demonstrator by asking her to prepare the laboratory for lectures and students' exams. She described the situation:

This is humiliation because it is not my work. The assistant professor should have done her work by herself. The educators do not have assistant laboratory technicians, so they have to prepare the labs themselves; not use one of the university demonstrators as she used to do. I was very thin<sup>70</sup> and I didn't object like the other demonstrator students.

It seemed to me that Asir did not regret this situation, as she described it with a smile. Actually, it seemed to me that she was remembering an exciting period of her life. She knew that her appearance of being thin and calm encouraged the assistant professor to take advantage of her.

Because Asir is a religious person, she believes that everything is written in her destiny. I felt this in all her words, especially when she said:

I am happy with everything that God gave me. I have achieved everything I want. I believe in destiny. My soul is satisfied that this is my fate from God. I am blessed in my life.

I believe that she is really happy in her life. Islamic religion has a big influence over her thoughts and beliefs. She is happy with everything that comes from God, even little things. She told me about one of the conferences that she attended in Medina when her daughters travelled with her, as she said:

It was a nice experience for my daughters because they had the chance to visit the Prophet Mosque there.

She wants to raise her daughters to grow up to be as religious as she is. She has made herself responsible for all those around her. She is flexible and accepts all their differences. She has girls who, in general, are demanding and want many things, yet this may make her more sensitive in dealing with other people.

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<sup>70</sup> Being very thin is considered a weakness in the Saudi culture.,

## Asir the academic mother

The head of Asir's department was a very tough person. Asir felt that because she wasn't a mother, she did not understand Asir's situation as an academic mother. She did not accommodate Asir as a researcher during her PhD studies when she needed to be dismissed early from the college to come back later in the afternoon to do her research. Moreover, if Asir was late because one of her daughters had a fever, she would criticise her by saying: "*Why? No one has children? Only you?!*"

Asir used to care for everyone in her family, yet she forgot about herself. It is difficult in her situation to convert from giving to taking because she is used to the life she is living and takes little in reward. I feel that she has the energy to give and learn more, but there is a cultural barrier that stops her from using the opportunities in her life. She cannot travel alone and cannot reduce her responsibility towards her family. She believes that family is her primary responsibility in life, not academia. She had an opportunity to study English abroad for a year, but she refused it, as she said:

Two years ago I had a scholarship to study English for a year abroad. I was so happy, but I couldn't accept this scholarship in my later years. It is difficult for me because I have children and responsibilities, and I don't want to be selfish and think only about myself. This is a nice opportunity for young students who don't have as many responsibilities as I do.

Ironically, she barely ever has thoughts about herself; nevertheless, she thought that if she accepted this scholarship, it would be selfish. From my own experience of the culture, her community would reject the idea of a woman travelling alone. Asir could not leave her children, they could not be taken out of school, and she had no family in Riyadh to take care of them. Asir was absorbed with these thoughts and tried to give the appearance that it was her choice to abandon the idea of travelling alone.

Asir had spoken before about being unable to travel alone, as she said: "*I can't travel alone. My husband will refuse and my society rejects this idea*". She also put this in other words, saying that "*the society will not have mercy on me*". I define her term 'the society' as her own small community. Many other Saudi academic women like Asir had the opportunity of taking a scholarship abroad; however, they took the opportunity and travelled with their children to spend a year or more studying English. The Saudi government would cover the entire academic fee for the student and her children. It was a real opportunity that Asir gave up because of the opinions of the community that raised her.

Asir does not want to portray her husband as an unsupportive person. I feel that he does not prevent her from going on with her academic life; however, Naser is a typical Saudi husband who comes from the Southern Region and wants his family and marriage to be the priority in his wife's life. He does not encourage her to travel abroad at all because this is against tradition. As a result, Asir does not attend conferences outside of Saudi Arabia. She attends around two conferences a year in the Gulf states, some of them are national and others are international conferences; Asir participated in one international conference with a poster submission in Dubai. Asir accepts her husband's decisions regarding her travelling; she does not want to ask for more than he believes she should take. Otherwise, she might lose him and her marriage, as happened to one of her classmates, Naderrah<sup>71</sup>.

Naderrah is an academic woman whose husband was jealous of her success. She married him during her Bachelors degree, and her father made it a condition of the marriage that his daughter be allowed her to finish her study because she was an excellent student. The writing of conditions in a marriage contract is a rare thing in Saudi culture, but it happens sometimes, especially in the Southern Region. After Naderrah graduated, she immediately became a university demonstrator and began her Masters. Her husband started to make her life miserable, blaming her studies for her not taking care of him or their daughters. Once, she had an exam but did not attend. All the Masters students were wondering about her because if she missed the exam, the college would not let her sit it later. The college was strict about issues regarding exams. She came to college the next day crying and saying that she missed the exam because of her husband who had left the apartment and closed the door from the outside so she could not leave. The department understood her problem and allowed her to take the exam. She got divorced from her husband and lived in a small apartment with her three daughters until she finished her Masters and PhD studies, then went back with her children to her family in the Southern Region. Now she is the dean of a college in one of the cities; she has not married again. It is not common in Saudi culture for a woman to live alone with her children far from her family, but this story shows the strength of Naderrah and her determination to achieve her goal.

Asir believes that reading is the basis of success. She said: "*I have to read and read to go on with scientific research*". However, as an academic mother, she has to manage her time between her family and job. In the past she did not have access to the internet in the college

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<sup>71</sup> Pseudonym.

library so she had to do all her internet research at home, which was sometimes difficult: *“I have five children and they need my time too. I do some research when they go to their beds. Sometimes I feel exhausted”*.

For the last three years, Asir has been able to take a connection device to the college to access the internet when she has a break; this gives her more time for her children at home. Asir gives her family as much of her time as possible, but still feels guilty when she is busy or away from them. Her eldest daughter once told her: *“Mom, I wish that you didn’t have a job, like my aunt. She is always laughing with her children. You are not. You are always frowning.”* I believe that this moment hurt Asir as a mother.

## **Dr. Asir**

Asir continued with her postgraduate studies to achieve the title that she dreamed of: *‘Dr. Asir’*, as she said:

I told you that my dream was to be a doctor. To accomplish this dream and be in this position, I had to do research and be a researcher. Now I find that I enjoy doing research. I am used to it, especially as I acquired the ability in my major to search in different scientific areas. I have to continue as a researcher because the situation around me continues to progress. Nothing stays as it is. Never.

Although she obtained the doctoral title, she still conducts research because she enjoys it and needs to update her knowledge. She wants to continue with her research, but the university does not support researchers after they complete their postgraduate studies. The university supports academic lecturers only by offering furnished offices, stationery, and a computer on every desk.

After Asir completed her PhD, she applied to the university for a research study grant. The university accepted the proposal and supported her financially with 33 000 US dollars. She was lucky to get this amount of money; other researchers are rarely successful. Asir contacted a western female chancellor from outside Saudi Arabia who used her experience to help with Asir’s research. Asir booked and paid for a hotel for this chancellor. She also took care of her for a week and took her on a tour around the city. The chancellor was an old woman who had lived in Iraq for eight years in the past. She speaks English and understands Arabic. On the other hand, Asir would talk to the chancellor in Arabic and understand her English, as she said: *“We made a good match.”*



Asir published one mini research article during her PhD in Arabic in the university's monthly paper. Later she had it translated and published it again in English because she wanted it to be read as widely as possible.

Asir published two single-author research papers after she became an assistant professor in the university and three research papers with co-authors. She worked with two colleagues when she had to publish some group work, but unfortunately they did not want to share the research work. She had to do most of the work, and began to love working alone rather than in groups. Asir publishes nationally in Arabic, but she has also published two research papers translated into English in a web journal. She used a translator's office and then sent the research papers to an editor before they were published.

### **Jealous colleagues**

After Asir finished her Masters degree, the Parameters Preparation College that belongs to Princess Nora University – which was at that time the General Presidency for Girls' Education – needed some Masters graduates to work in the college. The Science College invited Asir and her friend, Najla<sup>72</sup>, to apply for the job. The dean of the Parameters Preparation College welcomed them and was very polite. She accepted Asir's application without requiring her to present her Masters certificate. On the other hand, she did not accept Najla's application until she brought her certificate. Najla became very jealous and remarked *"She accepted you because you are from the same region that she is from"*. Asir was shocked by Najla's reaction because they had spent four years studying for their Masters together and she had never felt that she was jealous before, but this was the start of Najla's jealousy.

Najla fetched her Masters certificate from the Science College and went straight to the other college to apply for the job without telling Asir, not the behaviour one would expect from a friend. When Asir found out, she confronted Najla, who revealed her jealousy by saying: *"Do you want to take the job in the Parameters Preparation College and leave me?"* Asir's degrees were more advanced than Najla's, so the dean hired Asir as the deputy of the college, and Najla as the head of a department in the college. Najla's jealousy prompted her to arrange for people to call the dean and put pressure on her to appoint Najla in Asir's position. It seems that the dean had a call from a man who works in the men's administration, which is superior

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<sup>72</sup> Pseudonym.



to the women's administration. There is an expression used in Saudi Arabia that refers to a middleman or an intermediary who is in a high position and a leader of many people; just a phone call from this person is needed for people to do as he commands. It seems that the dean capitulated to his demands because after this phone call, she hired both Asir and Najla to be deputies in her small college, when there was no need to have two deputies. Moreover, at the end of the year, the dean evaluated Asir's work as 'very good' rather than 'excellent' because Najla did not deserve excellent and she could not give Asir a higher evaluation than Najla, as Asir said:

When we finished working there for a year, I was surprised that the dean rated me as 'very good' not 'excellent'. I asked her: "Why did you give me 'very good' and not 'excellent'?" She said: "The other deputy deserves 'very good' and I can't give you 'excellent'. She doesn't deserve it, and I can't give you a higher mark than her. She will make a problem for me by arranging more calls from the men's administration.

After a year, Asir and Najla went back to the Science College and started their PhD studies. Asir helped people around her, but Najla would gossip about everyone. She wanted Asir to hate the people around her. Later, Najla married a man who did not want her to study.

Asir is a humorous and kind person; however, as shown above, she has had bad experiences with the jealousy of other women during her academic journey. Another example is that during her PhD studies, she required a special device, which she asked the head of department to provide. Instead, the head of department gave Asir an old one to fix. Asir tried to fix it but it did not work. Asir had a relative who was a professor in KACST; he called the head of the department to ask that she buy a new device, as Asir said:

You know Mona it shocked me! A new device was brought out of a cupboard [after the phone call]. The department had a new one, but she didn't want to give it to me. I was really shocked. I don't know why she kept it from me. Why didn't she give it to me from the beginning?

It appears that this woman did not give Asir the device that she needed from the beginning out of jealousy, just to keep obstacles in the way of her study. The head of department had only obeyed the professor's call for fear of reprisal following her actions toward Asir.

After Asir finished her PhD study and graduated, the Parameters Preparation College wanted to hire her again. This time most of the staff had changed, even the dean of the college, so Asir agreed to go back. She was hired as the deputy again and another doctor, Reema, who came with her from the Science College, was hired as the head of a department. Asir's office wasn't very comfortable, and she did not have a secretary or equipment that she required.

Later she had a secretary with whom she got along very well; this secretary confessed that Asir's reputation was poor among the staff. She had been afraid to work with Asir because Reema talked about her in a derogatory way. Asir is naive and wasn't aware of this problem with Reema until her secretary warned her. Later that year, when Asir had four secretaries and a separate office, Reema visited her office and showed her envy, saying "*Wow, your office is better than mine*".

At the end of the year, Asir asked to go back to the Science College as an educator. She does not feel suitable for leadership positions. She likes to teach and work in laboratories, as she said: "*I want to give my students good information. I am happy now in the Science College*" where she could stay away from women's jealousy, which brings her "*headaches and sorrow*".

### **Ambition and looking forward to a better future**

Asir still considers herself young with a long journey ahead in her academic life, as she said: "*Ambition is still there in my life*". She believes that she is still taking her first steps of researching and learning and has not done enough yet. Moreover, her experience as an educator, in the English language, and in conducting research is still limited. She wants to work harder to get promoted and see the benefits of her research. She is a giving person, as she said:

I still want to share with my students my experiences and research.

Asir went through times in her academic life when she experienced difficulties and wished she could be an academic in a different country; but things have improved now that Princess Nora University is no longer part of the General Presidency for Girls' Education. Princess Nora University has started supporting students, staff and scientific research. Asir never thinks about going to a western country although she believes that she could conduct her research more easily there. However, she wants to give something back to her country, Saudi Arabia. I believe that she does not want to move to another country. She lives in a conservative society and cannot forget her upbringing. She is attached to a family name and a tribe, from which she cannot be isolated.

Asir made it clear many times that it is easier to find information now than when she started doing research as a postgraduate student. Moreover, current students are becoming more experienced in using computers and English, unlike her generation. These days, those who do not know English and computing are considered to be uneducated.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Najd: The woman who found the needle in the Saudi haystack**

*My voice has been heard beyond my college. I have a voice that can be delivered to far countries and farther than I imagined.....I am more confident now (Najd)*

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2011, one of the coldest days in the winter season in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, I went to visit Najd in her home at 7:00 pm. I took with me Honainy which is a popular dish of hot dates that Saudis habitually eat in winter to keep warm. This was my first visit to meet Najd.

Najd met me in front of the entrance to her house with a warm greeting, and politely took the hot dish from me as we entered her house. She guided me to sit in her parlor, which reflected her high taste in its furnishings. The decor was classic, in pale colours, with long curtains of luxurious material draped at the windows. There was a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, which spread lustre all over the salon and reflected light on the glass top of the designer wooden table that occupied the middle of the room. The house was a small villa in a classy neighbourhood, big enough and appropriate for a woman living alone with her housekeeper, and there was an outside room for the driver. It is common in Saudi Arabia for houses to have an outside room for a driver, who may be from a foreign country such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India or Pakistan.

Najd is a woman in her mid-fifties. She is an assistant professor in the Geography Department in the Art College and has worked in the field of education for almost 32 years. She was once married a long time ago, for a short period of time, but the marriage ended in divorce. She has no children. She did not appear to miss being married, and I got the impression that she no longer wanted this for herself. Her grey hair was neatly tied with a clip at the back of her head. She is a small woman, of medium height. She has a calm smile and a sophisticated appearance that earns people's respect as they realise that behind this façade there is a confident woman. She has a warm, clear voice which enticed me to listen to her without interruption.

Najd comes from the Middle Region of Saudi Arabia which is called Najd. She belongs to the upper class<sup>73</sup> in Saudi society. Her father was an educated person who followed a career as a military general. He passed on his love and respect of this career to his son and grandsons. Thus the military atmosphere that surrounds Najd, from all the male members in her family, may have contributed to the organisation and arrangement that is evident in her personality. It was clear to me that she is neat and organised in her appearance, her home, and her hosting skills. Her way of using the coffee spoon and putting it on the side of the saucer was delicate and I had the feeling that I was in the presence of a lovely, confident and warm woman. Her housekeeper was clearly trained in the correct sequence of hosting visitors. She started with the coffee and sweets, then came back with the tea and pastries. Hospitality and generosity are dominant attributes in Saudi society. Najd is a smart woman and she exhibits good intuition. She did not neglect the dish that I brought with me. She took from it, and ate from it while paying me compliments about it. She did not forget to return my clean dish at the end of my visit. Such hospitality rituals are very important among Saudis. The fact that Najd fastidiously observed them suggests that she was appreciative of my gift, and that hospitality is important to her. She stated that she is very proud of me using my time in a way to benefit my interests and complete my study. Other women in her age group may not consider studying to be a major aspect of a woman's life. They may prefer being mothers and housewives.

Najd has a strong relationship with her family. The day that I visited her, her brother who lives in Jeddah<sup>74</sup> was visiting her. Just a week previously, Najd had gone to Jeddah to visit her brother and his wife, her sister-in-law, Hana<sup>75</sup>. Hana was sick from the dust that effected Jeddah that week and had been hospitalised for two days due to a lung infection. Najd loves Hana as if she were her blood sister. I felt this many times in my conversations with Najd. As will be seen later in this chapter, Hana had strongly supported Najd throughout her academic journey.

Najd is very attached to her nephews, their wives and children. I noticed this in particular, when two of her nephews' wives came to visit Najd while I was having a conversation with her. One of the visitors was my friend Aljohrah<sup>76</sup>, whom I had not seen for two years. While we were talking and having tea, Najd did not talk too much. She simply responded to us when

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<sup>73</sup> Wealthy people who hold high positions in the country.

<sup>74</sup> Jeddah is a city in the Western Region, 846.36 km away from Riyadh. (Retrieved from [www.mapcrow.info](http://www.mapcrow.info); accessed on 7 June 2012).

<sup>75</sup> Pseudonym.

<sup>76</sup> Pseudonym.

we asked her a question, and watched us all the time. I noticed that Najd is not a talkative woman. She is a woman of few words, a serious person who smiles a lot and listens more than she talks. She does not engage in trivial chatter with younger people. She never giggles or laughs loudly; instead she simply smiles. It seemed to me that she enjoyed seeing her nephews' wives around her. Even while interviewing her, when she heard the children's voices coming through the windows as they played in the garden, she smiled and was obviously happy to hear them.

Najd raised her youngest nephew, Fahd<sup>77</sup>, when she was living in the family home with her father, her brother and his children. Her brother built four small houses near to the big family house for his sons to be able to live in the same block. Three of her nephews got married and lived in these houses, near to her. Later, her brother moved to Jeddah, but his youngest son, Fahd refused to go and chose to stay with his aunt Najd. After a few years, Fahd joined the military like his father and brothers, got married and moved to another city far from Riyadh. At that time, Najd felt very lonely in the big family home. She took over Fahd's former house, furnished it and lived in it. She wanted to be near her other nephews, suggesting a strong relationship between the members of this family. Fahd and his father did not argue about the house or try to rent it to obtain money. This is common in the Saudi community, especially when family members are rich. Since Najd's brother is rich, he did not want to jeopardise his relationship with his sister by considering financial gain.

