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**Against all odds: the successful leadership journey of a Saudi woman in a male-dominated STEM corporation**

Maha Aldaajani

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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

AGAINST ALL ODDS: THE SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP JOURNEY OF A SAUDI  
WOMAN IN A MALE-DOMINATED STEM CORPORATION

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

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August, 2023

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This dissertation, written by

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation, though mine in name, is truly a tribute to my late father, Abdullah Alotaibi, my guiding star, whose wisdom and teachings have profoundly shaped my journey. His life was a testament to the enduring power of education, his journey a narrative of resilience, dedication, and relentless pursuit of knowledge. His unwavering faith in education and its transformative potential profoundly influenced my own perspectives and aspirations. He was more than a parent to me, he was a



(1931 – 2017)

mentor, a role model, and a guiding light. His principles are embedded deeply in my heart, his words continue to echo in my mind, and his memory lights the path on which I tread. As long as he lived, he believed in me, ignited my passion for knowledge, and instilled the strength to pursue it. I am forever grateful for this. His legacy lives on - in the hearts of those who knew him, in the lives he touched, and in this academic work that his influence inspired. I miss him.

To my husband, Hamad Alzahid, my backbone, my devoted companion in every high and low, and my unwavering source of strength and motivation This journey would have been tougher without your constant support. Your belief in me, even when I doubted myself, fueled my drive and determination to see this journey through. You have been my confidant, my supporter, my anchor in the stormy seas of this academic pursuit. I am grateful beyond words for your love, patience, and support. I love you.

To my precious children, Lyla and Khalid, the sparks that light up my life, this work is dedicated to you. You are the heartbeat of my existence and the driving force behind my endeavors. Lyla, you are the kindest girl ever to have lived on this planet. Your encouraging Post-it notes and silly jokes were rays of light when I needed to laugh or take a break. Khalid, your giggles and

playful screams brought fun and joy throughout this journey. Lyla and Khalid, your smiles, waves of laughter, and unending curiosity inspired me to strive for excellence and to make you proud. I see a promising future in your innocent eyes, a world that can be bettered through knowledge, understanding, and empathy. This work is a testament to my desire to contribute to that future, for you and with you. I love you so much.

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I am exceptionally fortunate to have had Dr. Paula Thompson as the chairperson of my dissertation committee. Your expertise, patience, and unwavering belief in my abilities made a significant impact on this journey. Your ability to grasp and support my aspirations was instrumental in shaping this work. I deeply appreciate your empathetic guidance and the time you invested in my academic growth. Thank you.

I would also like to extend my sincerest appreciation to my committee members, Dr. Samaa Haniya and Dr. Lonnie McNamee. Your insights and thoughtful feedback enriched this work and pushed me to higher levels of understanding and critical thinking. Thank you.

My devoted husband, Hamad Alzahid, I am deeply grateful for your resolute support and unwavering commitment. Without you by my side, this journey would not have been possible. I know it has been a rollercoaster with our little kids riding along, BUT WE DID IT! Thank you, for being not just my partner in life, but also my partner in this significant achievement.

My dear friend, Maggie Sarebanha, words fall short of expressing my gratitude for your constant support throughout this journey. Your countless acts of kindness, from organizing playdates and sleepovers for our daughters to offering a peaceful sanctuary to work on my dissertation, have lightened my load immensely. You've been much more than a friend; you've been a cheerleader in my victories and a source of strength during hard times. Our children's

blossoming friendship is a reflection of our own bond and has provided them, and us, with precious memories. To you, Maggie, I express my deepest gratitude. Your compassion and understanding have been my haven, and for that, I am forever grateful.

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## ABSTRACT

Huda Al-Ghpson became the first Saudi woman in an executive leadership position at Saudi Aramco, defying gender discrimination in a male-dominated corporate. This dissertation examined Al-Ghpson's groundbreaking journey and its implications for Saudi women, addressing the scarcity of information on successful Saudi female leaders' strategies and experiences. The literature review explored gender-related theories, Transformational leadership theory, and Full-Range leadership theory. A qualitative exploratory single-case study design was employed, with Huda Al-Ghpson as the focal point. The research questions were: (a) as a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, how does Al-Ghpson perceive her ascension to leadership in a male-dominated corporation? (b) as a Saudi woman in a high-rank leadership role, what perceived challenges did Al-Ghpson encounter while climbing the leadership ladder in a male-dominated corporation? (c) how do Al-Ghpson and her former colleagues and co-workers perceive her leadership style? and (d) as a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, what strategies or actions does Al-Ghpson perceive as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business? Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) assessments, and artifacts. Qualitative thematic analysis revealed 10 primary themes: (a) Al-Ghpson's own definition of success, (b) her self-discovery journey of leadership, (c) her late mother was her mentor and role model, (d) her core challenge was the ingrained gender discrimination within Saudi culture, (e) unconscious bias and sexism in the workplace, (f) lack of organizational resources, (g) she is perceived as a Transformational leader, (h) her advice for female leaders, (i) her recommendations for organizations, and (j) belief in Saudi Vision 2030's effectiveness for female leaders. The study revealed cultural change within Saudi Arabia, highlighting Al-Ghpson's challenges and impact on the Saudi

workforce's future vision. Recommendations emphasized personal development and organizational support for Saudi female leaders, providing guidance for aspiring women and organizations committed to promoting gender equity. Future research should investigate multiple case studies, consider social and cultural factors, assess Saudi Vision 2030 and leadership development programs, and examine the influence of family, social networks, and cultural norms on women's career aspirations.

*Keywords:* Saudi Arabia, women, leadership, male-dominated, STEM, executive director, transformational leadership, MLQ, Saudi Aramco, gender bias, full range leadership, MLQ, glass ceiling, Saudi vision 2030, Huda Al-Ghpson



## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2012, Huda Al-Ghpson became the first woman to be promoted to a permanent executive position at her company Al-Ghpson expressed her sentiment in one of her printed interviews:

I am very happy to be the first woman in the history of Saudi Aramco to assume a leadership position. I am now the immediate supervisor of all the company's human resources management and development programs, which covers over 66,000 employees of 80 different nationalities. (Fidda, 2016)

Huda Al-Ghpson holds the honor of being the first Saudi woman to become an Executive Director of Human Resources at Aramco, the largest gas and oil corporation in the world, located in Saudi Arabia. Al-Ghpson has maneuvered her way through a labyrinth of gender-based barriers to be where she is today, Today, she serves as a board member of multiple notable organizations, further solidifying her status as a trailblazer and role model for aspiring female leaders in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

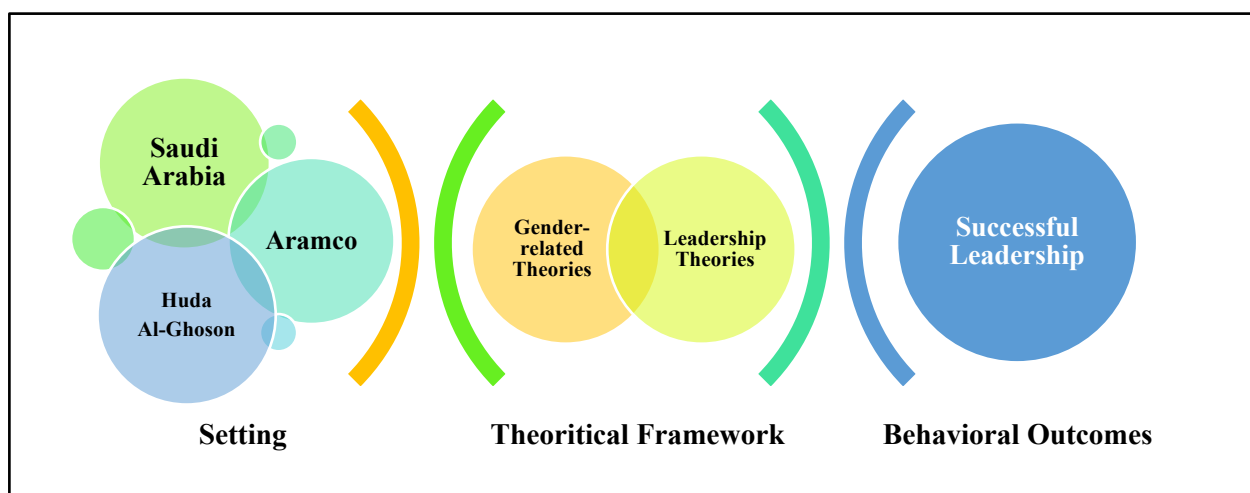
According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2021), Saudi Arabia ranked 142 out of 156 countries on gender disparity issues. Saudi Arabian culture is characterized by strong gender segregation (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015) which significantly contributes to the underrepresentation of Saudi women in leadership roles. One of the major problems faced by Saudi women in their quest for leadership is the scarcity of literature on female leaders in the country, as well as the lack of Saudi female role models in leadership positions. Despite the success of women leaders in other parts of the world, Saudi women remain underrepresented as senior-level executives compared to their male counterparts (Isaac et al., 2012). Addressing these issues could help foster greater gender diversity and equity in leadership

roles, providing more opportunities for women to excel and serve as role models for future generations.

Recognizing the significance of Al-Ghoson's notable career trajectory and ascent to an executive role in the male-dominated Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) field, this qualitative single case study explores cultural and organizational challenges contributing to the underrepresentation of Saudi female leaders in Saudi male-dominated corporations. The study's conceptual and theoretical framework is grounded in the intersection of gender-related theories, Transformational leadership theory, and Full-Range leadership theory (see Figure 1). Through an analysis of Al-Ghoson's career experiences at Saudi Aramco, this framework explores her attainment of an executive role within a complex and challenging cultural setting. Findings provide aspiring Saudi female leaders with valuable insights on overcoming these challenges. Outcomes also describe proven strategies for obtaining executive leadership positions in a predominately male environment. The study also fills a literature gap on Saudi women in STEM leadership roles.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*



This chapter will introduce the study, including the background of the issue, theoretical framework grounding the study, problem statement, statement of purpose, and research questions. Next, the rationale and significance of the study will be presented. The methodology will then be introduced followed by limitations and delimitations of the study. The chapter will continue with information on the role of the researcher. Chapter 1 will conclude with definitions of key terms and the organization of this dissertation.

### **Background of the Study**

In the past, the roles of men and women were determined by gender stereotypes. For example, leadership positions have been limited to men in many instances, even if there were qualified women with effective leadership skills (Abdullahi et al., 2019). Gloor et al. (2018) explained that women may still experience barriers to a successful career because of gender bias and gender stereotyping. Despite gender-based discrimination, women have increased their presence in influential leadership roles over time, which indicates the positive social changes in perceiving women as leaders (Alotaibi, 2020).

Yang and Carroll (2018) shared that women may experience sexual objectification, feelings of inferiority, and sexist language in the workplace. Women wishing to advance in leadership may experience challenges such as increased scrutiny, and they may be viewed as secondary to their male counterparts (Kabir, 2020). Data suggests that women in top leadership positions can become successful with sponsorship and mentoring (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). However, not every company has women in top leadership positions who can provide the support new female leaders need.

It is noteworthy that women are not advancing at the same speed in every country. For instance, women in the United States have a strong presence in many top leadership roles

(Lyness & Grotto, 2018); however, other countries are also noting changes in how women are viewed as leaders in the workforce (Jourova, 2016). Research on women and leadership is beginning to expand globally in recognition of the importance of cultivating and developing more women leaders worldwide (Amaechi, 2018).

In Saudi Arabia, more women now contribute to organizational growth and the evolving business economy (McGlynn, 2018). This progress has increased over the past few years to include more women in the workforce with leadership roles and fair promotion opportunities (Gloor et al., 2018). The increased number of Saudi women in senior management positions has been highlighted in *Forbes Middle East's* (2017) recognition of nine Saudi women in the “Top 100 Most Powerful Arab Businesswomen.” However, Saudi women are advancing to executive leadership positions at a very slow pace (Al-Ahmadi, 2011). By making this considerable progress, women have overcome many challenges of gender-based barriers that prevent them from achieving equality in the workforce (Criscione-Nayylor & Bokunewicz, 2018).

In recent efforts, the Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and the Royal Court developed the Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016. The Saudi Vision 2030 is a comprehensive economic and social plan that prioritizes the development of a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. A key aspect of this vision is the empowerment of Saudi women, which is highlighted as a significant goal within the plan. The Saudi government recognizes the importance of gender equity in promoting sustainable growth and development and has made significant strides toward achieving this objective (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). The reforms that were part of the Saudi Vision 2030 led to the appointment of women to councils, municipal government, and leadership/managerial roles in sectors that were previously dominated by males (World Bank Group, 2020). With this effort to empower women, the new Saudi government is

trying to break down gender barriers and challenges that prevented women from advancing into top management and leadership positions in the past. Some of the issues hindering the progression of women in the Saudi workforce include conservative culture, gender segregation and stereotypes, and misinterpretation of faith. To illustrate, Saudi Arabia and several other Arab societies, mostly in rural and impoverished areas, held strict social structures that defined gender roles and expectations. Under the old social structures, women's roles are confined to gender-segregated opportunities, (i.e., teachers, nurses) coupled with family duties (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Basaffar et al. (2018) mentioned that society, influenced by both these factors, placed limitations on women's progress in education and employment. Yet, the influence of these factors is now waning because of recent laws and policy reforms made by the new government to promote business leadership among more women in the Kingdom.

Gender disparity in the workplace is an issue of concern not only in Saudi Arabia but worldwide. Parker and Funk (2017) reported that the results of a survey conducted in the United States on workplace discrimination and gender disparity revealed that 50% of women in STEM have experienced gender discrimination in the workplace. Women facing gender bias and gender-based stereotyping in the workplace may experience unequal pay compared to their male counterparts, as well as feelings of incompetence, insults, and being ignored or overlooked for promotions (Parker & Funk, 2017). Saudi Arabia also has a similar situation. Abalkhail (2018) explained that although discrimination laws have been implemented, Saudi women may still face forms of discrimination in the workplace. A recent study conducted in Saudi Arabia revealed that Saudi women have faced some sorts of gender discrimination in the workplace due to the conservative traditions that some people still follow (Islam, 2017). For example, there is a pay gap between women and men in leadership roles. This concern may prevent women from

pursuing promotions into leadership positions within their organizations (Budhwar et al., 2010; Abalkhail, 2018).

Despite the gender stereotypes of the past that created barriers and limitations for women seeking employment, women in Saudi Arabia have more opportunities than in previous generations (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Saudi women are now assuming leadership positions, and this single-case study explores how Saudi women in elite leadership positions in STEM industries are breaking stereotypical barriers and enjoying successful careers. The methodology is examining the phenomenon of Executive Director Huda Al-Ghosen.

### ***Cultural Context***

**Saudi Arabia.** Located on the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia has a rich and ancient history and is commonly known as the birthplace of Islam (Saudi Embassy, 2022). In 1932, King Abdulaziz helped transform the kingdom into a modern nation, beginning an ambitious developmental era that began with the oil exploration and technology influx (Alotaibi, 2020; Saudi Embassy, 2022).

The World Bank Group (2020) acknowledged Saudi Arabia as one of the foremost economic reformers on the global stage. Historic reforms in empowering women have led to the increasing role of women in Saudi Arabia's economic growth (World Bank Group, 2020). Women are now vital to the economic development and growth of Saudi Arabia (Al-Qahtani et al., 2020). As a central component of Saudi Vision 2030 (Al-Qahtani et al., 2020), women's engagement will underpin the country's future economic progress and strategic aspirations. In their study discussing the complex issues pertaining to women's marginalization in leadership roles, Abdullahi et al. (2019) emphasized that empowering women leaders is important to drive the Saudi Kingdom forward. However, it is crucial to address the deeply ingrained cultural

barriers and overly-discriminatory practices that have historically limited women's opportunities in the professional sphere, particularly in leadership roles. By dismantling these obstacles, Saudi Arabia can truly harness the potential of its female workforce and create an inclusive and progressive society. In pursuing equality, Saudi Arabia has activated reforms that support the nation's future (Abalkhail, 2018).

Similarly, Saudi Vision 2030 is slowly changing how women are viewed and valued in Saudi Arabia. For example, Eum (2019) postulated that Saudi Vision 2030 promotes the participation of Saudi women, who were previously marginalized, in the development of a new and dynamic Saudi society. Therefore, Saudi Vision 2030 emphasizes the importance of women as an integral part of supporting the progress and future of the country.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia is still considered a young country (Eum, 2019). More than 50% of the population in Saudi Arabia is under 30 years old; therefore, the aim of Saudi Vision 2030 is to encourage younger generations to support the future of the Saudi nation.

**Aramco.** Aramco is one of the world's largest energy leaders specializing in oil production, refining, and petrochemicals (Aramco, n.d.). Commercial oil production in 1938 marked the beginning of Saudi Arabia's future prosperity and the success of Saudi Aramco. As a result, Aramco (n.d.) grew in the 1940s, making a name for Saudi Arabia in the oil industry. The need for innovative leaders also grew as the organization expanded. Halabi (2019) asserts that a balance of talent throughout an organization leads to innovation.

Over the years, Aramco has diversified its talent pool. In addition, Halabi (2019) explained how Aramco focuses on developmental opportunities through various programs designed specifically for women. Aramco now supports diversification by empowering women from entry-level roles to leadership positions.

## **Theoretical Framework**

By examining previously tested theories within a new context, Fillion et al. (2015) explained the value of a theoretical framework in advancing research where scarcity exists. Hence, findings from the study may serve as a foundation for further research on Saudi women with leadership positions in predominantly male fields such as STEM.

For this qualitative case study, the theoretical framework involves theory-driven literature that supports the focus of the research, research questions, and research design approach (Yin, 2015). With a focus on Saudi women in leadership, a framework centered on leadership theories and gender-related theories is appropriate.

### ***Transformational Leadership***

Transformational leadership was originally introduced by Burns (1978) and later expanded upon by Bass (1985a, 1985b). Bass (1998) further defined transformational leadership theory by combining traits, behaviors, and contingency methods. Transformational leaders are proactive; they raise followers' morale by modeling ethical conduct and providing support and recognition to surpass their self-interest (Antonakis et al., 2003). Furthermore, transformational leaders stimulate and inspire others to mature individually and grow organizationally while achieving optimal goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and focusing on social values to strengthen their followers' drive during times of distress (Bass et al., 2003).

By adopting one or more of the 5 I's of transformational leadership, leaders can be effective. These components are Idealized influence (idealized behaviors and idealized attributes), Inspirational motivation, Intellectual stimulation, and Individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). *Idealized influence* describes the degree to which leaders are perceived as role models. *Behavioral idealized influence* refers to leaders who show ethical behaviors and



transcend their self-interest to work on what is best for the group. *Attributed idealized influence* refers to leaders who are identified as trusted and respected by their followers. *Inspirational motivation* describes leaders who are able to attract their followers by articulating an appealing vision, engaging with them in an optimistic tone, and providing purpose for their followers to achieve challenging goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006). *Intellectual stimulation* describes the state by which leaders create a platform that is innovative to trigger followers' creative endeavors. Transformational leaders encourage followers to approach problems with new perspectives. Finally, *individualized consideration* refers to leaders who listen and provide support to their followers. Transformational leaders provide mentoring and coaching to individuals and respond to their needs. Similarly, transformational leaders sometimes delegate duties to help their followers challenge the status quo and grow personally (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Among early studies on women in leadership, McGregor (1985) found that women in leadership positions have characteristics that reflect the core components of transformational leadership. Bass and Avolio (1994) confirmed this claim as their research indicated that women are stereotyped as being more selfless and interpersonal, giving them the advantage of being individual-oriented leaders.

### ***Full Range Leadership***

The full range leadership model (FRLM) encompasses a range of leadership styles including transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership styles. Avolio and Bass (1991) proposed the FRLM by expanding on Burns' (1978) leadership theories that focused on the behaviors of leaders in the workplace. Building on the two leadership styles identified by Burns (1978), transformational and transactional leadership, Avolio and Bass (2004) added a third construct to the continuum termed *passive-avoidant leadership*, or hands-off leadership,

where leaders take no action. The researchers created the Full Range Leadership Model to explain how multiple leadership styles are combined for successful leadership (Avolio & Bass, 2004). Avolio (2011) proposed that a range of all three leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant) create successful and effective leaders.

The Full Range Leadership Model includes nine components spanning the three leadership styles (Antonakis & House, 2013). Avolio and Bass (1991) defined the nine factors of the FRLM; five are related to transformational leadership, two are related to transactional leadership, and the last component is the non-transactional passive-avoidant leadership (Antonakis et al., 2003). The components are described as follows:

- **Transformational leadership.** Idealized behaviors (IB), idealized attributes (IA), inspirational motivation (IM), intellectual stimulation (IS), and individualized consideration (IC).
- **Transactional leadership.** Contingent reward (CR), management-by-exception active (MBE-A), and management-by-exception passive (MBE-P).
- **Passive-avoidant leadership.** Also recognized as Management-by-Exception Passive (MBE-P).

These nine components are further discussed in Chapter 2. Using the Full Range Leadership Model developed by Bass (1985) as a theoretical basis alongside the gender-related theories may provide senior-level leaders with information that supports organizational promotions of women to leadership positions in STEM corporations.

As previously noted, there is a lack of available information on the impact that Saudi women in leadership positions are making within the Saudi Arabian workforce. Thus, examining the perspectives of a successful Saudi woman in a senior leadership role will expand the body of

literature on Saudi women and their leadership styles in the realm of STEM corporations. More importantly, it will provide a leadership framework for aspiring women leaders to follow. Saudi female leaders will benefit from understanding the variety of leadership styles of FRLM that will equip them with essential behaviors to lead.

### ***Gender-Related Theories***

This qualitative case study was informed by gender-related theories to build a better understanding of the case being studied. Alqahtani (2020) asserted that only a small percentage of women hold top leadership positions globally. However, an organizational structure is not gender-specific, and organizational cultures need to reflect the strengths women leaders have to offer.

The progression of women in the Saudi workforce has been significantly influenced by cultural factors, particularly male-dominated social practices (Metcalf & Mimouni, 2011). There is a wealth of evidence demonstrating that women face significant obstacles in advancing their careers within organizations across the developed world. These obstacles stem from deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, biases that are entrenched in recruitment and selection practices, and a notable scarcity of female role models who can serve as sources of inspiration and guidance for the emerging generation of women leaders (Budhwar et al., 2010).

Despite efforts to diminish gender discrimination, Al-Asfour et al. (2017) argue that efforts are still needed to help Saudi women face workplace barriers. Al-Asfour et al. (2017) also provided suggestions to help Saudi women be more successful in the workplace. The suggestions included forming programs dedicated to women's leadership development, allowing women into corporate networks, and providing mentorship opportunities to help aspiring Saudi women leaders become successful (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

To help understand the complex settings of this study and the cultural/societal context surrounding it, the research was informed by gender-related theories, namely social role theory, role congruity theory, intergroup theory, and social norms theory, which are thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem addressed by this study is the scarcity of available information on the impact that Saudi women in leadership positions are making within the Saudi Arabian workforce. Significantly, there is a lack of information on role models for successful leadership trajectories among Saudi women. In a study on barriers faced by professional women in Saudi Arabia, Hodges (2017) explained that many of the participants mentioned their limited access to female role models. A review of the literature has found a lack of studies specifically focused on women in successful leadership roles within the workforce culture of Saudi Arabia. Future female leaders lack the research-backed strategies that have proven effective in acquiring positions of power. Without guidance, women may become discouraged by the barriers they face, and they may stop working toward top positions of leadership (Andrews, 2017). The findings from this study could offer essential information on how Saudi women in leadership roles can positively affect the structure of corporate businesses.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative research study using a single case approach is to examine the perspective of a successful Saudi woman in a top leadership role and understand strategies and actions that have proven effective in acquiring positions of power in a male-dominated field. This single case study explores the successful career of Huda Al-Ghosen upon becoming an executive director at Aramco.

By examining the effective strategies and actions of a Saudi woman who has already achieved a position of power, these findings will present aspiring Saudi female leaders with a role model and essential information on becoming successful. More importantly, with the scarcity of research on Saudi female leaders in male-dominated STEM fields, findings on successful leadership perspectives provided by Al-Ghpson will contribute valuable knowledge and fill a gap in the literature related to Saudi women as senior-level leaders in predominately male fields.

### **Research Questions**

This exploratory case study was conducted using semi-structured interviews, a Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), and an analysis of publicly available information on Al-Ghpson such as newspaper and magazine articles. The interview questions will be based on research questions that align with the problem statement and statement of purpose. The research questions include:

- RQ1. As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, how does Al-Ghpson perceive her ascension to leadership in a male-dominated corporation?
- RQ2. As a Saudi woman in a high-rank leadership role, what perceived challenges did Al-Ghpson encounter while climbing the leadership ladder in a male-dominated corporation?
- RQ3. How do Al-Ghpson and her former colleagues and coworkers perceive her leadership style?
- RQ4. As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, what strategies or actions does Al-Ghpson perceive as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business?

## **Rationale and Significance of Study**

This case study provides a deeper understanding of a Saudi woman's lived experience in ascending to leadership positions in a male-dominated corporation in Saudi Arabia. The literature is full of studies on women and leadership within Western and European contexts, but the lack of available information on the impact that Saudi women in leadership positions are making within the male-dominated workforce drives the need for further investigation. There is little known about Al-Ghosen and her journey to take on positions of power in times where Saudi women were not yet empowered and were struggling with gender inequities. Examining the perspectives of a successful Saudi woman in a top leadership role in a male-dominated field will help fill the gap in the literature and provide new information on Saudi women and leadership success. Discovering factors deemed to be successful for effectively promoting Saudi women to senior-level leadership roles may further help identify strategies and behaviors to enable Saudi women to navigate barriers in a male-dominated workplace.

More importantly, it is vital for young women to have female role models to look up to in pursuing their goals (Asgari et al., 2012). Hoyt and Simon (2011) emphasized that young women's self-perceptions and ambitions for leadership are influenced tremendously by other female role models. Young generations of Saudi women need successful Saudi female leaders as role models to follow in pursuing similar leadership positions. Through highlighting the perspectives of successful Saudi women in top leadership roles, this study contributes to the discourse supporting the advancement of women to leadership positions that are predominantly male roles by providing a role model. Findings from this study provide insights that will benefit organizations and researchers seeking ways to advance the presence of Saudi women in top-tier leadership roles in STEM.

## **Overview of Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative single case study to shed light on a Saudi female representing a successful career path to attaining a high-rank leadership role in a male-dominated STEM corporation. Qualitative research is a method used to gather data that is descriptive in nature and supports gathering information, such as experiences and perspectives from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach will give a deep understanding of Al-Ghpson's challenges in achieving an executive position. Results will also provide a strategy for Saudi women aspiring to become leaders.

### ***The Case***

Huda Al-Ghpson, born November 19, 1957, is a former Human Resources Executive Director of Saudi Aramco, the largest oil and gas corporation in the world, located in Saudi Arabia. She walked into Aramco in 1981 as a fresh English Literature graduate and worked as a patient representative at Aramco Hospital. Over the years, Al-Ghpson navigated her way up the ladder to top leadership positions while faced with embedded cultural and organizational challenges resulting from gender discrimination. In 2006, Aramco promoted Al-Ghpson to Director of Employee Relations Policy and Planning. By May 2012, Al-Ghpson became the first Saudi woman to assume an executive leadership position, serving as Executive Director of Human Resources in recognition of her accomplishments.

A single case study was deemed suitable for this research because it yields an in-depth understanding of the case being studied. The qualitative approach allows for deep understanding and interpretations when studying a complex issue. Such a particular case is bounded by people, location, and time (Stake, 1995). The phenomenon being studied is the successful career of a Saudi woman who attained an executive role (Executive Director of Human Resources) at a

male-dominated STEM corporation. The case is bounded by people (Huda Al-Ghpson), location (Aramco, Saudi Arabia), and time (serving the company from 1981 to 2017).

### **Delimitations of the Study**

As stated by Creswell and Poth (2018), delimitations of a study set the boundaries for the researcher to narrow the scope of a study. This qualitative single case study is confined by the lived experience of one Saudi woman in attaining an executive leadership position within a predominately male field, STEM. The case is bounded by one Saudi female leader (people), Huda Al-Ghpson, who worked in a male-dominated corporation, Saudi Aramco (location), and her tenure at the company spanned from 1981 to 2017 (time), ascending to a leadership role as executive director, standing out amidst an all-male management leadership.