### **Trying to find a needle in a haystack**

Najd's undergraduate study was in the field of Geography and History which were one department and one major field of study at that time. She studied "*in the Arts College which belonged to the General Presidency for Girls' Education. Now it belongs to Princess Nora University under the Higher Education Ministry*". After she graduated with a Bachelors degree, Najd and her family went to Taif for a vacation. Taif is a city in the West Region of Saudi Arabia, which has a good climate, particularly in the summer. King Khalid used to go there in summer time with some military personnel, as she said:

My father was a military man who accompanied the king in summer. We used to go with my father. We had a house there. While I was there, I was informed that I had been

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<sup>77</sup> Pseudonym.

nominated to be a university demonstrator and study for my Masters degree. At that time the majority of women with academic qualifications had no ambition to complete further studies after the Bachelors degree. Most of them chose to stay at home or be teachers in schools. However, I wanted to continue my studies. I was so happy that I had been given this chance. I was young and enthusiastic towards anything new. I went back to Riyadh and started my studies.

Najd appeared to be very happy as she was telling me this. It happened a long time ago, but I sensed that she is very proud of the fact that she was in the minority of Saudi girl students in her generation who continued with postgraduate study. Postgraduate study in the Girls Education Colleges opened doors for female students in 1977. The government encouraged girl students to continue their studies even after the Bachelors degree. Every undergraduate student received 13 thousand USD after graduation, which was a great deal of money at that time. Najd had the ambition, as she said, to continue with her academic life and not be satisfied with getting married and having children, as many young women did at that time. Najd's generation was one of the first batches of girl students to graduate from the Saudi colleges.

Najd embarked on a preliminary year before she started with the proposal for her Master programme. She wanted to enrol for a Political Geography major, but that wasn't available for girls. During that time, she selected the topic for her proposal which was *'The Strategic Importance of Iran's Location and Situation in the World'*. Najd is a clever woman and had followed political news since her early twenties. She selected this topic because she knew that Iran posed a threat to other Arab countries in the Gulf area. So, doing research about Iran would yield new and potentially valuable information at that time. Her supervisor was a Palestinian man who had just arrived from the USA. It is common to have a male supervisor if the college does not have a female supervisor who is specialised in a specific field. Her supervisor approved of her proposed topic. However, the men in charge of the administration of the Girls Education Colleges refused this topic for political reasons, since the Iranian revolution has started one year previously, at the beginning of 1979. Luckily, as previously mentioned, Najd is well connected, and her father had a special position in the country. He had a good relationship with other men who worked in senior positions in the education system and used his influence to get the authorities to allow Najd to study the topic of her choice.

Although Najd was granted permission to write and do research in this field, she mentioned that writing about this topic wasn't easy at all. She could not find the required information easily, as she said:

All the books or information about Iran disappeared from the Saudi libraries. Because of the Iranian revolution, the Saudi government blocked any information about Iran. I used to go to book stores and libraries to search for books about Iran. I was so disappointed that I can't find any relevant books. Sometimes I would see the word 'Quran', and I read it as 'Iran' because this was the only thing on my mind.

Najd is not the only one who struggled to find information in the field of Politics, especially in the past, because there is no political freedom in Saudi Arabia. Thirty two years ago, there was no internet, so Najd found it very difficult to gather information that she needed for her study. However, she did not give up. She would go every Thursday, which is weekend in Saudi Arabia, to the King Saud University Library in Riyadh to the boys' section, which is better and bigger than the girls' library. She would ask the workers in the library about the books she required, and was able to receive copies later via fax. Each paper cost her 2 US dollars. It wasn't cheap to pay this amount of money for each paper, but this was the only way for her to obtain the required information.

Najd was the third woman to pursue a Masters degree in Geography in the Saudi colleges. At that time, there was only one TV channel. So she used to acquire documentary movies about Iran to learn more about the country, since she knew little about it. She conducted many interviews, met various people and built new relationships in order to collect the information that she needed. She sought any type of help from anyone around her, as she said: *'I was trying to find a needle in a haystack'*. However, her pain in seeking information through her Masters study became joy, since it is a history that has been told now with pride, which I felt in her words when she said:

Although my Masters research was a source of fatigue, I found satisfaction in every word that I wrote in my dissertation because I didn't get the information easily. I was requesting and begging people, libraries and newspapers to support me with information that I needed.

Najd worked very hard to collect the data for her Masters dissertation. Although she was young and had not much experience, she was confident and believed in herself. She still remembers the sign of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) office over the building which was in front of her house. She did not hesitate to write them a direct letter, asking for information about Iran, which is in the Gulf area. She was lucky that the GCC cooperated and



provided a lot of information that helped her substantially. They sent her files of translated foreign newspapers and Arabic newspapers that were published in other Gulf countries. These newspapers really helped her to find valuable information; moreover, they provided support for all the ideas and information that she had already collected. She also managed to obtain helpful information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Library and the Institute of Management Library. The latter library contained restricted information that was not easily discoverable, but she was lucky that she knew someone working there and this person helped her to obtain the information that she needed. It is a common trait among Saudi people that they like to help others. The problem is that the way the country works is complicated, so most of the time a person needs to know someone in every sector to intervene and solve his or her case, without having to go through all the bureaucratic procedures.

Najd really believed in herself – she was deeply committed to her study and did not stop searching for what she required. She went to visit the British Cultural Centre in Riyadh. They were surprised to see a Saudi woman visiting the centre, since the usual visitors were men or foreigners. Thirty two years ago, few educated Saudi women were active researchers, as she was. She mentioned more than once that she was in the habit of visiting libraries, centres or museums, just to explore and learn about new places, and not necessarily to seek particular information for her study.

### **I was a strong woman since I was young**

Najd has been affected in one way or another by the personalities of the military men who surround her – her father, brother and nephews. She derived from them the military characteristic of being strong. She was strong even during childhood, and was often in charge of the class when she was a student. She does not differentiate between people. She treats all people with the same level of respect and recognition that reflects the confidence in her own personality. She does not fear people as a result of their position. When she was in the first year of her PhD study, it happened one day that she was standing near the noticeboard in the college and saw the names of some undergraduate students who were refused from entering the exams. She said in a loud voice: *'This is unfair. They should have given these students at least two warnings. Then they can prevent them from taking the exam, but not from the first notice'*. Najd's belief in justice led her to speak out. She wasn't aware that the dean, who is a

princess, was standing behind her. However, the dean and the administration members agreed with her suggestion and decided to implement it.

About a month later, the dean called Najd to her office and offered her a position to work with them in the administration. This accomplishment really reflects Najd's strong personality since she was young compared to the people around her, and even the princess dean respected her. Najd accepted the offer to work in the administration, and she was in charge, and guided the staff during the college's activities. During one particular activity, the Art College had visitors from different colleges. As a strong leader, Najd organised everything. Everyone had a role to play, from the staff to the students. Most of the students were busy hosting the visitors with Arabic coffee and sweets. A princess student, who was very young, shy and thin, was standing beside Najd. She asked Najd if she could participate in the activities, so Najd gave her the Mebkhara<sup>78</sup> to stand with near the entrance and greet the visitors. The staff were angry with Najd, in daring to give a princess such a role, but in Najd's opinion she wasn't insulting her at all. Najd believes that she gave this student a pleasant role that suited her more than some other tasks, such as cleaning. Najd did not want to ignore the princess student's wish to have a role like the other students. Najd treats all people equally, as shown not only this example of the princess student, but also the princess dean who remembered the story of the incident at the noticeboard when Najd was a PhD student.

In 1985 Najd was a PhD student and her research was about the *'Territorial Boundaries of Water in Saudi Arabia'*. She needed specific contour maps of Saudi Arabia, not only maps of cities and borders, but again she could not find them easily. Najd considered herself lucky that the dean of the college was a princess who could exert her influence just by making some calls. She really wanted to help Najd to obtain the required maps; however, she wasn't an expert in what Najd really needed. The dean made a call to the Geological Survey of Contour Maps section in the Petrol Ministry and asked them to send contour maps of Saudi Arabia to the college. Najd needed maps of the Saudi boundaries of water on the land surface, as well as beneath the sea floor. People around Najd did not know that there are boundaries even under the sea floor. Although the dean was an associate professor, she asked Najd: *'Are there further boundaries under the ground of the sea? What is there?'* The dean was very happy that the Petrol Ministry sent many maps. Najd was happy too in the beginning, but when she saw the maps, she became very upset. Najd is very strong minded and cannot tolerate errors.

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<sup>78</sup> A metal pot with a burning coal covered by a small piece of fragrant wood to give the smoke a nice smell.

The Petrol Ministry had apparently fooled them: Najd had wanted contour maps, not political maps which they sent her, and these were obtainable from any bookstore for 1.50 US dollars. Najd told the dean: *'They knew that you don't know, so they manipulated you'*. She saw the shocked reaction on the dean's face; however, she did not apologise. Other people would not have had the courage to speak the truth to the dean, due to her royal position.

Because the dean respected Najd so much, she persevered in helping her to get the exact maps that Najd described to her. The dean told Najd: *'The Petrol Ministry is not be allowed to give me this kind of contour maps, but don't worry, because you will have them later'*. Najd did not simply wait for the Petrol Ministry to send the correct maps; she contacted everywhere that she could think of to try and obtain the contour maps, such as institutions, ministries, various people, and bookstores.

## **Determination and facing obstacles**

Najd started working on her thesis while waiting for the contour maps. After a few months, she received 160 contour maps from the various places she had contacted. She spent the three months of the summer vacation that year at home alone, working on the maps. Her family was out of the city, and she sacrificed the rest and leisure of the summer vacation in order to draw what she needed from the detailed maps. She was home alone with the servants and the driver. She converted the basement into an office, and spread all the maps on the floor. They were large maps, as big as a carpet. In those days, there was no such thing as a Geographic Information System (GIS). So she had to spread the maps out and use transparent paper to copy only the parts that she needed from each map and put them all together in one map. Then she took this big map to a man who used to work in the King Saud University, to make it smaller using a device that the university had. After that, he re-drew the map in a professional way. There were no service stores like there are today, which can re-size any picture in only minutes, according to a customer's requirements.

Najd worked very hard on the maps, and she even fell asleep poring over them. On one occasion when she fell asleep over her maps, she felt someone passing near her. When she opened her eyes she saw it was the driver sneaking from the basement door to the kitchen to get food from the servants; she pretended that she was asleep. Nothing stopped Najd from accomplishing her goal. She was ambitious enough to pursue what she wanted, even if it took

a long time. I am astounded at how time consuming it was for her just to get a map, and yet she did it.

Najd used to talk to everyone she met about her study needs. Her niece was engaged at the time, and a foreigner dressmaker came to their house to make the wedding dress. Najd talked to this lady about her study. Luckily the dressmaker's husband could bring Najd a book about the Law of International Water. Later she was able to obtain books from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the Law of International Water. She spent a year learning about the law and regulations in defining water boundaries. There were various special regulations that had not been taught in the subject at the college. Najd was so determined that she did not give up on something that had not been in the college curriculum. She tried her best and spent a long time seeking the true state of affairs. She grew in confidence and considered herself an academic researcher, as she described:

After the first part of my journey in my postgraduate studies, I became more mature and stable. I was able to check the information more easily. I began to analyse issues more closely, and I gained experience as an academic researcher.

After her PhD was completed, she compiled an atlas on the territorial water boundaries of Saudi Arabia, something which had never been done before. This is an amazing accomplishment, to her credit and that of her country.

Najd's academic journey has not been easy, even after her graduation. Today, when contour maps are more readily available, she still struggles to obtain them due to gender discrimination in the Management Institution Library (MIL) which is the only source of the contour maps that she needs. At least she can now produce maps using a Geographic Information System (GIS) without having to draw them from the large maps as she used to. Yet I felt Najd's anger and frustration as she talked about the obstacles and complicated situations that she continues to face as a researcher.

Najd has very clearly achieved a great deal; however, throughout her conversation with me, she highlighted her struggles: the difficulties in finding information, the lack of computer technology, and the gaps in her knowledge of the border laws. She believes that if she had not had to overcome these obstacles, she would have produced better results. She also believes that these days the youth have the opportunity to work more effectively than she did, due to improved language skills and the availability of technology and information sources. She said:

It is easier now to find any information you want just by pressing a button on the laptop and everywhere. Now you can find anything you are searching for in Google, and online articles, besides books.

Another example of a challenge that Najd faced was when she had to have her Masters dissertation typed on a typewriter, before the advent of computers, and in a limited period of time. Her sister-in-law, Hana, arranged for a man in Medina City to type Najd's dissertation. However, this man was very slow in typing and Najd called Hana and started crying and sobbing: *'This man will not finish my dissertation. He will write it in a month. I have to get it within a week'*. Hana comforted Najd by saying: *'Don't worry sweetie. Just come back and I will figure out something for you'*. Hana called her brother who hired three Egyptian men. They came and lived in Najd's family home for four days to finish typing her dissertation. It is clear that Hana really helped and supported Najd during that time. Hana never became jealous of Najd or her success; instead she threw a big party for Najd when she graduated with her PhD. She was proud of Najd graduating with a PhD in a time when so few women did. It's amazing how Najd managed to find people who could help her, and the circuitous routes she took to find what she needed; often it did not work out, yet she did not give up.

## Overcoming obstacles

When Najd was a university demonstrator and studying for her Masters degree, she received a small salary, most of which she spent on printing and photocopying. Najd considers that over recent years as an academic, her work has become slightly easier and she does not need to spend as much money as in the past. There are more devices that people can use independently, without having to approach various offices for services, as in earlier times. When she was a student, she did not feel that she had enough time to teach and study. However, these days, Masters students appear to have much more time than she did, as not only are they students, but they also teach sometimes as a substitute teacher. The student cadre has increased so much that now the college requires a greater number of educators. For example, in the Art College of Princess Nora University in 2011, there were 87 lecturers who hold a Masters degree and 229 with a PhD degree, on the levels of associate professor, assistant professor and professor educators; all these educators are Saudis<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> I emailed the university to get the figures in each college and was advised to email each college separately. So I obtained this information by email from the Art College of Princess Nora University (2011), see appendix (G).

Transportation could be considered as a problem that Najd had to overcome, especially because women do not drive. Najd has a driver now; although her family did not have a driver when she was young. She had to travel to the college on the bus that collected girl students from their doors and returned them directly to their houses again. Although this was more secure for the girl students, it took the bus some time to collect them all from their houses.

Najd was in the first generation of girl students. They did not learn English at school, as it wasn't considered to be important. As a result, Najd was very weak in English, which made it difficult for her to understand her Masters co-supervisor. Her co-supervisor was from Pakistan and although she could understand Arabic, she did not speak it. Their only slightly common language was English. The co-supervisor was very kind and helped Najd a lot through translating wherever possible. Instead of giving up due to her English being weak, Najd improved her language skills by taking a six month English language course when she was in the USA when her father was ill. Her father had to receive medical treatment in the USA and since Najd was very attached to her father, she went with him. She is an active woman who does not waste her time. Although she was busy with her sick father and in a foreign country, she used her time to benefit from the opportunity as much as possible by improving herself.

Later, when her father died, she was very sad being in Riyadh where he had been known as a high profile leader. She found it difficult to accept people's sympathy or questions. Her father had supported her throughout her academic journey. He had attended her PhD oral exam which was not common in the Saudi culture, especially since he was very old at the time. When he observed everyone talking in loud voices during the oral exam, he imagined that they were fighting. His military background was evident in his reaction to the educated examiners when he said in a loud voice: *'Why don't you keep silent and listen to each other?'* Najd laughed when she told me this story about her father. It was perhaps the only time that I saw Najd laughing as if she was younger. It seemed to me that she loved her father very much. She is a strong woman, as she mentioned many times, but when it came to the topic of her father, the child Najd appeared from within. As a result of her sadness after his death, and wanting to evade people's eyes, she returned to the USA alone to clear her mind. This time she took a year of English language courses, as well as a computer course. She contributed an article entitled *'Similarities and Differences between Saudis and Americans'* to the American magazine 'Marymount'.

## Administration and a leadership position

Najd is a smart woman and hard worker. She learns very fast. At one time a man trained some of the staff in the college to use computers, and Najd was one of them. Later, the college picked her above anyone else, and gave her a computer laboratory to teach students to use computers. Every student had a place to sit with a computer in front of her. Najd trained these students on computers for two years. Najd has worked in a variety of jobs besides being a lecturer. When she was a PhD student she was an assistant to the deputy of the postgraduate studies administration, in an unofficial way. After she graduated, she was given the post because of her ability as an efficient administrator. She is highly organised which is an important quality in this post. She remembers that she cried that day because she did not want to take on a leadership position.

Najd does not particularly like working in administration. She prefers to deal with students and considers them as if they were her sisters and daughters. She loves to teach because it allows her to improve herself in terms of knowledge gained, rather than moving into higher positions; however, she used her leadership position for the students' sake and interests. She had a certain amount of authority, so for example, she could take the students on field trips which wasn't acceptable at that time for girl students. Even the dean of the postgraduate studies administration would go with them. These trips were worthwhile for the students to visit historical and geographical sites. Najd spent two years in her job as the deputy of the postgraduate studies administration, followed by a renewal for a further two years. Then she told the authorities that she could not deal with administration anymore because her father became ill and she had to spend more time with him. They allowed her to return to lecturing, although they were reluctant to lose her in the administration.