Given these boundaries, the study is limited to exploring one Saudi female leader's successful career trajectory within the STEM field and her experiences in the male-dominated workplace of Saudi Aramco. It is important to note that the timeframe of this study is confined to the participant's tenure at the company, which happened prior to the recent transformative changes that took place in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, the data and findings reflect the events that transpired before the implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative.

Considering these limitations, it is essential to acknowledge that generalization may not be feasible due to the distinct contextual settings and societal influences that shaped this particular case. As such, any conclusions drawn from this study were interpreted with careful consideration of the unique circumstances that defined the participant's experience.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative studies, the researcher plays an integral role in data collection and participant interaction, as they serve as the primary instrument for conducting the research



(Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). However, Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2003) argue that designating researchers as research instruments may jeopardize the trustworthiness of the study. To address this concern, the researcher has included a comprehensive description of her background, biases, and assumptions, discussed in Chapter 3 under Statement of Positionality section. This transparent approach serves to define the researcher's perspective and allows the reader to better understand the context in which the study was situated.

In addition to providing a transparent account of her positionality, the researcher employed trustworthiness techniques to mitigate potential biases and boost the credibility and rigor of the study. One such technique is reflexivity, which enables the researcher to establish trustworthiness by actively engaging in self-reflection, documenting personal reactions, and analyzing the influence of her own beliefs and assumptions on the research process (Darawsheh, 2014). Through the combination of clearly stating her positionality and embracing reflexivity, the researcher strengthened the study's trustworthiness, ensuring a more nuanced and rigorous exploration of the phenomena under investigation.

### ***Reflexivity***

Reflexivity is a crucial technique for researchers, particularly within the realm of qualitative research, as it involves a continuous process of self-awareness, self-examination, and introspection (Reid et al., 2018). Researchers employing reflexivity actively acknowledge, scrutinize, and account for their own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions, which may influence their interpretation and understanding of the data collected (Malterud, 2001). By engaging in reflexivity, researchers can enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of their findings, as they become more aware of the potential impact of their subjectivity on the research process (Finlay, 2002). For instance, Berger (2015) emphasizes the role of reflexivity in

maintaining transparency and rigor in qualitative inquiry, as it encourages researchers to be more open about their influences on the research outcomes.

Emphasizing the importance of reflexivity in case studies, Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017) suggested that researchers maintain a journal to meticulously document their thoughts, experiences, needs, and ethical considerations throughout the research journey. This practice helps researchers critically examine their roles and influence on the study, ultimately enhancing the credibility and rigor of their findings. By employing reflexivity, the researcher was able to remain vigilant about her own contributions to the research process and foster a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

- **Aramco.** Aramco refers to Saudi Aramco, a global oil and gas corporation with headquarters located in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia (Aramco, 2022).
- **C-suite positions.** C-suite positions are top positions within an organization that may include board members or executive leaders (Williams, 2017).
- **FRL.** Full Range Leadership is defined as a combination of characteristics of transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and passive-avoidant leadership (Adserias et al., 2017).
- **Gender bias.** Gender bias is defined as the unfair treatment of a man or woman based on their sex (Gold et al., 2019).
- **Gender stereotypes.** Gender stereotyping involves situations where preconceived notions are ideas that assign roles to individuals based on gender (Sharma, 2017).
- **Glass ceiling.** A glass ceiling is a figurative barrier blocking women and minorities in their advancement to positions of leadership and upper management (Kirk, 2019).

- **Intergroup theory.** Intergroup theory is the process in which children learn to compartmentalize by using stereotypes, biases, or prejudices based on gender (Bigler & Liben, 2006).
- **MLQ.** The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire is a questionnaire developed to study leadership styles, such as transformational or transactional leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1996).
- **Role congruity theory.** Role congruity theory has been used to explain segregation in the workplace (Eagly & Karau, 2002).
- **Senior-level positions.** Senior-level positions include top management positions and include high levels of leadership (Osituyo, 2018).
- **Sexism.** Sexism refers to the systematic and pervasive bias or discrimination based on an individual's sex or gender. It can manifest as attitudes, prejudices, stereotypes, or discrimination in social, economic, political, or cultural systems. Sexism can be individual (e.g., interpersonal discrimination) or institutional (e.g., policies or norms that disadvantage a certain gender). It is most commonly used to refer to bias against women due to the historical prevalence of patriarchal societies (Dovidio et al., 2008; Glick & Fiske, 1999; Spence, 1999; Swim & Hyers, 2009).
- **Social norms theory.** Social norms theory identifies misperceptions or situations that involve one individual or group misperceiving the behaviors and characteristics of another group (Berkowitz, 2005).
- **Social role theory.** Social role theory is a social psychological view on how cultural gender-based stereotypes influence the roles of women and men in society (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

## **Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 introduced the single case study and its objective. The successful career of Huda Al-Ghpson was examined to elicit information on the challenges that women in Saudi Arabia face in obtaining high-rank leadership roles that are mostly attained by men. Understanding the challenges and barriers that Saudi women face in their pursuit of top leadership roles can provide women with knowledge on how to overcome these barriers. Chapter 1 briefly highlighted the background of the problem, theoretical framework, statement of purpose, research questions, rationale, and significance of the study, and provided an overview of the research methodology.

The following chapters present more details of the study. Chapter 2 presents a literature review that includes empirical findings to support the need for the study. It also includes an in-depth presentation of the theoretical framework, leadership theories, and gender-related theories. Chapter 3 presents details and support for the methodology, approach, sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the results of the data collection and analysis. Finally, chapter 5 provides a discussion of the results and will include recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

Over the past three decades, there has been a significant increase in scholarly research examining the role of women in leadership, with particular emphasis on their representation in corporate leadership within STEM fields. However, the investigation of women's leadership experiences in predominantly male corporate environments of developing countries remains largely unexplored. This qualitative case study delves into the inspiring journey of Huda Al-Ghpson, a trailblazing Saudi woman who achieved a prominent leadership position at Saudi Aramco, a male-dominated corporation.

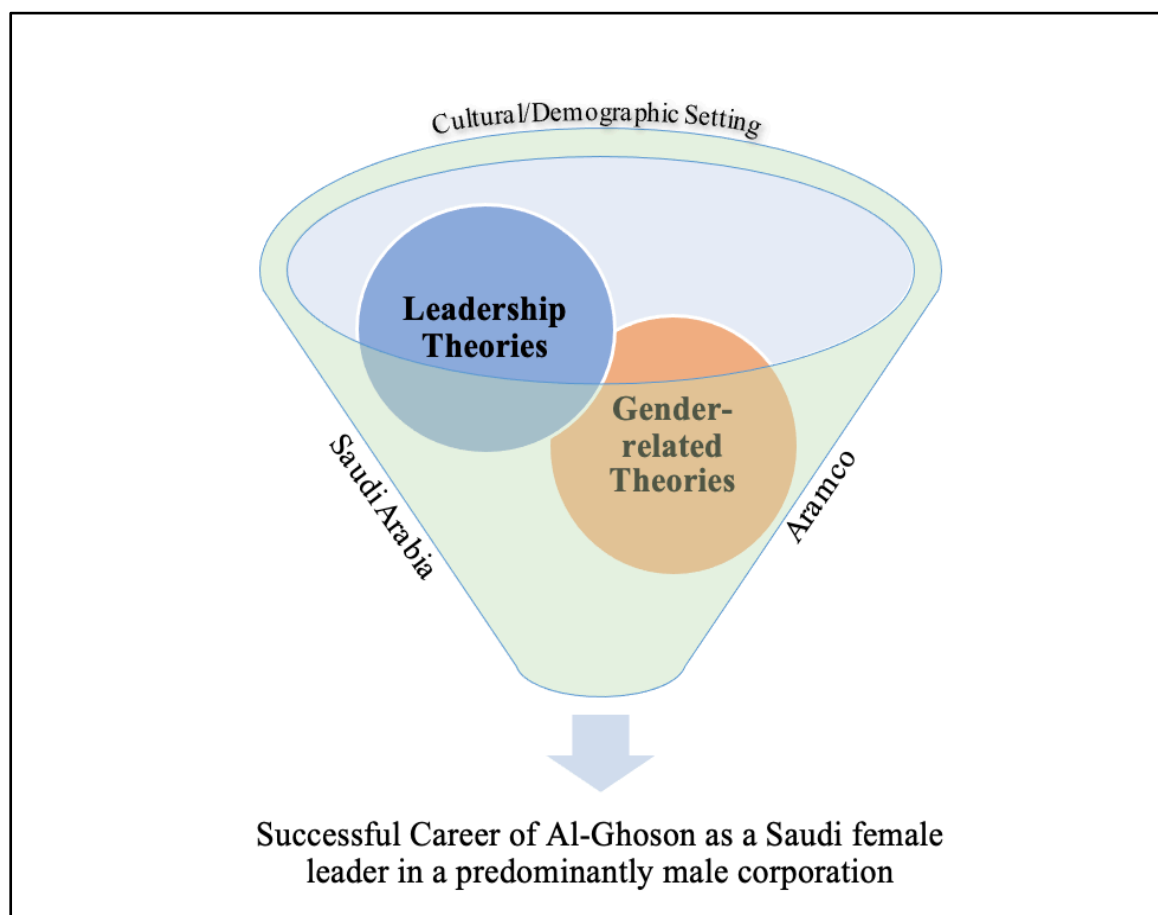
The study aimed to illuminate the myriad societal and cultural challenges Al-Ghpson faced while ascending to her influential role as Executive Director of Human Resources at Aramco. Additionally, this research contributes valuable insights by presenting recommendations and strategies that Al-Ghpson deems effective for fostering the growth and success of aspiring Saudi female leaders. By exploring Al-Ghpson's unique experience, this research aims to bridge the gap in the literature and enhance understanding of the barriers and opportunities facing women in leadership roles within male-dominated industries in developing countries.

This literature review synthesizes the existing work that informed this study's research questions. To establish a theory-driven foundation for this study, it is important to identify the social/situational context and driving theories of how a conservative culture perceives women as elite leaders. The theoretical framework will guide the actions of the study to examine the phenomenal career path of Executive Director Al-Ghpson as an example of women's hardship in attaining positions of leadership globally and in Saudi Arabia particularly.

The theoretical framework draws upon two primary research domains: leadership theories and gender-related theories. This study aims to integrate these two areas of research and apply them to the unique Saudi cultural and demographic context. As a highly conservative society with rigid gender norms and expectations, Saudi Arabia's context is poised to influence how leadership is perceived and enacted. By exploring the convergence of gender-based theories and leadership theories within the culturally specific context of Saudi culture, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of leadership in this distinct cultural and demographic setting. This research thus contributes to the broader academic discourse on gender-based dynamics in leadership roles (see Figure 2).

## Figure 2

*Theoretical Framework of the Single Case Study*



The gender-related theories inform the purpose of this study, which is to understand the challenges Saudi women encounter while climbing the leadership pipeline in predominantly male corporations. Theories on gender bias inform leadership theories when it comes to women in leadership. Acar and Sümer (2018) explain that gender-based theories offer insights as to why women experience hardship in advancing to leadership positions in various organizations and industries. Specific to the unique cultural and societal context of Saudi Arabia, deeply ingrained gender biases have served as substantial barriers preventing women from progressing in their careers and ultimately achieving leadership positions (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013).

This chapter discusses leadership theories, namely transformational leadership, women in leadership, and gender-related theories as the foundation of the theoretical framework of the study. The following sections will examine some of the barriers that women have faced in the past and challenges that are still currently present. Literature themes will be presented including biases in the workforce, power and gender, glass ceiling, double-bind dilemma, networking, and mentorship.

A further discussion of issues associated with Saudi women and their struggle to obtain leadership roles will be presented to help develop a conceptual boundary for the proposed theoretical framework. These issues include conservative cultural traditions, gender segregation, and misinterpretation of faith. The chapter will conclude with a brief biography of Al-Ghpson and a summary of the literature review.

### **Leadership Theories**

Leadership has been a central topic of organizational and behavioral research for decades and has been studied in multidisciplinary contexts. The massive scope of leadership research has produced plenty of nuances, yet leadership is not limited to one single definition. Generally,

leadership is defined in terms of behaviors, traits, social influence, motivation, a leader's attitude, relationships, and organizational goals (Yukl, 1989). Mass studies on leadership have produced major models of leadership to better understand how leaders can be effective (Bass, 1981). While this single case study aims to explore the successful story of a Saudi woman who became a prominent leader as Executive Director of Human Resources in one of the largest corporations in the world, it is very important to identify contemporary leadership theories that are inclusive of women. Traditionally, classical schools of leadership theory used innate and masculine characteristics to identify leaders; power, authority, and decision-making were exclusively for charismatic men (Northouse, 2019).

Nearly five decades ago, a modern form of leadership emerged that looked beyond charisma, authority, and macho power to achieve effective leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Hence, the researcher examined the literature for leadership theories associated with women by searching scholarly databases with key terms, including but not limited to: women in leadership, female leaders, leadership theory, gender, women in corporate, and the glass ceiling. The results yielded an abundance of studies, articles, journals, chapters, and books on women in leadership. Significantly, there was one widespread leadership theory with relevance to studying women's pursuit of leadership in the corporate world. Therefore, the theoretical framework for this study was formulated based on FRLM. The Full Range Leadership approach evolved from original leadership theories: transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and passive-avoidant leadership (Avolio, 2011). The FRLM is effective in studying leadership journeys across contexts, such as the experience of women in male-dominated fields. A notable example is the leadership trajectory of Saudi businesswoman, Al-Ghpson. The following sections will discuss FRLM to help understand her successful leadership at Saudi Aramco.



### ***Full Range Leadership***

Using the leadership theories of Burns (1978) as a basis, Bass and Avolio (1994, 1996) proposed a new FRLM that focused on the behaviors of leaders in the workplace. Building on the two leadership styles identified by Burns (1978; transformational and transactional leadership), Avolio and Bass (2004) added a third construct to the continuum termed passive-avoidant leadership or hands-off leadership. They also focused the Full Range Leadership Model on how multiple leadership styles relate to successful leadership. Avolio (2011) proposed that a range of leadership styles (transformative, transactional, and passive-avoidant) create successful and effective leaders.

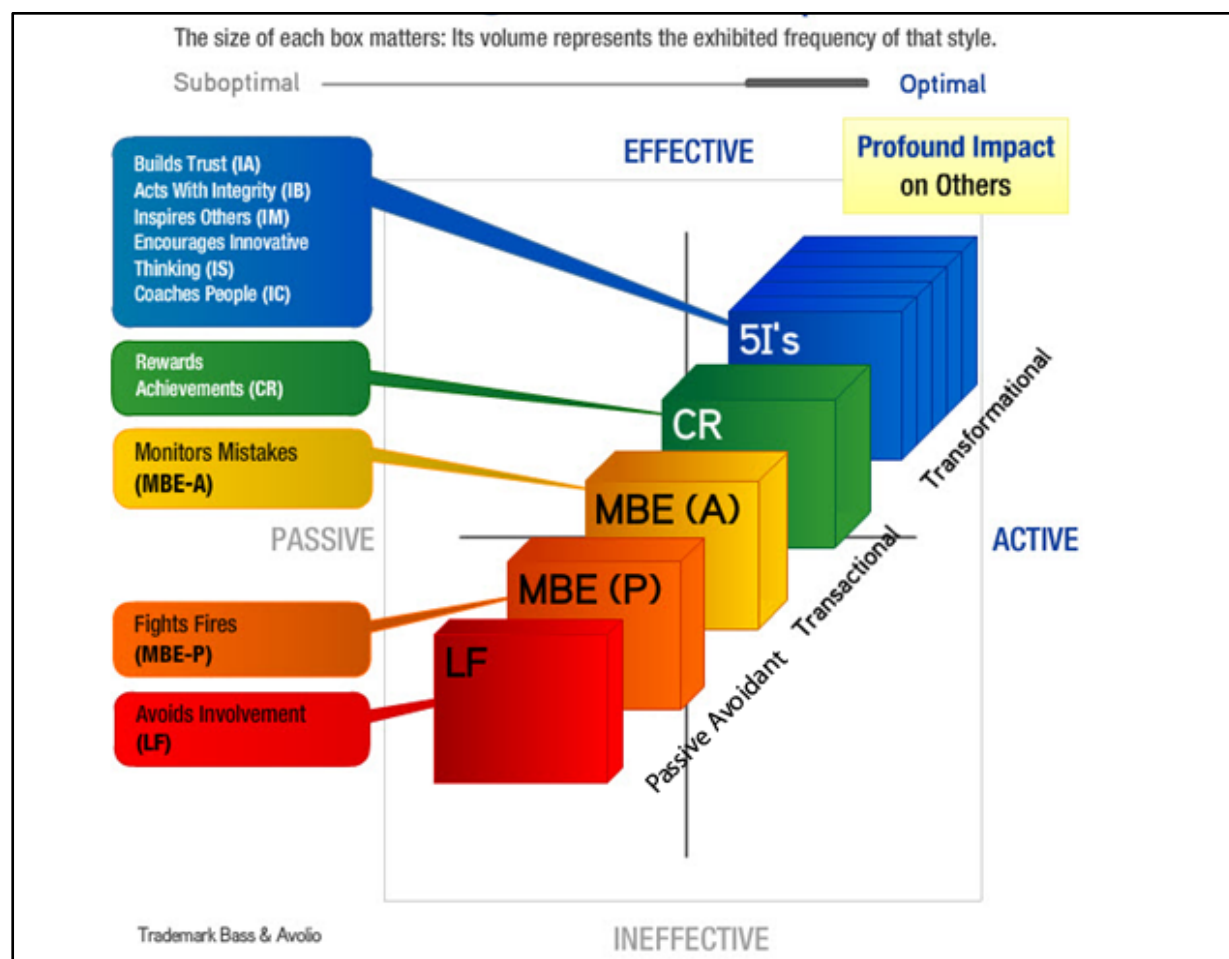
Although Burns (1978) indicated transformational and transactional leadership styles as two opposite ends where leaders can be either transactional or transformational, Bass (1985b) viewed both leadership styles as one continuum where leaders can use both approaches in a varying degree depending on the context and their followers' needs. Furthermore, Avolio (2011) argues that although many researchers view transformational leadership as one of the most effective styles of leadership, many of the successes of those leaders would not have taken place without the processes laid forth by transactional leaders. Transformational leaders cannot encourage their workers to reach a goal if a goal has not been created (transactional).

The Full Range Leadership Model is comprised of nine components spanning the three leadership styles which are the basis of the theory (Antonakis & House, 2013). Avolio and Bass (1991) defined nine factors of the FRLM, five are related to transformational leadership, two are related to transactional leadership, and the last component is the non-transactional passive-avoidant leadership (Antonakis et al., 2003). The five FRLM components of transformational leadership include attributed charisma, behavioral charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual

stimulation, and individualized consideration (Antonakis & House, 2013). The three FRLM components of transactional leadership include contingent reward leadership, management-by-exception active, and management-by-exception passive (Antonakis & House, 2013). The final component, passive-avoidant leadership, focuses on individuals removing themselves from a position of leadership and making decisions without authority. The following subsections will discuss each component of the FRLM model as illustrated in the diagram below (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*The Full Range Leadership Model*



*Note.* Adapted from "Multifactor leadership questionnaire: Manual and sample set," by B. M. Bass and B. J. Avolio, 2004, Mind Garden. Copyright 1996, 2004, 2007 by Bernard Bass & Bruce Avolio.

**Transformational Leadership.** In the past few decades, scholars have directed their attention toward transformational leadership. The change of focus gained momentum in the early 1980s (Arenas et al., 2017) and continued to gain interest until one-third of seminal work in the literature was focused on transformational leadership (Lowe & Gardner, 2001). In its basic form, transformational leadership is a model of leadership that stems from moral values such as trust, justice, inclusion, and motivation in order to positively influence followers and change the organization (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Charisma is a fundamental factor of transformational leadership as it positively stimulates the relationship between leaders and followers, which subsequently results in commitment and organizational change (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Conger & Kanungo, 1994; Downton, 1973).

The origins of transformational leadership can be traced back to the seminal works of researchers and scholars conducted in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Downton (1973) is believed to be the first person to coin the term *transformational leadership* in his sociological study. Earlier, Weber (1947) refined the concept of leadership by examining leaders' charisma and its effectiveness in empowering people. Influenced by Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, Downton viewed transformational leadership from a political and sociological perspective and claimed that leaders could influence followers through charisma, transaction, or inspiration as the transformational approach is directly associated with charisma (Nikezić et al., 2012). However, Downton's concept did not gain creditability until the late 1970s when James MacGregor Burns published his book *Leadership* and introduced the concept of transformative leadership, which evolved to become the basis of leadership literature (McDowelle, 2009)

**Burns' Model of Transforming Leadership.** In 1978, historian James MacGregor Burns extended Downton's work on the effect of charisma from a behavioral perspective and

established the concept of transforming leadership to describe the behaviors of political leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Burns (1978) was the first to fundamentally distinguish between transformational and transactional leadership in the sphere of political perception. Burns contrasted both styles, describing transforming leadership as a process that leaders adapt to elevate followers' awareness by engaging ideal values that results in advanced outcomes (Howell & Avolio, 1993). Unlike his transactional approach, which is based on value exchange, Burns' (1978) transforming leadership model involved making a positive change by example and emphasizing positive character traits to influence followers (Warrick, 2011).

***Bass' Model of Transformational Leadership.*** Furthering the initial work of Burns, Bass (1985) added to the concept allowing for measurements of leadership impact on motivation and performance (Storberg-Walker & Haber-Curran, 2017). Unlike Burns, who considered transformational and transactional as two separate styles, Bass (1987) stated that transformational and transactional models can coexist in the same continuum of leadership. In the transformational leadership theory, individuals motivate followers to transcend self-interests and achieve idealistic goals that enhance the organization. Moreover, individuals with the capacity to inspire followers to organizational success can be described as transformational leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006). According to Bass (1998), transformational leaders can help followers grow and develop into new leaders. Transformational leaders are described as individuals who demonstrate ethical characteristics such as integrity, raise their followers' morale through recognition and support, articulate clear vision and goals, nurture leader-follower relationships through empathy, and get followers to transcend their self-interests and accomplish higher goals (Warrick, 2011).

Using Burns' model as a foundation for transformational leadership, Bass and Avolio discussed the core of transformational leadership in four elements (Bass, 1985a). The four components of transformational leadership are significant for developing followers into leaders and, in turn, producing effective leadership (Bass & Avolio, 2000). Bass and Avolio (1994) outlined these transformational leadership elements, also referred to as the 5 I's, as follows:

***Idealized Influence.*** (Originally referred to as *Charisma*). According to Bass and Avolio (2006), idealized influence is the charismatic factor of transformational leadership. It refers to two conducts: *Idealized Behaviors (IB)* and/or *Idealized Attributes (IA)*. Behavioral idealized influence occurs when leaders demonstrate a high ethical standard and act as role models for their followers, in addition to delivering a strong sense of values and goals in their speech and manners (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders are intensely charismatic. They are capable of challenging and influencing their followers by articulating a strong vision. Attributed idealized influence refers to the attributes that followers identify with their leaders as role models. Such attributes that are identified with iconic transformational leaders are trust, commitment, respect, and reliability. Leaders with idealized influence inspire their followers with a higher level of ethics and conduct as followers admire and emulate their leaders.

***Inspirational Motivation (IM).*** Transformational leaders achieve what is best for the organization by enabling their followers to transform through empowerment. They empower their followers to move beyond their individual self-interests and work towards achieving the collective goals of the organization. The motivational factor helps leaders trigger followers' enthusiasm and optimism toward achieving organizational objectives. Transformational leadership enables followers to engage and reach higher levels of performance through challenge and motivation (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

***Intellectual Stimulation (IS).*** Leaders who demonstrate intellectual stimulation provide a creative platform for their followers and encourage them to think outside of the box. They arouse their followers' intellectual curiosity by challenging the status quo and questioning the provided assumptions. Transformational leaders encourage followers' innovation by including them in the process of decision-making and soliciting new approaches to problems. Transformational leaders further nurture not only an innovative workplace but also a cooperative and productive culture. Followers of such leaders are empowered and confident, as they feel no risk in sharing ideas and generating solutions (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

***Individualized Consideration (IC).*** Individualized consideration pertains to leaders who consider their followers' insight. Transformational leaders pay attention to each follower by providing growth opportunities and coaching whenever needed. They identify followers' needs, recognize their differences, and share their concerns in a supportive climate. Individual-considerate leaders mentor their followers to develop their strengths and grow professionally (Avolio & Bass, 2004). Studies have shown that leaders who adopt a transformational style are more effective (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge & Piccolo 2004; Piccolo et al., 2012) and are able to make followers commit to change (Herold et al., 2008). Moreover, studies by Eagly et al. (2003) showed evidence that women demonstrate higher levels of transformational leadership than men.

**Transactional Leadership.** Transactional leadership revolves around a system of rewards and punishments in exchange for followers' expected performance (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Transactional leaders channel behaviors associated with corrective and constructive transactions to promote desired performance (Jung et al., 2008). Transactional leaders direct followers to desired results by identifying roles and expectations. Bass and Avolio (2006) described three behaviors of transactional leadership as follows:

***Contingent Reward (CR).*** Contingent reward is a constructive transaction between leaders and followers. Leaders offer followers rewards in exchange for their efforts to meet organizational objectives. The contingent reward approach is powerful and has proven to reinforce positive performance. A contingent reward is based on motivating employees by rewarding their efforts.

***Management-by-Exception Active (MBE-A).*** Active MBE leaders take action and watch followers closely for mistakes. Leaders are constantly engaging with followers and monitoring their performance. Leaders also focus on predicting problems to intervene early before they occur (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Active management-by-exception involves a leader who constantly monitors and evaluates an employee's performance and intervenes immediately when performance expectations are not being met.

***Management-by-Exception Passive (MBE-P).*** Transactional leaders who passively manage-by-exception wait for issues and problems to arise before intervening and correcting them. They do not seek to elicit followers' desired performance with rewards; instead, they avoid taking managerial risks and only intervene when problems arise. Passive leadership can harm an organization as issues are ignored until they can no longer be ignored or addressed.

***Passive-Avoidant Leadership.*** Another form of passive management-by-exception, passive-avoidance leadership, is the absence of leadership (Arenas et al., 2018). Passive-avoidant leaders offer little to no direction and do not respond to problems or engage in any decision-making (Moss & Ritossa, 2007). Passive-avoidant leaders are not concerned with their workers or their workload and are indifferent to the needs of their employees. The passive-avoidant leadership style has a negative impact on followers and organizations (Bass & Avolio, 2006).

Embracing a comprehensive spectrum of leadership styles, full-range leadership empowers leaders with the flexibility to seamlessly adapt their behavior according to situational demands. The primary challenge confronting leaders lies in mastering the art of discerning when and how to effectively transition between these leadership styles in order to achieve optimal leadership outcomes.

### **Women in Leadership**

Through the years, women have made remarkable strides in gaining positions of leadership across various industries in the workforce (Gloor et al., 2018). The recent World Economic Forum (2021) report on the global gender gap revealed that there is a significant disparity in opportunities at workplaces across the globe. Saudi Arabia is among the countries with the lowest progress towards closing the gap at 93%, as women make up only 6.8% of managerial positions. Baker and Cangemi (2016) sought to discover the reason for this lack of representation of women in senior leadership positions in corporate America. In their study, the researchers suggested that organizations can take steps to promote women's empowerment by developing policies that encourage the consideration of women for senior leadership positions and emphasizing the value that women can bring to the table as leaders. Drawing from their findings, the authors suggest that such endeavors have the potential to raise awareness about gender equity and foster the advancement of women in organizational settings (Baker & Cangemi, 2016).

Delving into the complexities of women's career advancement, Carbajal (2018) conducted a study exploring the factors influencing women's ascent to leadership roles across various sectors, particularly focusing on the barriers and enablers they encounter in their professional trajectories. Findings revealed that women often face barriers such as gender



stereotyping, work-life balance issues, and a lack of mentorship and networking opportunities. However, the study also highlighted the importance of personal attributes, supportive organizational policies, and mentorship from male and female colleagues in overcoming these obstacles. Furthermore, the presence of supportive organizational policies and practices, as well as mentorship and sponsorship from both male and female colleagues, were identified as crucial enablers for women's ascent to leadership roles (Carbajal, 2018).