Najd took one year's leave of absence to go with her father to the USA for the first time. When she returned, she attended a formal meeting of academic men and women with Prince Naif, the crown prince and Minister of the Interior. During this meeting in 1998 the Prince announced that senior administrators in the Girls Education Colleges would now be women instead of men<sup>80</sup>. Najd had a feeling that this change would take place very soon. At that time, she was psychologically sick because her father was very ill. She was even losing her hair, which people noticed. She heard two academic women behind her talking about her and how she was losing much of her hair. They returned to the USA to complete his medical

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<sup>80</sup> Previously, all administrators in the Girls Education Colleges were men but they are women now.



treatment. When she came back a year later, she found real changes in the education system. For the first time there was a female deputy in the higher administration level in colleges in many Saudi cities.

Najd was hired as the General Director of Education Development for the 102 Girls Education Colleges in Saudi Arabia in 1999. While in this position she learned the reasons for some of the weaknesses in education in her country. Centralised management was open to men only, and women were not involved. Although Najd believes that women should participate in management, she does not like working in administration herself. Nevertheless, as a result of this experience, Najd has gained a good background knowledge and understanding of the education system. She can feel the benefit of this experience particularly when she meets with academic representatives of education ministries in other countries to share experiences.

Najd believes that education administration is better now that women are involved. Men are still considered to be more senior administrators, but at least women now have some authority. Najd described the hierarchy in education administration as follows:

Under the Minister of Higher Education comes the deanship for men, then the new deanship for women that did not formerly exist in Girls Education Colleges. The Girls Education Colleges were transferred from the Ministry of General Education to the Ministry of Higher Education and in 2006 the Girl's Colleges became Riyadh University. This has provided a good chance for women to improve their situation in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia. For the first time, in 2006, a female principal of a university has full authority after the Minister of Higher Education.

Najd has occupied many leadership positions through her academic life; however, she prefers to work towards improving education rather than pursuing such positions, as she said:

When I was still a university demonstrator, I got an offer to work in an administration position with a private car and a big salary, but I refused. I have received many offers during my academic journey to work in higher positions, and I always refuse them. I like to improve education without having clashes with people.

Najd's experience that leadership positions often cause clashes with people is similar to Amira's experience quoted by Arar and Queder (2011, p. 421): *'In order to reach such a post you lose a lot of friends on the way'*. From that time onwards, Najd avoided holding leadership positions.



## **“I am more confident now”**

Najd has loved to read since she was a child. Reading about political personalities in the gulf countries and the nature of governance in Arab countries led her to link geography with politics. She also likes to research and write about women’s topics and geography. Najd sometimes researches topics to broaden her own knowledge, which has enhanced her teaching. She loves to conduct research, especially about things that might yield benefits for her students.

Najd likes to travel around the world and reads many books during her travels. When she was young, she went to a medical doctor who boasted that he had visited 45 countries in the world. She rose to the challenge and promised him that she would visit 46 different countries, to top his feat. So far she has visited 35 countries and still intends to visit 11 more, including South Africa. Due to Saudi Arabian publishing controls, some Saudi writers publish their books in other countries such as Egypt or Lebanon. Najd’s travels have enabled her to find political books and legal correspondence that have helped her research to a great extent. She has become more independent in travelling alone and collecting information from libraries in the gulf countries. She has learnt a lot about political theories and the relationship between Saudi Arabia and other countries.

Najd’s PhD thesis was awarded a prize and has been cited as a scientific reference in several books. Her thesis had been typed originally on a typewriter that had simultaneous Arabic and English keyboards to enable some words to be written in English. Later, she had it re-typed on a computer and saved in electronic format. Then she had it printed, and it is now an academic book that has been used in education for almost 21 years.

Najd has become more independent as an academic woman. She believes in herself and is a successful academic researcher who is recognised not only in her own university, but also internationally. She also became a resource to other researchers by providing information for their research, as she said:

My voice has been heard beyond my college. I have a voice that can be delivered to far countries and farther than I imagined. I receive invitations to give lectures. Some researchers contact me seeking information, and I help them through their research studies. I am more confident now.

I could feel the confidence in her voice when she said that. She is proud of herself and of her accomplishments so far.

## Writing and publications

Najd has written reports for government commissions on women's education and the obstacles to overcome in order to improve higher education (for the Ministry of Higher Education), the role of women (for the Ministry of Planning), and women's conventions (for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Najd agreed to write these reports because through these ministries she could contribute to improving the situation of women in her country. Najd clarifies to me many times that the most important thing for her is improving education and knowledge in her country, Saudi Arabia, particularly for women. She does not seek high positions or fame.

Najd has written many articles on different topics, which have been published in various Saudi journals, but lately she has limited herself to writing about women, water and territory boundaries, which are her specialist areas. She also writes about women as a result of her membership in the Afaq Al-Mustakbal Organisation (AMO) for developing and improving and human rights. Her participation in this organisation supports her beliefs and thoughts about human rights and her attempts to help Saudi citizens improve their situation, especially women.

Najd writes an annual documentary file for the Saudi government about the boundary changes of water and lands after a tsunami event. She has published a set of research findings in Arabic about geographical changes of the shape of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, work which took the first position that year. She writes about floods in an English electronic journal. She has written 13 reports about the actual reality of life in Saudi Arabia. She has recently become more organised in publishing reports, which in turn has enabled her to publish some of them as books. Her most recent report is "Women's Role as Active Members in Saudi Arabia" which she considers to be among her best work because she had enough time to submit it in a draft form first, and then to fix critical points before publishing it as a book. She now enjoys standing as an important researcher in her country.

Najd attended her first geography conference, organised by the Geography Association of Arabian Gulf Countries, in Riyadh two years after she completed her PhD. She presented some of her research findings there. She then worked on a research study with two male doctors about pollution and disasters of the seas, which resulted in two research articles

published within two years. Although she was a co-author of these papers, women were not allowed to attend the associated conference in Jeddah.

In previous years, women and men were separated even in terms of their conference participation. Najd felt strongly that each gender should be able to hear the comments of the other. The first mixed gender conference that she wanted to attend took place six years ago. At that time, she was the General Director of Education Development for the Girls Education Colleges in Saudi Arabia. She used her position and asked the Minister of the Economy to allow women to attend the conference. He asked her how many women were likely to attend. She answered very quickly, giving a fictitious figure of 100 women, wanting him to believe that there would be a great number. She encouraged everyone around her to participate, hoping to reach a large number of female attendees. She succeeded in attending that conference which was the start of other mixed conferences; even though women and men were still required to sit in different sections, at least they could hear each other's contributions and comments.

Later, Najd was able to participate in a series of education workshops with experts from abroad, as part of a project that cost half a million US dollars. However, she had to do so under the leadership of a man because women were not allowed to participate in all the workshops. She presented her research in two workshops in Riyadh and Jeddah through the Afaq organisation to which she belongs, as previously mentioned.

The early conferences in which Najd participated provided her with excellent experience. She learnt how to lead a conference, and a new door was opened to her when she was able to participate in international conferences. She attended the United Nations conference in Geneva on discrimination against women in Saudi Arabia, and participated in conferences in Cairo (Egypt), Masqat (Oman) and Manamah (Bahrain), presenting a lecture about territory water. She presented a poster at a conference in Jordan and participated in the Albright programme in Ireland and Tunisia on the topic of women's rights. She participated in conferences twice in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and once in Beirut, Lebanon. As an independent woman researcher, she grew in confidence by attending all these conferences outside her own country without fear of travelling alone, and was able to present her research in both Arabic and English.

Najd was the chairwoman of the Saudi delegation which visited the University of Japan on a course lasting 15 days. Even though Japan is a long way from Saudi Arabia, she did not

hesitate to travel there and gain new experiences. She also attended Educational Affairs meetings for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Nothing stops Najd from improving herself. She uses any chance she has to continue to be a successful academic researcher.

She went to Yemen and Jazan, Southern Saudi Arabia, to do fieldwork about the borders between the two countries. She went to the Forsan Islands on the border of Jazan with Yemen. They took her and other researchers in a private small airplane to the Alshibah Field in the Fourth Quarter Desert. It seemed to me that Najd was happy to do all these field trips.

Although Najd is the first female to gain a PhD in Political Geography in Saudi Arabia, and she loves education and teaching, she is not yet an associate professor. In order to be promoted, the department requires four single research outputs and two outputs as co-author. Although Najd has met these requirements, she is still waiting for promotion. The University counts every research output as one point, but all conference attendance counts together as one point. That's why some people who care about position do not attend conferences and concentrate on research. I have a feeling that Najd has lately started to notice younger women academics who have concentrated on research outputs and are professors, when they may not deserve it as much as she does.

Najd's major subject is rather unique which means that there is little chance of collaborating with her colleagues in researching or writing. She does continue to work with her Masters supervisor, whom she also meets at conferences. It is quite special that she has maintained this relationship with her supervisor for almost 32 years.

## **Najd the researcher**

Since Najd is a researcher, she likes to visit libraries without any restrictions. However, as a woman she is not allowed to visit the King Faisal Library, the King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research, and the Archives Aldarah Library. In the King Fahd library, there is a special section for women and a man helps them to get the information they need. She feels strongly that such barriers to women visiting libraries should be lifted. It bothers Najd because she refuses to be restricted to a small part of the library and denied access to the main area. As a researcher she wants to feel free to move around in all libraries.

Najd loves to go to libraries even just for a visit. She went to the Library of Congress in the USA. She was not allowed to carry anything in, so she entered without even a pen; however, she had great time reading there. She found some interesting information which they printed out for her. She also visited the Military Library in Jordan. She realised that it was a military library when she noticed many people wearing military outfits. She has visited the Arab World Institution in Paris many times because she used to go to Paris with her family almost every year.

Najd also travels to Beirut in Lebanon almost annually with her family in summer time because they have a house there. Lebanon has a nice climate that allows people to escape the Saudi heat in summer. In 2004, when she was in Beirut, without her laptop, she had an unfortunate experience in a public internet store. She was working from her flash memory drive, preparing for a conference that she was planning to attend later in Dammam City. She had a feeling that some hackers had accessed her work, and on quickly pulling out her flash drive, she heard two people near her saying: *'She knew!'*. Three years after this accident, she was in a conference where one participant presented a topic that she had had on her flash drive that year in Lebanon. He had worked directly from her draft without even fixing her mistakes or adding anything new. At that moment, Najd knew that this man had stolen or bought her work from someone else. She learned that she shouldn't trust public computers and now she takes her laptop with her wherever she goes.

Najd has sense of humour. One day she was invited to the American Embassy in Riyadh. They were talking about Saudi generosity and how we host our visitors very well. They were teasing her, saying, *'We want you to host us one day'*. She said, *'Never. I will never host an American in my house'*. They were shocked and asked her the reason why; so she told them that if she hosted American people and one of them fell down in her house, America will sue her. They all laughed. Nevertheless, a few months later, she invited an American delegation from Oregon University to her home. Later that year, the members of the delegation invited Najd to visit Oregon University, which she did, as she happened by coincidence to be in the USA at that time.

Although Najd's house is small because she lives alone, she has hosted many important people from different countries. She likes to host women academics from other countries, and when she does so, she invites Saudi academic women from the same field to share

experiences. She wants her foreign visitors to know about the high levels of education achieved by Saudi academic women.

Najd is a lovely down-to-earth person. She was very kind to me and mentioned to her students that I am ‘her friend’ and studying for my PhD in South Africa. She called me her friend, rather than just saying ‘someone’ – that made me feel good. She encouraged her students to likewise continue their studies in the future. Najd tries to elicit from her students the best that they can give. She wants her country to be improved as a result of the progress of the youth. She told me about an excellent Masters student that they had had in Information Systems, whom everyone admired. There was sorrow in her voice and she was upset that this young educated woman *‘unfortunately didn’t find support from the university. Until now she didn’t find a job with her certificate’*. Najd has a strong memory which is evident in the details of her stories that happened a long time ago. Now that I have written her story, she wants a copy of it. She said this with a smile.

Najd is a scholar and researcher and she continually seeks to improve herself. She is a member of many associations and organisations. She is a very confident and independent woman, especially in comparison to other Saudi woman of her age. Najd has had the opportunity to accomplish her dream and do things that other women have not been able to do for various reasons, such as fearing the community’s gossip, refusal of permission by a father or husband, or being attached with children.

Although Najd likes to travel around the world learning from other countries, she chooses to serve in her own country. She would like to have more freedom in conducting research and obtaining the information that she needs. She is proud to be a female scholar in her country because she is building capacity in the girl students whom she considers to be her daughters.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Hejaz: Living in a different world

*They are French. They will not come here. I will go back to them after the end of this semester. I have to go to them... I swear to God that I love to be here in Saudi Arabia (Hejaz)*

On the day that I visited Hejaz, the temperature was cool. I was very tense and nervous because I was going to the house of people that I did not know at all; moreover, I did not even know any of their acquaintances. It is not common within the Saudi culture to enter a house without knowing the residents beforehand. I reached the house following the directions that Hejaz gave over the telephone. When I got out of the car, I told my driver to wait for me. As I was ringing the doorbell, the nearest mosque was making Adhan<sup>81</sup> to announce the time for Isha<sup>82</sup> prayer; I was so relieved when I heard the Adhan and I asked God to make my situation in this stranger's house easy.

I rang the bell and the maid answered through the intercom. I was in an awkward situation because I do not know the surname of Hejaz's husband, which is what would normally be given when first speaking into an intercom. Instead, I just asked if I was at Hejaz's house. The maid opened the gate for me immediately because they were expecting me. I was still nervous. I reached the wooden door of the villa carrying a wrapped plate of chocolate that I had bought for Hejaz because she was sick, and it is a common act in Saudi culture to buy a gift for a sick person. Before I could knock on the interior wooden door, a lady welcomed me and guided me to sit in the salon. As I walked with her, I gave her the chocolates and asked her if she was Dr. Hejaz. She said that she was her sister. A few minutes later, Hejaz walked in using a crutch; she had twisted her ankle and was on sick leave. I felt some relief from my anxieties once I saw Hejaz. She looks older and different from her sister. Hejaz is a short woman with a tiny body. She has short black hair and dark skin. She is in her mid-fifties and wears thick spectacles. She seemed to me to be a confident woman, but there was a slight

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<sup>81</sup> Words spoken through loud speakers to alert people to prayer time

<sup>82</sup> The Isha prayer is the night time daily prayer and the fifth of the five daily prayers.

sadness behind her eyes. I later discovered the reason for her sadness was that her father has passed away two months earlier. I was sitting on the couch, so I stood up to greet her and she welcomed me. After I saw her and relaxed, I took off my Abayah<sup>83</sup> and put it down by my side. She wanted to host me by pouring some Arabic coffee, but I quickly took the coffee from her to pour for us both. It is unacceptable in Saudi culture to let a woman serve anyone who is her junior, especially when she is sick. Hejaz hosted me with tea accompanied with sweets and pastries on both my visits; in Saudi culture, guests are very well looked after.

Hejaz's servant – who is from Indonesia – came in with a plate of sweets and greeted me with the Islamic greeting, “*Alslam Alaikom*”. I asked her to bring me a glass of water even though it wasn't hot. It was December and cold, but because I was experiencing a critical moment of fear, and wanted to clear my throat.

I talked about my study and my research, as Hejaz had only a vague understanding of what it was about when we discussed it over the telephone. I gave her a copy of the questions in Arabic and English, and I gave her the consent letter and asked her to read and sign it. While she was signing it, she told me that she wanted to do the interview whatever the letter said; she likes to help researchers and is proud of Saudi Arabia's youth because they want to improve themselves and the country. She wanted me to begin the interview and she would give her answers as best as she could. Hejaz was very tired that day and having difficulties recalling old memories from her past. I did not want to push her too much, so we completed our interview on my second visit a week later, when she was feeling much better.

## Who is Hejaz?

Hejaz was born in Mecca in the Western Region of Saudi Arabia. The people of the Western Region are known to have come from different countries around the world to the holy places of Mecca and Medina before settling in Saudi Arabia and becoming Saudis. It is a cosmopolitan region “with a heterogonous population since many of its residents are pilgrims who settled in the Arabian Peninsula hundreds of years before the formation of the Saudi Arabian Kingdom” (Jamjoom, 2010, p. 550).

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<sup>83</sup> A long, black, loose-fitting outfit worn by women over their clothes while in public or in the presence of foreign men.



This region has the best private schools for girls, which teach English starting from primary grades. People of the Western Region are typically more educated than people in other regions in Saudi Arabia. Hejaz is lucky to have lived in Mecca and graduated from the best schools there. Her father supported women's education and encouraged her to read. He began buying her story books when she was three years old.

In the late seventies, Hejaz studied for her Bachelors degree at the King Abdul-Aziz University in Mecca City with a major in psychology. She then studied for one year for an education diploma, after which she married a Frenchman of Tunisian descent and moved with him to live in the USA.

## **Between East and West**

Hejaz lived in Houston, Texas from 1980 to 1985. She spent "*five lovely years*" in the USA with her husband, Ahmed<sup>84</sup>, who was working there. It was a new experience for her, and it was the first time she had lived in a western country. She was young and amazed by everything. Houston is a large, organised city, with highways, to which Hejaz was not accustomed. Women are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia, so she started learning new things. She enrolled in a driving school so she could learn to drive herself to the university and other places while her husband was at work. She quoted an American phrase: "*Driving a car is as easy as 1, 2, 3*". She was young and adaptable, so she learned very quickly. She learned to drive an automatic car, which did not take long, and she soon had her license. I felt her enthusiasm through her words; Hejaz enjoyed her new life.

She also took English classes. She was lucky to be proficient in English before she moved to the USA, so she worked to improve it for only a few months before starting her Masters degree. The Saudi Arabian government encourages its youth to study abroad by providing a scholarship for any Saudi student to complete his or her undergraduate or postgraduate study. Hejaz received a scholarship to study for her Masters degree in Houston; she received her funding within two months of submitting her application to the government. Moreover, she received a monthly salary of 1 200 US dollars during her studies and therefore faced no financial problems during this time.

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<sup>84</sup> Pseudonym.

Hejaz postponed having children for five years while she lived in the USA. She gained her Masters in Educational Administration, completing her studies without any obstacles. She experienced many positive things in the United States. She admires the American system of study and found their way of teaching to be easy and exciting. She was able to find any information she wanted in the university library, which was large and well organised. The educators would help the students by providing references and books. Although there was no internet access at the time, she did not have any difficulty finding information. The Masters study was dependent on individual research and giving presentations. Hejaz was still young and had come from a conservative community and an upbringing that was completely different to that of her western peers. However, she was smart and able to learn quickly. She was independent and became more confident; she was able to deliver presentations without fear of facing her peers and educators.

Hejaz developed new relationships with American friends. They were very friendly towards her. Her English was fluent so she had no difficulties in interacting with her new friends. She made good friends whom she would invite over as a family for lunch or dinner; and they would invite her and her husband, Ahmed, in return. She mentioned that her classmates were also very helpful if she missed part of a lecture; they would not hesitate to give her a copy of their notes.

Hejaz had no family in the USA, so she became closely attached to Ahmed. They were always together and she would go with him everywhere to take care of all the responsibilities, such as grocery shopping, rather than going alone. Ahmed was very cooperative and played an important part in her success. Although he came home late, he would join Hejaz in the kitchen and cook with her. He understood her situation as a Masters student, accommodating her late lectures and the hours she spent in the library by supporting her in both her household responsibilities and her studies. Although Hejaz's English is very good, Ahmed helped her in her Masters studies because he has an excellent understanding of English, even better than hers. She heard the experiences of the women around her as they bore all the family responsibilities and complained about their husbands. Some husbands did not believe their wives to be capable of success or dealing with their own lives. According to Hejaz, Ahmed was different:

But my husband was really supportive and co-operated with me, with the house and later with our children.

Ahmed played a positive role in Hejaz's academic life. Hejaz believes that a married woman's success is partially due to her husband's support.

## **Hejaz, the academic woman in France**

After five years in Texas, Ahmed took a new job in Paris, in his home country of France. Hejaz started making a family life and settling in the country that she had to adopt because it was her husband's. She started her PhD proposal when she was in the USA. After she moved to France, she applied to undertake her PhD studies in Paris 5 College, Ronea Decar, which is one of the colleges in the Sorbonne University. When Hejaz told me the name of the college in French, the words came very naturally and gave me an indication of her French language skills. Hejaz clarified that Paris 5 is the College of Education; there are many colleges and every college has a number. For instance, Paris 2 is for law, medicine and pharmacy. Hejaz was lucky that her Masters certificate from the USA was quickly accepted. Converting to the French programme of study normally takes longer for those coming from other countries.

Hejaz enrolled in a French language program after the Sorbonne University accepted her onto the PhD program. Later, the university was convinced that she did not need to spend time in taking French classes because her language skills were already strong. Hejaz had begun speaking French with Ahmed when they lived in the USA. Her French language was very good, and now it's even better than her English language skills. When she speaks French, people think that she is French from Arab ancestors.

After a few months, Hejaz started working on her PhD with her supervisor, who liked her proposal. She wasn't required to do any research subjects; she had only to write her thesis, which was on the topic of *'The role of parents and educators in the primary school'*. Hejaz believes that the primary grades are the most fundamental grades in education, and any difficulties or deficiencies encountered during this period will cause ongoing difficulties for the child. This topic was particularly challenging because parents do not often engage in effective contact with educators. Moreover, parents tend to blame the educators for any failure of their children. As a result of her interest in this topic, Hejaz had started on the research in English while she was in the USA, but after she moved to France she switched to French, and wrote her thesis in French.

As Hejaz had written her proposal in English, the references were also in English. She had intended at the beginning of her study to use English resources and translate them into French, and any difficulties found during the investigation would be researched in French. However, she discovered that it is easier to find information from around the world in French rather than English. Moreover, the education system in France is better than in America. Hejaz started writing her PhD thesis in 1985 and had appointments with her supervisors to guide her work. She conducted her field work in both eastern and western countries. Her study compared eastern and western parents' stereotypes and beliefs regarding their primary children's educators. Hejaz selected France, the UK and Holland as her western countries, and Saudi Arabia and Egypt from the east. Some of her information was collected through interviews with the parents of primary children in these countries. She also gathered information about the education systems and their history; although there was no internet at that time, searching for information through libraries did not prove to be too difficult.

In the 1980s, public libraries in Saudi Arabia were not well supplied with research information. Fortunately Hejaz did not have to use the public libraries because she knew someone who worked in the General Education Ministry who could give her all the books and publications that she might need and would have struggled to find otherwise. Knowing this person in the General Education Ministry made it easy for Hejaz to get all the information she wanted, even though there was not much research in the field of education at the time. Saudi people are known to search for someone they know in every sector, who can act as a middleman to simplify their procedures and resolve their issues. In Egypt, on the other hand, she had a great time visiting the libraries, which were "*fabulous*", providing all the information she needed. Although the Egyptian libraries were not as well organised as the French libraries, they contained worthwhile information.

In the western countries, Hejaz visited libraries in France and the UK; however, the one that she used most was the "*stunning*" library in France, of which she said:

I hope that you visit it. I used to go to the old building. My children now are using it in the new building. They moved to the new building 5 years ago. It is very nice and big. I used to order what I wanted. The next day, I would go to receive what I had ordered in sealed plastic with my name on it. They have a high quality of service. Every researcher has a place that is booked for him until he finishes his research. I used to have one place that was only for me. I used to read there and write my research.

Hejaz appears to admire the service in the French library. It was very calm and well-prepared for students to spend many hours studying there. When she was pregnant with her first baby

girl, Lara<sup>85</sup>, Hejaz used to read in the library until late at night in the specific place that was reserved for her as a PhD researcher. Once, she slept for many hours in this spot and thought that she had spent no more than a couple of hours there, which indicates that the library was a place that made her feel very comfortable.

Although Hejaz could take some books out of the library, reference books had to be used in the library. However, working in the library was better for Hejaz than working at home. The library atmosphere helps students to concentrate and accomplish more. Everything she needed was available around her, such as restaurants, so she could eat and return to her work very easily. It was as comfortable as her home, as she described: “*This library had a reserved area for me*<sup>86</sup>”. Moreover, there were metro stations near the library with routes to many areas, so Hejaz did not need to drive in Paris and deal with the problems of parking her car. The city was crowded with cars – unlike the USA – so she took public transport, such as the metro and buses, which was easier than using a private car.

Hejaz started writing her thesis. She thought that she would face some difficulties, but it appeared that it was not greatly different from writing a small research piece (as she was trained to do in the USA); the only difference is that a thesis is longer with many more references. Hejaz’s spoken French is excellent; however, her spelling needed improvement. She wished she had a computer to correct her spelling; however, she had to write her thesis by hand before taking it to an office to have it typed. Hejaz’s husband, Ahmed, used to correct the spelling for her, but this process took a long time, because there were many incorrect spellings and the thesis had to be rewritten many times. Hejaz’s hand hurt from writing, as her thesis was around 400 pages. In the end, she printed the thesis and, using her own money, gave it to an editor to edit proficiently. This was very expensive, especially the final edit, but she was lucky to be a Saudi scholarship student with paid tuition and a student salary of 1 400 US dollars per month. Hejaz completed her PhD a long time ago; however, she still appreciates the economic support from the Saudi government.

Hejaz’s husband supported her not only in writing her thesis, but also in taking care of their home and children. I believe that most men, especially Saudi men, would not even read his wife’s thesis once she had printed it out. Ahmed was very supportive of his wife, as she described:

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<sup>85</sup> Pseudonym.

<sup>86</sup> The library provides a place for every PhD student.

God blessed me with a good husband. He supported me and encouraged me through my academic journey. He is proud of me. He is a professor. He works in the UNESCO<sup>87</sup> and is a professor in the Sorbonne University. He is bilingual in English and French. My husband is a supportive man of the first degree.

Ahmed is an educated man who speaks two languages besides Arabic and is a professor in the Sorbonne University. He supported his wife in becoming educated and raising an educated family. He is more experienced than his wife. He would help Hejaz through her studies even when she did not have the energy. She mentioned that during her PhD, she spent two years living between France and the UK with her husband and her daughter, Lara, who was still a baby. Ahmed gave lectures in the University of Ireland. Hejaz had an opportunity to visit libraries in the UK and research the information she needed for her thesis. Ahmed would take Hejaz to France when she had an appointment with her supervisor or needed to submit papers. On one occasion, Hejaz had to submit a chapter while they were in London. She was busy touring around London every day and having fun, so she did not complete the work she had to do. Ahmed was worried about her so he started waking her in the middle of the night to finish writing a chapter, while he took care of Lara who was just seven months old. Ahmed did not want to prevent his wife from having a good time, but he wanted her to accomplish her goals. When Hejaz remembers his actions and support towards her, she appreciates what Ahmed did. She loves her husband; however, I feel that in some ways she regrets that she had to change her culture and raise her children under the western influence, which is completely different to the culture that she was raised in. Indeed, she said, *“I swear to God that I love being here in Saudi Arabia”*.

Hejaz does not recall any suffering during her studies in France. It seems to me that she had an easy academic life there. She stated many times that her postgraduate studies went very smoothly and she never felt that her children were an obstacle in her progress. She now has two children, her daughter Lara and a son, Adam<sup>88</sup>, who is younger by two years. Hejaz organised their time and hers with her husband’s support. She never felt that they were a responsibility that she could not handle, or an obstacle in her life. She had a young Moroccan babysitter for the children when they were toddlers. When they were older, the children went to a day care centre near their home from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. One day Hejaz was unable to collect the children at 5:00 pm and the teacher was upset that she was late. This was the only occasion that Hejaz can recall facing a problem as an academic mother.

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<sup>87</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

<sup>88</sup> Pseudonym.

## **A principal in Paris**

In 1991, Hejaz finished her PhD study. She wrote reports in an Arabic journal that is published in France. After three years, she was invited by the Saudi Ambassador to become the principal of the Saudi Academy School in Paris, where she served from 1994 to 1999. Saudi children living in Paris used to study in the Iraqi Academy School. However, after Iraq invaded Kuwait, for political reasons, the Saudi government commanded the Saudi Embassy to remove all Saudi diplomatic children from the Iraqi school, and within weeks they had established a new Saudi school. They allowed the children of diplomats from the other Gulf countries to enrol in this academy. An advertisement for teachers was placed in a local newspaper; many Arabic people from Egypt, Sudan and other Arab countries lived in Paris, so there was no difficulty in finding applicants. Teachers were hired and paid reasonable salaries by the Saudi government. The Saudi government sent Saudi books at no cost, and provided security guards for the school. Later, the facility was moved to a bigger building near the embassy. It is obvious to me that Hejaz admires the Saudi government for how much money it spends on education. She has lived in western countries so she compares the Saudi educational approach with that of western countries, where the burden of educational expense rests on the students' shoulders. Although Hejaz seemed to be thriving and happy in the US and Paris, it appeared that in her later years she felt more comfortable at home in Saudi Arabia.

Being a principal in the Saudi Academy was Hejaz's first job aside from working as a writer. She was the only Saudi working in the Saudi Academy School, and the first Saudi female to graduate with a PhD from the Sorbonne University.

## **The return of the migrant bird**

On my second visit to Hejaz, we started talking about France and South Africa. We talked about living in a foreign country and how I miss my own family, but that I believe that any experience in the world comes with both positives and negatives. I always try to focus on the positive things in my life. Hejaz asked me about the Sheikh<sup>89</sup>, Abdulrahman Alsudis, who is the Imam in Mecca Haram; and whether I am related to him because we have the same

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<sup>89</sup> A religious man in the Islamic religion, who is a scholar specialising in Islamic subjects



surname. I am accustomed to being asked this question everywhere, even in South Africa. I remember that one Muslim doctor, who was a member of the committee that interviewed me when I applied for my PhD at the University of Pretoria, asked me if I was related to Sheikh Alsudis. I responded that I am proud to be related to him. He told me: *“We all love him and admire him”*. By saying *“We”*, he was referring to all Muslim people.

In turn, I asked Hejaz about a Saudi friend that I met when I was in the USA. Hejaz and my friend have the same surname, but they are not related to each other; they are from different regions.

Hejaz resumed her story by saying that when she had been the principal of the school for five years, her mother became very sick in Saudi Arabia. Hejaz visited her mother in Saudi Arabia from time to time, but one day her mother asked Hejaz to stay with her. She said, *“Please, work here to be with me so I can see you. I don’t know about my life. I may die soon”*. These words touched Hejaz’s heart and affected her deeply. As a result, Hejaz left her young children with Ahmed in France, and went to stay with her mother. Her family understood her situation. Hejaz applied for a job in Saudi Arabia to be an assistant professor in the Girls Education Colleges, which is now Princess Nora University.

The year that her mother died, Hejaz was hired to work in Princess Nora University. She spent seven months working there before taking unpaid leave to return to Paris and the Saudi Academy School. She had been in Paris for only a year when her father had a heart attack that resulted in paralysis. Someone had to take care of him, especially after his wife’s death. Hejaz has only one sister who was unable to care for their father because she has had two disks removed from her back, so she would be unable to move him. Therefore, Hejaz returned once more to Saudi Arabia to be with her father and take care of him. She settled in Riyadh, bought a small house, and hired a driver and a servant. She resumed her work in as an assistant professor in the Princess Nora University.

### **I left everything behind me to take care of my father**

Hejaz sacrificed many things in her life to be with her father and take care of him. I was amazed by the strength of their relationship. She said:



My father needed me. So, I spent my time with him. I left everything behind me to take care of my father. I left my husband and my children. I sacrificed attending many conferences because I couldn't leave my father.

She spent ten long years far away from her children and husband, from 2000 till 2011. She left her children with their father at a critical stage. They stayed in Paris and she visited them during their vacations. While she was away, her sister would look after their father for no more than two weeks because she had a husband and young children to take care of. I felt that this was ironic; as if Hejaz does not have a family! I believe that Hejaz had really missed her own country and wanted to stay, not only to look after her father who needed special care. I wonder why she did not try to convince her father to move with her to Paris. She left one family that needed her, to look after her other family: her father. Her situation was so difficult; having to decide whom to leave and whom to care for. Perhaps, behind her decision lay some nostalgia and a longing for her homeland.

Hejaz also had to sacrifice her academic life for her father. She had to spend most of her time with him, so she could not conduct many research investigations, as she said:

To do research you have to be in a good mood and in a calm atmosphere. And this is what I didn't have. People say: "Education has no limits and there is no special age for it". I hope that I can work harder in these coming years.

Hejaz is very optimistic about her current academic situation. She does not consider herself too old to go on doing research. She still dreams of being a professor one day. She is an ambitious woman who wants to accomplish her dream, although she postponed everything for ten years to take care of her father. He died in 2011. I knew then the reason behind her sadness. Hejaz was torn between her father and her children and husband; she had been hiding her sadness at being far from her husband and children for ten years. She was a good daughter to her father. She explained:

I hope that I will be a scholar in the future wherever I am; here or in France. My father limited my time, but my certificate is with God. God have mercy on him. Now I will have the chance to work harder. My laptop is always on my lap. I have many things that I started but haven't finished yet.

What Hejaz meant by this was that she will receive her certificate from God as an obedient daughter, and God will substitute her academic certificate with a reward that will last forever; even after her death. She would have liked to have been a professor already but not at the expense of the time that she spent with her father, as she said:

I would like to be a professor already. I don't regret the time that I spent with my father. I wanted to be better but not by taking advantage over my father.

She wanted to be with her father as much as she could and, as a result, she reduced her conference attendance to a maximum of twice a year, but only when possible. She had the opportunity to attend a conference on creative thinking held in Egypt when she accompanied her father to receive medical treatment there. She submitted a poster to an international conference that was held in the USA, but she could not attend because her father needed her and she could not leave him for more than a week.

Hejaz neglected many things in her life – even her children – for the sake of her father. She left Lara and Adam for ten years. They recently finished their Masters degrees in Paris. They are French and do not want to live in Saudi Arabia. Hejaz decided to go back to her children after her father died; however, she postponed her departure until the end of the semester in 2011. She cares about the students and did not want to move back to France before finishing what she started, for her students' sake.

Hejaz said, “*I have to go to them*”, implying that she does not want to go back to France, but she will force herself. She likes to live in her own country, Saudi Arabia, but her justification of needing to be with her father does not exist anymore. Lara is now 26 years old and is engaged. She has a Masters degree in political science and a parallel Masters in law. Adam is 24 years old and is one of the most talented students in France. He won the first prize in his MBA<sup>90</sup> from the International Business School in Paris, as Hejaz described: “*It is HEC, Ecole des Hautes Études Commerciales de Paris*”. She said the name of the school in French spontaneously without showing off (as some people attempt to show their high level of education when they use English or French words). It was clear to me from her perfect pronunciation that Hejaz is accustomed to speaking in French on a daily basis.

This HEC school is very selective and admits only the best students; people such as ministers and financial executives graduate from this school. Adam had just graduated with his Masters and he was already receiving offers from prominent companies around the world. While Hejaz was talking about her son and his accomplishments, she showed me the framed picture standing on a side table, of President Sarkozy awarding her son the MBA prize with a cheque. She seemed to be very proud of her children; however, she is sad that they have lost the use of Arabic. As a consequence, they cannot read the Quran in Arabic, which is something all

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<sup>90</sup> Master of Business Administration

Muslim people wish to do. Her children speak Arabic but do not read or write it<sup>91</sup>. Hejaz explained that their first language is French, followed by English and German.