In a related vein, Glass and Cook (2016) explored the challenges faced by women who have surpassed the glass ceiling in leadership positions, offering insights into their unique experiences and obstacles. Through a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews, the study revealed that women leaders continue to face persistent gender stereotypes, struggle with work-life balance, have limited access to networks and mentors, and experience heightened scrutiny and isolation. The researchers emphasize the importance of addressing these challenges by tackling gender stereotypes, promoting work-life balance, providing networking and mentorship opportunities, and fostering inclusive environments in order to support women in top leadership roles and advance gender equity in the workplace (Glass & Cook, 2016).

Shifting the focus to bridging the female promotion gap, Hendon (2020) examined how female leaders navigated a path to successful senior-level leadership. Hendon shared three themes common to the successful navigation of leadership: leadership traits, perspective, and perceptiveness. Hendon (2020) also found that women who achieved the most success demonstrated the characteristics of transformational leadership. Since leadership involves communication and influence (Raziq et al., 2018), studies have shown that women demonstrate these two aspects effectively through their inherently communal characteristics as they adopt a relational leadership style (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Research has also indicated that women

better conform to transformational leadership characteristics than their male counterparts (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

### ***Leadership Styles***

Historically, leadership has been predominantly associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness and power, while communal attributes, which also hold significant value in leadership, have often been undervalued (Koenig et al., 2011). Walker and Curran (2017) contend that traditional leadership theories have primarily catered to the male experience, neglecting the unique potential and strengths that women bring to leadership roles. Consequently, there is a pressing need to re-conceptualize leadership by incorporating the female perspective and experience. As the dynamics of the workforce have undergone significant transformations over time, it is essential for leadership styles to adapt accordingly. Contemporary leaders must critically evaluate their practices, identify the most effective and inclusive leadership approaches, and abandon outdated methodologies that no longer serve the diverse needs of today's organizations (Mauri, 2017).

Within the realm of leadership research, transformational and transactional leadership have emerged as two of the most frequently cited and influential styles, shaping contemporary understanding and practice in the field (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Transformational leadership involves leading by example, where leaders establish themselves as role models and manifest positive behaviors that motivate followers to achieve organizational goals beyond self-interest (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Contrarily, transactional leadership is centered on mutual interest between leaders and followers, where leaders motivate their followers with rewards in exchange for satisfactory performance (Northouse, 2007). Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) found that when these leadership styles were developed, the styles were not related to gender-specific

roles. However, studies on transformational leadership have broadened the construct of leadership to a more female than male leadership style since the focus is on establishing expectations for behavior and gaining the trust of employees through modeling (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001).

Researchers also found that women are more likely than men to enhance organizational effectiveness through a transformational style of leadership (Eagly et al., 2003). Joy (2008) conducted a study on the impact of women in some of the top international corporations. The researcher found that corporations with a higher percentage of women in top leadership positions performed better than companies with a lower representation of women (Joy, 2008). Building on the notion that gender dynamics influence leadership styles and the experiences of women in leadership positions, a study found that women leaders in pharmacy tend to use a transformational leadership style that emphasizes empowerment and collaboration, which is effective in promoting team cohesion and improving outcomes. However, the study found that women leaders may face challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities and may be subjected to gender-based discrimination, harassment, and retaliation (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017).

### ***Biases in the Workforce***

Over the years, the workplace has transformed, and the rise of service sectors has generated new job opportunities, including an increase in part-time employment, shift work, and temporary or seasonal positions (Stam et al., 2014). Stam et al. (2014) revealed that with the increase in job opportunities, European and Western countries had seen a surge of women in the workforce. Women are more likely than men to take on part-time and temporary positions as a way to contribute to their household and still prioritize family responsibilities (Stam et al., 2014).

However, despite the rise in female employment, a difference still exists between the positions and roles of men and women in the workforce. Jardina and Burns (2016) stated that female employment has made progress over the years as education and civic skills narrowed the gender gap in terms of educational opportunities and work experience. Specifically, in the United States, the civil rights movement and the women's movement contributed to positive shifts in career opportunities for women (Jardina & Burns, 2016).

Also, changes in workplace dynamics and traditional gender roles have created some conflict and bias (Heilman, 2012). Many different types of bias can occur within the workplace. Individuals may be judged based on age, gender, culture, and lifestyle choices. One of the main types of bias that women face is gender bias. In the past, gender stereotypes determined the roles of men and women. For instance, Smith et al. (2019) explained that if work performance evaluations were based on gender bias and stereotypes, women would experience barriers to career growth and promotions. Studies continue to indicate that gender stereotypes concerning the social roles of men and women have created a bias in the workforce, notably male employees' bias against female leaders (Gloor et al., 2018). Funk and Parker (2018) conducted a study examining the perceptions of workplace equity among men and women in STEM fields. The research revealed significant disparities in how male and female STEM professionals perceive gender discrimination, with women reporting more experiences of gender-based inequities and biases in their work environment compared to their male counterparts. Specifically, 50% of women in STEM occupations stated they had faced gender discrimination at work, while only 19% of men in STEM reported the same. This divergence in viewpoints highlights the ongoing challenges faced by women in STEM and the need for increased awareness and action to address these disparities (Funk & Parker, 2018). Criscione-Nayylor and

Bokunewicz (2018) suggested that women may still experience gender biases in a successful career, including lack of mentorship, social exclusion, and limited opportunities for growth and promotions.

To decrease gender bias in the workplace, Grogan (2019) has suggested that researchers should use data to identify and recognize the barriers to gender equality in the workplace. While women make up 47% of the total US workforce, they are extremely underrepresented in STEM jobs (World Bank, 2019). If gender bias and other stereotypical biases are confronted and overcome, the scholastic community could benefit from increased gender and racial diversity since women are significantly underrepresented as leaders in STEM (Office of Federal Operations, 2019). Organizational leadership could also benefit from diversity; however, many hiring committee practices for senior-level positions still present barriers to women entering executive leadership (Soklaridis et al., 2017).

### ***Power and Gender***

In positions of authority and power, the leadership roles that rank the highest are the hardest to come by. In every industry and corporation, there is only one top position, typically the chief executive officer or chief financial officer. Women have worked especially hard to gain ground in these higher-level leadership positions.

Carrasco et al. (2015) revealed that ethical corporations are shifting to a gender diversity effort to include more women in top management levels. They also noted a report that was published in 2011 that indicated the ratio of women on boards by country, where Sweden ranked the highest at 27.3%, and Italy scored the lowest at 3.7% (Catalyst, 2011). In their study, Carrasco et al. (2015) wanted to examine to what degree a country's culture would affect the representation of females in the workforce and the roles of leadership. They found that women

remained underrepresented on corporate boards across the globe and noted that cultural differences could affect the structure of corporate governance. Although many steps have been taken globally for the promotion of women in leadership roles, more efforts are needed to equalize leadership opportunities.

### **Gender-Related Theories**

Gender-related theories are frameworks that seek to explain the social construction of gender, the relationship between gender and power, and the ways in which gender affects human behavior, experiences, and identities. These theories have implications for understanding gender bias. Gender bias refers to systematic favoritism or prejudice towards a particular gender, often resulting in unequal treatment or opportunities for individuals or groups based on their gender. It can manifest in different forms, such as stereotyping, discrimination, or marginalization, and can occur in various settings, including education, employment, healthcare, politics, and media. Gender bias can be conscious or unconscious and can affect people of any gender identity, although it primarily affects women who face structural inequalities in many societies (Eagly & Miller, 2016).

The difference between men and women can be viewed differently through various scientific lenses depending on the area of study. Women in top leadership positions often face gender bias and discrimination, which can limit their opportunities for career advancement and make it difficult for them to be taken seriously as leaders (Glass & Cook, 2016). For example, biologists may view men and women in a biological sense, comparing their differences on a genetic level (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Therapists may view the differences between men and women through a psychological lens, and sociologists often view the differences between men

and women using the male and female positions as they occur in the societal hierarchy (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Throughout the years, gender-focused research has examined the role of men and women in multiple disciplines and the challenges it poses. Therefore, gender is relevant to a conceptual framework in regard to how women ascend to leadership positions in a long-standing male-dominated corporation. Some of the most common theories used to study gender include social role theory, role congruity theory, intergroup theory, and social norms theory. The combination of these gender theories lends itself to the unique settings of the case.

Consideration must be given to the complexity of the cultural and organizational context of Saudi Arabia in which gender biases impede women's promotion to leadership roles. The previously mentioned gender-related theories, pioneered by Eagly and colleagues, are deemed to be suitable to inform the research questions. Gender-related theories are discussed in the following sections.

### ***Social Role Theory***

Social role theory was initially developed by Alice Eagly and Valerie Steffen in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Eagly and Steffen's theory proposed that gender differences in behavior and attitudes can be explained by social roles and the expectations associated with these roles. They argued that men and women behave differently because they are socialized into different roles and are expected to exhibit different behaviors and attitudes in these roles (Eagly, 1987). Eagly and Wood (2012) argued that the underlying principle of gender roles is shaped by the behavioral similarities and differences between both genders. Therefore, the social roles of men and women are perceived differently depending on the contextual culture they belong to. Moreover, gender roles are learned through socialization, particularly during childhood and

adolescence, and are reinforced by social institutions such as the family, education system, media, and workplace. These roles dictate the behaviors and attitudes that are deemed appropriate for men and women in various domains, such as work, family, and social interactions (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Social role theory focuses on understanding socially prescribed roles and the effects and consequences of role associations (Scalambrino & Lowery, 2017). According to Scalambrino and Lowery (2017), traditional socially prescribed roles can be divided into two views: a) men and women have distinct areas to work in, and b) there is a societal hierarchy in which men and women are categorized. Social role theory emphasizes that historical and cultural attitudes are associated with not only who should perform a role, but the expectations associated with that role (Scalambrino & Lowery, 2017). Social role theory suggests that the different social roles assigned to men and women can result in different behaviors, attitudes, and experiences. For example, women are often assigned roles as caretakers and are expected to prioritize the needs of others over their own, while men are assigned roles as providers and are expected to be assertive and competitive in the workplace (Eagly & Wood, 2012). However, social role theory does not imply that these roles are fixed or immutable. Rather, it acknowledges that social roles are dynamic and can change over time as cultural and social norms shift. Moreover, social role theory emphasizes that individuals have agency and can challenge and renegotiate traditional gender roles and expectations (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Social role theory is commonly used to conduct gender-related research, especially involving women and workplace equality. Mukarram et al. (2018) highlighted the prevalence of gender stereotypes and their negative impact on women's evaluation across various contexts. They argued that these stereotypes can create a bias that leads to different standards being



applied to women as compared to men, even when their performance and qualifications are equal. Many social class distinctions of the past have placed men at a greater advantage than women in workplace roles and opportunities (Rucker et al., 2018). According to a 2015 report conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, women reported earning only 79% of what men earn in comparable positions (Rucker et al., 2018). Despite this, Dogaru-Tulică (2019) highlighted some characteristics of women that are viewed as more receptive among employees. The researchers noted that women leaders are dedicated to respecting their employees and presenting a more personal approach to problem-solving. Although the traditional and stereotypical roles of genders do differ in the workplace, the employee's receptiveness to leadership style is dependent on the type of organization, workforce, and work culture (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). As social role theory has been used in past gender-related research, specifically involving women and the workplace, this is an appropriate choice for a theoretical basis for this study.

### ***Role Congruity Theory***

Role congruity theory, developed by Eagly and Karau (2002), builds on the earlier work of Eagly and others regarding social role theory and gender stereotypes and seeks to explain how gender stereotypes can influence people's evaluation of individuals in leadership roles. Eagly and Karau's theory proposes that gender-based bias and discrimination in leadership roles are not only a result of overt sexism or discrimination but also of subtle biases and expectations that are rooted in cultural and social norms. The theory suggests that people are more likely to view men as congruent with leadership roles and women as incongruent, which can lead to gender-based discrimination and bias in employment and other settings. (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The social identity of women in their workplaces may reflect widespread gender stereotypes, especially among organizations that have few to no women in senior positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Role congruity theory emphasizes that people tend to associate leadership roles with stereotypically masculine traits and that this can make it more difficult for women to be perceived as effective leaders. A mismatch between female gender roles and senior leadership positions can result in two forms of prejudice: a) a perception that women possess inferior leadership abilities compared to men, and b) a belief that the behaviors associated with the female gender role are less desirable in leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Wang et al. (2019) claimed the difference in wages between male and female leaders holding the same position provides evidence supporting the role congruity theory postulation that organizations favor male leaders.

Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) has been used to explain segregation in the workplace. Eagly and Karau (2002) argued that in the workplace, leaders, and managers might perceive women and men through the lens of traditional social roles, thus forming conclusions about the characteristics and work habits of each. In a study by Kossek et al. (2017), researchers conducted a systematic secondary analysis of literature that focused on the perspectives on women's career equality. Kossek et al. (2017) stated that women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, particularly within every country's business and political institutions. In their analysis of the literature, Kossek et al. (2017) noted that many researchers attribute the career inequality that some women experience to gender biases. These biases intentionally exclude women from career growth and opportunities. The researchers also described descriptive prejudice as a contributing factor to gender bias in the workplace. Descriptive prejudice is based

on beliefs about women's stereotypical roles, and these beliefs dissuade employers from recognizing leadership qualities and potential in their female workforce (Kossek et al., 2017).

According to Mukarram et al. (2018), role congruity theory suggests that management should consider the resources that women leaders can bring to the table when appointing them to boardroom positions. The researchers also recommend that organizations should examine the influence of female executives on a company's overall performance. Mukarram et al. (2018) also recommended that organizations should consider the impact of women executives on a firm's performance. As women still face many barriers to organizational growth and promotions to senior levels of leadership, role congruity theory is an appropriate theoretical framework to use since the theory examines senior leadership roles and female gender roles in relation to prejudice.

Role congruity theory suggests that reducing gender-based bias and discrimination in leadership roles requires challenging and changing gender stereotypes and expectations. This can be done through awareness-raising, education, and targeted interventions that promote more diverse and inclusive leadership models (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

### ***Intergroup Theory***

The earliest formulations of Intergroup Theory can be traced back to the work of social psychologists such as Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s. Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed that individuals' identification with social groups plays a key role in shaping their perceptions of themselves and others and that group membership can influence individuals' attitudes and behavior towards members of other groups. Intergroup Theory explains that individuals tend to view members of their own group more positively than members of other groups. This tendency, known as ingroup bias, can lead to prejudice, discrimination, and conflict

between groups. The theory proposes that intergroup dynamics are shaped by a variety of factors, including competition for resources, perceived threats to group identity or status, and socialization processes that reinforce group membership and identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Recognizing that these dynamics also have roots in early life experiences, it is important to note that stereotypes and prejudices often form in early childhood (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Developmental research based on intergroup theory has been conducted to try and understand causal mechanisms in early childhood in order to prevent the formation of stereotypes and prejudices (Bigler & Liben, 2007). In researching adult behaviors concerning organizational aggression, prejudice, and racial tensions, Rosette et al. (2013) suggested three intergroup theories that should be evaluated. They included the intergroup theory of social dominance, the intergroup theory of gendered prejudice, and the intergroup theory of social identity (Rosette et al., 2013). The intergroup theory of social dominance explores group-based social hierarchies and how they are formed and maintained (Pratto et al., 2006). Social dominance is used in intergroup research as a basis to understand how the processes of producing and maintaining prejudices and discrimination occur in institutional practice, relationships, and interactions among men and women (Pratto et al., 2006).

McDonald et al. (2011) argued that racism, stereotypes, and bias stem from the gendered nature of prejudice. In their research, McDonald et al. (2011) explained that many workplace employees are composed of group-based social hierarchies with the view that one group has more social and authoritative power than the other. Concerning intergroup theory and social identity, Hogg et al. (2017) claimed that motivational emphasis is given to intergroup competition over status, meaning that many individuals will promote and protect an individual from their own social identity group. Originally used as a theory to explore conflict and

cooperation among groups, social identity has evolved to help improve relations between groups by helping groups understand group identity and recognizing emotional investment and the impact it can have on organizational relationships (Hogg et al., 2017). As intergroup theory is often used to support research that examines causal mechanisms and the formation of stereotypes and prejudices, this theory appropriately supports the narrative of this single case study on women in leadership roles.

### ***Social Norms Theory***

According to Cialdini et al. (1991), social norms theory proposes that people's behavior is influenced by their perception of what is considered typical or normal behavior in a given social context. They suggested that individuals are motivated to conform to the norms of their social group in order to gain acceptance, approval, and validation from others. The theory also suggests that people tend to overestimate the prevalence of certain behaviors or attitudes among their peers, leading to a “false consensus” effect in which individuals believe that their own behavior aligns with the norm even if it does not (Cialdini et al., 1991).

In the context of organizational leadership, the theory suggests that perceptions of what is normative and acceptable for leaders can impact who is perceived as a suitable candidate for leadership positions. For example, if the norm is for leaders to be assertive and dominant, women may be less likely to be viewed as appropriate leaders, as these traits are often associated with men (Rudman & Glick, 2021).

Social norms theory has often been used as a basis to address social justice issues and help explain why women are often underrepresented in leadership positions in organizations (Berkowitz, 2005). Social Role Theory found that women may face social pressure to conform to gender norms that are seen as incompatible with leadership, such as being nurturing and

communal, which can create a mismatch between women's perceived competence and leadership potential. This mismatch can result in women being overlooked for leadership roles and undervalued when they do occupy such roles (Elsesser & Lever, 2011).

Chung et al. (2019) found that in a work environment, the supervisor often influences the behavior of the workplace. In their research, Chung et al. (2019) noted a connection between social norms theory concerning misperceptions and a supervisor's connection with their employees. Social norm theory also explains how an individual's behavior can be influenced by misunderstandings. Blay et al. (2018) shared that social norm theory is practical to use in research into empirical business ethics. The researchers also described social norms as the behaviors of sufficiently large subsets of people conforming to the norm of a situation or similar situation. In the workplace, a social norm may include downplaying the contributions of female employees.

To combat this, some organizations have sought to challenge and redefine gender norms around leadership, promoting more inclusive and diverse leadership styles and providing opportunities for women to develop their leadership skills (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, in some workplaces, gender stereotyping is considered a socially acceptable behavior (Gloor et al., 2018), rendering social norm theory an appropriate theoretical basis for this study.

This study uses four common theories used to study gender on a theoretical basis. The four theories include the social role theory, the role congruity theory, the intergroup theory, and the social norms theory. Understanding how past theories have supported studies on women in the workplace and women in positions of leadership, empirical research provides a foundation for this narrative case study. Theories that support the research on women in the workplace have

helped researchers design and conduct studies to explore essential women's issues, including studies on women and glass ceilings, mentorships, and workforce cultures.

### **Organizational Barriers**

Organizational cultures often mirror social constructions of gender and social norms in society by reflecting and perpetuating traditional gender roles and expectations and by contributing to the meritocracy paradox (Vinkenburg, 2017). In her study, Vinkenburg (2017) examined how organizational practices and structures can reinforce gendered assumptions and create biases, thus limiting opportunities for women and perpetuating gender inequalities in the workplace. The research emphasizes the importance of systemic diversity interventions that engage gatekeepers, optimize decision-making, and mitigate bias to effectively address the meritocracy paradox and promote a more equitable work environment. Over the past two decades, the number of women in leadership positions has increased (Powell, 2018). Despite the initiative and policies made to advance women's professional careers, data from the World Economic Forum (2011) and other empirical and statistical studies on the gender gap reveal that women's participation in leadership roles is relatively low across the globe (Acker, 2009; Davidson & Burke, 2011; Powell, 2018).

Bakht et al. (2017) investigated the representation of women on the editorial boards of medical journals. Their analysis revealed that female researchers are currently underrepresented on these boards, which may be attributed to several barriers, such as hostile workplace culture and inadequate support for women. By highlighting these challenges, Bakht et al. (2017) suggested that there is a need for greater efforts to promote gender diversity and equity within the field of medical publishing. Likewise, women encounter hindrances to attaining senior-level roles in the banking sector, as stated by Alhalwachi and Mordi (2021). For instance, the banking

industry in Bahrain has experienced a decrease in female employment, and this may be due to barriers such as a non-supportive work environment, lack of organizational knowledge, and exclusion from group activities. The researchers suggest that addressing these barriers and implementing targeted policies and initiatives to support women in the Bahraini banking sector can help promote gender diversity and equity in senior management positions (Alhalwachi & Mordi, 2021).

Islam (2017) asserts that gender-based discrimination is one of the greatest barriers to women advancing in the workforce in the Arab states. Gender discrimination against Saudi women may be based on conservative cultural traditions (Islam, 2017). Abalkhail (2018) noted that although anti-discrimination laws have been implemented, women may still face forms of discrimination in the workplace. For example, Abalkhail (2018) shared that there is a gap in pay between genders. Also, men in leadership roles may overlook women for promotions into positions of leadership. Overtly, these gender biases manifest most often in STEM fields where women face greater challenges to occupy unconventional roles. Wynn and Correll (2018) found that women pursuing careers in technology companies often face alienation and discriminatory practices during recruitment sessions, which can hinder their entry and advancement in the field. Moreover, a study by Mackenzie (2015) identifies the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon as a major barrier to women's career advancement, which refers to the gradual loss of women at consecutive career stages. The study finds that women often face gender discrimination, bias, and a lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, which contribute to their departure from these fields (Mackenzie, 2015).

Evidence suggests that significant progress has been achieved in enhancing the presence of women in select leadership capacities; nevertheless, obstacles persist for women aspiring to



attain upper management and senior leadership positions (Rishani et al., 2015). Cross-cultural research reveals that the advancement of women to high-ranking positions is hindered by various organizational barriers, which are often underpinned by gender-biased perceptions and attitudes (Powell, 2018).

### ***Glass Ceiling***

Often used to describe a barrier to success, a *glass ceiling* is defined as an invisible barrier that prevents highly qualified individuals from advancing within an organization, especially at the top level of management or leadership (Gunawardana, 2017). Expanding on the limitations of traditional perspectives on workplace inequalities, Acker (2009) provided a conceptual analysis of the glass ceiling and its limitations in capturing the complexity of workplace inequalities, advocating for a shift toward inequality regimes. The glass ceiling metaphor, focusing on individual-level barriers, inadequately addresses systemic and structural issues. The analysis emphasizes the growing prevalence of inequality regimes, characterized by subtle discrimination through organizational practices and policies, often masked by diversity and inclusion initiatives. Acker (2009) argues that, considering the interplay of gender, race, and class, a more intersectional approach is crucial for understanding workplace inequalities and promoting systemic change to challenge power structures and institutionalized discrimination.

Although significant gains have been made concerning the increase of women in powerful leadership roles, barriers still exist for women seeking to climb the corporate ladder. These workplace barriers are often referred to as a glass ceiling. The recent Global Gender Gap Report showed a limited presence of women as senior leaders, even in the most advanced countries, because of the persistence of glass ceilings (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Chisholm-Burns et al. (2017) shared that women in fields such as pharmaceuticals, academia, healthcare, and other large organizations are making good progress within the lower ranks of leadership and management. However, once they reach a glass ceiling, their progress, and efforts to grow in senior leadership become stymied. Chisholm-Burns et al. found that upon examination of Fortune 500 and S&P 500 companies, women represented only 4-5% of CEOs, and the ratio of women holding senior positions was less than 25%. Chisholm-Burns et al.'s (2017) findings demonstrate that the glass ceiling is still an enduring barrier that exists for many women worldwide. Similarly, Yount et al. (2018) indicated that women are inadequately represented in leadership roles in the realm of global health. The researchers explained that breaking the patterns of gender discrimination and intersectionality requires the implementation of equality to ensure equal opportunities to obtain leadership as men (Yount et al., 2018).

Furthermore, there is a significant glass ceiling in STEM fields as well as a gap in the supply of STEM workers compared to the demand. Yet, despite the efforts of past U.S. presidential initiatives to increase the number of STEM workers, the gender gap in this field has yet to be fully addressed, with men consistently outnumbering women (Swafford & Anderson, 2020). Swafford and Anderson (2020) emphasized how the percentage of men enrolled in STEM programs as freshmen outpaced the number of women pursuing degrees in the same field by 29% to 15%. Cidlinská (2019) reported that barriers that women face to progressing in STEM fields might include views on motherhood and a woman's perceived role in a family as well as gender sensitivity. Perceived gender roles and stereotypes may also present barriers to women breaking the glass ceiling in STEM careers (Cidlinská, 2019). Abalkhail (2019) also asserted that barriers to the advancement of Saudi women might include a lack of training for women and resistance to change in a male-dominated workforce.

To break this glass ceiling, more support is needed to encourage the promotion of women to senior levels of leadership. Researchers have shown that a more diverse senior management team benefits the organizational growth of a company. Saleem and colleagues (2017) argued that developing countries, in particular, should prioritize the development of policies that promote active female participation in senior-level management. Their study, which examined the impact of the glass ceiling on women's effectiveness, revealed the need for fair and equitable workplace policies that support female leadership and ultimately lead to economic growth. Alsubaie and Jones (2017) conducted an overview of the state of women's leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The researchers discovered that a lack of exponential growth of female leadership in higher education might be linked to historical factors such as strict cultural norms and legislative laws that have limited women's access to leadership positions in Saudi Arabia.

Hodges (2017) examined the barriers that many professional women face in Saudi Arabia. Interviewing 25 educated female participants across a variety of industries in Saudi Arabia (i.e., education, law, science, health, and journalism), Hodges (2017) pointed out that many of the participants expressed limited access to role models or mentors. The participants also expressed a need for a mentorship program that could help women with career planning and job advancement.

### ***Mentoring***

Women in top leadership positions face unique challenges in building and maintaining social networks and finding mentors who are willing and able to provide guidance and support (Glass & Cook, 2016). The role of positive mentoring is recognized by many as a key to a successful career path that leads to leadership roles (Hill & Wheat, 2017). Mentors are individuals with advanced career experience and knowledge and who contribute to enhancing the

career advancements of less experienced employees (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015). Chisholm-Burns et al. (2017) stressed the importance of mentoring and sponsoring women pursuing leadership roles. The researchers explained that mentorship is a crucial factor in promoting the career growth of women, as mentors offer valuable guidance and insights on navigating through various organizational structures (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). Accordingly, mentorship could help increase the presence of women in leadership roles internationally.

Female leaders often lack the support (e.g., mentorship and coaching), resources (e.g., networks), and power to obtain executive-level leadership positions. A 2015 study by Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG) indicated that women in leadership positions often lack mentorship compared to their male counterparts. The report highlights that more than 60% of women surveyed identified the lack of mentorship and sponsorship as a barrier to their career growth (KPMG, 2015). Scheepers et al. (2018) discussed that more mentoring, coaching, and job shadowing at the senior level would support more senior-level advancement for women. Many men at the C-suite level have access to other successful male mentors and coaches; however, with few women at the chief executive level, female leaders lack the same number of resources for support (Scheepers et al., 2018). Allen (2007) stressed that women encounter challenges in advancing their careers, therefore mentoring is more critical for women than it is for their male counterparts.

### ***Networking***

Like the absence of mentorship, women also lack access to formal and informal organizational networks (Bagilhole & White, 2011). In a study examining the role of sponsorship in advancing women's careers to leadership positions, Ibarra (2019) argues that while mentorship is important, sponsorship is crucial in providing women with access to opportunities, resources,

and visibility needed to advance their careers. The study highlights that women face barriers in accessing sponsorship opportunities and that sponsorship tends to be informal and based on personal relationships. As a result, women who lack access to these personal networks are at a disadvantage in advancing their careers. The study suggests that organizations should create more formal sponsorship programs that provide women with access to sponsors who can advocate for them and help them navigate the organizational landscape. The study further notes that sponsorship is particularly critical in advancing women from middle management to senior leadership positions, where women continue to be underrepresented (Ibarra, 2019).

Nearly half a century ago, Kanter (1977) made the case that an individual's position and level of power within an organization can significantly impact their career advancement. Kanter (1977) also argued that withholding organizational resources, such as mentoring programs and social networks, from women can create obstacles that hinder their ability to progress professionally. By highlighting the importance of equitable access to resources, Kanter's (1977) work accentuates the need for organizations to create inclusive workplaces that support the advancement of all employees, regardless of gender. A study by Cross and Linehan (2006) supports Kanter's argument that women's advancement to managerial positions is hindered by a lack of social capital. They examined the careers of women in the information technology field in Ireland to explore the factors behind the underrepresentation of women in senior management roles.

Cross and Linehan (2006) reported that women believe that career advancement opportunities come through access to information via formal and informal networks. Even on a higher level, women who are already leaders are likely to have less authority in accessing and mobilizing resources such as networks and funding due to gender-based stereotypes and

expectations (Ely & Meyerson, 2000) thus impeding the transfer of knowledge and experience among female leaders. The scarcity of research continues to prevail in exploring the ways in which women in positions of power can employ authority to access resources remain prevalent (Shair-Rosenfield & Stoyan, 2018).

Likewise, women in the Arab region suffer from the same disadvantages of lacking access to coaching and networking. There is a distinct lack of mentoring and networking to assist Arab women in advancing in their careers (Abalkhail, 2012). With respect to cultural and organizational differences, Arab women tend to be outsiders to male-dominated networks and lack access to valuable information needed to advance professionally (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010).

There is evidence that Saudi women face similar organizational barriers to Western women in regard to engaging with networks. However, Abalkhail (2012) affirmed that personal connections are deemed effective in helping Saudi women with career promotions. Saudi women tend to seek support from family and personal connections to advance their professions rather than trying to access male organizational networks (Abalkhail, 2012).

### ***Ambivalent Sexism***

Glick and Fiske (1996) introduced the concept of ambivalent sexism, which distinguishes between two types of sexism: hostile and benevolent. Hostile sexism refers to negative, hostile attitudes towards women, while benevolent sexism refers to seemingly positive attitudes that still serve to limit and constrain women.

Based on a study that recruited 303 participants (151 men and 152 women) from various organizations in Turkey, Acar and Sümer (2018) examined the role of ambivalent sexism in the evaluation of women's leadership effectiveness. Specifically, their study showed that women

who exhibit stereotypically masculine leadership behaviors, such as being assertive and dominant, are penalized and evaluated less favorably than men who display the same behaviors. This penalty is a manifestation of hostile sexism, which involves negative attitudes and beliefs toward women who violate gender norms. On the other hand, women who exhibit stereotypically feminine behaviors are seen as less competent and suitable for leadership positions, which is a manifestation of benevolent sexism. In both cases, women are caught in a *double bind*, where they are penalized for exhibiting both masculine and feminine behaviors and are therefore less likely to be evaluated as effective leaders (Acar & Sümer, 2018).

### ***Double-Bind Dilemma***

In male-dominated organizations, women who exhibit stereotypically feminine traits may be perceived as less suitable for leadership roles, even if they possess other important leadership qualities. This can create a double bind for women, who may be penalized for being too assertive or too warm, depending on the situation (Eagly & Karau, 2002), making it challenging to navigate traditional leadership roles effectively. A study by Eagly and Carli (2007) supports this notion, finding that female leaders who exhibited agentic qualities were perceived as competent but not likable, while those displaying communal attributes were liked but not deemed competent, underscoring the complex dynamics female leaders must negotiate in male-dominated environments. Madaan and Pradhan (2017) described a double-bind dilemma as a psychological deadlock created when conflicting demands are made so that in any situation, no matter which demand is followed, the response will be considered incorrect. In other words, a double-bind dilemma presents a lose/lose situation. The researchers continued to explain how this situation is troublesome for women in leadership positions. Many women in leadership positions find themselves facing gender stereotypes that view women as either capable or

pleasant, but not both (Madaan & Pradhan, 2017). Jamieson (1997) stated that female leaders have to reconcile paradoxical expectations, which are solely imposed on women, to succeed. However, Jamieson (1997) believed that this bind could be broken by implementing a gender-equality expectation in the workplace that is not based on male normative roles and by owning the power of defining women's styles of leadership.

For women in leadership positions, a double-bind dilemma produces stress as women feel the need to spend extra time proving their worth and value. According to Banihani and Syed (2016), sociocultural variables and individual identity and agency have a significant impact on the work engagement of women in Saudi culture. Despite progress, Saudi women continue to face a socio-cultural environment that limits certain professions to women, resulting in workplace inequality and segregation. Almaki et al. (2016) shared that many Saudi women feel conflicted when faced with existing sociocultural prejudices while simultaneously receiving encouragement from the government to grow as leaders.

### **The Workforce of Saudi Arabia**

In recent years, the Saudi government has emphasized the importance of having women in the workforce (Varshney, 2019). This has prompted a change in how women are viewed and has increased the empowerment of Saudi women. Women can expect a successful future in leadership in part due to one influential figure in Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah, supporting women advancing into leadership roles (Kattan et al., 2016). The following sections discuss the cultural and societal demographics of Saudi Arabia. It will also deliberate on embedded factors affecting women rising to predominantly male leadership roles because of gender segregation and conservative cultural norms. Additionally, the sections provide a review of the Kingdom's



Saudi Vision 2030, including the initiatives and policies implemented by the government to encourage women's participation in the workforce and leadership positions.

### ***Saudi Arabia***

Located in western Asia, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest state in the Arabia Peninsula. The kingdom has a rich culture shaped by the diversity of its people and the religious values of Islam, as it is known as the cradle of Islam (Saudi Embassy, 2022). In 1932, King Abdulaziz established the unity and national identity of reformed Saudi Arabia by adapting to the modern world while maintaining traditions of the culture and faith in Islam (Alotaibi, 2020; Saudi Embassy, 2022). Following the death of King Abdulaziz in 1953, his son King Saud continued his father's work and established the first institute of higher education. Making his mark as an international leader, King Saud was the first Saudi King to visit the United States and, in 1963, sponsored an international Islamic conference. Economic and social development continued to grow on a global scale as Saudi leaders worked on foreign policies. In the early 1970s, King Faisal established the first public school for girls. According to the Saudi Embassy (2022), with each succession to the throne, each Saudi leader has contributed to the economic growth and development of the country.

In 1932, King Abdulaziz named the country the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and officially declared the country an Islamic state with Arabic as the national language (Saudi Embassy, 2022). As a state deeply rooted in its cultural heritage, established norms, and traditions have played a significant role in shaping Saudi society (Alotaibi, 2020). Before 1995, women were limited in choices. However, King Abdullah helped change the role and status of women in Saudi society. By inviting women to attend the National Consultative Council, King Abdullah laid the foundation for how Saudi women contributed to the nation's education and economic

development (Alotaibi, 2020). Although many changes have occurred over the year to include the contributions of women, Abalkhail (2019) asserted that the gender segregation of the past still exists. Previously, Saudi men and women were educated separately and worked separately. An established sense of patriarchy has contributed to most positions of leadership being held by men. Abalkhail (2019) also noted that, despite recent changes to support Saudi women in economic development, many women lack the connections to gain employment themselves and rely on male family members to network on their behalf.

As higher education for women has been historically limited, positions of leadership held by women at the university level are sparse (Abalkhail, 2019). Although this will improve over time, there is a need for female leaders to help develop the next generation of women. With an emphasis on education, technology, and innovations to support the economic development of Saudi Arabia, new initiatives have been established to promote women in the workforce (Abalkhail, 2018). Established in 2017, Saudi Vision 2030 was created to promote job skills so that Saudis are globally competitive (Abalkhail, 2018).

### ***Cultural Barriers and New Reforms***

Saudi women today possess higher levels of education, greater awareness, and increased financial autonomy than ever before (Varshney, 2019). However, this has not always been the case for Saudi women. In the past, a combination of conservative cultural traditions and strict laws placed limitations on opportunities for women (Basaffar et al., 2018). Elamin and Omair (2010) shared that over the last three decades, Arab countries including Saudi Arabia have seen changes for women including increased education opportunities, employment prospects, and a decline in the idealism concerning the traditional role of women. In a quantitative study of 500 Saudi male participants, Elamin and Omair's (2010) findings indicated that Saudi men are

believed to be a good fit for leadership because of their masculine characteristics of being dominant and competitive. Women, on the other hand, believed that they are not capable to take leadership positions. This is because they are perceived as submissive, caregivers, and homemakers. This is in addition to lacking leadership qualifications (Elamin & Omair, 2010). Although laws have been passed to encourage the promotion and growth of women in the workforce, more time will be needed for men to change their views on the role of women in work and leadership.

Addressing the cultural context of women's empowerment, Basaffar et al. (2018) elucidated that traditional Saudi culture positioned men as dominant figures, while women were perceived as modest and predominantly limited to teaching roles in all-girls schools. Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been a paradigm shift as the Saudi government actively promotes business leadership opportunities for women, transcending the cultural barriers of the past (Basaffar et al., 2018). Furthermore, Al-Kwifit et al. (2019) emphasized that, despite the historically strict patriarchal views in the Middle East, globalization has emerged as a potent catalyst, fostering positive change and advancing gender equality across various aspects of life.

### ***Gender Segregation***

Historically, the Saudi Kingdom and other Arab societies have held onto a social structure that strictly defined gender roles (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). In Saudi Arabia, the deeply ingrained cultural practice of gender segregation poses a unique set of challenges to women's professional development and leadership progression (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015). Stemming from cultural conservative misinterpretations of Islamic principles, this strict separation of the sexes in public spaces, workplaces, and educational institutions has historically limited the opportunities for women to engage in professional networking, pursue diverse career paths, and assume

leadership roles. For example, women have been legally restricted from interacting with men that are not from family, without the presence of a male family representative. Al-Asfour et al. (2017) also explained that women were limited to sex-segregated settings.

Despite the significant strides made by the Saudi government in recent years to promote gender equality and empower women, addressing the deeply rooted issues of gender segregation and discrimination remains crucial to advancing women's leadership progression (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015). As a result of these efforts, new laws are now changing the outlook of how women are viewed in Saudi society. For example, in 2018, a ban on female drivers was finally lifted (Krane & Majid, 2018). Lifting this gender-biased barrier to transportation has opened possibilities for women in the Saudi workforce. Krane and Majid (2018) explained that by removing the driving ban for women, Saudi Arabia should see an increase in competition for employment among women. By dismantling these barriers and fostering a more inclusive professional environment, Saudi Arabia can pave the way for a new generation of women leaders who can contribute to the nation's social, economic, and cultural growth.

### **Saudi Women in Corporate Environments**

Over-discrimination, characterized by excessive bias and unjust treatment, further exacerbates the barriers faced by women in their pursuit of leadership positions. This pervasive discrimination manifests in various forms, such as wage disparities, restricted access to resources and opportunities, and stereotyping of women's skills and capabilities (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015). Consequently, women in Saudi Arabia often struggle to break through the proverbial glass ceiling that hinders their upward mobility within organizations and industries.

Although the gender gap is lessening and opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia are increasing, Alsubaie and Jones (2017) shared that Saudi Arabia was ranked 141 out of 144

countries for gender equality in the Global Gender Gap Report. Compared to the same report in 2021, a gender gap still persists with Saudi Arabia ranked 146 out of 156 countries covered. Saudi women were found to hold 7.4% of managerial positions with gender disparity at 83% in leadership roles (World Economic Forum, 2021).

A 2019 World Bank study reported that 70% of Saudi women are enrolled in undergraduate programs compared to 66% of Saudi men; however, Saudi women occupy less than 25% of the labor force (World Bank, 2019). Growth in educational opportunities indicates that change is occurring, including growing recognition of the contributions that women can make to Saudi society. With changes to laws and new grant funding from the Saudi government, women in Saudi Arabia have more opportunities and employment support than previous generations (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Recognizing the value of women in the workforce and in positions of leadership can benefit the Saudi labor force.

### ***Successful Saudi Female Leaders***

The path to success for women in Saudi Arabia is rapidly changing, and women are now empowered by the presence of women appointed to leadership positions within the Saudi military and labor force. An early major step to empower Saudi women was King Abdullah designating 30 Saudi women to join Shura, the Saudi version of Parliament, back in 2012 (Salloum et al., 2016). In 2017-2018, many changes occurred that benefited Saudi women, including lifting the ban on women driving, attending a cinema, and joining the military. In 2017, Sarah Al-Suhaimi was appointed the head of the Middle East's largest stock exchange. In 2018, Dr. Tamadur bint Youssef Al-Ramah was made the first female Saudi Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Development. In 2019, Hind Al-Zahid was appointed as a deputy minister of Women's Empowerment at the Ministry of Civil Service, a newly established position by the

Saudi government to empower women. These appointments are a major success in furthering the achievements of Saudi women (Perper & Pasley, 2019). Saudi women are slowly becoming able to demonstrate their potential as organizational leaders.

### *Saudi Aramco*

Aramco (2022) is a global leader in energy and chemicals and is known for its crude oil production. In the beginning, Aramco was an oil venture owned by four oil companies based in the United States, including Standard Oil of California, Mobil, Texaco, and Standard Oil Company of New Jersey. In 1980, the Saudi government bought Aramco. However, ever since its beginnings, Aramco has contributed to the economic growth of Saudi Arabia's private sector.

Building on this legacy, Hertog (2013) emphasized that by maintaining its status as the most favored employer, Saudi Aramco attracts a substantial cohort of aspiring Saudi graduates; the company's management and engineering professionals are widely acclaimed within the global oil and gas industry. Hertog (2013) also reported that Saudi Aramco was known for a workforce of mixed genders where women could drive. Islam (2017) emphasized that Saudi Aramco has been a leader in the hiring of women and has included women in their workforce since 1964.

Saudi Aramco is seen as a catalyst in providing equal opportunities for both genders to enter the corporation. Considering the Saudi cultural norms at that time (1980-2000), women were stigmatized for joining predominantly male professions such as STEM-related companies. Islam (2017) noted the contributions of women to the STEM field at Aramco before there was a general precedent set in Saudi Arabia. Some of the most notable women that worked for Aramco included Najat Husseini, hired in 1964, who was the first university-educated female employee (Islam, 2017). In the early 1980s, two notable Saudi women joined Aramco and left a legacy

behind, Huda Al-Ghpson and Nabilah Al-Tunisi (Al-Naimi, 2016). Huda Al-Ghpson joined the company in 1981, and by 2012 she became the very first woman to hold an executive leadership role (Al-Ghpson, 2015); and Nabilah Al-Tunisi who joined Aramco in 1982 and became the Chief Engineer of Aramco in 2015 (Warner, 2016). In addition, Saudi Aramco is now offering scholarships to women pursuing careers in STEM industries (Capello & Borisly, 2019).

Huda Al-Ghpson is a great example of a successful Saudi business leader. Al-Ghpson credits her family, especially her late mother, for supporting her educational and occupational goals, which helped her take advantage of many different leadership opportunities at Aramco. She began her career at Aramco Hospital as a patient representative and worked her way up to director of employee relations policy and planning, general manager of training and development, and eventually Executive Director of Human Resources (Al-Ghpson, 2022).

### **Huda Al-Ghpson**

Huda Al-Ghpson is a Saudi public figure known for her remarkable achievement at the largest oil and gas company in the world, Saudi Aramco. Entering Aramco as a fresh English Literature graduate in 1981, she climbed her way up to attain an executive leadership role at the company. As a Saudi woman during the time of a conservative Saudi regime (1980-2015), she was faced with societal and cultural challenges that still persist today. In 2012, Aramco promoted her to Executive Director of Human Resources. A brief biography of Al-Ghpson is provided in the appendices (see Appendix A). It is notable that she was able to attain a high-ranking leadership position in a male-dominant corporation prior to the renaissance change (Saudi Vision 2030) decreed by the new reign of King Salman Bin Abdulaziz. The Vision promotes women's empowerment and urges the participation of Saudi women as leaders in the public and private

sectors as part of the economic growth of the country (Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2019).

### **Women's Empowerment and Change in Saudi Arabia (Saudi Vision 2030)**

Although Saudi Arabia has the largest gender gap in labor force participation among G-20 countries, the Saudi government acknowledges the untapped potential of Saudi women and their capacity to contribute to the nation's economy (Naseem & Dhruva, 2017). As a part of its efforts to develop a sustainable future, the Saudi government has formulated a vision plan known as Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to transform the nation's economy from oil-based to knowledge-based. Saudi Vision 2030 is a plan that outlines goals for creating a sustainable future for the Saudi Kingdom.

At the core of the Saudi Vision 2030 lies three central pillars: the creation of a dynamic society, a prosperous economy, and an inspired nation (Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2019). This comprehensive plan aims to address these pillars by introducing a series of reforms, such as empowering women in the Saudi workforce, to create a brighter future for the country. By promoting gender equity and creating opportunities for women to participate in the workforce, the Saudi Vision 2030 seeks to harness the full potential of its population and cultivate a more inclusive and diverse society (Hvidt, 2018).

Researchers Alsubaie and Jones (2017) shared how Saudi women have made many advancements in higher education, reporting an exponential increase in the number of women enrolled in graduate and postgraduate degree programs. In a study of leadership among female Muslim academic leaders, Almaki et al. (2016) noted many of their participants felt women should have a clear vision of what leadership is and use this idea to inspire and motivate others. Al-Kwifí et al. (2019) found that many Saudi female entrepreneurs are educated and highly



confident. Al-Kwifit et al. (2019) shared that women in positions of management and leadership demonstrate competence in important skills needed to succeed in business.

Through initiatives like Saudi Vision 2030, women benefited from the country's promotion of economic growth. Capello and Borisly (2019) highlighted how, in 2019, one-third of international scholarships were awarded to women. Similarly, Saudi Aramco has provided over 300 scholarships to women pursuing STEM careers (Capello & Borisly, 2019). Alotaibi (2020) reported that changes to policies and initiatives in Saudi Arabia, like Saudi Vision 2030, have improved the role of women in the nation's economic growth and development. According to Alotaibi (2020), Saudi women are now empowered to seek out careers in the STEM field as their contributions to the innovations are essential to the economic growth of the country. By recognizing the crucial role that women can play in advancing the nation's economy, the Saudi government is paving the way for a more prosperous and equitable future for all Saudis.

### **Summary**

In this literature review, relevant literature and information on women and leadership were presented. The chapter began with information on leadership theories. Views on women in leadership roles and gender-related theories were also presented. Explanations of glass ceilings, barriers to leadership positions, and the need for mentorship were also discussed. The chapter concluded with information on the Saudi workforce and examples of successful Saudi women in leadership roles. The researcher identified a gap in the existing literature on the successful experiences of Saudi women in business. There is a lack of empirical studies on how Saudi women ascend to leadership positions despite the ongoing industrial and cultural challenges. Therefore, this study has been conducted to contribute to the current literature by exploring the experience of a successful female Saudi leader in the realm of business.

The following chapter includes information on the methodology of the study and includes study design, research questions, research methods, population, sampling, data collection, analysis, researcher's role, and a summary.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Organization of the Chapter**

This chapter aims to delineate the methodological approach of this study. The chapter begins by restating the research purpose and research questions. An overview of qualitative methodology is then followed by a discussion of the preferred research design and a justification. The research details, including selecting the participant, data collection, and data analysis, are discussed. Chapter 3 also explains the ethical considerations of this research and concludes with the limitations of the study.

### **Restatement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the lived experience of a successful Saudi woman, Huda Al-Ghosen, and her rise to an executive leadership position in a STEM-related industry. Al-Ghosen is a former Executive Director of Human Resources at one of the largest oil and gas reserves in the world, Aramco, in Saudi Arabia. Today, she continues to provide a beacon of hope for women aspiring to leadership roles in STEM fields generally and for the new generation of Saudi female leaders in particular. For this reason, this research was conducted to explore the perspectives of Al-Ghosen's leadership style, then identify her challenges and the factors that contributed to her success in obtaining a senior-level leadership role. Her experiences not only serve as a trailblazing model for other Saudi women but also potentially redefine the parameters of gender roles within these sectors. This research significantly contributes to the existing literature by addressing a notable void regarding Saudi women in leadership roles within fields typically dominated by men. By doing so, it also paves the way for more comprehensive research on the participation and advancement of women in such sectors within the Arab region, with a particular emphasis on Saudi Arabia.

## **Research Questions**

Research questions are essential to shaping the design of the study. The researcher will employ multiple means of data collection: interviews, MLQ questionnaires, and publicly available artifacts to inform a meaningful understanding of Al-Ghpson's successful leadership experience. The researcher developed guiding questions for this exploratory case study as follows:

- RQ1. As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, how does Al-Ghpson perceive her ascension to leadership in a male-dominated corporation?
- RQ2. As a Saudi woman in a high-rank leadership role, what perceived challenges did Al-Ghpson encounter while climbing the leadership ladder in a male-dominated corporation?
- RQ3. How do Al-Ghpson and her former colleagues and coworkers perceive her leadership style?
- RQ4. As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, what strategies or actions does Al-Ghpson perceive as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business?

## **Methodological Approach**

A research methodology serves as a blueprint for scholars to plan and conduct high-quality scientific research (Yin, 2015). Therefore, the choice of a research approach must be informed by the research purpose, the research questions, and an appropriate strategy for collecting and analyzing data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative methodology was selected for conducting this study.

### ***Qualitative Research***

Qualitative research, characterized by its naturalistic and interpretive approach, delves into various phenomena, such as individuals' lived experiences and the inner workings of organizations, to offer a comprehensive understanding of the inquiry's essence by addressing the “what,” “why,” and “how” of events (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Yin (2015) emphasized the inherent flexibility in designing qualitative studies, which allows researchers to deviate from rigid plans and tailor their approach as they deem appropriate. The crux of a successful qualitative study lies in the researcher's ability to connect the research questions, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques thoughtfully and coherently in a logically sequenced manner (Yin, 2015).

In qualitative research, various components play a critical role in shaping the study. Guba and Lincoln (1994) delved into the underlying philosophical assumptions, including ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the relationship between the researcher and the researched), and the constructivist paradigm (the belief that knowledge is constructed through human experiences and interactions) and their impact in shaping the structure and direction of the study. Ahmed (2008) elucidated that ontology, rooted in the philosophy of human existence, serves as a lens through which reality is explored. Inquisitive questions are employed to probe the nature of a situation, facilitating the acquisition of new knowledge and insights (Ahmed, 2008). Epistemology, on the other hand, is concerned with the researcher's process of understanding a phenomenon (Ahmed, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). From an epistemological standpoint, the researcher's objective is not merely to discover information but to construct a meaningful understanding of the case based on the gathered data.

In this context, the philosophical orientation of the research is focused on comprehending Al-Ghpson's journey toward becoming a successful leader. Therefore, the researcher's study design aligns with a constructivist paradigm, signifying that knowledge is constructed by drawing from the experiences and information elicited during the data collection process.

### ***Research Design***

Creswell and Poth (2018) described five common approaches to conducting qualitative research. The five qualitative approaches include narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A narrative design was not appropriate, as this type of design weaves a story (narrative) using the timeline and sequence of events from one or two individuals. Phenomenology was not suitable for this study, as several participants would be needed to help describe an event or social experience. Grounded theory is used when a researcher is trying to build a theory using a large sample. Ethnography is used when a researcher conducts a long-term study of culture through immersive observation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As this study aims to explore the experience of one successful Saudi female leader, a single case study is most suitable to capture a meaningful perspective of Huda Al-Ghpson's successful leadership journey.

### ***Case Study***

A case study is a qualitative research approach that delves into the experiences and perspectives of a single individual or a group, shedding light on their unique context (Yin, 2018). In the present study, an exploratory single-case study will be employed (Yin, 2014). This approach facilitates a holistic understanding of one individual, providing rich and detailed information that supports the study's focus. Although a single case study may exhibit certain inherent limitations, such as concentrating on a sole individual within a specific organization,

location, and timeframe - Huda Al-Ghpson's tenure at Aramco from 1981 to 2017 - these constraints simultaneously showcase a strength. This is because Al-Ghpson made substantial strides in leadership prior to the implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative. Gaining insights into her perspectives on the challenges and barriers faced by Saudi women can be invaluable for others pursuing leadership roles. Given the study's objective to comprehend the viewpoints and experiences of a Saudi leader in a male-dominated field, a single-case study is deemed suitable.

A holistic case study serves as an apt research design to investigate the phenomena surrounding a Saudi woman and her outlook on thriving as a leader in a male-dominated STEM corporation. Yin (2018) highlighted the value of a qualitative case study for probing the lives of participants through their personal perspectives and experiences. An individual case study, as a research method, facilitates an exhaustive examination of a single participant's experiences and perspectives in a systematic and comprehensive manner. By honing in on the singular attributes and characteristics of a single individual, this approach enables a deep analysis of specific phenomena, encompassing personal attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making processes. Employing this method allows researchers to gain valuable insights into the complexities and nuances of an individual's experiences and the factors shaping them (Yin, 2018).

**The Case.** Huda Al-Ghpson, born November 19, 1957, is an extraordinary Saudi woman who has devoted her life to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace. As a single Saudi woman, she has faced her own share of challenges and setbacks but has always remained committed to her mission of changing people's perceptions of Saudi women and their capabilities.

Al-Ghpson began her career at Saudi Aramco in 1981, working in various financial planning and policy design functions. She quickly established herself as an asset to the company, holding various financial planning and policy design functions. Her hard work and expertise earned her a reputation for being a capable and innovative problem solver. She was later appointed as Director of Human Resources Policy and Planning in 2006 and General Manager of Training and Development in 2009. In 2012, Al-Ghpson's remarkable career at Saudi Aramco reached its pinnacle, as she was appointed as the Executive Head of Human Resources, where she has played a significant role in shaping and implementing Human Resource Development (HRD) strategies. In this position, she oversaw all aspects of the company's human resources function, including recruitment, training and development, and compensation and benefits. She was one of the key individuals responsible for the development of human resources at Saudi Aramco. Al-Ghpson's leadership was critical in helping Saudi Aramco to achieve its goal of increasing the number of female employees to 20% of the company's total workforce by 2020 (Alexander, 2018).

Throughout her tenure at Saudi Aramco, Al-Ghpson's visionary leadership and dedication were instrumental in promoting gender equality, improving diversity, and creating a culture of continuous learning and development. These achievements have earned her widespread recognition and respect, both within Saudi Arabia and internationally, as outlined in her biography (see Appendix A). Al-Ghpson's legacy at Saudi Aramco will continue to inspire and motivate generations of women to come.

### **Protection of Human Subject**

Researchers devise and follow rules and procedures to protect the privacy of research participants. Protecting a single participant is just as essential as protecting a group of



participants (Yin, 2012). Ethical considerations to protect participants include acquiring the institutional review board's approval to conduct the study and obtaining participants' informed consent that indicates their agreement to be part of the study.

### ***Institutional Review Board (IRB)***

Ethical considerations and guidelines will be used to ensure the benefits outweigh the risks for research participation. Prior to the start of data collection, the researcher obtained permission from Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study (see Appendix B). The IRB's approval ensured that the university complied with federal regulations regarding protecting human subjects and that the researcher adhered to these guidelines (Creswell, 2013). The researcher also obtained a certificate on the protection of human rights by taking the CITI training course (see Appendix C).

Confidentiality and anonymity are both essential aspects of the human subject's protection. However, anonymity is not applicable in this case, as the subject Huda Al-Ghosen is a public figure and will be identified by her real name. Likewise, she is sharing her story of leadership ascension at Aramco; therefore, confidentiality is not a concern. On the other hand, the researcher did not identify or share information about the subject's former co-workers who were willing to participate in the multifactor leadership questionnaire. The questionnaire's invitation included informed consent explaining that participation is voluntary and anonymous.

All necessary research forms were submitted to the IRB before starting the data collection process. Upon IRB approval, the researcher contacted the participant to review the informed consent and schedule an interview. The participant received a copy of the interview protocol as well.

### ***Informed Consent***

Consent is a strong ethic of transparency and honesty when research involves human subjects. Informed consent provided the participant with an informed consent form that describes the purpose of the study, the design, how the results would be published, how confidentiality was ensured, and the researcher's contact information (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

The researcher used the informed consent template available on Pepperdine's IRB webpage to obtain the subject's consent after receiving IRB approval. The informed consent form (see Appendix D) includes the study information, instructions on contacting the researcher, participant rights (including the right to withdraw), potential benefits and risks, and information on how the data is stored and secured. The participant was informed that her participation was voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality were mitigated since the participant is identified by her real name and told her story as part of the study. However, the participant's former co-workers participating in the MLQ remain anonymous.