## **Hejaz the academic woman**

Hejaz conducts research in three languages<sup>92</sup>, but she feels more comfortable using Arabic and French, rather than English. Arabic is her first language, and she adapted to using French later, particularly at home with her husband and children. Nevertheless, it has been difficult for Hejaz to adapt to living in a culture that is totally different to hers.

Hejaz has the desire to complete her academic journey, and she has been lucky to have chances that most other people do not. She is a Saudi woman and has had many experiences in life that have contributed to her success as a researcher. She lived in three countries, changing cultures and locations. Living away from her own country, reading in different languages and learning different cultures have changed her as a person. She believes that she has developed new skills as a result of experiencing different situations in her life.

Hejaz explained that Princess Nora University encourages staff members and graduate students to improve themselves by participating nationally or internationally in any conference, seminar or forum. Hejaz believes that the university provides its staff and students with everything they need to encourage them as academics.

Hejaz is a loving person but she has experienced difficulties with her colleagues in Saudi Arabia. Although her colleagues say that they feel she is a second mother or an elder sister for them, and they want to learn from her experience, they do not cooperate with her in any research. She makes excuses for them, suggesting that they might be busy with their personal issues. As a result, she works individually, especially after a particular incident that occurred a few years ago. Hejaz had started writing a research paper with one of her colleagues, but had to go to France for two weeks during the project. On her return, she was shocked to find that her colleague had published this project under her own name without even mentioning Hejaz. Hejaz was saddened by this but, because she is a forgiving person, she did not confront her colleague; instead she withdrew from the situation and never tried to work in a group with colleagues again.

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<sup>91</sup> Arabic is a Semitic language that does not use the Latin alphabet.

<sup>92</sup> Arabic, French and English

Hejaz noted that, in recent years, finding the information she needs has been much easier as she can access the internet anywhere and anytime, especially compared to the past when she used to manually type her papers at an office desk. Now, she uses her own computer to write in a way that she likes, and which is easier for her with the availability of word processing programs and spell checking facilities. She used to find it difficult to read her editors' handwriting, but now people correspond through email. Hejaz appreciates technology because it encourages educators to be creative and to attract the students' concentration; for example, Hejaz uses an interactive smart board and PowerPoint presentations in her teaching.

### **I want to improve education in my country**

Hejaz's words show that she loves her country deeply. She would prefer to be an academic in Saudi Arabia than in France or any other western country, as she expressed with a sigh: "*I swear to God that I love being here in Saudi Arabia*". I felt that she said these words from her heart, unequivocally and with no doubt about her feelings.

Hejaz loves her country and wishes that everyone around her could benefit from her experience. She wants to improve education in her country and to give the Saudi youth the best of her knowledge, education and experience as repayment for the money the Saudi Arabian government spent on her education. She compared Saudi Arabia with France, where the students pay for their tuition, books and bus transportation. In Saudi Arabia, education is free with no tuition or book fees; students do not have these benefits in other countries. Hejaz is very grateful to her country, Saudi Arabia, for all the funding the government has provided since she was a child.

Hejaz does her best to improve the education system in Saudi Arabia. She introduced the automatic exam marking method, having had the idea in her first year working in the Art College, ten years ago. She saw educators pulling heavy trolley bags, which were full of students' papers. The educators would take these papers home to correct them. Marking this amount of papers was a slow process; consequently, the results took time to be published and there was always the possibility of errors. Moreover, marking was a significant burden for educators on top of their other responsibilities, and they would suffer from backache. In her first year of teaching, Hejaz followed the traditional method of correction although she did not find it to be effective. She arranged for an automatic marking machine to be brought to the

college. When she demonstrated it to the administration, they were impressed and entered into a contract with a company to purchase more. Hejaz developed training courses for the other educators on how to create exams for automated marking, and how to operate the machines, and she ran courses for the students to show them how to complete the exams on special sheets. This method allowed educators to correct hundreds of pages in five minutes instead of spending a week checking just one exam. The benefits of this kind of exam are that it can cover the whole curriculum and educators have no difficulties in reading the students' handwriting.

Hejaz continues to be a researcher in her field. She believes that to understand any culture, a person must live in it. She has experienced both the east and west and uses this to compare and take lessons from the different educational situations. She has used her experiences to improve education in her country by publishing reports and taking direct action.

Hejaz is a member of several educational organisations, such as the King Abdul Aziz National Dialogue Center<sup>93</sup>, which is tackling social, cultural, political, economic and educational problems by reinforcing communications and national dialogue channels with organisations and individuals outside of Saudi Arabia<sup>94</sup>. Hejaz is a member of the Curriculum Development Organisation for General Education, which works on improving the primary curriculum by using experiences from abroad within the Saudi culture and the Islamic religion. She presented lectures that were honoured by the presence of Princess Hessah, King Abdullah's wife. These education improvement lectures presented comparative assessments of Saudi Arabian education with other countries. Hejaz presented many lectures at the Princess Nora University and trained educators through her courses on education.

Hejaz published an academic book in Arabic with the title: *'Children's education in Islam'*. There were three authors of this book; an Egyptian male, a Saudi doctor and Hejaz. She also published research in Arabic about students dropping out of college classes. She writes a column in the Saudi publication, Alwatan Journal. While in France, Hejaz wrote reports in an Arabic journal as well as many articles for Le Monde; she is also a member of UNESCO.

Hejaz is a confident woman. People in France often assume that she is French from Arab ancestors, because many French people look Arabic. During Hejaz's PhD discussion exam,

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<sup>93</sup> This centre seeks to create a new environment to facilitate dialogue among various sections of society with the aim of promoting public interests and consolidating national unity based on the Islamic faith.

<sup>94</sup> King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue, (2012). Retrieved from [http://www.kacnd.org/eng/center\\_goals.asp](http://www.kacnd.org/eng/center_goals.asp) (Accessed on 5 May 2012).

one of the professors told her: *“I didn’t believe that you are a Saudi”*. She reacted strongly, asking without any hesitation: *“Why?”* and he said, *“Because your French language is as good as any French person’s”*. Since she is proud to be a Saudi, she felt offended by his question, although the professor did not mean to be rude. I think that Hejaz is accustomed to defending her culture among French people and her situation can become difficult and tiring. She wants to portray a positive picture of her country to the French people; this is a source of stress that she lives with on a daily basis when in France. She admitted to me that she does not like the stereotypes French people have about Saudi people, especially Saudi women, as she said: *“They are prejudiced towards us”*. I felt a sense of anger from her as she said this. Nor does she like the French attitude towards wearing the Hijab<sup>95</sup>, as she said:

They think that wearing the Hijab, covering the head, will limit our thinking. They think that every Saudi has a barrel of petrol in his garden or yard. I always try to give a clearer image of the Saudi culture that they don’t know. They believe that just because Saudi women are not allowed to drive, they are missing a lot. This is a national law, not part of the Islamic religion. We don’t feel that this is a problem because all the women here have drivers and servants. But in France, I have the problems of parking and not having a servant.

Hejaz defends her country as well as her religion. When she says *“we”*, she is referring to Saudi women and when she says *“here”*, she means Saudi Arabia. She feels and always will, that she is Saudi rather than French like her children. She amazed me when she compared Saudi Arabia with France; highlighting the positive aspects of her country in order to defend her culture over the French culture. Her loyalty is to Saudi Arabia, and she believes that she fits in better with the Saudi culture than with the French culture. I believe that she lives two lives: her life in Saudi Arabia is completely different to her other life in France. In Saudi she has a driver and a servant, and she lives among her relatives and within her own culture. In France, she has a family that she loves, but to whom she will always be an outsider.

In writing this chapter about Hejaz and her personality, I have come to realise that there can be no doubt about her commitment and loyalty towards her country, but a question has arisen regarding the strength of her relationship with her husband. I believe that when Hejaz left her young children, she intended to return to them soon, but her father’s needs and illness consumed ten years of her life. After ten years, Lara and Adam became independent adults who had been influenced by western culture. Hejaz faced a difficult choice in her life; either remaining in her own culture and country, Saudi Arabia, which she loves, but without Ahmed,

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<sup>95</sup> Covering the head with a scarf for women, which is part of the Islamic religion

Lara and Adam; or to return to the western culture as a stranger, and to her family who will not abandon the culture in which they grew up.

In March 2012, Hejaz decided to resign from Princess Nora University and go back to her family in France. She had no one who needed her in Saudi Arabia and would have had to work for ten more years at the Princess Nora University in order to complete her apprenticeship and retire with a monthly salary. Hejaz decided to give up her career in Saudi Arabia because she could not spend another ten years away from her husband and children. Hejaz had many plans and unaccomplished goals in her life that she had to sacrifice in order to meet the demands of her family.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Living in a bubble: Being a Saudi woman academic

#### Introduction

In the earlier chapters of this thesis I described Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz as I experienced them during our conversations. I included my own reflections in the four stories. In offering a holistic picture of the four academic women, I focused on their determination and strength in being academics, their roles in their families, and their abilities to deal with the challenges they face in becoming academic researchers. It is inevitable that they are affected in one way or another by the conservative Saudi Islamic culture in which they live. The emotions that pervade their stories speak to their challenges.

In this chapter, I bring together the four stories to highlight commonalities and differences that the women experienced through their academic journey, with some support from the literature review. My intention is to understand what challenges they face as academics in a conservative Islamic culture, and what strategies they use to overcome these challenges in ways that conform to the Islamic culture, while simultaneously helping them to move forward as women academics. I set these findings against the theoretical framework of Activity Theory (AT) and thereby seek to contribute new knowledge that I believe will provide some depth to understanding how Saudi academic women cope in a conservative religious culture. I use the notion of ‘activity’ to refer to the process of becoming researchers. In so doing, I respond to the main research question: *How do Saudi women researchers perceive their role at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?*

In this chapter I show that the notion of an identity, as constructed by an individual and the social context, is a powerful tool in determining the actions of an individual. In his Activity Theory (AT), Engeström (1999, p. 34) argues that the interaction between internalisations (individual actions) and externalisations (activities around humans) is the focus of an activity. I argue that because identity differs between individuals, actions differ. I agree with Engeström that an individual’s actions are shaped by the tools described in AT, but in my



opinion, he has neglected the power of identity in determining action. In an effort to extend Engeström's (1999) notion of AT, I argue that identity is hegemonic in determining the actions of an individual in any activity. In the Saudi case, religion and culture are an inextricable and intimate part of that identity and become the most dominant determinant of action. Hence, I do not consider only individual actions as internalisations, but I also take into account the identity of the agents of an activity.

Religious people may rebel against “movement culture”<sup>96</sup> which introduces new types of behaviour that may be against their beliefs (Williams, 2003, p. 317). Although the Saudi culture is Muslim, it has exceeded the concept of conservatism in Islam, to form an extremely conservative culture that rejects ‘movement culture’. The Saudi community works in a narrow range of adaptation within the broader Islamic religion, which itself embraces more flexible values. Islam encourages and urges people to develop and progress within the Islamic framework. On the other hand, the Saudi culture exhibits a reluctance to adopt new ‘intruding’ thoughts or ideas. Hence, the Saudi culture is more conservative than other Muslim cultures.

This chapter explores the theoretical position outlined in my conceptual framework and its applicability to my research findings. In summary, my argument is that the four Saudi academic women are profoundly affected by their identity as religious women living in a conservative Islamic culture. The six tools of AT are not used in a vacuum, but are shaped by the culture in which the activities take place (Kaptelinin et al., 1995, p. 191). These six tools are subject, object, community, rules, division of labour and the mediating artifacts. Engeström (1999) describes the mediating artifact as the “auxiliary stimulus” (p. 29). Further, in extending our understanding of AT, Engeström (1999) argues that “humans are controlled either from the outside by society or from the inside by themselves” (p. 29). I show that the activities and challenges faced by academic women in Saudi Arabia take place in a space that is formed by their conservative identities. The four Saudi academic women who participated in this study are controlled by both themselves and their society. In other words, the distinction that Engeström makes between the outside and the inside is blurred in the women involved in this study, because their individual actions are strongly linked to their society and correlated with their activities.

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<sup>96</sup> Changing cultural practices in different aspects of people's lives.

The Saudi community is a homogenous community built on a conservative religious culture, and the majority of individuals within the community are conservative religious people. Hence, an individual's desires are met by the community and vice versa; however, contradiction and conflict can sometimes occur. Therefore, internal activities (spirituality and belief) that shape the religious identity of the academic women cannot be understood in terms of AT if they are analysed separately from external activities, because internal and external activities are in a constant state of interaction. I used the six main tools of AT to organise the themes that emerged from the data, and to analyse the data in further detail. I believe that tensions and coherences between these tools not only yield the outcome of an activity, but also lead to change in the identities of the four participants in my study (who are the agents in this activity), and the perceptions of themselves as academic researchers.

I have chosen to use the metaphor of a *bubble* to emphasise that these four Saudi academic women are living within their conservative Islamic culture which formed their identities as conservative Muslim women and surrounds all their actions and decisions wherever they are, in their own country or abroad. The *bubble* is the protective Saudi Islamic culture that surrounds their lives. I argue that it is important to take account of the Islamic framework when considering any challenges or experiences they face. The metaphor of the *bubble* also draws attention to the fact that they are culturally and spiritually isolated from the rest of the world and their world is a small one, protected by a strong religious and cultural framework. This isolation occurs because the Saudi culture exceeds and exaggerates the regulations of the Islamic religion, resulting in an extremely conservative culture.

Academic women from different countries and diverse ideological backgrounds, perceive their educational successes and challenges differently, drawing upon their own beliefs, culture and education system. According to Shah (2010) "there is a need to recognise that people from diverse philosophical, ideological and faith backgrounds conceive and perceive educational leadership differently, particularly across the gender divide, drawing upon their beliefs, values and knowledge sources" (p. 28). From this standpoint, I argue that the four Saudi academic women in this study have been challenged through their academic journey in ways that are different from western academic women, for example in visiting libraries which is possibly not so difficult for western academic women. Although this study does not conduct any comparison between western and Saudi academic women, the literature review offers some insight into various challenges that western academic women face.

In summary, I illustrate in this chapter the extent of feelings of Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz about their academic achievements while being women of faith. I clarify that being academics and keeping their identity as Muslim women mean a great deal to each of them, so much so that they would be unhappy if either of those aspects of their lives were to be compromised. All four women were very clear about their love of being academics in Saudi Arabia and nowhere else. All of them indicated they still have more to contribute to academia and more research that they intend to conduct.

I use the following three themes that emerged from my findings and interpretations of the data as a way of understanding the main research question:

- Family and cultural role: a fine line between support and control
- Challenges through the academic journey
- The Saudi identity

It would be appropriate to begin this chapter by highlighting the family roles of Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz within my conceptual framework.

### **1. Family and cultural role: a fine line between support and control**

The narratives of Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz explore how religious and spiritual values and beliefs have influenced their experiences as academic women. They live as religious Saudi women in the epistemological space of their life and work.

Under this theme, I examine the data that speaks to elements of the Saudi culture. I focus on two elements that overlap strongly. The first is the family role. All four academic women are strongly affected by the role of their families in their lives. The family role consists of loving, sensitivity, encouraging, emotions, advising, supporting and controlling. The second element is the role of people around the academic women – their community – who have strong views on the Saudi culture and are often seen to be speaking on behalf of that culture. The Islamic religion and cultural beliefs strongly affect the participants, their families and other people living around them.

According to Elyani (2011), the family role within the Saudi culture is fundamental. I show how Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz have been supported or controlled throughout their academic life by their families and the people around them. These four academic women lean

on their families and absorb their love, strength, support and guidance, even if their families control them. I argue that all their actions take place under the umbrella of the ideology of the Saudi conservative culture. However, these actions are not always the best for them as academics, or for the advancement of academia in Saudi Arabia.

### ***‘Living with’ and not alone***

Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz became successful in their academic lives as a result of their ambitions and the strength they displayed in the face of all the challenges they encountered; however, in one way or another they have been guided and controlled by their families and their community, as Salma said: *“honestly, the community guides you sometimes to choose your future under their expectations”*. Therefore, they are not living alone. They are living within their families who share with them their decisions and efforts to build their future. A Saudi woman is sometimes a victim of her community’s opinions because of the conservative culture in which she lives. In the name of Islam, many Saudis, especially men, consider mixed genders in the workplace to be taboo, although this is not a principle of Islam. Since genders are separated and isolated from each other in the education sector, many very conservative women end up being academics, such as the case of Asir.

Perhaps Asir’s story is the clearest example of this type of family control: *“I wanted to be a medical doctor, but my family refused that I be a doctor and work in hospitals”*. Asir accepted her family’s decision. Furthermore, she did not complete her postgraduate studies immediately after graduation because her brother, who became the family’s guardian after her father’s death, refused on the grounds that she should marry instead. Asir wouldn’t have succeeded if she had married a man who denied her wish to complete her academic path, or who prevented her from doing so.

Asir was torn between being a wife and a researcher at the same time. This may seem normal and not a unique dilemma, since many academic women around the world are wives and mothers. However, this was a challenge for Asir who was accustomed to the higher education policy in Saudi Arabia which emphasises the preparation of Muslim women to practice a particular profession only while maintaining their role as mothers (Alageel, 2005, p. 114). As

a Saudi woman, and according to the university goals<sup>97</sup>, Asir's role is to be a wife and a mother first, and then a scientist and a worker.

Asir is privileged as a Saudi academic woman to have a nanny for her children, as opposed to Donna Nelson, the western academic mother who used to take her son to the laboratory and put him in a playpen in the middle of the room, even when he was sick (Nelson, 2005). Even though Asir had the services of a nanny, she chose to bring her responsibility as a mother into her workplace.