Information on potential risks was also disclosed in the consent form. Participation posed minimal risks, including fatigue from extended interviews and emotional responses to questions. The security of data storage was also clarified. All data was stored in a secure personal computer that only the researcher could access. The researcher will continue to store the data for three years or per institutional recommendations. After this time, all interview data will be destroyed according to institutional research regulations.

### **Participant Selection**

As this study used an individual case study approach with a qualitative methodology, large sample size was unnecessary as a generalization to a larger population was not a priority. In

qualitative studies such as this individual approach, a small sample is recommended for interview-based research (Campbell & Yin, 2018).

Qualitative researchers seek to select participants with experience with the phenomenon. They deliberately choose participants based on their unique contribution to answering the research questions and providing a context-rich knowledge of what is being studied (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). This strategy is referred to as strategic or purposeful sampling. Patton (2015) explained that purposeful sampling allows researchers to select individuals and research settings that help get the information needed to answer research questions.

Patton (2015) detailed multiple purposeful sampling strategies; among the strategies is the single-significant-case strategy. This strategy allows picking a single case that provides breakthrough insights to answer the research questions (Patton, 2015). The single significant case of Huda Al-Ghpson is a distinct phenomenon and will provide an in-depth understanding of how a Saudi woman rose to leadership in a male-dominated organization. The researcher recruited Al-Ghpson via a mutual connection, and soon after the first phone call, the researcher established a rapport with the participant. Establishing clear and concise communication with the participant is optimal for building trust and conveying the genuine intention of the study. During the phone call, the researcher shared the study's purpose and explained what was expected from Al-Ghpson.

For selecting the MLQ participants, the researcher used another purposeful strategy: convenience sampling. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), convenience sampling allows researchers to conveniently recruit participants within the network. The researcher asked Huda Al-Ghpson to provide an e-mail list of 50 to 100 former co-workers and colleagues to participate in the MLQ. Al-Ghpson verbally agreed to provide an e-mail list after IRB approved the study.

## **Data Collection**

The qualitative research methodology using a single case approach used three sources of data: interviews with the participant, MLQ completed by the participant and her prior employees and co-workers, and publicly available documents and artifacts about the participant.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews involve a flexible, guided conversation using open-ended questions and predetermined topics, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). Sackett and Lawson (2016) explained that a qualitative study increases the understanding of a phenomenon, allowing the participants to share their experiences openly. In accordance with Campbell and Yin (2018), the interview is a primary data source in qualitative case studies. An interview is an appropriate method of gathering perspectives and experiences from the identified Saudi female leader. Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions helped guide the data collection process.

**Interview Protocol.** The interview protocol is a structured guideline that researchers follow to ensure consistency and coherence while conducting interviews. It typically includes a list of open-ended questions, predetermined topics or themes, and probing questions that the researcher will ask participants during the interview process. By adhering to an interview protocol, researchers can maintain a systematic approach, improve reliability, and facilitate comparison across different participants within the case study (Yin, 2012).

An interview protocol was developed after a thorough review of current literature on women in leadership and their challenges in male-dominated fields, namely STEM. The researcher's interest stemmed from her background and guided the investigation of available literature on Saudi women pursuing predominantly male leadership roles. The researcher found

an association between gender-related theories and women's struggles to advance professionally to senior-level leadership roles in the corporate realm. Grounded in the literature, these theories (gender-related theories and leadership theories) informed the creation of questions and, therefore, the development of the interview protocol (see Appendix E).

Before the interview began, the researcher used a peer debriefing technique for credibility. Peer debriefers are experts or colleagues familiar with the phenomenon being studied who challenge the researcher's assumptions and provide feedback (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher asked three colleagues to review the interview protocol and interview questions, and to provide their insights and feedback using a peer debriefer form (see Appendix F). Peer debriefing provided valuable insights on the appropriateness of the protocol and suggested necessary modifications to enhance effectiveness.

Once the interview protocol and interview questions were reviewed by peer debriefers and IRB permission to conduct the study was granted, the data collection process began via scheduled interviews with the participant. The researcher conducted two rounds of interviews (each lasting two hours) with the participant to ensure sufficient data was gathered, and all questions were asked and addressed. The first interview began with fundamental questions about experiences, leadership, and perspectives on women in top-level positions. The second interview covered the remaining questions built on the first interview. It addressed any new questions that emerged from a review of the first conversation and allowed the participant to share any experiences or examples not shared in the first interview. The interviews were scheduled to occur via Zoom and were video recorded and sent for transcription. IRB permission and interview protocol with interview questions can be found in the Appendices.

### *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire*

Another form of data collection was the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). Creswell and Poth (2018) identify surveys and questionnaires as convenient and affordable means to gather information about people's behaviors. The MLQ is a standardized tool for measuring organizational leadership styles (Bass & Avolio, 1996). It measures the nine factors of the full range leadership to assess a leader's leadership tendencies: transformational, transactional, or passive-avoidant (Avolio & Bass, 2004). The MLQ instrument utilizes 45 statements to assess the leader's behaviors across three leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and passive/avoidant. The respondents used a five-point Likert scale to answer each statement (Pittenger, 2001).

The researcher used the MLQ II 360 Leader's Report, a self-rater version for leaders to measure their leadership styles and outcomes, and a rater version. The researcher emailed the self-rater version to Al-Ghoson to rate her own leadership style; the invitation included a consent form (see Appendix G). In contrast, the purpose of the rater version is to gather leadership rankings and classifications of associates that know the participant and are familiar with her leadership style and capabilities. The researcher sent the rater version to the participant's former co-workers, including employees, colleagues, and higher-level managers. The leader, Huda Al-Ghoson, provided the researcher with a contact list of approximately 55 former co-workers who could serve as raters. The researcher distributed the MLQ to the raters via e-mail. The e-mail invitation included informed consent (see Appendix H), indicating that participation is voluntary and anonymous; by partaking in the questionnaire, participants agreed to give their consent. The researcher followed up with e-mail invitations until she successfully gathered a minimum of 40 responses.

### ***Artifacts***

Artifacts can be valuable data sources in qualitative case studies, as they offer additional context, insight, and information related to the research topic. Artifacts can include documents, photographs, videos, objects, or any other publicly available items that provide insights into the phenomenon being studied (Bowen, 2009).

Al-Ghpson has recently published a memoir titled *Unbounded* which the researcher read and analyzed (Al-Ghpson, 2022). Additionally, the researcher reviewed public resources to find available information about the participant, Huda Al-Ghpson, such as YouTube videos, magazines (e.g., Forbes), and online articles and documents. The preliminary internet search yielded plenty of articles and videos about the participant's contributions to the company but merely touched on her leadership style and the challenges she encountered throughout her career at Aramco. This data was examined and analyzed promptly.

### **Statement of Positionality**

The researcher's interest in this study is rooted in her personal life experiences as a Saudi woman who has navigated a gender-biased culture and as a STEM graduate with limited career options at the time. As a Saudi woman, mother, and lifelong learner and explorer, she is deeply invested in understanding the experiences of women like herself. Her investigation into the experiences of Saudi women in STEM leadership, focusing on Al-Ghpson as a role model for future generations, is fueled by her desire to illuminate the obstacles and triumphs encountered by Al-Ghpson in her journey to prominent positions within a male-dominated field.

The researcher's motivation for this study was multifaceted. From a leadership standpoint, her late father, a man of wisdom and progressivism, greatly influenced her perspective. He was a supportive parent who encouraged his children to pursue learning

opportunities across professional and academic domains. As a remarkable leader with a 40-year tenure at Saudi Aramco, he not only established a respected reputation but also became a role model for others to emulate. The researcher has always admired her father as a mentor and leader, aspiring to follow in his footsteps. However, societal barriers hindered her ambitions. After earning her bachelor's degree in computer science, she hoped to join Saudi Aramco's IT department but faced discrimination due to prevailing gender norms within Saudi culture. Despite her qualifications, she was discouraged from pursuing a career in a male-dominated field and ultimately accepted a humble administrative position at an all-female workplace with limited advancement opportunities.

From the perspective of personal growth and development, the researcher's persistent curiosity revolves around how Saudi women can attain leadership roles within the male-dominated STEM domain. As a result, she is keen to investigate the strategies women can employ to surmount organizational and cultural barriers and secure leadership positions in companies such as Aramco. This interest in STEM was intensified during her undergraduate journey in computer science, which ultimately inspired her to seek higher education abroad, despite facing disheartening cultural expectations.

The researcher's experiences living in a conservative Saudi society, combined with the recent changes brought about by Saudi Vision 2030, have solidified her determination to investigate women's experiences in STEM leadership. As such, her study aimed to highlight the success story of Saudi female leader Huda Al-Ghosen.

Fully aware of her background's influence on her preconceived ideas, assumptions, and prior knowledge of the subject matter, the researcher carefully employed mitigating strategies to minimize her biases' impact on the study. These strategies encompassed reflexivity, member



checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing (Yazan, 2015), ensuring a more rigorous and objective exploration of the topic.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research is rich in data, yielding extensive descriptions and thorough interpretation to convey an accurate, meaningful representation of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers use structured procedures to study their data and identify patterns when analyzing qualitative data. As Patton (2015) explains, it is challenging to analyze qualitative data because of the dynamic recursive nature of reducing data and linking themes extracted from textual interviews. Analyzing qualitative data is a process of pattern-building as researchers identify a set of codes in textual data, discover relationships, and categorize findings accordingly to conclude meaningful findings (Campbell & Yin, 2018). Moreover, qualitative researchers depend on the research purpose, research questions, and data collection type to inform the most suitable data analysis technique (Guest et al., 2011).

This study is exploratory in nature, which calls for an interpretive, interrelated, and emergent approach to data analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Therefore, the researcher employed Creswell's (2013) deductive coding approach, which emphasizes the interwoven nature of data analysis. Given the exploratory context of this case study and taking into account the particular characteristics of the data and the selected methodologies, the researcher utilized a multifaceted analytical framework. This included thematic analysis for the interview data, descriptive statistics for deciphering the results of the MLQ, and content analysis for evaluating the relevance of artifacts. Each of these analytical methods was carefully chosen and fine-tuned to derive meaningful insights from the corresponding data sources, thereby enhancing the depth of understanding and contributing to a comprehensive interpretation of findings.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Data coding commences following the completion of interviews, capitalizing on the iterative nature of qualitative design, which facilitates the discovery of emerging themes and patterns (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Upon concluding each interview, the audio recording was submitted to *Rev.com*, a reputable transcription service. Once transcribed, the resulting data was coded to identify recurring phrases and terms. The researcher utilized *Quirkos*, a qualitative analytical software, to organize the data and aid in theme recognition. Through the application of thematic analysis, the coding process enabled the identification of themes pertinent to addressing the research questions.

Thematic analysis is a versatile approach that allows the researcher to identify themes, patterns, and concepts within qualitative data. Inherently exploratory, thematic analysis was chosen by the researcher as the data analysis approach. Joffe (2012) highlighted the compatibility of thematic analysis with the constructivism paradigm orientation. This method is effective in identifying and interpreting socially constructed behaviors present with a dataset. Given that the primary data source consists of in-depth interviews, the data transcripts were coded in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase framework for conducting a thematic analysis:

- 1. Familiarization.** The initial phase of the thematic analysis began with the researcher becoming increasingly familiar with the data by thoroughly reading and re-reading the transcripts, allowing her to identify potential themes and patterns in the information, experiences, and thoughts of the participant by initially highlighting and labeling similar *codes* in the text.

- 2. Coding.** In this phase, the researcher scanned the transcribed interviews for text similarities. The transcripts' initial codes were entered into Quirkos, an analysis software, to help assist with identifying codes and the organization of the codes. Quirkos's analytical feature helped tag analogous text. The *bubble view* feature in Quirkos displays the identified themes and codes as bubbles, with the size of the bubble indicating the frequency of the theme or code in the data.
- 3. Forming themes.** Creating themes entails recognizing patterns among the codes by scrutinizing their similarities and disparities. The researcher constructed a list of thematic elements that captured the emerging themes initially discerned during the preceding phases of familiarization and coding.
- 4. Examining themes.** This phase reviewed identified themes for validity. The researcher examined the themes by organizing codes, which were then labeled by the research questions. The researcher also consulted with the dissertation committee for further consideration of identified themes. Once this phase was completed, the themes were named in preparation for the next phase.
- 5. Labeling themes.** During this phase, the researcher categorized and labeled themes, while also writing definitions and summaries of each category and theme. This phase served as the foundation for presenting the findings of the study and facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the underlying patterns in the data.
- 6. Reporting themes.** The last phase of thematic analysis was producing the final report. The researcher will provide a write-up of data analysis with detailed descriptions in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will represent a discussion of themes concerning the reviewed literature. It will also discuss the themes in addressing the research questions.

Before writing the final report, themes were member-checked to verify authenticity. Member checking is a form of verification to ensure the data analyzed is reliable and authentic. The participant received the resulting themes in a document for review and had one week to respond with additions or corrections.

### ***Descriptive Statistical Analysis***

This study used the MLQ to provide statistical data to answer research question 3: How do Al-Ghpson and her former colleagues and coworkers perceive her leadership style? To ensure participants understood the goal of the MLQ, the researcher first described the questionnaire's measurement scale in detail. Once the MLQ responses were received from participants, the researcher read the results and identified numerical data with higher scores to classify the leader's leadership style.

Descriptive statistics of central leadership tendencies were written to record initial findings describing the participant's leadership style. Afterward, the researcher prepared descriptive statistical tables that were related to answering research question 3. The findings from the MLQ were compared with the codes and themes to identify similarities and differences in the sources of data. Using the MLQ to provide statistical data enhanced findings and validity when triangulated with interviews and artifacts, leading to a more robust and comprehensive analysis.

### ***Qualitative Content Analysis***

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) is a research methodology that involves systematically interpreting and categorizing textual data to identify patterns, themes, and underlying meanings (Schreier, 2012). Building on this concept, Bowen (2009) suggested that

researchers should consider the following steps to effectively use artifacts in a qualitative case study:

- 1. Identify relevant artifacts:** Determine which artifacts can provide valuable insights and context to complement other data sources, such as interviews and observations.
- 2. Collect artifacts:** Obtain access to the artifacts through appropriate channels, ensuring ethical considerations and permissions are in place.
- 3. Analyze artifacts:** Examine the artifacts to identify patterns, themes, and relationships that contribute to answering the research questions. This may involve content analysis, discourse analysis, or other qualitative analysis methods.
- 4. Triangulate data:** Use artifacts alongside other data sources, such as interviews and observations, to triangulate findings and enhance the validity and reliability of the case study.

Artifacts collected for this study did not require obtaining permission to access them as they were digitally available on the internet. The researcher used content analysis (Maschi & Drisko, 2016) to examine existing artifacts, including publicly available articles, magazines, and videos on the Internet. Utilizing content analysis, the researcher meticulously reviewed the contents of these artifacts and documents, seeking evidence that directly corresponded to the study's research questions and objectives, thus ensuring relevance. A descriptive table is provided in Chapter 4 to illustrate the content analysis of collected artifacts and reasons for inclusion/exclusion in the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness plays a vital role as it signifies the meticulous methodology researchers apply to ensure their findings are both credible and reliable. Attaining

trustworthiness involves demonstrating methodological rigor, systematic inquiry, and analytical precision (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt et al., 2007). Patton (2015) emphasized the critical nature of trustworthiness in qualitative research, particularly in studies aiming to explore complex social phenomena from the vantage point of participants.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) were the pioneers of the trustworthiness framework, outlining several approaches to evaluate a research study's merit. The scholars identified four essential elements of trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—which collectively strengthen the integrity and validity of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### ***Credibility***

In qualitative studies, credibility is viewed as how believable the findings of a study are (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Credibility refers to how trustworthy the study findings are; therefore, a triangulation assessment is often used to ensure the accuracy of data and findings (Noble & Heale, 2019). Data from the transcripts were compared with the feedback from the MLQ questionnaire to ensure that the information provided was consistent across the dataset. Once all data were analyzed, the findings were organized and presented in Chapter 4.

Another way to establish credibility is through a thorough description, so the researcher has provided a full description of the study's data in the findings. It is optimal to establish clear and concise communication with the participant to build trust and convey the genuine intention of the study. Furthermore, peer debriefing and member checking were both vital to ensure the credibility of the study. Finally, interview questions were shared with colleagues and experts in the field to mitigate biases and review for quality, while the analysis of the interview

transcription was sent to the participant to ensure the accuracy of reflected themes (Campbell & Yin, 2018).

### ***Transferability***

Another component of trustworthiness is the transferability of the findings. Guba and Lincoln (1994) explained how transferability is defined as the likelihood that reported results could be transferred to another setting. Transferability can be achieved by offering detailed information about the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, credibility was established by presenting details via documentation and a provision of accurate accounts.

### ***Dependability***

Trustworthiness can also be established through dependability, which involves reporting with succinctness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability established that the findings reported are reliable and can be replicated using the same research design and approach. Triangulation of the findings helped present the accuracy of the findings, establishing dependability. Moreover, reflexivity and peer debriefing helped deliver clear and reliable findings.

### ***Confirmability***

The last component of trustworthiness is confirmability, which involves providing a level of confidence that the findings are representative of the participant's feedback (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Member checking was used to ensure that the data extracted is accurate. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal and processed a log of notes while conducting interviews to prevent bias. Triangulation also helps qualitative researchers establish confirmability. Akin to credibility, triangulation helped establish confirmability as it can support comprehensive and accurate results. Triangulation was used to establish the confirmability of this study.

### *Validity of the MLQ*

Validity pertains to the accuracy and reliability of the quantitative analysis of the MLQ instrument, while trustworthiness strategies pertain to the rigor of the interviews and artifacts. Credibility often endorses the validity of the study. Using various data sources (interviews and artifacts) and varied analyses (MLQ results and thematic analysis) contributes to the trustworthiness of a study and its validity (Campbell & Yin, 2018). Over the years, the MLQ has received intense scrutiny from leading scholars; however, multiple meta-analyses (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe et al., 1996) have confirmed its validity and effectiveness as a leading instrument. The MLQ has been used for over 25 years in various industries and organizations and has been used in over 30 countries and in many languages (Avolio & Bass, 2004), making the MLQ an acceptable and reliable instrument (Antonakis et al., 2003; Sadeghi & Pihie, 2012).

### *Authenticity*

Another method of establishing credibility and trustworthiness in a research study is by addressing authenticity. Authenticity refers to portraying different realities and conveying participants' stories (Polit & Beck, 2014). Authenticity involves capturing the perspectives and experiences of participants to realistically interpret the deep meaning of a phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For this study, conversations were recorded and documented, and several meetings with the participant were conducted to help support the authenticity of the data gathered. To ensure the data were authentic and relevant to the study, careful consideration was made to select a Saudi leader in the STEM field as a participant who could provide information on the barriers or challenges women face in advancing in their careers. To establish authenticity, the participant selected is a professional with relevant experience and background. More importantly, the participant is not anonymous, and her real name is identified as she is a public



figure who appeared in publicly published interviews and articles; thus, it makes anonymity not applicable to this study. Identifying the source of data by making the participant aware of disclosing her name adds value to the study and makes it authentic.

Campbell and Yin (2018) explained that a study's trustworthiness strengthens the value of the findings. Trustworthiness criteria are the results of meticulous and systematic data collection to support accuracy. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher used the previously explained means: interview protocol, triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, reflexivity, and thick description.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented information on the research methodology and design. This chapter included information on the population, sample, and instrumentation. Study procedures were included, along with details on the data collection and analysis. Validity, trustworthiness, and limitations were also presented. The following chapter will present the findings of the study. Chapter 5 will present the interpretations of the data and recommendations for future studies.

## Chapter 4: Results

This Chapter provides readers with a comprehensive overview of the study, revisiting its purpose and research questions to set the context for the findings. It includes a thorough description of the data collection methods, analytical procedures, and measures taken to establish the trustworthiness of the results. The chapter proceeds to discuss the findings and identify emerging themes. Finally, a summary concludes the chapter by offering key insights and transitioning to the next chapter.

### Overview

The culture of Saudi Arabia is known for its strict gender segregation, as affirmed by Abalkhail and Allan (2015). This cultural aspect plays a significant role in the inadequate representation of Saudi women in leadership positions. Among the key obstacles Saudi women encounter in their pursuit of leadership roles are the insufficient resources for female leaders in the country and the absence of Saudi female role models in leadership positions.

Reflecting on recent developments, the World Bank Group in 2020 recognized that significant progress had been made in empowering women in Saudi Arabia, resulting in the advancement of their role in the country's economic growth. According to Al-Qahtani et al. (2020), women are now deemed essential to Saudi Arabia's economic development and progress. In line with the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative, the active participation of women is expected to contribute significantly to the country's future economic growth and overall vision.

Huda Al-Ghpson has achieved a remarkable milestone as the first Saudi woman to hold an executive leadership position at Saudi Aramco, the world's largest gas and oil corporation situated in Saudi Arabia. As the Executive Director of Human Resources, Al-Ghpson has successfully navigated through numerous gender-based obstacles, and her journey has led her to

become a board member of various distinguished institutions. Her career journey has led to a successful leadership trajectory that could serve as a source of inspiration for other women facing similar challenges in male-dominated industries. Despite encountering pervasive gender discrimination entrenched in cultural and organizational structures, Al-Ghpson persevered and broke through barriers to achieve her goals, serving as a powerful example of what can be accomplished with determination and resilience.

### ***Re-Statement of Purpose***

This qualitative study used a single case approach to examine the perspectives of a successful Saudi woman in a top leadership role and understand strategies and actions that she found effective in acquiring positions of power in a male-dominated field. This single case study explored the successful career of Huda Al-Ghpson upon becoming an executive director at Aramco. The findings presented in this chapter may provide prospective Saudi female leaders with a role model and crucial knowledge on how to succeed by analyzing the successful tactics and behaviors of a Saudi woman who has previously attained a position of authority. More importantly, the findings on successful leadership perspectives provided by Al-Ghpson help contribute valuable knowledge and fill the gap in the literature related to Saudi women as senior-level leaders in predominately male fields due to a shortage of studies on Saudi female leaders in STEM fields.

### ***Research Questions***

In this study, the following research questions were explored:

- RQ1. As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, how does Al-Ghpson perceive her ascension to leadership in a male-dominated corporation?

- RQ2. As a Saudi woman in a high-rank leadership role, what perceived challenges did Al-Ghpson encounter while climbing the leadership ladder in a male-dominated corporation?
- RQ3. How do Al-Ghpson and her former colleagues and co-workers perceive her leadership style?
- RQ4. As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, what strategies or actions does Al-Ghpson perceive as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business?

### ***Participant's Profile***

Throughout her career, Al-Ghpson successfully climbed the corporate ladder and secured top leadership roles, despite confronting cultural and organizational barriers entrenched in gender discrimination. Huda Al-Ghpson is a former Human Resources Executive Director of the world's largest oil and gas corporation, Saudi Aramco, located in Saudi Arabia. This study focused on one Saudi woman's successful career path, culminating in her attainment of an executive position (Executive Director of Human Resources) at a male-dominated corporation in the STEM field. The research was limited by specific parameters, including the individual being studied (Huda Al-Ghpson), the location of the corporation (Aramco, Saudi Arabia), and the period during which Al-Ghpson served the organization (1981-2017).

### **Data Collection**

The qualitative research methodology used in this study involved a single case approach comprising three sources of data as the dataset: (a) two interviews conducted with the participant, (b) an examination of publicly available documents and artifacts related to the participant, and (c) the completion of MLQ surveys by the participant and her former co-

workers. Although a case study featuring one individual, organization, location, and timeframe (Huda Al-Ghosaon's tenure at Aramco from 1981 to 2017) may have certain limitations, it also possesses a strength. Al-Ghosaon's leadership accomplishments are notable as they occurred before the introduction of the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative.

Utilizing the Zoom platform, the researcher successfully conducted two in-depth interviews, providing a convenient and interactive means for remote communication and data collection. Before each interview, the researcher answered Al-Ghosaon's questions, ensuring that all her concerns were addressed before proceeding with the recording process. Following the interview protocol (see Appendix E), the two rounds of interviews with Al-Ghosaon (each lasting approximately 2 hours) ensured that adequate data was collected and that all questions were asked and answered. The first interview focused on fundamental inquiries concerning experiences, leadership, and views on women occupying top-level positions. The second interview addressed the remaining questions, which were informed by the first interview.

The researcher also examined publicly accessible artifacts to gather pertinent data for the study. After conducting a comprehensive content analysis and examining various sources, such as articles and documents, the researcher identified Al-Ghosaon's book, *Unbounded*, as a relevant artifact (Al-Ghosaon, 2022). This resource was utilized to provide a context in addressing the research objectives alongside other pertinent data.

In addition to the interviews and artifacts, the researcher used the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ II 360 Leader's Report) to collect additional data. The MLQ included both a self-rater version for Al-Ghosaon to assess her leadership style and a rater version for her former co-workers to provide their assessment of her leadership style. Al-Ghosaon provided the researcher with a contact list of around 60 former co-workers to act as 'raters.' The researcher

subsequently recruited 52 raters and sent out the MLQ through email. Out of the 52 recruited raters, 48 responded (approximately 92.31% response rate). Ultimately, the comprehensive dataset was compiled to facilitate an in-depth thematic analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

This research combined MLQ's descriptive statistical analysis, qualitative content analysis, and thematic analysis using Quirkos to analyze the dataset. Data coding commenced immediately with artifacts as they were readily available online without requiring permission. In contrast, data coding for interviews and MLQ began after obtaining the necessary IRB approval.

The MLQ was used to assess the leadership styles of the participant. On its own, the MLQ's report provided a quantitative perspective on the leadership styles of the participant. The researcher collected 48 completed questionnaires to assess the leadership styles of the participant, Huda Al-Ghosen. For Al-Ghosen, a distinctive leadership style theme was identified in answering research question three. The theme is presented in the form of descriptive statistical analysis in the findings section, which summarizes the key aspects of the leadership style and highlights the specific patterns that emerged for each individual.

For artifacts, a qualitative content analysis was used to analyze collected artifacts. The researcher was able to identify one artifact, Al-Ghosen's memoir, as relevant. All other collected artifacts were excluded. A table in the appendices is attached to illustrate why these artifacts were excluded (see Appendix I). Using content analysis, the researcher could highlight significant excerpts and identify initial codes. These excerpts were later imported into Quirkos for additional thematic analysis.

Finally, the two semi-structured interviews were conducted, and upon their completion, the audio recordings were sent to *Rev.com*, a reputable transcription service. After obtaining the

transcriptions, the data was meticulously analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher conducted a thorough thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions alongside the book's excerpts following Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis using the qualitative data analysis software, Quirkos.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

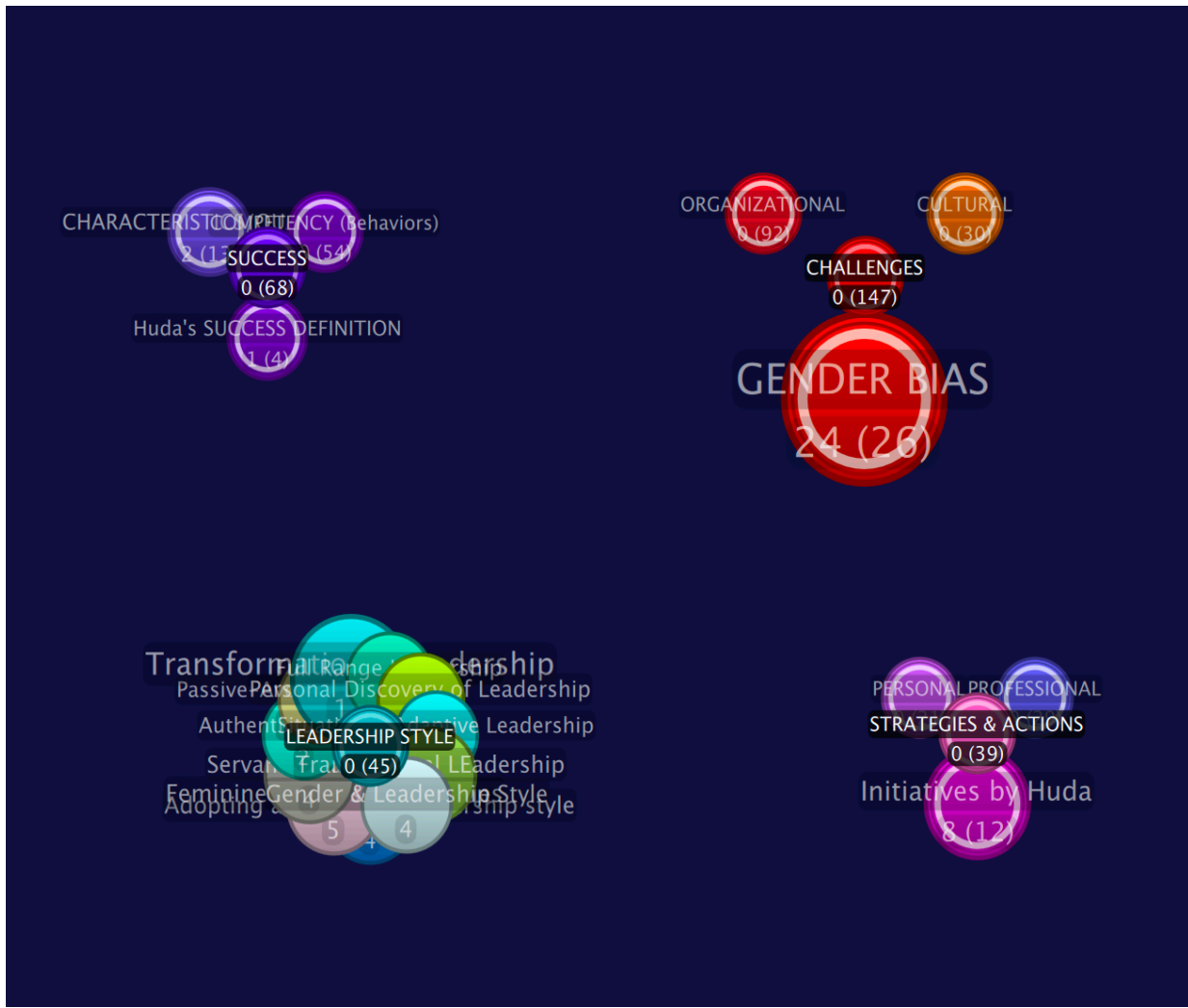
Described herein is a detailed explanation of how the researcher executed the thematic analysis using Quirkos, following Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase framework:

- 1. Familiarization with the data:** After importing interview transcriptions and book excerpts into Quirkos, the researcher started by carefully reading and re-reading the text to become familiar with the content. This allowed the researcher to get an initial sense of the content and ideas emerging from the interviews. The researcher has also rewatched the original video recordings, taken notes, and highlighted interesting sections in the transcripts. The researcher applied these notes and highlights in Quirkos.
- 2. Generating initial codes:** After familiarizing herself with the data, the researcher started coding the transcriptions in Quirkos. This involved identifying and marking text segments that appeared to be relevant or significant and assigning them descriptive codes. The researcher created, modified, or merged codes as needed, eventually generating clusters of 385 unique codes (words or phrases representing a concept). Within Quirkos, the codes are called 'Quirks' and are displayed as bubbles in the canvas. The size of the bubble corresponds to the number of codes it contains, with larger bubbles indicating a higher code count (see Figure 4). It's important to note that not all of the 385 codes were used in the final analysis. Instead, the researcher honed in on key codes that contributed

to meaningful themes. A sample of the thematic codebook is showcased in the appendices (see Appendix J).

**Figure 4**

*Canvas of Codes Quirks in Quirkos*



**3. Searching for themes:** Next, the researcher examined the codes and began grouping them into broader themes or categories. The researcher looked for patterns and relationships among the codes, considering how they coherently fit together or represent larger concepts. In Quirkos, the researcher visually organized and connected codes by dragging and dropping them into thematic clusters, helping to identify potential themes.



As depicted below, an example of codes grouped into a thematic cluster called CULTURAL (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Example of Clustered Codes*



4. **Reviewing themes:** The researcher then reviewed identified themes for an accurate representation of coded data, refining, merging, or discarding them as needed. As qualitative data analysis is iterative, codes were continuously refined to reflect emerging themes. In Quirkos, themes were compared with the original text, examining frequency and distribution to determine if a theme required further refinement.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** Once the themes were reviewed, the researcher worked on clearly defining and naming each one. This involved describing the essence of each

theme, what it represents, and how it relates to one or more of the research questions. In Quirkos, the researcher added descriptions to each theme, or *Quirk*, using the ‘Quirk Properties’ feature as illustrated below (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Quirk Properties*

**Quirk Properties**

Title: GENDER BIAS

Description: The systematic favoritism or prejudice towards a particular gender, often resulting in unequal treatment or opportunities for individuals or groups based on their gender. It can manifest in different forms, such as stereotyping.

Color: [Red color selection box]

Groups:

Group	Associated quirks	Toggle
RQ1	26	<input type="checkbox"/>
RQ2	44	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
RQ3	12	<input type="checkbox"/>

Buttons: New/Change Group, Cancel, Save

- 6. Producing the report:** Finally, the researcher produced a written report of the thematic analysis. This included a detailed description of the themes, supported by evidence from the coded data, and an interpretation of how these themes related to the research question. The researcher used Quirkos to extract relevant quotes and data segments from the coded material to support her analysis and illustrate the themes in the forthcoming report.

***Establishing Research Trustworthiness***

Trustworthiness is crucial in qualitative research, as it signifies the meticulous methodology researchers employ to ensure their findings are both credible and reliable (Bernard

& Ryan, 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schwandt et al., 2007). To establish trustworthiness in this study, the researcher utilized several techniques, adhering to the trustworthiness framework pioneered by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which consists of four essential elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility.** Credibility was established through the use of triangulation, comparing data from interview transcripts and the book with the feedback from the MLQ questionnaire and ensuring consistency across data sources. The researcher also provided thick descriptions of the data in the findings, engaged in peer debriefing and member checking, and shared interview questions with colleagues and experts to mitigate biases and ensure accuracy.

**Transferability.** Transferability was achieved by presenting an in-depth account of the research process, including thorough documentation, precise descriptions of the study, and a transparent portrayal of the methods employed. This comprehensive approach enables the findings to be readily applicable and adaptable to various other settings, promoting the broader relevance and utility of the research outcomes.

**Dependability.** Dependability was established through the use of triangulation, reflexivity, and peer debriefing. The researcher employed peer debriefing to identify potential biases, blind spots, or misinterpretations in the researcher's analysis, as well as to explore alternative explanations and insights. The researcher shared the interview protocol with three peers with expert knowledge of the subject matter. After reviewing the interview protocol, two of the peers did not suggest any changes, while the third peer made minimal modifications. This feedback indicated that the interview protocol's original questions and structure were well-conceived and aligned with the research questions.

Furthermore, a copy of the data analysis was shared with one peer to enhance the researcher's interpretations. The peer suggested minimal changes to code articulations and inclusion. This helped the researcher to refine their understanding of the data, address potential limitations, and strengthen the overall research quality. Moreover, triangulation ensured the accuracy of the findings, while reflexivity and peer debriefing contributed to the clear, unbiased, and reliable presentation of the research outcomes.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability was accomplished by leveraging member checking and sharing the study's findings with Al-Ghpson to guarantee the precision of data extraction. The researcher provided Al-Ghpson with a summary of the preliminary findings and interpretations, seeking her feedback on the accuracy of the data extraction. Al-Ghpson suggested minimal meaningful changes to enhance the study's confirmability. These changes may have included refining the interpretation of specific data points, highlighting additional contextual information, or offering alternative explanations for specific findings.

Furthermore, the researcher kept a reflexive journal and process log during interviews to reduce bias and applied triangulation to ensure comprehensive and accurate outcomes.

**Validity.** The validity of the MLQ instrument was firmly established due to its widespread application across diverse industries, organizations, countries, and languages, reflecting its versatility and adaptability. Moreover, the instrument's robustness has been corroborated by multiple meta-analyses (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe et al., 1996), further substantiating its efficacy and reliability as a valuable tool for assessing leadership qualities and effectiveness in various contexts.

**Authenticity.** Authenticity was established by selecting a participant with relevant experience and background, recording and documenting conversations, and conducting several

meetings with the participant. The participant's real name was disclosed, adding value to the study and making it authentic.

In the following section, findings are reported per research question, highlighting primary themes and corresponding codes. Serving as a connected thread, Al-Ghoso's responses offered clarity and illustrated the themes identified.

## Findings

This single case study explored four research questions about Al-Ghoso's perspectives on her successful leadership at the male-dominated Saudi Aramco, the challenges she encountered, her distinctive leadership style, and, ultimately, the strategies she deems effective for pursuing leadership and achieving success as a female leader.

Data analysis identified ten primary themes, each with significant codes that explored the core meaning. These themes were structured in a sequence aligning with the research questions (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Emerging Themes from Data Analysis by Research Questions*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Thematic Findings</b>
<b>RQ1:</b> As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, how does Al-Ghoso perceive her ascension to leadership in a male-dominated corporation?	<p><b>1.1.</b> Al-Ghoso has her own definition of success.</p> <p><b>1.2.</b> Al-Ghoso's self-discovery journey of leadership unfolded by trial and error.</p> <p><b>1.3.</b> Al-Ghoso's late mother was her mentor and role model.</p>

Research Question	Thematic Findings
<p><b>RQ2:</b> As a Saudi woman in a high-rank leadership role, what perceived challenges did Al-Ghpson encounter while climbing the leadership ladder in a male-dominated corporation?</p>	<p><b>2.1.</b> Al-Ghpson's core challenge was gender discrimination, which was deeply ingrained and pervasive within Saudi culture.</p> <p><b>2.2.</b> Al-Ghpson experienced unconscious bias and sexism in the workplace.</p> <p><b>2.3.</b> No organizational resources supported Al-Ghpson's career advancement.</p>
<p><b>RQ3:</b> How do Al-Ghpson and her former colleagues and co-workers perceive her leadership style?</p>	<p><b>3.1.</b> Al-Ghpson is perceived as a Transformational leader.</p>
<p><b>RQ4:</b> As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, what strategies or actions does Al-Ghpson perceive as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business?</p>	<p><b>4.1.</b> Al-Ghpson advises female leaders to develop personal qualities and professional competencies.</p> <p><b>4.2.</b> Al-Ghpson recommends organizational support for female leaders.</p> <p><b>4.3.</b> Al-Ghpson believes Saudi Vision 2030 is effective for female leaders.</p>

### *Corresponding Themes to RQ1*

The first research question asked, “As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, how does Al-Ghpson perceive her ascension to leadership in a male-dominated corporation?” It sought to explore Al-Ghpson’s experience at Saudi Aramco, providing insights into her perspectives and the ways she navigated her path to leadership. The research question also aimed to illuminate how she handled the unique expectations inherent in a predominately male corporate environment.

**1.1. Al-Ghoson has her own definition of Success.** Al-Ghoson holds a distinct definition of success, which she shared during the first interview. When asked: How do you define your success as a female leader at Aramco? Al-Ghoson (personal communications, December 15, 2022) defines her success as making a difference in the organization and people's lives, stating, "Success to me is leading authentically, transforming lives, helping individuals achieve their full potential, and realizing their aspirations and personal goals." She also views success as transforming behaviors and culture, rallying support for the company's performance, and gaining recognition from top management while attracting the best talent.

For Al-Ghoson, the essence of success is not merely defined by personal achievement but extends to cultivating an encouraging work environment filled with motivated, engaged employees actively contributing to their organization. Al-Ghoson articulates her vision of success as, "Adding positive vibes in the workplace, seeing people around me, motivated, engaged, and doing their best to contribute to the organization, again, that's success." This vision underlines her belief in fostering an environment where enthusiasm, commitment, and a collective drive toward achievement pervade the workspace. She perceives success as a collective experience, not an individual one, where everyone in the organization plays a critical part in achieving common goals. Ultimately, in Al-Ghoson's perspective, success is the harmonious interplay of people, the organization, and strategic direction.

Al-Ghoson provided a comprehensive explanation of her definition of success in leadership and highlighted essential characteristics and aspects that women need to cultivate to become effective and successful leaders. Her responses yielded four key codes: (a) learning to learn; (b) her commitment, competence, collaboration, contributions, and character (Five Cs); (c) her courage, humility, intellect, integrity, and compassion (CHIIC); and (d) fortitude.

**Table 2***Success Definition Codes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Definition of Success	Learning to Learn	The importance of continuous learning.
	Five Cs	Commitment, competence, collaboration, contributions, and character.
	CHIIC	Courage, humility, intellect, integrity, and compassion.
	Fortitude	Courage, Perseverance, and Resilience.

***Learning to Learn.*** Al-Ghpson emphasized the importance of continuous learning and adaptability in leadership, stressing the significance of acquiring new knowledge and expertise to address complex issues. She highlighted that intellectual and social capacities are developed through learning rather than mere training. Al-Ghpson explained,

For me, it was also important to continuously acquire new knowledge and expertise that will enable me to constantly create value and address a wide range of complex issues.

And this prepared me for the many roles I had to perform as a leader.

She further emphasized the concept of lifelong learning, explaining that “lifelong learning or learning to learn new knowledge, unlearn and abandon previous beliefs in the light of more compelling evidence, and relearn new concepts that are relevant to our modern time.” Al-Ghpson believes that adaptability to change and enthusiasm for continuous and fundamental transformation from within can only transpire through learning to learn.



Al-Ghpson also emphasized the value of learning in developing critical skills beyond technical abilities, stating that “Technical skills alone will not solve all our problems.” She explained that practical problems require “a wider horizon and greater awareness of various possibilities.” Unrestricted learning equips individuals with adaptability in a rapidly changing world and the ability to respond to new situations and challenges. Broadening one's mind through learning expands knowledge and intellectual capacities, helping develop essential skills for success in any enterprise.

By engaging in learning, individuals can develop clear and persuasive communication skills, master the spoken word, and enhance their ability to think on their feet. As Al-Ghpson puts it, “Learning will help you develop independence of thought and challenge ideas that may be widely shared but lack merit.” She believes that learning to learn not only contributes to success at work but also guides personal values and life decisions, affirming, “As they say, hard work beats talent when talent does not work hard.”

Al-Ghpson strongly believes that embracing lifelong learning fosters independent thinking, empowering individuals to challenge widely accepted yet meritless ideas. In her own career journey, she found that hard work and dedication to continuous learning triumphed over talent alone, leading to success in both her professional and personal life.

***Five Cs.*** Al-Ghpson developed her own unique framework for successful leadership, which she referred to as the five Cs. Describing the five Cs, she stated, “As you start your career, you have to demonstrate your commitment, competence, collaboration, contribution, and character. I always call them the five Cs.” *Commitment* is the starting point, followed by *competence*, which involves looking inward, determining the skills and knowledge needed to excel, and taking responsibility for one's own learning and development. She explained the

importance of going beyond the basics, stating, “If you limit your knowledge and skills to the basic job requirements, then you will have nothing to show that warrants a promotion to the next level, and your progression will be very slow.”

The third C, *collaboration*, is essential for conquering complex problems, gaining fresh perspectives, increasing visibility, and building credibility and reputation. Al-Ghpson emphasized, “Teamwork helps bring a fresh perspective to old problems and allows you not to accept common practices without questioning them.” She also highlighted the connection between collaboration and personal growth, asserting, “Through collaboration, you increase your visibility. People start knowing you, your work ethic, and your professional conduct. And that's how you also build credibility and reputation.” By working together and embracing diverse perspectives, leaders can solve complex problems, enhance their professional standing, and foster a strong reputation within their organization.

*Contribution*, the fourth C, is about proactively adding value to the organization and delivering effective results. Al-Ghpson highlighted the need for innovation, saying, “You have to be proactive, take initiative, and look at innovative and creative ways to execute and improve my work.” By embracing a forward-thinking approach and actively seeking opportunities for improvement, leaders can make meaningful contributions to their organizations and drive success.

*Character*, the final and most crucial C in Al-Ghpson's leadership framework, encompasses credibility, work ethic, personal identity, values, and professional conduct. She underscored the significance of a strong character, stating,

The first four will not help you if you don't build a solid character. And by character, I mean building your credibility, your work ethic, your personal identity, your values, and

your professional conduct. And once you have all of that, then you can master your destiny. When you have self-leadership in all these five elements, it means you can also lead others.

By cultivating a solid character and demonstrating self-leadership, individuals can effectively guide others and assume more prominent leadership roles within their organizations.

This personalized approach, which encompasses a commitment to one's work, competence in one's role, collaboration with others, making meaningful contributions to the organization, and building a strong character with credibility and work ethics, demonstrates Al-Ghpson's innovative thinking and adaptability in crafting an effective leadership style that embraces a well-rounded set of characteristics, setting her apart as an exemplary leader.

**CHIIC.** Al-Ghpson further encapsulated the attributes of successful leaders in a unique acronym, CHIIC. She shared,

I always say, 'A Successful leader is a CHIIC leader.' And I don't mean CHIIC in terms of fashion. I mean C for courage, H for humility, I for intellect, I for integrity, and the last C is for Compassion. So, these are characteristics of successful leaders.

Al-Ghpson emphasized that successful leaders need to possess a core of characteristics. She outlined: Courage, humility, intellect, integrity, and compassion and believes they are essential for leaders to achieve success. She strongly believes that these qualities enable leaders to face challenges, value others' contributions, make informed decisions, uphold ethical principles, and foster a supportive work environment, ultimately leading to long-term success in their careers.

**Fortitude.** In essence, Al-Ghpson summed up the elements that helped her become a successful leader, stating that "Courage, perseverance, resilience, and learning to learn, plus a big

dose of self-belief are what helped me succeed in my career and reach an executive position of power and influence in the company.” She explains that courage involves overcoming fear and taking risks to pursue what is important, while perseverance is the persistence and tenacity to achieve goals despite difficulties or failure. Resilience, according to Al-Ghpson, is the ability to cope with crises, adapt positively, and recover quickly from setbacks. She emphasized the value of learning from failures, saying, “Failures are lessons about our tendencies, propensities, and judgment; bouncing back with vigor and positivity is a form of success.” Lastly, she highlights the importance of continuous learning, urging individuals to expand their personal and professional knowledge and build depth and breadth in their respective fields.

In summary, Al-Ghpson's vision of success in leadership is multifaceted in that it encompasses a wide range of qualities, characteristics, and personal growth elements. It goes beyond just focusing on professional achievements or a single attribute, integrating various aspects such as continuous learning and adaptability, commitment, competence, collaboration, contribution, character, and the core traits of courage, humility, intellect, integrity, and compassion. Through her comprehensive approach to leadership success, Al-Ghpson acknowledges the complexity of being an effective leader and emphasizes the importance of developing a well-rounded skill set and personal qualities driven by resilience and perseverance.

### **1.2. Al-Ghpson’s self-discovery journey of leadership unfolded by trial and error.**

Al-Ghpson developed her leadership style through trial and error rather than relying on training. She believes experimenting with different leadership styles was crucial to finding the approach that aligns with her personality and nature. She also emphasized that real-life situations often differ from what is taught in training, requiring practical experience. During the first interview, Al-Ghpson shared,

Actually, it's by trial and error that I discovered what works and what is in perfect alignment with my personality and nature. Of course, the company provided a lot of training and education on how to be an effective leader, but these are all academics. Yeah. When you come to reality, not everything you learn, you can apply because situations differ.

A thorough examination of the collected data revealed five significant codes that informed this theme: Masculine, Servant, Feminine, Adaptability, and Determination.

**Table 3**

*Leadership Exploration Codes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Leadership Exploration	Masculine	Imitating masculine leadership style.
	Servant	Switching to a servant leadership style
	Feminine	Leveraging feminine traits to lead.
	Adaptability	Adapting to situations and personalities.
	Determination	Self-belief and professional ambition diligence.

***Masculine.*** In her memoir, Al-Ghpson reminisced that “during the early years of my career, the atmosphere in the company was sharply masculine.” As she began assuming leadership positions, she initially sought to emulate her male colleagues, believing that adopting a masculine leadership style would lead to success. As a result, she became “autocratic, dominating, aggressive, and authoritative, focusing more on the task rather than the people.”

She believed that men could be leaders because they were tough and aggressive, reflecting the command-and-control management style. Attempting to adopt this style, she became more task-oriented instead of people-oriented.

Al-Ghpson described her efforts to fit in by adopting a masculine leadership style, stating, “I started emulating the masculine leadership style around me, focusing more on tasks and achievements and less on interpersonal relations.” However, this approach soon caused internal turmoil, as it conflicted with her true nature. Working with a coach helped her realize the importance of authentic leadership, as she learned, “You see, you just can’t fake it. Your leadership has to be authentic and reflect your belief system and internal propensities.”

The consequences of adopting this leadership style became apparent when she noticed a passive climate in the organization and low morale among her colleagues. She explained,

And then, I started noticing a subdued climate in the organization, and people’s morale was low. There was no excitement, no enthusiasm, and no passion as people performed their tasks. And that made me reflect and work with a coach to address my shortcomings and correct the situation.

Her initial efforts at emulating a masculine leadership style did not work out well. She shared, “Unfortunately, that did not work out too well, as it unsettled my internal equilibrium. I became cold and competitive, alienating colleagues, including my supporters. It also helped fuel my detractors.” Through this experience, Al-Ghpson learned the importance of authenticity in leadership and remaining true to oneself.

Al-Ghpson initially adopted a masculine leadership style, believing that emulating her male colleagues would lead to success. However, through trial and error, she discovered that this

approach conflicted with her true nature and negatively impacted her colleagues and the work environment.

***Servant.*** Al-Ghpson found inspiration in the concept of servant leadership. In her memoir, she stated, “My philosophy toward carrying out my duties relied on the ‘servant leader’ principle, which calls for the engagement of people by attending to their needs, so they, in turn, become invested in attending to the organization’s needs.” During the interviews, she stated that she “started noticing the qualities of the servant leader,” as she reflected on her role, questioning, “What is the job of the leader? Yes, it is to guide people, has a compelling vision to inspire people to follow you to accomplish the goals and objectives of the organization.”

Al-Ghpson adopted a servant leadership style, explaining that she shifted her focus to being “more participative, more connecting, [and] more collaborating with the team,” allowing the team to concentrate on their tasks. She demonstrated humility and flexibility and found that her ability to “listen, adapt, and address the issue at the right time” led to an effective approach. This change in leadership style awakened her innate feminine qualities, enriching her leadership capabilities and contributing to greater success.

After recognizing the shortcomings of the masculine leadership style, Al-Ghpson experimented with servant leadership. Through this trial, she discovered that this approach better aligned with her values and resulted in a more positive impact on her team.

***Feminine.*** In her memoir, Al-Ghpson described a pivotal moment when she embraced her authentic self, recognizing that there was nothing wrong with feminine leadership qualities such as being “soft without being weak” and “assertive yet showing humanity.” She acknowledged that these qualities were crucial for effective leadership and should be embraced rather than repressed.

During the interviews, Al-Ghpson explained how her coach's advice resonated with her, emphasizing the importance of feminine qualities in leadership and urging her not to suppress these traits, particularly in her field of Human Resources. She recalled her coach saying, "Don't suppress your feminine leadership qualities." This insight prompted her to reflect and follow her intuition and natural tendencies. In doing so, Al-Ghpson concluded that "as I adjusted to my role, I felt more comfortable showing my feminine colors and being flexible, nurturing, and socially interactive with my team."

Through trial and error, Al-Ghpson found that her feminine qualities such as empathy, intuition, and emotional intelligence, have been more beneficial in her career, particularly in her role within Human Resources. By leveraging these qualities, she fostered a more inclusive, supportive, and collaborative work environment, ultimately enhancing the performance and well-being of her team.

***Adaptability.*** Al-Ghpson realized that effective leadership requires adaptability and flexibility. She emphasized the importance of adaptability in her leadership, stating that she tried different approaches to see what was most effective. She adjusted her behavior based on the situation and the people she was working with. She described that she treated mature individuals like partners and handled those with big egos with sensitivity. In situations with tight deadlines or high risks, she would not hesitate to "get involved." This adaptability allowed her to manage diverse personalities and situations adeptly.

By closely observing people, situations, and tasks, Al-Ghpson adeptly adjusted her leadership style to achieve optimal results, whether partnering with mature individuals, sensitively managing those with big egos, or actively engaging in critical tasks with tight



deadlines. In doing so, she effectively navigated diverse personalities and situations, demonstrating a remarkable level of adaptability and responsiveness in her leadership style.

***Determination.*** During the interviews, Al-Ghpson accentuated the need for strong self-confidence and a deep-seated drive to pursue one's goals and highlighted the positive impact that this mindset can have on realizing one's potential. Embodying determination and strong self-belief, she emphasized the importance of persistence and confidence, stating,

You have to really want it and work hard to achieve it. I always believed that I could make it and that I am as strong as the men around me. I believed I can be as good a leader as the top leaders in the company. I believed I had what it takes to be a successful leader, and I believed in my infinite potential to accomplish great things.

Growing up, Al-Ghpson recognized the importance of carving her own path and chasing her aspirations, driven by a strong sense of determination. Reflecting on this mindset, she states, “From a very young age, I was determined to follow my own path,” taking responsibility for her dreams and recognizing the necessity of economic independence for exercising her right to self-determination.

In describing her tenacity, Al-Ghpson stressed the significance of aiming high and embracing opportunities, stating, “I always set my sights high and prepared relentlessly to seize opportunities when they came my way.” She also highlighted the importance of being ready to excel, adding, “By being ready to excel when opportunities arose, I was able to advance my career and achieve my goals.” demonstrating that persistence and a proactive mindset are key factors in overcoming challenges and reaching success. This conveys that a combination of unwavering persistence, a proactive mindset, and readiness to exceed expectations are key to overcoming hurdles and attaining professional triumphs.

Throughout her journey, Al-Ghpson emphasized the importance of determination and self-belief in realizing one's potential. Through trial and error, she learned to seize opportunities and excel in various situations, ultimately achieving her goals and aspirations.

This theme highlighted the dynamic and evolving nature of her leadership development, reflecting her ability to adapt and refine her approach to avoid the masculine-feminine dilemma while cultivating her determination to ultimately establish an effective and authentic leadership style.

**1.3. Al-Ghpson's late mother was her mentor and role model.** Al-Ghpson drew inspiration from her strong, resourceful, and independent late mother as a role model. In her memoir, Al-Ghpson stated that the “key to the learning experience was mentoring by other accomplished women in the company.” However, that was not the case for Al-Ghpson during her tenure at Saudi Aramco. She explained, “There were no women I can learn from, not only inside the company but also outside the company, in the corporate world.” Two significant codes emerged from the data that highlighted this theme: Lack of female mentors and Mother as a role model (see Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Role Model Codes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Role Model	Lack of female mentors	There were no female mentors due to underrepresentation of women in leadership.
	Mother as a role model	Al-Ghpson's late mother was her solo role model and mentor.

*Lack of female mentors.* The absence of female mentors within the company posed a challenge for Al-Ghpson. When asked: At your time, were there other women for you as mentors? She responded, “Unfortunately, No. That was an issue because there were no role models in the company that I can learn from or look up to.” Being the first woman in the company's history to reach the executive level, Al-Ghpson had to forge her path without the guidance of other women who had faced similar experiences. She explained,

There were very few women in leadership positions, and most of them are from my generation and started their careers at the same time as me. I was the first one to get into the executive level and the first woman in the history of the company to get into the executive level. There was no precedence or prior experience that I could learn from.

While accomplished women did exist in the country, they often worked in family businesses, which did not expose them to the same challenges faced in the corporate world. Al-Ghpson explained that if a woman works in a family-owned company, she wouldn't encounter the same obstacles that are present in the corporate environment.