One time I was busy in the lab and my nanny was busy cleaning too. I left my three months old daughter on a table. The blanket under her was moving as a result of her movement. Later, she fell down onto the floor from the table, on her face. Her forehead was marked from the line between the ceramic tiles that she fell on. Alhamdulillah<sup>98</sup> nothing bad happened to her. (Asir)

Asir was reluctant to leave her daughter at home with the nanny, in case her husband would criticise her for not being a good mother. Thus she exposed her daughter to danger and jeopardized her safety by taking her to the laboratory, in order to validate her husband's decision to support her in completing her academic path. So, Asir and Donna both took their children to the laboratory, but for different reasons – Donna because she had no one to care for her child, and Asir because she did not want to jeopardise her husband's sanction of her studies. Another example of Asir's commitment to family life was to give birth to five children, four of them during her postgraduate studies. Although she was young and could have postponed her pregnancies, it was necessary to have a boy, based on her community beliefs and to please her husband. As she said with a joyous tone and a smile on her face: "*God blessed me with a boy*" after four girls.

Asir faced this challenge of balancing her identity as a mother and an academic researcher. She accepted the cultural norm of being controlled by her husband (and community), who could prevent her from continuing on her academic journey. She followed her ambition to choose her own way as a researcher, even it put her and her daughter in danger, and she was aware of that. During my conversations with Asir, she did not confess to the power of her husband being the leader in their marriage; nevertheless, she continues to balance her life and follow his decisions in order to maintain the success of the marriage. Even though bringing

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<sup>97</sup> To work on building a girl's personality fully in order to carry out her duty in life as a wife, mother, scientist and worker by providing her with the knowledge and the required skills to tackle whatever comes her way (Princess Nora University webpage, 2012).

<sup>98</sup> Thank God

her daughter to the laboratory put her at risk of physical harm, it brought Asir peace of mind by placating the norms and expectations of her community.

Asir is not allowed to travel alone *“I can’t travel alone. My husband will refuse and my society rejects this idea”*. Asir did not fight for her rights as a researcher or weaken her identity by trying to grasp all opportunities. She accepted her situation and did not try to enlarge the bubble around her. She worked only within the limitations and opportunities that were available to her.

Every time I spoke to Asir, I saw victimisation and sacrifice in her tone and attitude towards her family. I felt sympathy as I saw sadness in her eyes, for example, that she cannot spend a year abroad to improve her English. In trying to be a good mother and wife, Asir thinks that if she were to ask a little for herself, such as taking an English course, this would make her selfish and a bad mother. She is very sensitive about what her family might feel, and the need for them to decide for her. I suggest that Asir does not know how to share the experiences of being an excellent academic researcher with her family; if she asked for her needs as a researcher, it might imply a failure of her marriage.

On the other hand, there is Salma who was able to use all her chances to improve herself as a researcher, without contradicting Islamic beliefs or Saudi regulations and law. Since a Saudi woman cannot travel without being accompanied by her Mahram (a male family member, *Najran*<sup>9</sup>, 2010), Salma always tries to convince her husband or brother to travel with her to attend conferences abroad. She has a very conservative and religious identity as Asir does, but Salma has a strong personality that allows her to fight and not to give up too easily.

Although Salma travels abroad and participates in mixed gender conferences, she does not use public laboratories.

There are very well prepared labs in King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre. I went there several times, but I couldn’t work easily. I wasn’t comfortable while I was in the lab. There were many men around me. I am a very conservative person. I can’t take off my veil, and I don’t feel comfortable working while I am wearing it. I wish they had a separate section for women. (Salma)

Salma could not change her identity or step out of her bubble because she fears being judged by people around her. However, she took a bold step when she asked her father to build her a laboratory of her own, which helped her to become a successful researcher: *“My father established a new lab for me in the garden of his new house. It was very good for me to use”*. The Saudi woman scientist Almutairi confirms that the courage to make and embrace tough

decisions is the basis of success (Alomran, 2012). In Salma's case, there is a paradox in considering whether her father's action was parental support or control. Working in a public laboratory would have provided experience for her in working with people, and would have been less expensive; however, her father may have been upset if his daughter was working in a public laboratory in the presence of men. But if her father had not established a private laboratory for her, her ability to conduct scientific research would have been limited and she could have been lost to academia as a researcher. Salma is now considered to be one of the best researchers in Princess Nora University. Ironically, a large segment of Saudi society, including her father, would have criticised Salma if she had worked in public laboratories with men. While Salma had the luxury of her own laboratory, this is not an answer for all conservative women in Saudi Arabia. It was only as recently as 2007 that many research centres were established with sections for women. Salma and other academic women can now use these public research centres.

During my conversations with Salma and Asir, they showed that they were supported by their families and not controlled, as one might surmise. They did not experience this as control, because their identity is shaped by the assumption that a father or a husband has the right to direct his daughter or wife. In summary, the line between support and control is blurred; these academic women are really 'living with' and not alone. What is clear is that without the support of their husband or father respectively, Asir and Salma wouldn't have been able to pursue their academic careers.

Building on my conceptual framework, I have shown that Salma and Asir's conservative identities and their individual actions (internal activities) exhibit the same values as their families and the community around them (external activities). There is no tension or contradiction between the two (internal and external) activities; however, these individual actions within the conservative community did not encourage the best from the agents (Salma and Asir) in being academic researchers, which is the AT activity under consideration. Salma and Asir's families supported them within the borders of the Saudi culture; however, they should have expanded these borders a little to provide more support to enable the women to become better academic researchers, without exercising so much control over them.



### *Centralising the father*

Saudi women do not go against the wishes of their parents, especially their fathers, since they receive all their social protection and well-being from their parents. Salma, Najd and Hejaz had a strong relationship with their fathers. They mentioned their fathers' support when I interviewed them, as Salma said: *"I am lucky to have an educated father to help me to buy things that I needed for my research"*. The fathers of Najd and Hejaz also played a major role in their daughters' academic journeys. Hejaz mentioned that her father was supportive of her ever since she was a child, for example, by buying her books. Although Hejaz left everything behind, even her children and husband, to take care of her father for ten years, she did not regret it. I would have thought it preferable for Hejaz to take her father to live with her in France near her other family, husband and children. This would have balanced taking care of her two families, her father, as well as her children and husband; however, her father definitely wanted to remain in Saudi Arabia, and she may even have wanted an excuse to stay at home. In my conversations with Hejaz, she mentioned her father's support before her husband's. From her story it appeared that her husband supported her more than her father, but perhaps her father's recent death made her feel that her father had supported her more.

Hejaz put her father on a pedestal and her grief at her loss was still evident when I interviewed her. It reminded me of the Saudi scientist Sindi who, while receiving her prize, wished for the presence of her father who supported her throughout her academic life and who had passed away four months earlier (Alrwais, 2010). When Hejaz talked about her father's death, it was clear that she had lost more than a father. She had lost her roots that had kept her in her country while caring for him. Her father's illness that kept Hejaz near him offered her the chance of finding herself again. She had not lost her Saudi identity while living in France, but was able to identify with it more easily in her own country.

Najd spent some time taking care of her father, considering it her duty towards him. At the same time, she improved herself as an academic researcher by taking an English language course, as she said: *"When my father got sick, I spent six years taking care of him. He went to the USA to receive medical treatment. I went with him. I took six months of an English language course"*. Najd lost the psychological and moral support that she had received from her father, and his illness prevented her from being an active researcher for many years.

In summary, it appears that community and culture are the strongest forces in the lives of Hejaz and Najd. The power of community, which is one of the six tools in the AT, is so



invasive that even their identity is formed by loyalty to community and culture. In their cases, the authority and centrality of the father overrides all other commitments. While Hejaz and Najd were taking care of their fathers, they improved themselves as academics, but this was a slow process. I argue that a good academic researcher shouldn't be prevented from conducting research with the goal of advancing their career; however, Najd and Hejaz would have given up their career for the sake of their fathers.

### *Do you know someone?*

“Do you know someone?” This question is often asked in the Saudi community, referring to finding a man who can make something happen easier or faster. A *middleman*<sup>99</sup> or intermediary is a common service that people seek when they know someone working in the administration, who can help them achieve what they need. A middleman is always a man in a powerful position, leading many people who work under him. So a simple phone call from him to people working under him will get them to do as he asks. This phenomenon of a middleman is something that was commonly experienced by the participants in this study during their academic lives.

Najd knew someone working in the Institute of Management Library who helped her to get restricted information about Saudi Arabia that she needed and could not find anywhere else<sup>100</sup>. Salma's father used to work in the General Presidency for Girls Education. He knew many men who worked in the men's administration (which was more powerful than the women's administration), the details of their positions, and what they are able to do for him. He used his position and authority by calling a man in the men's administration and getting him to register Salma in the major of her choice<sup>101</sup>. Even Asir received help from a middleman who called the head office of the department to give her a new device that she needed in the laboratory<sup>102</sup>. A similar thing occurred for Hejaz – she knew a person who worked in the General Education Ministry who helped her to get information that she needed for her research<sup>103</sup>.

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<sup>99</sup> A middleman is a person who makes things or procedures easier to achieve according to the desired outcome.

<sup>100</sup> See p. 179.

<sup>101</sup> See p. 135.

<sup>102</sup> See p. 171.

<sup>103</sup> See p. 198.

It appears that the community sometimes worked together in helping and supporting Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz through their academic journey to become researchers. But such support remains the privilege of well-connected people. Obviously not everyone has the same opportunity as Salma clarified, pointing out that some women are in high positions because they are well connected. Krieger (2007) states that in Saudi Arabia “faculty promotions usually have more to do with seniority and political connections than with the quality of a professor’s teaching or research” (p. 1). This is an important issue that should be considered. Making use of the service of a middleman by academics is not always considered favourably.

An example of how the community can act in ways that are disadvantageous to education is Asir’s experience of injustice when she was a deputy in the Parameters Preparation College. The dean of that college evaluated Asir’s work as ‘very good’ rather than ‘excellent’. This was because the other deputy, Najla, was well connected and if she had not received an excellent evaluation, highly positioned people could have caused trouble for the dean<sup>104</sup>. While individuals may benefit from such practices, the nation does not. Nonqualified academics should not enjoy unfair advantages over qualified academics as a result of a simple phone call. Such treatment could lead highly qualified academics to feel devastated and no longer willing to compete on such uneven grounds. Furthermore it will have an adverse effect on academia in the future. I suggest the need to establish fair competition between academics as an essential element in filling faculty positions. Recruitment and promotion in academia should be based on qualifications and experience, not the influence of intermediaries.

Although Asir experienced this challenge of unfair treatment by the dean, her identity was shaped by avoiding competition over an administrative position; instead she returned to being an educator. Thus she channelled all her power and energy into conducting research and teaching students. Again, in this activity of the four academic women becoming researchers, it appears that the AT tool of community played a big role in shaping them. People around them in their community either played a supportive role, or impeded their success in becoming academic researchers.

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<sup>104</sup> See p. 171.

## 2. Challenges through the academic journey

Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz faced a variety of challenges in Saudi Arabia, some of them within their institution and some from external influences. Since Hejaz spent many years in western countries, she experienced fewer challenges compared to Salma, Asir and Najd. Under this theme, I have divided the challenges they experienced into three headings: visiting libraries and seeking information, qualifications of academics, and cooperation between academics.

### *Visiting libraries and seeking information*

My literature review shows that the challenges faced by Saudi academic women are different from those experienced by western women. For example, because of their gender, academic women are not allowed to visit some libraries in Saudi Arabia (Alhwaity, 2008). Salma and Asir did not complain about this, because they are very conservative and want to have a separate section for women in laboratories and libraries. In fact, Alsalem (2006) suggests enlarging the women's section in the King Fahd National Library. Hence, my sample consisting of Salma and Asir supports my argument that sometimes their identity as academic women and their conservative culture may be well aligned, although this direction may not be the best for the improvement of conditions in academia. On the other hand, Najd exhibited conviction in her words, *"I refuse to be in a small part of the library and not to be allowed to get to the basic area of the library. I am a researcher and I want to feel free going around in all libraries"*. Najd wants to break all boundaries when visiting libraries. She wants to enjoy the feeling of being a researcher without any restrictions due to her gender. She valued the opportunity she had of visiting the Library of Congress in the USA. Although she was not allowed to copy materials or write anything down, that library at least respected her desire to seek knowledge<sup>105</sup>.

I believe that Najd was able to expand the bubble surrounding her by desiring more rights in visiting libraries, in line with what male researchers expect. She is not asking for something that is against her religion. Visiting libraries in the presence of men is not a taboo in Islam; it is only her culture that segregates genders in all public facilities. She rejects this limitation because it restricts her freedom as a researcher. On the other hand, Salma and Asir are not

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<sup>105</sup> See p. 191.

able to enlarge the bubble that surrounds their identity, even in their own country. Salma refuses to work in laboratories in the presence of men, and Asir is influenced by the idea that women are not allowed to visit a place of mixed genders.

Academic support for researchers includes being able to access the information they need. If a researcher cannot find the required information for her research, then she may not be able to complete her project successfully. Hence, I believe that information is the most powerful tool that should be available for researchers. Being able to access the required information was a challenge faced by Salma, Asir and Najd. However, this time it was not due to their gender, but because Saudi Arabia is a developing country that provides limited information for researchers, especially information that deals with political topics. Saudi Arabia controls the publication of particular books, such as those that might contradict the Saudi culture, system or beliefs. Certain books are not allowed in Saudi Arabia's libraries. There is no freedom to publish in Saudi Arabia, so some Saudi writers publish their books in other countries such as Egypt or Lebanon. Fernea, the American academic woman, asserts that "central control" in Saudi Arabia was evident, and that "while the telephone system, the libraries, and the bookstores appeared excellent, sources of information were not yet available to the public" (Fernea, 1998 p. 335).

Aleqt's (2007) study points out that some information centres and institutions do not release information, or prevent people from obtaining it by various means. Najd, who conducts research about topics dealing with political subjects in Saudi Arabia, faces this challenge. The Saudi Government does not release certain information, such as information about political geography, for reasons of national security<sup>106</sup>. Lots of information is secret, blocked, confidential, restricted or released only under certain conditions. I suggest that the Saudi Government should allow researchers to obtain the information they require for their research; even access to political information should be allowed, so as to enable valid research findings and honest and intellectual insights, based on accurate information. This is the role of researchers – to promote progress, find solutions for the country, and contribute to building the nation.

In Alabdulatif's (2007) study, 70.3% of the academic women stated that references are not available in libraries, and if they are, they are out of date and often in English, rather than in Arabic. Since Saudi Arabia is an educationally developing country, its libraries are simple

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<sup>106</sup> See p. 182.

compared to western countries, and they often do not contain updated information. On the contrary, Hejaz who lived and worked in the west, did not have a problem in visiting libraries. She found the libraries there to be highly satisfactory; in fact she said: *“The libraries are stunning”* (Hejaz). Her experience was the opposite of that of Najd and Salma who said: *“The library was very small and not qualified enough to have everything we search for”* (Salma).

When Hejaz compared the libraries in the west to the libraries in Saudi Arabia it became clear that the limited information in Saudi libraries opened doors for the four women to search libraries abroad and do their research in English. Salma and Hejaz have no problem in using English; nevertheless, both of them continued to improve their English language usage by reading and doing research in English. *“My English was very weak ... My English language is better now than before. I have no problem with the language”* (Najd). Although her English was originally weak, Najd did not give up. She improved herself by taking six months of English language classes in the USA. On the other hand, Asir, who also said: *“My English language is very weak”*, accepted this weakness and did not fight for more rights. Although she would like to improve her English, she is not encouraged to do so by her family or her institution. Since there are many Saudi academic women in a similar situation to Asir, I suggest that the Ministry of Higher Education should take steps to improve the English language skills of academics by holding courses for them inside Saudi Arabia and abroad.

This external challenge of weakness in using English and the difficulty of finding information in Arabic forced the participants to make some positive changes in their internal identities by improving their English language skills and becoming better at reading and doing research in English. As a result, they became better researchers who can participate internationally and represent new knowledge to the world using an international language. It appears that the mediating artifacts that provide an ‘auxiliary stimulus’, such as the ambitions and motivations of the four Saudi academic women, moved them to varying levels to address this challenge. They improved themselves by learning more English, which was achievable since learning languages does not conflict with their religious identity. In summary then, an external challenge led to the strengthening of internal abilities.

Building on my conceptual framework, it appears that the identities of the four academic women exhibit different levels of conservatism. As a result, their mediating artifacts, such as personality, ambition and motivation, produced different individual actions in dealing with

the ‘tool rules’ demarcated and explained by AT. The challenges of visiting libraries and finding information in Arabic are examples of such tool rules. The women addressed these challenges by improving their English language skills and conducting research in English. Asir’s personality caused her to accept her weakness in English and she did not seek to improve herself as the other three women did. It appears that the ‘tool’ of community played a role in Asir’s case. Her culture and family do not encourage her to find time for herself to take English courses in order to become a better academic researcher, which is the main purpose of this activity, namely for the four women to become researchers. Although Asir has the desire to become a successful academic researcher, her culture and community (the tool of community) have a stronger effect on her than her ambition (the tool of mediating artifacts).