However, Al-Ghpson's career took a pivotal turn when she joined Community Services within Industrial Relations. Despite initial hesitation, this transition in her career path led her to meet Ahmad Nassar, the then-general manager, who became her life coach for 20 years. Their chance encounter significantly impacted her career trajectory. Although Al-Ghpson initially struggled with a lack of mentors, she was fortunate to find guidance in Nassar. Even though her coach was a male, he provided her with unwavering guidance and support throughout her leadership journey. In fact, within even the most traditionally male-dominated environments such as ARAMCO, there are men who actively defy these stereotypes, acknowledging and embracing the unique characteristics, abilities, and insights women bring to the fold. These men,

much like Nassar, embody a progressive stance, providing unwavering guidance and support to their female colleagues. They recognize the importance of diversity in leadership and the strength that arises from balancing male and female perspectives.

During the interviews, she confirmed the significant impact her mother had on her journey, stating, “She was my mentor. She was my role model. She always gave me advice.” Acknowledging the lack of female mentors, Al-Ghpson found inspiration and guidance in her late mother, who served as her mentor and role model, recognizing the significant impact her mother had on her journey.

***Mother as a role model.*** Al-Ghpson’s late mother was her sole role model and mentor, inspiring her through intellectual curiosity, resilience, and optimism. She stated, “So, my only role model and mentor was my late mother. She was my inspiration in life.” With limited education, she admired her mother’s intellectual curiosity and passion for learning as she single-handedly managed the family’s affairs during her father’s travels. Al-Ghpson clarified,

In spite of her limited education, she had a keen intellectual curiosity and passion for learning and knowledge to improve her status and the status of those around her. She was a proud woman, independent, responsible, and courageous. Because my father was a frequent traveler, she had to manage the affairs of her six children all on her own. She managed our finances, our education, our cultural and social activities, our travel, our health, and well-being, and she had time to go to night school, do charitable work, and enjoy her own social life with her friends. She taught me compassion, responsibility, humility, and integrity.

Her mother’s outlook on life shaped Al-Ghpson’s own perspective, as she shared that there was no room for negativity in her mother’s life. She accepted everything with resilience and

optimism, believing that hard work and goodness would be rewarded. She recalled her mother's open-mindedness and intellectual hospitality, stating, “And while she was a traditional woman, she had an open mind and great intellectual hospitality to different opinions, cultures, and faiths,” emphasizing how her mother's inclusive and accepting perspective significantly influenced her own worldview and approach to life.

Reflecting on her mother's achievements despite living in a strict culture that was unkind to women, Al-Ghpson recognized her potential and imagined the possibilities: “Imagine if she was educated, if she was working, empowered and had a support system, where would she be now? and what incredible things would she be able to accomplish?” This realization fueled Al-Ghpson's determination to break barriers and achieve greatness in her own life.

Al-Ghpson's mother served as a powerful role model and mentor for her, embodying values such as compassion, responsibility, humility, and integrity despite the challenges posed by a strict and limiting cultural environment. Her mother's resilience, optimism, and intellectual curiosity inspired her to rise above constraints and pursue her own success. Al-Ghpson recognized the potential her mother could have reached with more education, empowerment, and support, which fueled her determination to break through barriers and achieve greatness in her own life.

### ***Corresponding Themes to RQ2***

The second research question asked, “As a Saudi woman in a high-rank leadership role, what perceived challenges did Al-Ghpson encounter while climbing the leadership ladder in a male-dominated corporation?” The three themes identified to address this research question explored Al-Ghpson’s perspectives on the obstacles she experienced as a Saudi woman while advancing her career at Saudi Aramco.

**2.1. Al-Ghpson's core challenge was gender discrimination, which was deeply ingrained and pervasive within Saudi culture.** During the interviews, Al-Ghpson discussed how deeply rooted gender biases and beliefs have fueled discriminatory practices within Saudi culture, impacting her career advancement. Her responses revealed four significant codes: Biased mindset, stigma against single women, the fallacy of work-life balance, and changing the culture (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Saudi Culture Codes*

Theme	Codes	Description
Saudi Culture	Biased mindset	Cultural upbringing contributed to a biased mindset and discriminatory practices.
	Stigma against single women	Single women were stigmatized for joining predominantly male professions.
	The fallacy of work-life balance	Al-Ghpson believes work-life balance is either a lie or a myth.
	Changing the culture	Changing culture and mindsets takes time.

***Biased mindset.*** Al-Ghpson grew up in a society where women were marginalized and considered weak creatures with limited intellectual capacity. She recalled,

When you grow up in a culture that marginalizes women and considers them weak creatures with limited intellectual capacity and constantly hammers these views into everyone's head in childhood when the capacity for believing is the strongest, then the

ability for many men and women to think for themselves and make unbiased judgments is paralyzed and ruined. These views become everyone's beliefs, values, and creeds that rule our lives and social relations.

Facing tremendous opposition in her ambition to work and build a career, Al-Ghpson remembered the struggle: "It was also considered disgraceful and unacceptable for a woman to work outside the home in a mixed environment like Saudi Aramco." However, she didn't let herself be discouraged, sharing that cultural upbringing influenced people's character until they started thinking rationally for themselves.

Al-Ghpson understood the deep-rooted nature of these beliefs and sometimes excused the behavior of those around her, saying, "Poor men. They don't know better. This is how they were raised by their parents, the education system, religious teachings, social customs, and tradition, and also the mainstream media." She provided an example of how the media, particularly soap operas, perpetuated stereotypes of women being inferior, victimized, and marginalized.

Cultural upbringing plays a significant role in shaping individuals' character and beliefs, potentially perpetuating discriminatory practices. Highlighting the consequences of these practices on the organization, Al-Ghpson stated, "We were stuck in a medieval mindset that was, unsurprisingly, reflected in the behavior, attitudes, and corporate culture of the organization."

***Stigma against single women.*** Al-Ghpson encountered enduring challenges due to societal perceptions of unmarried women not conforming to the traditional expectations within her community. In her memoir, she sadly remarked, "My society saw no place for an unmarried woman as it was." As a single woman, she was stigmatized for working in male-dominated corporate environments, specifically in the context of Saudi Aramco. During her time, single

women living in the company's compound faced negative judgments from the local community. They were seen as 'loose' and 'immoral.'

This stigmatization emphasized Al-Ghpson's struggle as she navigated societal norms and cultural expectations as a single woman. This often portrays single women negatively as they pursue careers in male-dominated fields, creating additional challenges and barriers for them to overcome.

***The fallacy of work-life balance.*** Al-Ghpson challenges the conventional notion of work-life balance, describing it as "a lie, a myth." She argues that achieving balance goes beyond juggling work and family, involving five areas: work, family, friends, community, and personal needs. She emphasizes that work-life balance for women remains a persistent challenge, particularly in societies where traditional gender roles dictate that women bear most of the responsibility for home and family care. Navigating these challenges herself, Al-Ghpson shared her insights on the subject, drawing from her own observations and the experiences of other women. She stated, "I am not married and don't have children, so my perception is based on the experience of others." She believes that the real issue is not marriage itself. Instead, it is the nature of the relationship between the husband and wife. "The nature of the relationship can either support or derail a woman's career progress and success. If the husband is controlling and not willing to shoulder some of the family and home responsibilities, the woman's career will suffer," She explained.

Al-Ghpson elaborated on the challenges married women face, especially when their partners do not understand or support sharing responsibilities. She asserts that striking a balance between work and personal life can be particularly difficult for leaders and notes that women often sacrifice professional aspirations due to home care responsibilities. She argues that society



should not expect women to singlehandedly manage both professional and household responsibilities. She noted that this would be very difficult and likely lead to either sacrificing family or work. Questioning these societal expectations, Al-Ghpson wondered, “So why do we expect a woman, to be a successful leader or professional and, at the same time, attend perfectly to the household responsibility on her own, and have a happy life?”

Ultimately, Al-Ghpson believes that a healthy and supportive relationship between partners is critical to achieving success in both work and home life. She emphasized that it's essential for couples to reach an agreement to share responsibilities and provide mutual support, enabling both partners to succeed and flourish: “The secret of success is in the relationship between the man and woman, and their willingness to support, trust, respect, and honor each other's ambitions and aspirations.” Al-Ghpson's insights demonstrated the importance of shared responsibilities and supportive relationships in achieving a work-life balance for women, emphasizing that societal expectations and traditional gender roles must be challenged to enable women to thrive both professionally and personally.

*Changing the culture.* Al-Ghpson reflected on the culture of Saudi Arabia during the last four decades, stating,

I think this is all accumulation of cultural hypnosis that continues to rule their world.

And they cannot help it. It's very difficult to change the mindset of people who've been raised this way for 40 or 50 years. It's very difficult to change them.

Al-Ghpson emphasized that while policies can change quickly, it is difficult to change ingrained cultural norms and attitudes toward women in the workplace. She affirmed, “You can change policies maybe overnight. But you cannot change the culture and psychology of the people and

mindsets overnight.” It takes time and generational shifts to truly change the culture and mindset of the people in the organization.

Al-Ghpson highlighted the challenge of changing deep-rooted cultural norms and biases towards women in the workplace that perpetuate inequality. She stressed that policies could be altered quickly but transforming mindsets takes time and evolutionary cultural transitions. She further explained that even with the implementation of new policies, people's attitudes toward women may remain the same unless they undergo a significant transformation.

**2.2. Al-Ghpson experienced unconscious bias and sexism in the workplace.** Sexism and unconscious bias are prevalent in the company’s culture. During the interview, Al-Ghpson addressed the organization’s mindset, stating, “There is an unconscious bias in the organization, especially since it is a high-tech engineering company.” When asked how often sexism occurred, Al-Ghpson highlighted the existence of unconscious bias in the high-tech STEM company she worked at, which negatively impacted women's opportunities for growth and advancement. As she reflected on the pervasiveness of gender biases in the past, she responded, “Sexism was the norm, and nobody thought anything of it.” She noted that “everybody in the country looked at Aramco as the most liberal and progressive company when it comes to women employment, although there were a lot of gender biases in the policies.” Women were marginalized, Al-Ghpson recounted, “We were so marginalized when we first started. And we were not taken seriously. Everybody looked at us as short-timers, just killing time until we find a husband and then leave.” This perception led to a lack of investment in their professional growth, as management believed they would not remain in their positions for long. She further clarified, “So, management was not willing to invest in us.”

In her struggle with sexism in the workplace, Al-Ghpson identified three prevailing misconceptions about women in the workplace. First, it was believed that “women cannot take on hard work and cannot be available whenever and wherever she was needed.” This misconception suggested that women could not handle demanding tasks and lacked the necessary flexibility. Second, “management believed that women don’t have the intellectual capacity needed for the successful performance of the organization.” This belief led to the fear that businesses would suffer if women failed to deliver. Lastly, she noted that “they believed that women don’t have the skills to lead people, especially men, and should not be bossing men because men are superior to women.” Consequently, placing women in charge of businesses was seen as a significant risk due to these misconceptions.

Al-Ghpson shared an example of sexist behavior to illuminate the biased treatment she received when proposing new ideas to the management. She recalled a specific incident where her suggestions were met with dismissive comments and belittling remarks that undermined her credibility and expertise, stating,

Unfortunately, these people lack emotional maturity and are insecure about their capabilities. When I first started my professional life, every time I tried to come up with innovative ideas, I was turned down because, first of all, they did not believe that a woman can think logically and can be creative and smart. Second, it was a threat to the men around me to outperform them and expose their incompetence and insecurities.

Al-Ghpson experienced similar situations across different levels, even including top leaders. As she explained, “I experienced this in many situations from people at different levels in the organization, including top leaders.” She attributed this behavior towards women to the fact that “these people lack emotional maturity and are insecure about their capabilities.” She expressed

her disappointment: “Unfortunately, many people are more motivated by their personal agenda than the common good of the team or organization.” These experiences illustrate the persistent gender bias faced by women in the workplace, hindering their ability to contribute effectively and receive recognition for their talents.

During the interviews, Al-Ghpson provided a rich and insightful discussion shedding light on the pervasive gender biases that exist within the workplace. Her valuable insights led to the identification of seven significant codes that captured the nuanced aspects of these biases.: Gender inequality, career advancement disparity, resistance, absence of female leaders, chauvinism, glass walls, and harassment (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Sexism in the Workplace Codes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Sexism in the Workplace	Gender inequality	The gap was significant in employment benefits between men and women.
	Career advancement disparity	Limited opportunities and growth for women.
	Resistance	Resisting to women advancing their careers, despite their talent, success, strength, and knowledge.
	Absence of female leaders	Underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within the company.
	Chauvinism	Extreme support and loyalty to men. Prejudice and discrimination against women.

Theme	Codes	Description
	Glass walls	Women were restricted to routine jobs.
	Harassment	Unwelcome behaviors towards women cause a gender-based hostile environment.

***Gender inequality.*** Al-Ghpson recounted instances of discriminatory treatment she experienced because she is a woman. Women were disadvantaged compared to men regarding employment benefits, such as “the housing allowance, home ownership program, medical care” for family members. This disparity stemmed from the belief that women were not considered heads of households and that these benefits should be provided by the men in their families. As a result, granting women these company benefits was seen as “double-dipping,” perpetuating gender inequality within the organization.

In her reflection on the gender dynamics within her workplace, Al-Ghpson noted a hopeless trend, stating that “all positions of importance and authority were dominated by men who had the bulk of promotions, training, and challenging assignments.” Despite her hard work and dedication, men were the champions of career advancement.

***Career advancement disparity.*** Al-Ghpson recognized the limited career opportunities for women within the organization, attributable primarily to the prevailing biases. Reflecting on her experiences, she shared, “I was told, repeatedly and unapologetically, that career progression was very limited for women, and there is no opportunity for us to advance to leadership positions of influence in the company.” This discrimination manifested in her being denied opportunities for significant assignments, further exemplifying the challenges women faced in her workplace.

The sentiment of being excluded from promotions was further reinforced when she explained,

Although my performance reviews had been uniformly outstanding, and my work ethic was held in the highest regard, I was left dangling in place while my male peers had, one by one, ascended to the decision-making level of the corporate ladder.

Due to prevailing biases, Al-Ghpson clarified that challenging assignments were typically given to men, questioning, “So how would a woman learn and grow if she is not given challenging assignments outside of her comfort zone?” Also, access to educational programs was often reserved for men, as women's professional roles were regarded as secondary. She elaborated that, as a result, women received lower compensation than their male counterparts and their bosses were unwilling to invest in the development and training of women as they did for men.

Gender inequality was one of the challenges Al-Ghpson faced during her tenure at Saudi Aramco. These discriminatory practices created disparities in career opportunities, pay, and professional development, hindering women’s progression.

***Resistance.*** Al-Ghpson broke new ground in the company as the first woman to assume an executive position. With no precedent for female leaders within the organization, she faced skepticism and uncertainty from her male colleagues and bosses. Her journey as the first woman to assume an executive position within the company was fraught with challenges. Initially, her male colleagues and bosses were unsure whether to trust her approach, strategies, or decisions, as they had never experienced working with a woman of equal standing. This uncertainty led to some men refusing to work on her team, leaving the conference room when she was present, “refusing to shake hands or having a one-to-one dialogue” with her, and withholding critical knowledge. Al-Ghpson disclosed that she was tested by these resistance manifestations, revealing the deeply ingrained gender biases within the corporate culture.

Her rise to leadership challenged the status quo and demanded a radical shift in attitude from her colleagues. Nevertheless, Al-Ghpson's resilience and determination gradually changed their perceptions. During the second interview, she expounded,

So, my position as a leader created a massive shock to their belief system and required real conviction and a heroic shift in attitude on their part. But after a while, once they got to know me and know my character and my personality, gender did not matter much then.

However, for her subordinates, accepting a female leader took more time. She explained that it was a different challenge for those who reported to her, as they needed time to adjust to having a woman leader and to trust her with their careers and future.

These attitudes stemmed from the belief that women were unfit for leadership roles and incapable of handling difficult jobs. Al-Ghpson noted, "Many people still believe that women are unfit for leadership roles and can't take on difficult jobs and always need the protection of men." The resistance she faced was not limited to her local colleagues but also extended to expatriates, who likewise did not like having a woman, particularly a local one, as their supervisor.

Al-Ghpson understood that this resistance was deeply rooted in societal norms and expectations. She continued to explain that it was natural for such attitudes to persist, given that they had been taught from childhood that women were unfit for leadership positions. This upbringing "created a dim view of women in general in their world," something that was not challenged in their everyday lives, neither at home, in the community, nor in their social circles, local media, or anywhere else in the country.

Despite these challenges, she remained committed to her pursuit of success. She worked diligently to demonstrate that the focus should be on the job and the organization rather than

personal biases. She explained, “I had to work my way around them and show them that it is not about me or about them. It's about the job and the organization.” By doing so, she hoped to change their perceptions and pave the way for greater acceptance of women in leadership roles.

*Absence of female leaders.* When she began her career, Al-Ghpson faced the stark reality of the underrepresentation of female leaders. In her memoir, she noted that “many cultural, social, and institutional challenges, subtle and strong, impeded” women’s potential to acquire significant positions and progress professionally.

The lack of women in leadership positions was evident. Al-Ghpson asserted that very few women held leadership positions, and most of them were from her generation, having started their careers concurrently with her. In her memoir, she revealed that among “the sixty thousand employees in the entire Saudi Aramco workforce, only four women at most operated at my job level.” This testimony confirms that the disparity was evident within the hierarchy of Saudi Aramco.

Positions of leadership at Saudi Aramco are dominated by men. Al-Ghpson remarked that “most of the top jobs were dominated by men. There were no women, whatsoever, in a supervisory position.” She noted that even after her departure, the situation had not improved significantly. She recalled, “I left the Company five years ago. Since I left, until today, there is no executive woman in the company in an executive position.” Furthermore, there are merely one or two female managers in the entire organization.

Despite some progress, female representation in leadership roles remained insufficient. Al-Ghpson admitted, “As for women in leadership positions, we still lagged in this area.” The scarcity of female leaders emphasized the existing gender inequality and the prejudiced attitudes faced by women pursuing leadership positions.



***Chauvinism.*** During the interviews, Al-Ghpson was asked if she could provide examples or instances where she experienced prejudice in the workplace. She promptly responded, “Oh, I experience prejudice every day!” Particularly as she climbed the corporate ladder in an alpha-male-dominated culture. Facing new challenges, she added, “I was met with a freshly hatched prejudice as many men believed women were unfit for leadership positions” and that men were more entitled to those positions.

Al-Ghpson recalled an instance where she witnessed prejudice, specifically during talent reviews with management and senior leaders. She noted that they often favored men over equally or more qualified women. This bias extended to various aspects of the workplace, including “recruitment, training, promotions, performance reviews,” where senior leaders consistently preferred men for “chief positions” despite the qualifications and capabilities of their female counterparts.

Navigating the complexities of the workplace amid prevalent gender biases, Al-Ghpson observed the impact of a woman's success on her male counterparts. She believed a successful and autonomous woman could challenge “some men’s internal insecurity and shatter their false sense of superiority,” potentially bringing out their chauvinistic nature under challenging situations.

Al-Ghpson’s personal experience at Saudi Aramco highlighted the prevalence of prejudice and discrimination as she climbed up the ladder within the alpha-male culture. She observed that women were often overlooked for leadership positions, despite their qualifications and hard work. This discriminatory practice also permeated recruitment, training, promotions, and performance reviews, ultimately affecting women’s professional growth.

**Glass walls.** During the first interview, Al-Ghpson shared that, despite her qualifications, she observed her male colleagues advancing faster in their careers. When she confronted her superiors, she was told, “Huda, women's progression is going to be slower than men's because they will never exceed this level in the company. So, rather than to hit the ceiling too fast in their tenure, we slow them down.” However, she soon realized that the imposed ceiling was set too low. She expressed disbelief at the rationale behind this approach, noting that women would inevitably hit the ceiling quickly regardless of the attempts to slow their progression.

Al-Ghpson recognized this phenomenon as the glass ceiling, an invisible barrier preventing women from climbing the corporate ladder. She described it as an imposed limitation, not reflecting actual capabilities. However, her challenges didn't end there; she also encountered glass walls, which constrained women to particular job roles. In the early stages of her career, Al-Ghpson noted that, at the time, “women were boxed in certain jobs,” such as being “a nurse, a secretary, a teacher, a clerk, and in the back office.” Thus, women faced a glass ceiling limiting their upward mobility and the glass walls restricting their professional opportunities. Feeling trapped and frustrated, Al-Ghpson compared her situation to being in a glass box, watching her male colleagues “moving, moving up, and moving sideways” while she remained stagnant. She described the experience as incredibly ‘frustrating!’

Al-Ghpson faced challenges in the corporate world due to the glass ceiling and glass walls, which prevented her and other women from advancing their careers and limited them to routine jobs. These challenges persisted, reflecting the broader issue of gender discrimination in the workplace.

**Harassment.** During the first interview, Al-Ghpson reflected on her career, stating that she experienced harassment, bullying, belittling, and threats for not conforming to the image of a

submissive female. As the only professional woman in Facilities Planning and a non-traditional Saudi woman, she faced significant harassment and hostility from a group of traditional Saudi men in her organization. In her memoir, she reminisced, “unsigned nasty notes were left on my desk, and offensive phone calls frequently disturbed my peace at home.” These threatening calls would order her to renounce her “blasphemous lifestyle” or risk being arrested by the Mutawa, a formidable religious police force.

Despite the distressing nature of these incidents, Al-Ghoson believed that complaining to management would be fruitless. She refrained from reporting them, fearing that doing so would lead to punishment. She chose to endure the harassment rather than risk being eternally bounded to conventional and unchallenging roles that would stifle her growth.

Al-Ghoson’s experiences emphasized the presence of unconscious gender bias and sexism in the workplace. She overcame “gender-related obstacles, such as a lack of resources, harassment, and resistance from male coworkers.” These challenges posed significant barriers for women, especially Al-Ghoson, in achieving their full potential and advancing their careers in male-dominated workplaces.

### **2.3. No organizational resources supported Al-Ghoson’s career advancement.**

Throughout her career, Al-Ghoson grappled with the scarcity of resources and opportunities, which led her to focus on self-development as her primary advancement method. She took it upon herself to gain multidisciplinary knowledge about the business of her field. When asked about the resources that aided her career advancement, she explained that she had to create her own opportunities. Al-Ghoson recognized the importance of continuously improving her skills and knowledge to succeed in her position. She focused on learning not just about the business and economic environment but also her “internal capabilities, the organization’s psychology, and

how to manage people.” Reading and reflecting became integral parts of her self-development journey. She affirmed, “I read a lot. I reflect a lot.” By committing herself to a habit of reading and reflection, Al-Ghpson demonstrated her dedication to expanding her knowledge and skills, which in turn contributed to her success in the corporate world.

Al-Ghpson also found solitude an essential tool for meditation and mental clarity. This introspective approach allowed her to understand herself better and reflect on her decisions. She embraced mistakes as valuable learning experiences, stating, “Mistakes are always good teachers. They teach you what not to do next time.” She became her own best resource, attributing her growth to reading and reflection.

During the interviews, Al-Ghpson’s responses revealed two underlying codes supporting the lack of organizational resources: Networking and developmental programs (see Table 7).

**Table 7**

*Lack of Resources Codes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Lack of Resources	Networking	Women struggle to build and maintain professional relationships with men in their fields.
	Developmental Programs	Lack of training and development programs targeting women’s leadership growth.

**Networking.** During the interviews, Al-Ghpson expressed the challenges she faced in networking due to the male-dominated nature of her work environment. She acknowledged the importance of networking, stating, “If you don't have it, you have to do double the work and

build allies and relations inside the workplace.” When asked about entering elite circles, she responded, “Unfortunately, I missed this opportunity because the elite circles were dominated by men.” As a single woman, it was unacceptable for her to socialize with her male colleagues outside the work environment. In her memoir, she bemoaned the impossibility of mingling with men and staying informed about the latest developments in the field.

Al-Ghoson wanted to socialize and network with her male colleagues outside the work environment but knew it wouldn't be acceptable. In the interview, she explained her attempt to bridge the gap by inviting both her colleagues and their wives to a dinner party at her house. However, her plan was met with frustration when the men and women immediately separated upon arrival. Al-Ghoson was left with a dilemma,

Now, what do I do? Do I go and sit with the men and my colleagues and risk upsetting the women? Or do I leave them to socialize among themselves, and I go sit with the women whom I don't know and have nothing in common with?

This situation thwarted her goal of networking and left her questioning how to navigate such social dynamics.

The lack of networking opportunities affected her career advancement, and she had to be creative with her networking efforts, focusing on building relationships within the workplace and professional events. She described the situation, mentioning that there were 30 male executives, each responsible for a distinct line of business and dependent on each other's services. This interdependence allowed her to interact with other executives as they negotiated and discussed their needs. To seize these opportunities, she tried to “mingle with these executives at lunchtime” or by having “a cup of coffee with them at their offices” while engaging in friendly conversation.

As a result of the male-centric culture and work environment, Al-Ghpson faced barriers to networking and building connections. Nevertheless, she persevered by fostering relationships within her workplace, showcasing her adaptability and tenacity.

***Developmental programs.*** Al-Ghpson's experiences at Saudi Aramco revealed a significant lack of developmental programs targeting women. In her memoir, she remarked that "women were not receiving major company benefits" such as "scholarship programs, international assignments, and several other privileges that male employees took for granted."

While the company provided education and training on effective leadership, Al-Ghpson revealed that these resources were mainly targeting men. She stated during the interview, "All the high education and developmental programs, the leadership development, were targeted to men. So, women were not given opportunities. Even scholarship programs." This disparity was evident during her early years when she applied for a company-sponsored scholarship program. She recalled,

When I applied, after two years... Aramco had this scholarship program where they give scholarships to the employees and sponsor them for master's and Ph.D. in the UK and everywhere in the world. And, when I applied, I mean unapologetically, they told me, 'Rejected. Reason, you are a woman.'

This blatant discrimination was a clear obstacle to women's development within the company. On the other hand, Al-Ghpson explained the limitations of the company's approach to leadership training, noting that "the company provided a lot of training and education on how to be an effective leader, but these are all academics. When you come to reality, not everything you learn, you can apply because situations differ." Emphasizing that these programs did not always translate into real-world applicability.

Al-Ghoson highlighted that the scarcity of developmental programs was a significant challenge. Regrettably, these programs were exclusive to men leaving women without opportunities for growth.

### *Corresponding Themes to RQ3*

The third question asked, “How do Al-Ghoson and her former colleagues and co-workers perceive her leadership style?” It aimed to identify Al-Ghoson’s leadership style by primarily administering the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to both Al-Ghoson and her former co-workers.

**3.1. Al-Ghoson is perceived as a Transformational leader.** The MLQ assessment was used to measure Al-Ghoson’s leadership tendencies and effectiveness based on the Full Range Leadership Model. Results revealed two codes: MLQ report and raters’ testimonials.

**Table 8**

#### *Transformational Leader Codes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Transformational leader	MLQ Report	An objective analysis of Al-Ghoson's leadership style.
	Raters’ testimonials	Personal accounts of Al-Ghoson's leadership were provided by her former colleagues and co-workers.

***MLQ Report.*** The MLQ assessment of Al-Ghoson’s leadership was completed by 48 former co-workers, comprising a diverse range of perspectives that included Al-Ghoson's self-assessment, feedback from 2 superiors, 14 peers, and 32 subordinates. The evaluation spanned

from December 2022 to late January 2023, ensuring ample time for thoughtful responses. Al-Ghosen's MLQ profile revealed her remarkable leadership capabilities.