### *Qualifications of academics*

Postgraduate studies in the Girls Education Colleges only became available in 1977, so there were no Saudi women holding degrees higher than a Bachelors degree at that time. As a result, most of the senior educators were foreigners. Devis (2000, p. 70) suggests that Saudi universities should avoid employing academics from foreign countries because they might not understand the Saudi culture. Another practical problem with foreign academics is that their work contract might end before their supervision of particular postgraduate students is completed. Salma, Asir and Najd all encountered this challenge during their postgraduate studies; their supervisor’s contract with the institution ended before the student’s research was completed, and there was no alternative supervisor available as Salma said:

One of my problems through my study was that my supervisor’s contract with the college was ended and they didn’t renew it with her. She went back to her country, Egypt. There were no Saudi doctors in our college. I had to complete my work with her even when she was in her country. I had to send everything to my Egyptian supervisor by mail which was so difficult at that time to have access to the internet from my house. All the responding from her took a long time to get back to me. (Salma)

This challenge at Princess Nora University is gradually being solved; Appendix G shows that the number of non-Saudi academics is less than the number of Saudi academics; however, there are more non-Saudi female academics (86) compared to non-Saudi male academics (57). It appears from the experiences of Salma, Asir and Najd that when hiring an educator, the institution places more importance on gender, over and above the qualifications of the educator. Asir experienced a non-qualified non-Saudi female supervisor during her

postgraduate study, who advised Asir to work unofficially with a non-Saudi male professor to supervise her work<sup>107</sup>. Also, Salma's doctoral supervisor wasn't a specialist in her field (Analytic Chemistry), but when she found a male doctor in a male university who was experienced in her field, he did not want to supervise her work because he was not employed by her institution<sup>108</sup>.

Devis (2000) states that it is necessary to focus on the qualifications of administrative and teaching staff in a university. I suggest that when hiring academic staff, Princess Nora University should be concerned about their qualifications before their gender. My point is not that academia should be mixed in terms of genders; rather if the activity is about improving academia, then the tools employed should fit this goal. However, it appears that in Saudi Arabia the goal of improving academia tends to be less important than the goal of preserving cultural norms.

I believe that female academics will gain more benefit from a qualified male educator than from a non-qualified female educator, who may be appointed just for the sake of preserving gender priorities. I do not consider that men are better than women, or that women are better than men; I suggest hiring academics based on their qualifications, rather than on their gender merely to comply with the Saudi cultural framework of gender separation. This could happen by loosening the Saudi culture and the identity of Saudi female academics, so as to accept a qualified male educator working with them.

As we have seen, Princess Nora University is concerned with hiring women because of their gender, even if they are not in the right positions. Furthermore, the participants in my study experienced that the university does not encourage them in conducting research, due to a lack of understanding of the value of research. Salma experienced this challenge:

Unfortunately some of the academic women who are in high positions are not educated enough or do not have the right certificate or major to qualify them for their positions. They achieved their positions because they served many years before young people like us appeared. As a result, they don't understand the benefit of scientific research.....The University doesn't support our research at all. We are three associate professors researchers. The labs are for the graduate and undergraduate students use only. (Salma)

Although there are only three associate professors in the department, the head office of department refused permission for them to use the laboratories, because laboratories are for

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<sup>107</sup> See p. 162.

<sup>108</sup> See p.139.



the use of students only<sup>109</sup>. When Salma asked the head office of department for permission to use the college laboratories, she refused instead of offering encouragement. She said to Salma: “*Enough Salma. Haven’t you had enough of your experiments?!*”

As a result, these educators had to use public laboratories like those in the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre. Since not everyone is able to establish a private laboratory as Salma did, I suggest that there should be some flexibility in the institutional regulations. The dean should allow associate professors to use the laboratory in order to conduct research that would improve education and make a contribution to the field of scientific research. If the institution had supported Salma from the start of her research, she would not have lost nine years conducting experiments in her private laboratory without a qualified person to guide her. Although Salma and Asir experienced unqualified academics in their work environment, they tried their best to cope with the situation.

When Salma faced the obstacle of not being allowed to use the college laboratory (under the tool of rules in AT), it reduced the progress of this activity in achieving the outcome of Salma becoming an academic researcher. However, Salma (the tool of subject) used her personality, professional qualification, ambition and motivation (the tool of mediating artifacts), as well as her father’s role (the tool of community) in building her own laboratory in the academic space (the tool of object), to accomplish her goal of being a Saudi academic woman researcher. Her individual actions in the face of this obstacle (the tool of rules) emerged from her identity as a conservative Saudi woman who does not wish to share laboratories with men, as well as her identity as a successful researcher who does not tolerate the idea of giving up.

### ***Cooperation between academics***

As revealed in the literature, gender is also taken into consideration when institutions hire staff members in western countries. It seems that academic women do not have the same organisational opportunities as men do because of their gender, which can be considered as discrimination against academic women (Heward, 1996; Martin, 2003; Drury, 2011; Dean, Bracken & Allen, 2011). Thanacoody et al. (2006) explain that “academic women experience greater isolation, higher levels of stress, a lower sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence, more difficulty in establishing relationships with colleagues, and the feeling of being an

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<sup>109</sup> See p. 150.



outsider in masculine cultures” (p. 3). Acker (2010) uses words that give the impression of women being outsiders and isolated in the working environment; “old boys”, “gentleman’s club”, “male dominated” and “a world of men” are common phrases describing the isolation of women academics in a male-dominated world. The experience of western academic women in being isolated from their male colleagues shapes a strong relationship between them to compete against their male colleagues.

A side effect of the gender segregation in educational institutions in Saudi Arabia is that women have opportunities to occupy high positions without competing with men. However, women then become peers on the same level and competition between them comes to the surface. In some cases, jealousy appears among women, that is motivated by competition instead of gender. As a result of such competition, Salma, Asir and Hejaz tend to prefer working individually rather than in groups. Hejaz experienced that after travelling for two weeks, she was surprised on her return that her colleague had not mentioned her in the project they had done together<sup>110</sup>. On the other hand, Najd moved herself out of the women’s sphere to cooperate with male academics, arguing that *“most of the people that I work with are men and outside the university”*.

I suggest that Salma, Asir and Hejaz need to work with other academics to share knowledge and experiences. They should seek to cooperate with women or men academics from other institutions. They need to face this external challenge with a stronger identity in order to become better academic researchers, rather than continuing to work individually. However, Salma is not sufficiently supported by her institution to contact and cooperate with international academics as she wishes:

I wish that we could have contact with scientists and researchers from abroad so that they can help us and learn from their experiences; but in order to do this we must have a good system to run and a big budget that we don’t have. (Salma)

It is clear that Salma believes that Saudi Arabia needs to cooperate with foreign scientists in the field of scientific research. This viewpoint assumes that foreign scientists are in a better position and have better experiences than Saudis. Salma’s wish shows the extent of her love for her country and how she is eager to improve academia in Saudi Arabia. It also shows that although she conducts her research individually, it is not that she prefers it this way; it is only because she seldom finds opportunities for cooperation among Saudi academics in her field,

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<sup>110</sup> See p. 205.

as she said: *“I tried with many colleagues around me even from other majors, but no one wanted to cooperate”*. (Salma)

I suggest that academic networking should take place and be considered as one of the goals in Princess Nora University. The most important goal in this activity is producing academic researchers. The division of labour is one of the six tools in this activity of AT. This tool (division of labour) concerns whether research is conducted individually or by collaborating with colleagues. Since Salma, Asir and Hejaz had experiences that resulted in a preference for working individually, they did not hesitate to choose this preference in conducting their research. This shows that this tool (division of labour) is the weakest tool among all the tools of AT.

### **3. The Saudi identity**

Saudi Arabia is a country which allows a Muslim woman her full rights to practice the Islamic religion and follow conservative practices such as being fully covered to avoid harassment or mistreatment. A Saudi woman can wear the Hijab fully covering her face, without this being a problem or a barrier to finding a job or completing her studies, as it might be in many other countries. Thus, the four Saudi academic women in this study prefer to live and work as academic researchers in Saudi Arabia, within a space that resonates culturally, spiritually and intellectually with their Islamic religion and Saudi culture.

The Saudi identities of the four academic women are an intricate part of their lives, as they said:

I am proud to be a Saudi female researcher. I can't live outside Saudi Arabia, but as an academic researcher, I would prefer to live in Saudi with the western atmosphere of being able to do research without the barriers and difficulties we encounter in Saudi Arabia. (Salma)

I would like to take good things from the west, such as being able to conduct research easily. However, I like to give back to the country, Saudi Arabia, something according to what I received from it. (Asir)

I am happy. I can't live outside Saudi Arabia. I would like to have more freedom in conducting research and getting information that I need and can't get from other resources besides Saudi resources. I am proud to be a female scholar.....I don't like to be in a western country and I don't like to be in another country. I am building for my

daughters<sup>111</sup> here. However, I would like to gain good experiences from other countries, but serve only my country. (Najd)

I swear to God that I love being here in Saudi Arabia. (Hejaz)

Hejaz said these words from the depth of her heart. She lived in western countries in the past, but her identity as a Saudi woman affects her and will do so forever. Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz know that the west provides better education and support for research, which justifies the fact that some Saudi women conduct research in the west, such as Khawla Alkuraya, Ghada Almutairi and Hayat Sindi, the researchers who were mentioned in Chapter Three. Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz would like to have the atmosphere and benefits of conducting research in the west, but they made it clear that they can live only in Saudi Arabia.

The vision of Princess Nora University reveals that the expectations of this institution regarding the role of women academics is to be a scientist in keeping with the Saudi identity and emphasising the importance of the Saudi culture, by “building a society of knowledge within a framework of Islamic cultural and social values for the community” (Princess Nora University webpage, 2012). My data shows that being a Saudi and an academic researcher means much to the four women in this study. Although they did work in leadership positions, they prefer teaching students and improving education, as Asir said, *“I like to teach and work in labs. I want to give my students good information”*. They believe in themselves as mother figures who want to raise their community by providing the best of their knowledge to their students, whom they count as their ‘daughters’, which Najd referred to many times:

I don’t like to work in administration. I like to deal with students. They are my sisters and daughters. I love to teach.....I love to research especially about things that give benefits to my daughters....I am building for my daughters here. (Najd)

The identities of the four women are shaped as academic researchers in that they feel there is no limit to conducting research, or any age at which to stop seeking information. Although they have held various administrative positions, they prefer to be educators and conduct research. They continue being eager, showing the ambition to learn more, and to keep going as researchers for the rest of their lives because *“education has no limit and no special age for it. I hope that I work harder in these coming years”*. (Hejaz)

Ambition is still there in my life. I consider myself still young and I will have a long journey throughout my academic life. I am still in my first steps of doing research and learning. I haven’t had enough yet. (Asir)

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<sup>111</sup> She means the youth in her country.

Academic researchers develop new identities with an alternative vision of the future (MacLure, 1996). Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz have become more confident as scholars, which I often felt during my conversations with them. *“I am a scholar already, but I would like to improve myself better in the future. I am a member in many associations and organisations”*. Although Najd’s words exhibit confidence, she still feels the need to gain more knowledge.

According to Witherspone and Mitchell (2009), black women in academia do not separate their spirituality from the decisions they make in their work environment. Toni the black academic woman in Witherspone and Mitchell (2009) said, “I don’t make decisions in my personal life without following the Word” (p. 660). Furthermore, Saudi women do as the scientist AlKuraya advises, “Be always a fighter, your faith has to be your weapon, and always put your trust in God” (Mustafa, 2010).

Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz thank God for everything in their lives because they are women of faith. They do not separate their spirituality and beliefs from the decisions they make during their academic journey, as Salma said: *“I spent that summer vacation crying and praying to God to be accepted as a PhD student”*. They are happy with what they have because they believe that it is their fate: *“Alhamdole Allah I am so happy at this stage to be an academic researcher”*. (Salma)

I am happy with everything that God gave me. I have achieved everything I want. I believe in destiny. My soul is satisfied that this is my fate from God. I am blessed in my life. (Asir)

Salma, Asir, Najd and Hejaz are aware of being controlled by their Saudi culture and their conservative identity. Their identity and actions are inseparable. Their identity will always be shaped by their conservative Saudi culture that creates a bubble around them. The same applies to me as a Saudi academic woman. I do not suggest bursting this bubble that guides us, or losing our Saudi identity; but I suggest widening the bubble around us to encourage better Saudi academic researchers in the future, within the Islamic framework. Most of these limitations are the result not only of the culture, but also of community perceptions towards academic women. Thus it is time to change community perceptions and expand our bubble by making greater contributions and reinforcing our presence, not only within the walls of our institutions but also beyond them.

In short, a Saudi academic woman as an agent of an activity does not face more or fewer challenges than a western academic woman. Her actions in her activity as a researcher are merely different due to her religious identity. The challenges are different, not only because of the conservative culture in which she lives, but also because of her mediating artifacts, which provide an ‘auxiliary stimulus’ in order to deal with these challenges. Her mediating artifacts that she uses in this activity, such as her ambitions, personality and motivations, are derived from her identity that in turn is shaped by her conservative Saudi culture. Since her culture is different from that of a western academic woman, her identity is different. Hence her mediating (ambitions, personality and motivations) are also different.

### **Significance of this research**

The challenges experienced by women academics throughout the world have strong similarities; however, the peculiarities of the Saudi context permeate the lives of academic women in ways that are very different from their western counterparts. This study is one of the few that investigate women academics in Saudi Arabia. It challenges western notions of Saudi women and Saudi women academics in particular.

This study is valuable for western academics in that it allows them to generate a picture of how Saudi academic women characterise interactions within their universities, how they face their particular challenges, and how these challenges have an impact on and affect their experiences throughout their career as academic women of faith. It was not possible during this study to investigate other related fields. For example it may be useful to understand the visions for higher education in Saudi Arabia in the global context.

This study will be valuable for other institutions in Saudi Arabia to become aware of the challenges that most Saudi academic women face as researchers in Saudi institutions. This will contribute to reducing such challenges in the future, since most Saudi women’s institutions have a similar nature, circumstances and goals. Indeed, I believe that this study makes a contribution by highlighting the academic obstacles and challenges that Saudi academic women experience in their institutions, such as the lack of institutional support for research, which is part of their role as educators. It is successful research and its corresponding outputs that will provide the country with the improvement and growth that every community seeks.

This study gives new meaning to the notion of accomplishing the desired goal of an activity as proposed in Activity Theory. This study has shown that these four Saudi academic woman as individuals experience different tensions through the activity of being academic researchers, and these tensions are experienced in a unique way because of their identity which is different from that of western women.

## **Conclusion**

In the activity of becoming researchers, the four Saudi academic women (subjects) used their personality, ambitions and motivations (tool of mediating artifacts) that are shaped by their Saudi conservative identity to undertake individual actions in the face of all the obstacles and challenges (tool of rules) they encountered during their academic journey in the space of academia (tool of object) to become academic researchers (the outcome of this activity). There is a huge intervention in this activity by their families and people around them, who represent the tool of community. In summary, most of the time the most two powerful tools in this activity are the mediating artifacts and the community, which work together and have a strong impact on the individual actions of the four women in facing all the obstacles and challenges (tool of rules) they encountered.

I believe that AT shapes new identity; in this study the identity of the participants was shaped after accomplishing the activity of being a researcher. Their identity has been shaped by all the internal (individual actions) and external activities that surround the four academic women; however, the effects differ from one participant to another, depending on her identity before she started the activity. Since belief is the wholeness of self, not a part of, or separated from an individual, the mediating artifacts of the four Saudi academic women in this study are used differently from those exhibited by western academic women. Therefore, their identities are shaped not only by the activity, but also by their strong religious identity and the influence of their community which dominates them. As a result, the challenges that the four women face through their academic journey are experienced differently from those faced by western academic women, because they live in a spiritual ‘bubble’ that simultaneously protects, yet isolates them from the western world. I believe that it is important to maintain the bubble because it signifies identity. At the same time, I propose that the bubble requires space in which to grow, in order to keep pace with the ‘movement culture’.

The Saudi academic women whom I have analysed in this study have succeeded as academic researchers while maintaining their identities and perceptions towards themselves as conservative religious women; furthermore they do not *give up* when confronted with obstacles or challenges. The religious identity of these four women who live in a conservative religious culture affects them strongly, not only in their private lives, but also through their journey as academic researchers. Yet their academic journeys provide evidence of a slow, quiet, yet determined ‘movement culture’ that is getting momentum in Saudi Arabia, allowing them to maintain their Saudi identity of which they are so proud. As an academic researcher myself, I have learned that there are no limitations – we can overcome all the barriers and challenges that present themselves, in order to succeed in our academic journeys. Yes, we can do it. It is time for us as Saudi academic women to improve education in our country by giving our best to our beloved land.

It is my hope that Princess Nora University should accomplish its vision, mission and goals, particularly to undertake a positive role in the field of scientific research which contributes to progress and to building a knowledge-based economy both locally and internationally, by conducting research, encouraging researchers, and establishing support centres (as mentioned in Chapter Two). At present however, there is a gap between the university’s goals and its outputs. I hope to see these goals implemented in real life, instead of remaining words on paper. If Princess Nora University accomplishes these goals, we can be confident that it holds the promise to become not only the biggest university in the world, but also one of the best.

## APPENDICES

Appendix (A): Statistics on Higher Education in 2005.

Appendix (B): Public Universities in Saudi Arabia.

Appendix (C): Private Higher Education Universities in Saudi Arabia offering Bachelors and Masters Degree programmes.

Appendix (D): Number of educators in public higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia in 2011.

Appendix (E): Number of Saudi students with Saudi government scholarship abroad in 2009.

Appendix (F): Colleges of Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University.

Appendix (G): Numbers of the faculty members in Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University 2011.

Appendix (H): Protocol letter of invitation to participate in a study.

Appendix (I): Letter of informed consent.

Appendix (J): Approval letter from Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University.

Appendix (K): The Ethics Clearance Certificate.



## APPENDIX (A) Statistics on Higher Education in 2005<sup>112</sup>

COLLEGE	STUDENTS		GRADUATES LAST YEAR		TEACHING STAFF		ADMIN STAFF		GENDER	ORGANISATION	
	TOTAL	SAUDI	TOTAL	SAUDI	TOTAL	SAUDI	TOTAL	SAUDI			
1	14425	13953	2809	2702	990	700	599	543	MALE	UMM- AL-QURA UNIVERSITY	
0	10559	10319	2290	2266	262	222	100	94	FEMALE		
12	11	24984	24272	5099	4968	1252	922	699	637	TOTAL	
5		4484	1507	844	215	429	417	476	473	MALE	THE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
0		0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	FEMALE	
5	0	4484	1507	844	215	429	417	477	474	TOTAL	
2		24622	23836	3684	3531	1337	1059	1455	1285	MALE	IMAM MOHMMAD BIN SAUD ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
0		7103	6979	1197	1153	143	131	63	39	FEMALE	
13	11	31725	30815	4881	4684	1480	1190	1518	1324	TOTAL	
5		32723	32121	5265	5156	2299	1392	2404	2009	MALE	KING SAUD UNIVERSITY
0		19047	18521	3222	3195	669	430	668	626	FEMALE	
19	14	51770	50642	8487	8351	2968	1822	3072	2635	TOTAL	
5		26195	25729	3764	3747	1518	1168	1012	813	MALE	KING ABDULAZIZ UNIVERSITY
1		18995	18242	2532	2513	799	649	301	279	FEMALE	
16	10	45190	43971	6296	6260	2317	1817	1313	1092	TOTAL	
9		8659	8013	1189	1118	896	288	1327	722	MALE	KING FAHD UNIVERSITY OF PETROLEUM & MINERAL
0		0	0	0	0	0	0	6	2	FEMALE	
9	0	8659	8013	1189	1118	896	288	1333	724	TOTAL	
	1	6182	6113	817	813	607	304	685	604	MALE	KING FAISAL UNIVERSITY
	0	6877	6750	705	704	172	94	154	116	FEMALE	
8	7	13059	12863	1522	1517	779	398	839	720	TOTAL	
	7	11020	10968	2587	2583	668	330	290	247	MALE	KING KHALID UNIVERSITY
	0	315	311	176	174	1	1	0	0	FEMALE	
10	3	11335	11279	2763	2757	669	331	290	247	TOTAL	
	19	4602	4601	967	967	375	190	272	258	MALE	MINISTRY OF HEALTH
	18	2685	2684	492	492	263	156	174	164	FEMALE	
37	0	7287	7285	1459	1459	638	346	446	422	TOTAL	
	17	30060	29995	3845	3845	1987	1496	340	334	MALE	Technical Edu. & Vocational Training
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	FEMALE	
17	0	30060	29995	3845	3845	1987	1496	340	334	TOTAL	
	0	0	0	0	0	522	6	16	14	MALE	MIN. OF EDU. / FEMALE COLLEGES
78	0	181655	180977	32185	32082	4965	2925	1049	1011	FEMALE	
	0	181655	180977	32185	32082	5487	2931	1065	1025	TOTAL	
	18	26423	26376	4281	4281	1989	855	340	329	MALE	MIN. OF EDU/ (TEACHERS COLLEGES)
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	FEMALE	
18	0	26423	26376	4281	4281	1989	855	340	329	TOTAL	
	2	3239	3239	347	347	246	58	161	131	MALE	ROYAL COMMISSION FOR JUBAIL AND YANBU
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	FEMALE	
2	0	3239	3239	347	347	246	58	161	131	TOTAL	
	2	745	653	0	0	88	15	72	38	MALE	PRIVATE COLLAGES
	3	522	385	0	0	94	31	123	85	FEMALE	
6	1	1267	1038	0	0	182	46	195	123	TOTAL	
	0	3140	3140	1135	1135	540	445	256	255	MALE	Institute of Public Administration
	0	523	523	173	173	59	41	42	42	FEMALE	
1	1	3663	3663	1308	1308	599	486	298	297	TOTAL	
	93	196519	190244	31534	30440	14491	8723	9705	8055	MALE	TOTAL
	100	248281	245691	42972	42752	7427	4680	2681	2459	FEMALE	
251	58	444800	435935	74506	73192	21918	13403	12380	10514	TOTAL	

<sup>112</sup> Ministry of Higher Education. 2005 Statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.mohe.gov.sa> (Accessed on 17/6/2011).

## APPENDIX (B)

### Public Universities in Saudi Arabia<sup>113</sup>

University	Location	Year established
Umm Al-Qura University	Mecca	1981
Islamic University	Medina	1961
Al-Imam Mohammad Bin Saud Islamic University	Riyadh	1953
King Saud University	Riyadh	1957
King Abdulaziz University	Jeddah	1387
King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals	Dhahran	1963
King Faisal University	Hafoof	1964
King Khalid University	Asir	1998
Qassim University	Ar Rass	2002
Taibah University	Medina	2003
Taif University	Taif	1980
University of Ha'il	Ha'il	2005
Jazan University	Jazan	2005
Al Jouf University	Sakaka hand Garayat	2005
Al Baha University	Baha	2006
University of Tabuk	Tabuk	2006
Najran University	Najran	2006
Northern Borders University	On the North of Saudi Arabia near the border of Iraq. In Rafha and Arar	2008
Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University	Riyadh	2008
King Saud Bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences	Riyadh, Jeddah and Al-Hasa	2008
University of Dammam	Many Science colleges spread in many cities in the Eastern Region	2009
University of Prince Salman in Kharj	Kharj, Hotat Bani Tamim, Aflaj, Sliel and Wadi Al-Dawasr	2009
Shagra University	Shagra, Guaiyah and Dwadmy	2008
Almajmaah University	Almajmaah, Zelfy, Alghat, Remah and Hotat Sdair	2009
Saudi Electronic University	Riyadh, Jeddah, Medina and Dammam.	2011

All these 25 public universities are newly established or merged from some existing colleges into one university. Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University is the only one in this list that is for women only; no colleges for males. The King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals is for males only. The remaining universities are for both males and females; however, they are segregated into two different campuses. Each campus has a number of colleges that could differ between the male and female campuses.

<sup>113</sup> For further information visit <http://www.mohe.gov.sa/>

## APPENDIX (C)

### Private Higher Education Universities in Saudi Arabia offering Bachelors and Masters Degree programmes

University	Gender	City	Started in
Prince Sultan University	Male and female	Riyadh	2000
Effat University	Female	Jeddah	2000
Arab Open University	Male and female	Riyadh	2002
Al Yamamah University	Male and female	Riyadh	2004
Fahd Bin Sultan University	Male and female	Tabuk	2005
Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University	Male and female	Alkhobar	2006
Alfaisal University	Male and female	Riyadh	2007
Dar Al Uloom University	Male	Riyadh	2008
King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST)	Male and female	Jeddah	2010

## APPENDIX (D)

### Number of educators in public higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia in 2011<sup>114</sup>

Total of educators in the 25 Public institutions of higher education in Saudi Arabia	Nationality	Holding PhD		Holding Master degree		Holding other diplomas		Total		
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
	Saudi	6 610	2 901	2 240	2 863	10 048	7 778	18 898	13 542	32 440
Non Saudi	9 944	3 978	2 859	2 228	1 861	857	14 664	7 063	21 727	
Total	16 554	6 879	5 099	5 091	11 909	8 635	33 562	20 605	54 167	

<sup>114</sup> For further information go to <http://www.mohe.gov.sa/>

## APPENDIX (E)

### Number of Saudi students with Saudi government scholarship abroad in 2009<sup>115</sup>

Gender	New registered students in 2009				Enrolled students				Graduates in 2009			
	Diploma	Under graduate	Post graduate	Total	Diploma	Under Graduate	Post graduate	Total	Diploma	Under graduate	Post graduate	Total
Male	55 316	81 397	5 731	142 444	100 346	232 477	10 514	343 337	20 798	28 838	3 289	52 925
Female	14 269	112 754	3 387	130 410	27 039	381 627	5 736	414 402	6 706	62 306	1 114	70 126
Total	69 585	194 151	9 118	272 854	127 385	614 104	16 250	757 739	27 504	91 144	4 403	123 051

<sup>115</sup> <http://www.mohe.gov.sa/ar/Ministry/Deputy-Ministry-for-Planning-and-Information-affairs/HESC/HESC-b/Pages/default.aspx> Accessed on 25 March 2012.

## APPENDIX (F)

### Colleges of Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University

College	Departments
Language and Simultaneous Translations	*English Language and Translation *French Language and Translation *German Language and Translation * Japanese Language and Translation
Management of Business Administration	*Business Management *Accounting *Economics *Systems
Arts	*Islamic Studies. *Arabic Language and Literature *English Language and Literature *History and Civilization *Geography *Libraries and Information *Reading Quran
Social Services	*Social Services
Computer and Information Sciences	*Computer Science *Networks and Communication Systems *Information Technology
Art and Design	*Arts and Printing. *Visual Communication Design *Photography and Art Appreciation
Education	*Curriculum *Psychology *Special Education for Disabled
The Domestic Economy	*Nutrition and Food Science *Clothing *Management Institutions of Family and Childhood
Kindergarten	*Child Psychology *Curriculum Department *Curricula and Teaching Techniques for Kindergarten *Culture and the Media Children
Nursing	*Medical and Surgical Nursing *Maternity Nursing and Obstetrics and Gynecology. *Pediatric Nursing *Department of Nursing Services *Nursing Mental Health *Community Health Nursing
Pharmaceuticals	*Drugs and Alternative Medicine. *Pharmaceutical Chemistry and Phytochemistry *Pharmacology and Toxicology *Pharmaceutics *Clinical Pharmacology
Physiotherapy	*Basic Science for Physical Therapy *Natural Treatment for Disorders of the Circulatory and Psychological for the Elderly *Natural Treatment for Disorders of the Nervous System and Muscle Surgery *Natural Treatment for Disorders of Growth, Development Stages and Surgery for Children *Physiotherapy for Musculoskeletal Disorders and Surgery *Natural Remedies for Surgery *Biomechanics *Natural Therapy for Gynecology, Obstetrics and Surgery
Science	*Mathematics *Physics *Biology *Chemistry
Preparing Teachers	Preparing Teachers

## APPENDIX (G)

### Numbers of the faculty members in Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University 2011<sup>116</sup>

College		Holding PhD		Holding Masters		Bachelor degrees		Total		
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
Science	Saudi		114		84		35		233	233
	Non Saudi	9	4					9	4	13
	Total	9	118		84		35	9	237	246
Education	Saudi	1	87		45		9	1	141	142
	Non Saudi	10	1					10	1	11
	Total	11	88		45		9	11	142	153
Preparing Teachers	Saudi		1		5		2		8	8
	Non Saudi		3						3	3
	Total		4		5		2		11	11
Arts	Saudi		229		87		39		355	355
	Non Saudi	10	4					10	4	14
	Total	10	233		87		39	10	359	369
Social Services	Saudi		44		19		3		66	66
	Non Saudi	2	3					2	3	5
	Total	2	47		19		3	2	69	71

<sup>116</sup> I obtained this information by email from each college of Princess Nora University (2011).

<b>Language and Simultaneous Translations</b>	Saudi		5		9		17		31	31
	Non Saudi	3	5		2			3	7	10
	Total	3	10		11		17	3	38	41
<b>Art and Design</b>	Saudi		3		3		3		9	9
	Non Saudi	2	4		1			2	5	7
	Total	2	7		4		3	2	14	16
<b>Kindergarten</b>	Saudi		1		5		15		21	21
	Non Saudi	2	5		2			2	7	9
	Total	2	6		7		15	2	28	30
<b>The Domestic Economy</b>	Saudi		43		51		21		115	115
	Non Saudi		11						11	11
	Total		54		51		21		126	126
<b>Pharmaceuticals</b>	Saudi				3		14		17	17
	Non Saudi		7		1				8	8
	Total		7		4		14		25	25
<b>Nursing</b>	Saudi				1		2		3	3
	Non Saudi	1	6		1			1	7	8
	Total	1	6		2		2	1	10	11
<b>Physiotherapy</b>	Saudi		1		5				6	6
	Non Saudi		5						5	5
	Total		6		5				11	11



<b>Computer and Information Science</b>	Saudi		1		28		32		61	61
	Non Saudi	6		3	7			9	7	16
	Total	6	1	3	35		32	9	68	77
<b>Management of Business Administration</b>	Saudi			3	24				27	27
	Non Saudi	9	7		7			9	14	23
	Total	9	7		10		24	9	41	50
<b>Deanship of Community Service</b>	Saudi						11		11	11
	Non Saudi									
	Total						11		11	11
<b>Total</b>	Saudi	1	529		343		232	1	1 104	1 105
	Non Saudi	54	65	3	21			57	86	143
	Total	55	594	3	364		232	58	1 190	1 248

## APPENDIX (H)

December 2011

Dear Doctor

### **PROTOCOL LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A STUDY**

My name is Mona Alsudis, and I am a registered PhD student in the Department of Education Management and Policy Studies at the University of Pretoria. I am currently conducting research in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the PhD degree. My research topic is **“How Saudi women educators perceive their role as academic researchers at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University”**.

The purpose of the study is to understand and explain the role of women academics in Saudi Arabia who live in a conservative religious culture and how they fulfil their research obligations. Moreover, I intend to investigate and understand challenges they face through their academic journey.

The primary research question of this study is: **How do Saudi women researchers perceive their role at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?**

The research sub questions are:

1. What are the expectations of princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University regarding the role of women academics?
2. What do women academics want for themselves professionally at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?
3. What are the challenges that women academics experience at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University?

I am writing to request you to participate in this study. The request for your participation is based on my judgement of your involvement as an academic researcher at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University in Saudi Arabia. Your participation will be confined to a series of semi-structured interviews, which is part of the research design. If possible, I would like to meet with you for three interviews, each lasting an hour and will be tape recorded, over a six week period. The dates, times and venues for these interviews will be at your convenience.

I would like to conduct the interviews in private outside the university to ensure confidentiality, and to minimize any potential unintended consequences of your participation in the study. Furthermore, the research will be conducted under Saudi law as well as according to the principles of the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Pretoria. I will also comply with the professional responsibilities of conducting research as outlined in the

University of Pretoria: Code of Ethics for Research. The professional responsibilities include: integrity, quality, and accountability.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and is based on informed consent. You thus have the right to decide for yourself whether or not you wish to participate in the research. I shall contact you within a week to establish your willingness (or otherwise) to participate in this study.

The principles of the University of Pretoria Faculty of Education Ethics Committee are:

- Voluntary participation in research, implying that the participants might withdraw from the research at any time;
- Informed consent, meaning that research participants must at all times be fully informed about the research process and purpose, and must give consent to their participation in the research;
- Safety in the participation, meaning that participants should not be placed at risk or harm of any kind;
- Privacy, meaning that the confidentiality and anonymity of participants should be protected at all times;
- Trust, implying that participants will not respond to any acts of deception or betrayal in the research process or its published outcomes.

It is in the context of the information that I have provided and in accordance with the stated ethical requirements that I am requesting your consent to participate voluntarily in the study. I undertake to ensure your confidentiality at all times.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of applicant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of supervisor**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

## APPENDIX (I)

To: The Respondent / Participants

Princess Nora University Bint Abdul Rahman University

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

### LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study. The focus of my study is to understand and explain the role of women academics in Saudi Arabia who live in a conservative religious culture, and how they fulfil their research obligations. Moreover, I intend to investigate and understand challenges they face through their academic journey.

I would like to conduct research amongst Saudi women educator researchers at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University. You will be requested to participate in a series of conversations and interviews with me. These will be conducted by me and consist of questions that deal with your views and personal beliefs about yourself as an academic researcher.

Participation in the study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. The confidentiality of all participants is assured. Your name(s) or any other data that could possibly identify you will not be used in the dissertation, which means that I will be the only one who knows your real name. These interviews are going to be tape recorded.

All the information collected from you during my research activities, including the draft chapter pertaining to your personal data will be stored safely stored for fifteen years in the University of Pretoria, even after the study is completed. Transcripts of interviews as well as the draft chapter pertaining to your data will be made available to you for comment before the data is used.

Attached is a consent form. Should you be willing to participate in this study, please read and sign the consent form.

Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. My contact details are:

Phone: 0027791786184

Email: [deem-at@hotmail.com](mailto:deem-at@hotmail.com)

I look forward to working with you.

Yours faithfully,

.....

Mona Alsudis

## CONSENT FORM

**I hereby agree to participate in this research project:** “How Saudi women educators perceive their role as academic researchers at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University”.

**I understand that I can withdraw as a participant in the research at any time.**

**I have received the contact details of the researcher should I need to speak about any issues which may arise from the research/study.**

**I understand that my identity and responses will be kept secure and will remain entirely confidential.**

.....

**Respondent / Participant signature**

**Date:** .....



## APPENDIX (K)



### RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

<b>CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE</b>	<b>CLEARANCE NUMBER :</b>	EM 11/10/05
<b><u>DEGREE AND PROJECT</u></b>	PhD	
	How Saudi women researchers perceive their role at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University	
<b><u>INVESTIGATOR(S)</u></b>	Mona Saleh Alsudis	
<b><u>DEPARTMENT</u></b>	Education Management and Policy Studies	
<b><u>DATE CONSIDERED</u></b>	18 July 2013	
<b><u>DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE</u></b>	APPROVED	

Please note:

*For Masters applications, ethical clearance is valid for 2 years*

*For PhD applications, ethical clearance is valid for 3 years.*

**CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS COMMITTEE** Prof Liesel Ebersöhn

**DATE** 18 July 2013

**CC** Jeannie Beukes  
Liesel Ebersöhn  
Prof V Pillay  
Prof WJ Fraser

This ethical clearance certificate is issued subject to the following conditions:

1. A signed personal declaration of responsibility
2. If the research question changes significantly so as to alter the nature of the study, a new application for ethical clearance must be submitted
3. It remains the students' responsibility to ensure that all the necessary forms for informed consent are kept for future queries.

Please quote the clearance number in all enquiries.

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