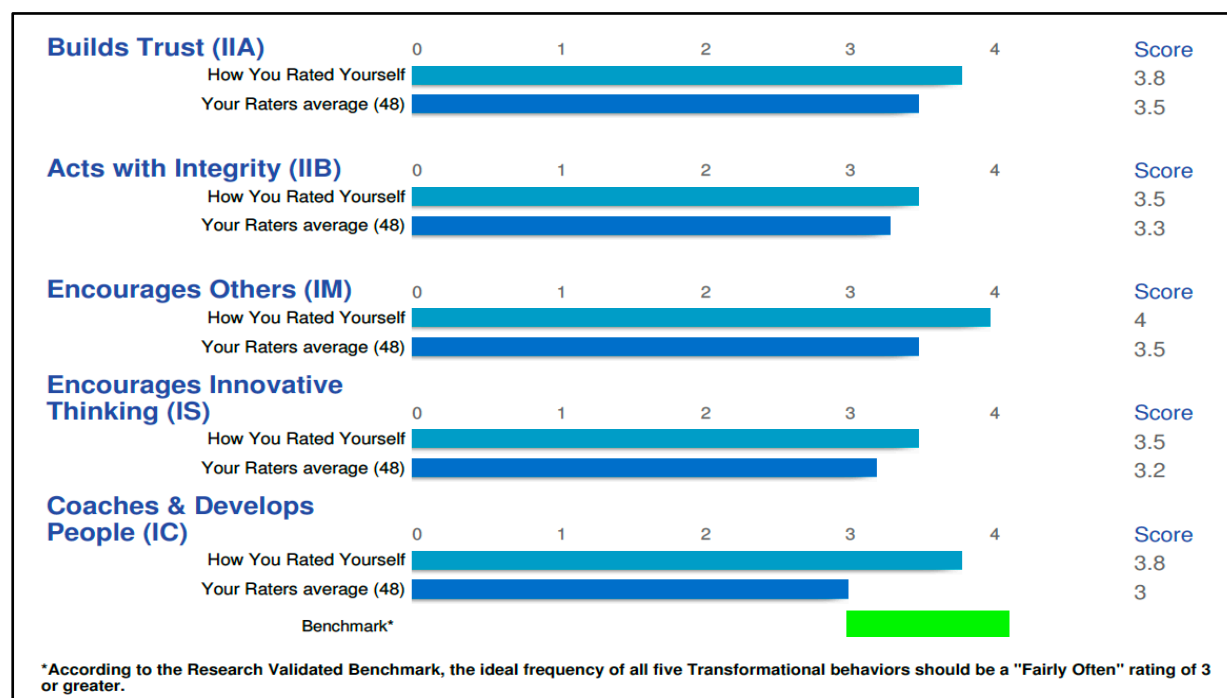
The MLQ assessed leadership across three domains: Transformational, Transactional, and Passive-Avoidant. Al-Ghosen's results reflect her performance in behaviors within each domain, as outlined below:

### 1. Transformational Leadership:

Al-Ghosen exhibits robust transformational leadership, especially in Idealized Influence (Attributed) and Inspirational Motivation, scoring 3.8 and 4 in self-ratings. Raters' lower scores suggest a potential enhancement in leadership embodiment and team motivation. Intellectual Stimulation, with a self-rating of 3.5 and raters' 3.2, suggests room for fostering innovation. The most significant self-rating and raters' gap occurs in Individualized Consideration, highlighting a need for personalized team member support (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

#### *The Five Behaviors of Transformational Leadership*



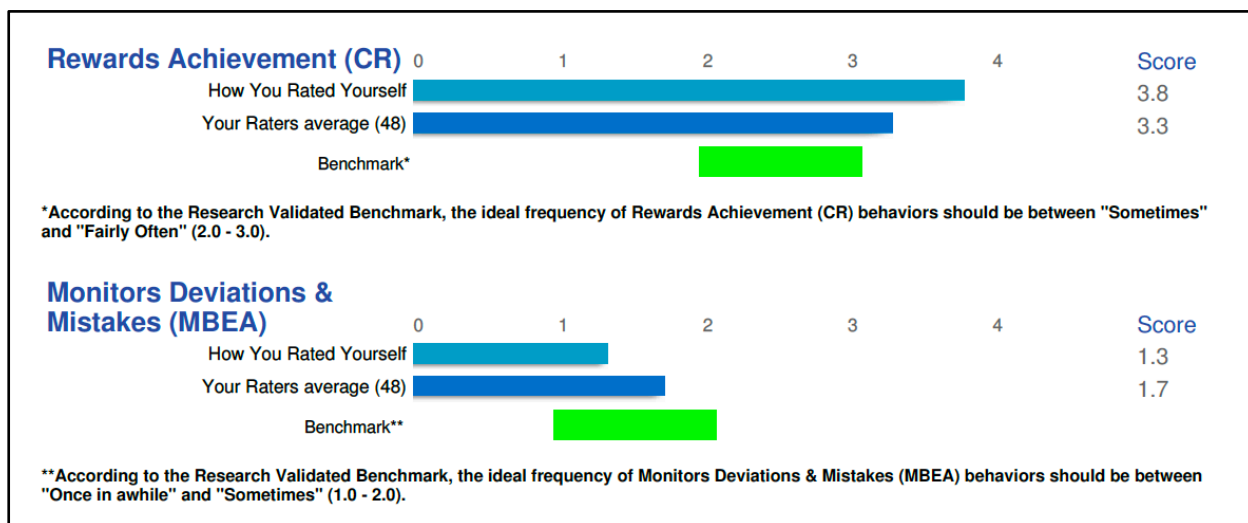


## 2. Transactional Leadership:

Al-Ghosen appears to rely on Contingent Rewards, as shown by the self-rating of 3.8 and the raters' score of 3.3. While this approach can be effective in certain situations, it would be beneficial to balance it with active Management-by-Exception techniques to address issues and challenges proactively. Al-Ghosen's self-rating of 1.3 and raters' score of 1.7 in Management-by-Exception Active (MBEA) indicate an area that warrants improvement (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8**

### *Transactional Leadership Behaviors*

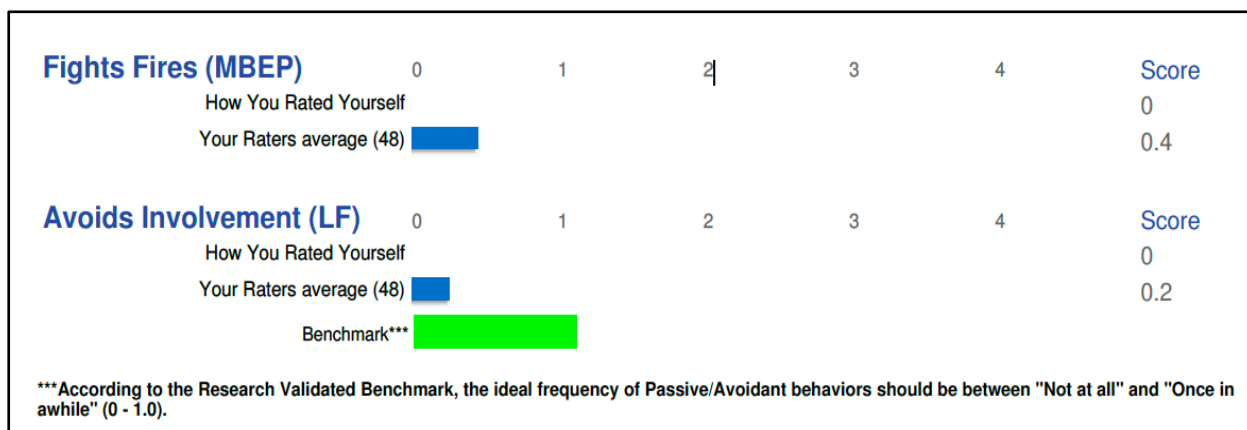


## 3. Passive/Avoidant Behaviors:

Al-Ghosen's low Passive-Avoidant Leadership scores in both self and raters' evaluations affirm her proactive leadership. The minimal scores in Management-by-Exception Passive (MBEP) and Laissez-Faire (LF) leadership reflect her dedication to addressing issues proactively instead of dodging responsibilities. These metrics showcase her lean towards engaged, solution-focused leadership, emphasizing her commitment to front-line problem resolution (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9**

*Passive/Avoidant Behaviors*

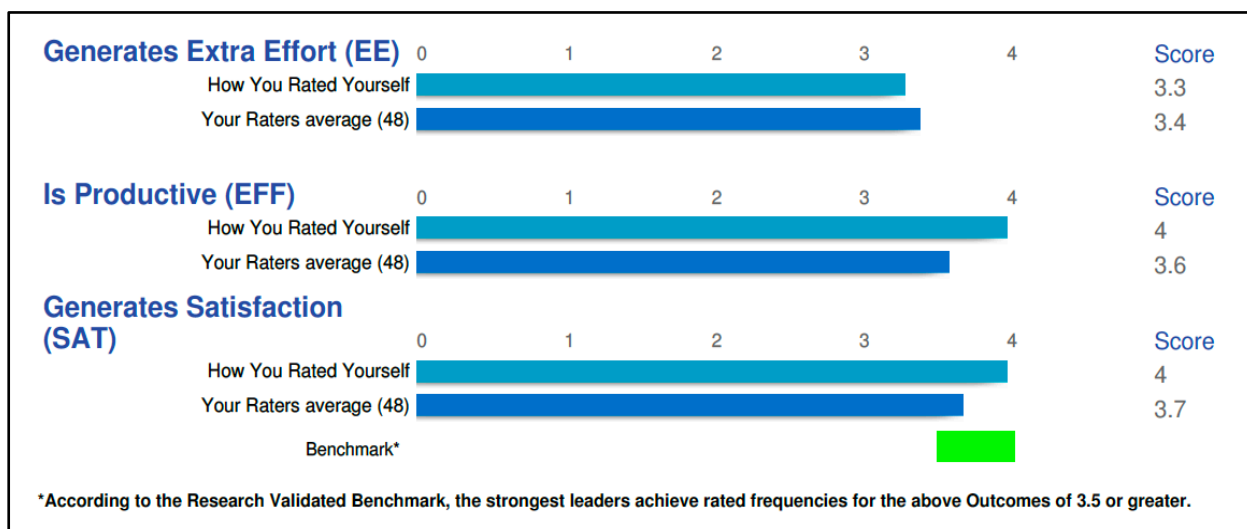


**4. Outcomes of Leadership:**

Al-Ghoson’s leadership successfully spurs Extra Effort from her team, mirrored by self-rating and raters' scores of 3.3 and 3.4, respectively, implying her style inspires above-role efforts. Though she sees her leadership as highly effective (self-rating 4), the raters' 3.6 score suggests a potential for improvement. High Satisfaction scores (self-rating 4, raters' 3.7) show employees appreciate Al-Ghoson's support (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10**

*Outcomes of Leadership*



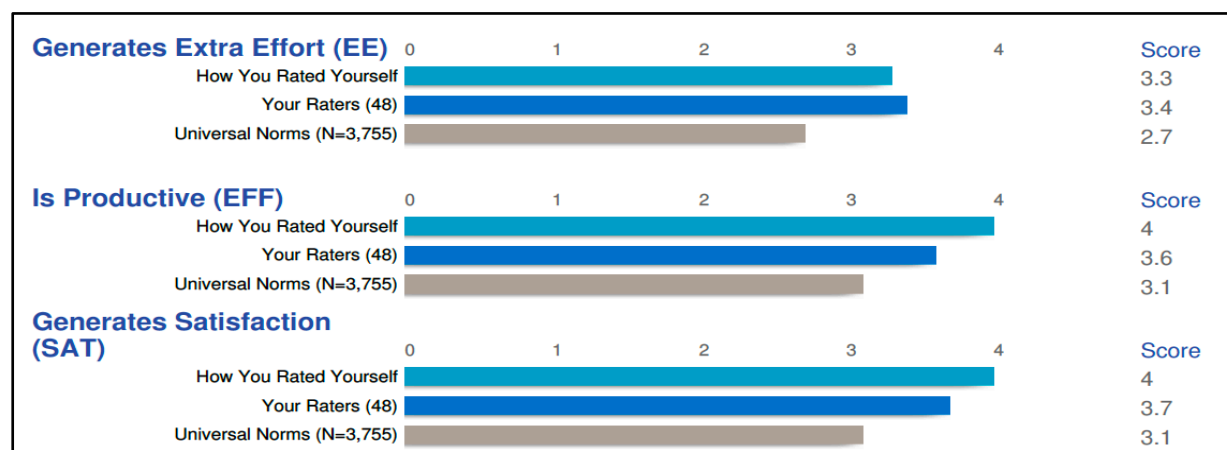
## 5. Comparison with Norms:

Compared to universal norms, Al-Ghoson stands out as a top performer in transformational leadership, with above-average performance in transactional leadership and significantly lower scores in passive-avoidant leadership:

- For Transformational Leadership, Al-Ghoson demonstrates a higher performance than the norm, indicating she is a strong transformational leader. This suggests that Al-Ghoson's abilities in this domain are already well-developed.
- In the Transactional Leadership domain, Al-Ghoson's above-norm performance indicates effective use of transactional leadership. However, a balance between transactional and transformational leadership methods is advisable for optimal effectiveness.
- Regarding Passive-Avoidant Leadership, Al-Ghoson's performance is significantly lower than the norm, which is a positive attribute. It demonstrates that she effectively avoids passive or avoidant behaviors in their leadership style.
- Lastly, for the Outcomes of Leadership, Al-Ghoson's performance is notably higher than the norm, suggesting that she has achieved positive outcomes in her role (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11**

*Al-Ghoson's Leadership Outcomes Compared with Norms*



The MLQ results primarily depict Al-Ghpson as a Transformational leader (see Figure 12), with higher scores in this domain compared to Transactional and Passive-Avoidant Leadership domains. She exhibits strengths in key components of Transformational Leadership, such as Idealized Influence (Attributed), Inspirational Motivation, and Individualized Consideration. Her effective use of Contingent Rewards underscores her commitment to recognizing team members' achievements. These results align with Saudi Aramco Corporation's culture, which values innovation, teamwork, and employee development.

**Figure 12**

*Al-Ghpson Profiled Against a Full Range of Leadership Styles*



Al-Ghpson's leadership style corresponds with the transformational leadership theory, demonstrating her ability to inspire and motivate her team. This theory suggests that inspiring leaders can positively impact an organization's success (Antonakis & House, 2013). Her focus on addressing worker needs and fostering growth also aligns with the principles of transformational leadership theory. Thus, the findings emphasize the importance of embracing transformational leadership principles and addressing gender biases for women's advancement in male-dominated corporations.

**Raters' testimonials.** The MLQ provided three open-ended questions for the raters to voluntarily answer: (a) What can help the leader be more effective? (b) What obstacles limit the leader's effectiveness, and (c) What is admired about the leader?

- **What can help the leader be more effective?** Raters provided various suggestions on how Al-Ghpson could be more effective as a leader. Some noted that she could benefit from additional exposure to business management and marketing. Others highlighted the importance of developing others' leadership skills, with one comment stating, "Huda can develop others' leadership by guiding them to reach conclusions and make decisions rather than provide solutions. Her style could also benefit from being softer and less rigid." Another suggestion was for her to be more approachable, fostering a less formal and more enjoyable work environment. It was also mentioned that she could consider identifying and nurturing potential female leadership candidates to learn from her.
- **What obstacles limit the leader's effectiveness?** Some obstacles facing Al-Ghpson's effectiveness include her occasional frustration and potential to be perceived as dismissive of others' opinions. Raters noted that she may need to be more patient and actively listen to direct reports. One rater commented, "Sometimes, Huda should

prioritize her battles to overcome obstacles and resistance.” Another comment highlighted that “at times, she may be trusting of those who do not deserve her trust.” Additionally, working within organizational standards may limit her ability to explore more flexible approaches, and she may need to expand her network beyond her immediate circle to gain different perspectives.

- **What is admired about the leader?** Al-Ghpson is admired for her courage and determination to succeed in a male-dominated environment, as well as her commitment to continuous self-improvement. Raters appreciate her focus, work ethic, and ability to plan and pursue excellence. They also acknowledge her fairness, dedication, and vision. Huda is seen as a strong and courageous leader who is passionate, supportive and committed to her team.

In summary, the MLQ open-ended responses revealed that Al-Ghpson's leadership could be improved through targeted skill development and adopting a more approachable demeanor. Despite facing challenges, she is admired for her courage, determination, and commitment to excellence in a male-dominated field, making her an inspiration for future leaders.

#### *Corresponding Themes to RQ4*

The fourth question asked, “As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, what strategies or actions does Al-Ghpson perceive as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business?” It examined Al-Ghpson’s strategies and actions that she deemed effective for women in thriving and attaining leadership roles within the male-dominated Saudi Aramco.

**4.1. Al-Ghpson advises female leaders to develop personal qualities and professional competencies.** Throughout the interviews, Al-Ghpson heavily discussed essential qualities and competencies that women should cultivate to become successful in their leadership journey. Two

significant codes resulted from her responses: Strategies and Al-Ghpson as an example (see Table 9).

**Table 9**

*Al-Ghpson's Advice Codes*

Theme	Codes	Description
Al-Ghpson's Advice	Strategies	Characteristics and competencies women should cultivate to grow and advance as leaders.
	Al-Ghpson as an example	Using Al-Ghpson as a role model: What can be learned from her success?

**Strategies.** Drawing from her wealth of experience, Al-Ghpson generously shares her advice and guidance with women to help them advance as leaders. She outlines specific characteristics and competencies that female leaders should cultivate to succeed in their careers, as outlined below:

- Characteristics:
  - Courage and self-confidence: Al-Ghpson emphasizes the importance of not being intimidated by the environment and standing up for oneself.
  - Discipline, commitment, and responsibility: She advises leaders to approach work with passion and energy and to work hard.
  - Assertive and professional image: Al-Ghpson urges women leaders to project a strong image from the beginning to create a long-lasting impression.
  - Authenticity: Leaders should align their behaviors with their values and beliefs, walking the talk and practicing what they preach.

- Learning to learn: Al-Ghpson highlights the importance of continuous learning, unlearning, and relearning to develop essential skills and broaden intellectual capacities.
- Competencies:
  - People-oriented leadership: Al-Ghpson advises women leaders to focus on their people, understanding their aspirations and capabilities, and helping them succeed, as the quality of talent determines an organization's success.
  - Credibility and work ethics: “Build[ing] credibility and maintain[ing] high standards of work ethics” to become a trustworthy and reliable leader is essential. Al-Ghpson recommends adhering to these principles to demonstrate confidence among teams and peers.
  - Analytical and problem-solving skills: By engaging in learning, leaders can develop the skills to analyze complex problems, generate ideas, and evaluate solutions.
  - Communication skills: Acquiring new knowledge helps leaders communicate clearly and persuasively, as well as develop the capacity for argument and challenging widely shared but meritless ideas.
  - Networking and relationship-building: Al-Ghpson stresses the importance of building allies and connections throughout the organization and the broader business community to accelerate career progression.

By incorporating Al-Ghpson's advice into their leadership approach, women could skillfully navigate the challenges and seize the opportunities in their careers. This empowers



them to make a meaningful impact in their respective fields, fostering success and growth as they grow.

*Al-Ghpson as an example.* Drawing inspiration from Al-Ghpson's remarkable journey, women can learn valuable lessons from her success as a trailblazer in empowering women and fostering their growth. Her story exemplifies the importance of taking the initiative, challenging societal norms, and cultivating the qualities that enable women to thrive in their careers.

Al-Ghpson's leadership positions at Saudi Aramco enabled her to actively support and help women develop their careers. She empowered women and established training and women's development programs aimed at broadening horizons and fostering self-confidence, resilience, and courage among female students and employees. Recognizing the need for guidance in a patriarchal society, these programs challenge self-limiting beliefs and empower women to pursue their dreams.

The programs include mentoring sessions and feature successful women sharing their experiences, demonstrating how to build a strong professional image. Women learn to navigate challenges, embrace empowerment, unlock potential, and take charge of their destinies. Continuing to share her knowledge and experiences with young female students and professionals, Al-Ghpson encourages them to believe in their infinite potential. She asserts that competence, personality, character, capabilities, skills, hard work, efforts, and professional relations are crucial to climbing the ladder of success.

Al-Ghpson recently published her memoir, *Unbounded*, hoping to inspire women to harness their free will and achieve their aspirations despite obstacles. The memoir details a career spanning four decades, filled with discoveries, encounters, failures, and victories, emphasizing the power of self-determination. Her memoir offers an intimate look into the life of

a woman who defies societal expectations and cultural norms. Through her story, she aims to motivate others to embrace their innate abilities, achieve their aspirations, and overcome challenges. Al-Ghpson conveyed a powerful message, stating, “The central message of my story is that we are the masters of our destiny,” encouraging women to take control of their lives and overcome challenges.

**4.2. Al-Ghpson recommends organizational support for female leaders.** During the interviews, Al-Ghpson offered some professional strategies and efforts to support women’s leadership development in businesses. This theme was informed by two codes: Diversity in leadership and securing the pipeline for women (see Table 10).

**Table 10**

*Recommendations for Organizations Codes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Al-Ghpson's recommendation for organizations	Diversity in leadership	Organizational efforts to foster gender diversity and empower female leaders.
	Securing the pipeline for women	Proactive actions organizations should implement to include women in the leadership ladder.

***Diversity in leadership.*** Al-Ghpson highlighted the importance of women in leadership positions, emphasizing that their presence in companies enhances and balances leadership styles while enriching the capabilities and effectiveness of leadership teams. She cited various research studies supporting the positive impact of workforce diversity on business performance. For

instance, Al-Ghosen mentioned a study by McKinsey Consultancy, which indicated that companies with a higher proportion of women in leadership positions generally outperformed those without women at the top by an average of 47%.

According to Al-Ghosen, expanding the talent pool to include both women and men improves decision-making due to the diverse skills and attributes that each gender brings to the workplace. She described female leaders as being “more interpersonal, democratic, and leaning more toward an inclusive, participative style of management.” Additionally, she noted that women tend to make decisions based on facts, intuition, empathy, and interpersonal skills while sharing power and information.

Emphasizing the importance of diversity, Al-Ghosen eloquently compared it to a painting, stating, “Without diversity, the work environment becomes flat and pale, frail and stale!” She argued that recognizing, celebrating, and appreciating diversity is essential to unlocking the intellectual richness within companies.

Overall, Al-Ghosen's insights and her data underscore the significance of fostering a diverse and inclusive work environment, particularly in leadership roles, to improve overall business performance and decision-making.

***Securing the pipeline for women.*** Al-Ghosen outlined a comprehensive strategy for companies to ensure a consistent pipeline for female leaders, emphasizing the importance of “diligent intervention programs” throughout the “entire hire-to-retain cycle.” She suggested a data-driven approach that includes the following steps:

- 1. Talent Acquisition:** Companies must examine their recruitment practices to ensure they are hiring the appropriate number of women “with the right qualifications.” Al-Ghosen highlighted this initial step as a strong foundation in talent acquisition.

2. **Training and Development:** Stressing the importance of providing women with “the necessary training and development programs” to increase the organization's talent pool, Al-Ghoson emphasized the need for ongoing support.
3. **Performance Assessments:** Regular performance evaluations should be conducted to “identify skill gaps” and implement strategies to close them. Al-Ghoson added that continuous assessments are crucial to maintain progress.
4. **Opportunities for Growth:** Al-Ghoson emphasized the importance of providing growth opportunities. She suggests companies should offer women “challenging assignments, leadership training, critical roles,” and exposure to various business environments and experiences.
5. **Networking and Mentorship:** Al-Ghoson highlighted the value of helping women “network and work with mentors to shape their professional image and personality” as a vital component of the pipeline development for women.

Al-Ghoson emphasized the importance of adopting a “meticulous and deliberate” approach, emphasizing the necessity for unwavering support from top leaders in the company. By doing so, companies can ensure the attention and endorsement of line organizations, ultimately building the required pipeline and “bench strength” for future female leaders. As presented by Al-Ghoson, this data-driven plan provides a solid foundation for organizations looking to promote and support women's leadership.

**4.3. Al-Ghoson believes Saudi Vision 2030 is effective for female leaders.** During the second interview, the researcher inquired about the status of women in relation to the Kingdom’s Vision 2030. Al-Ghoson provided a thoughtful reflection on Saudi Vision 2030, emphasizing the significance of women's empowerment and their integral role in society, while also

acknowledging the ongoing efforts to create more opportunities for women to contribute to the nation's development and progress (see Table 11).

**Table 11**

*Reflection on Saudi Vision 2030*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Al-Ghpson's reflection on Saudi Vision 2030	Al-Ghpson's statement	Sharing her insights on the recent transitions of the Kingdom and the potential opportunities presented for women.

*Al-Ghpson's statement.* In her statement reflecting on Saudi Vision 2030, Al-Ghpson highlighted the significance of inspiring and empowering all members of society, including women, to create a thriving modern nation. This emphasis on women's empowerment has led to several notable changes in the country, as she illustrated by various data points:

- **Participation in the labor market:** In 2018, Saudi women's participation in the workforce was only 20%. By embracing the Vision 2030 reforms, the country has seen this figure increase to approximately 36% today. Al-Ghpson proudly noted, “This growth is considered, by all measures, remarkable and impressive.”
- **Inclusion across sectors and organizational levels:** Women are now present in all sectors of the economy and at all organizational levels, even holding top leadership positions. Al-Ghpson highlighted this progress, stating, “Women's participation has extended to all sectors of the economy and at all organizational levels, including top leadership positions.”

- **Equal rights and opportunities:** The recent reforms have focused on leveling policies and programs, providing women with equal rights in terms of work, wages, benefits, and civil rights, and removing restrictions on their activities, movement, and education. Al-Ghpson emphasized, “Today, Saudi women can exercise their full rights for self-determination and play an active role in public policy as well as domestic and foreign affairs.”
- **Self-determination and involvement in policy-making:** Saudi women now have the right to self-determination and can play an active role in public policy, as well as domestic and international affairs. Al-Ghpson praised this progress, affirming, “Their achievements and contributions in raising Saudi Arabia's competitiveness are recognized regionally and globally.”

As Al-Ghpson discussed, the progress achieved in such a short period is impressive compared to other countries in the region that have been working toward similar goals for much longer. These data points demonstrate the significant strides that have been made in women's empowerment and inclusion in Saudi Arabia, reflecting the successful implementation of Vision 2030's objectives. Al-Ghpson concluded, “We are very proud that, considering our conservative and traditional culture, we were able to achieve these impressive results. I mean, that's amazing.” This progress has made Al-Ghpson incredibly proud and optimistic about the future of women in Saudi Arabia.

## Summary

This qualitative research study aimed to examine the perspectives of Huda Al-Ghpson on her leadership journey at Saudi Aramco. As a trailblazing Saudi woman who has risen to a high-ranking leadership position in a male-dominated field, Al-Ghpson has shattered stereotypes,

demonstrated exceptional resilience, and inspired countless women to pursue their own aspirations in traditionally male-dominated industries. The study endeavored to understand Al-Ghosen's perspective of her own leadership, the challenges she faced throughout her tenure, and the strategies and actions she effectively implemented to achieve her executive role at Saudi Aramco. This chapter presents the findings derived from an in-depth single-case study approach that explored Al-Ghosen's successful career trajectory, culminating in her appointment as an executive director at Saudi Aramco, a leading oil and gas corporation headquartered in Saudi Arabia. The data analysis revealed ten significant themes that provided insight into Al-Ghosen's successful journey toward attaining an executive role at Aramco.

Women in Saudi Arabia encounter numerous difficulties in attaining leadership positions, rooted in cultural, societal, and organizational constraints. Nevertheless, Saudi women are fully capable of surmounting these obstacles and carving out successful leadership paths by cultivating personal qualities, demonstrating competency, and implementing strategic approaches such as building a robust team and gaining a profound understanding of the corporate milieu. Furthermore, embracing a broad spectrum of leadership styles, particularly those emphasizing the recognition of employees' needs and fostering growth, can navigate a successful course in leadership roles, as exemplified by Al-Ghosen's achievements. Despite existing barriers, Saudi Arabian women are making significant strides, overcoming cultural and societal challenges, and paving the way for future generations of female leaders. The following chapter presents a comprehensive discussion of these findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions**

This chapter summarizes the study's key components, including background information on the issue, its purpose, and research questions. The theoretical framework informing the study is also revisited. Furthermore, the findings and conclusions are discussed by research questions supported by empirical research. Finally, the chapter concludes with implications and recommendations for future research.

### **Overview of the Study**

According to Andrews (2017), when women in the workplace are without guidance, they may face obstacles that lead to discouragement and a lack of ambition to achieve top leadership positions. The problem to be addressed by this study was the scarcity of available information on the impact that Saudi women in leadership positions are making within the Saudi Arabia workforce. The phenomenon being studied was the successful career of Huda Al-Ghpson, a Saudi woman who worked her way up to an executive role (Executive Director of Human Resources) at a male-dominated STEM corporation. Al-Ghpson served as the former executive director of human resources at Saudi Aramco, the world's largest oil and gas company with headquarters in Saudi Arabia. Al-Ghpson overcame embedded organizational and cultural obstacles brought on by gender discrimination over the years as she worked her way up the corporate ladder to top leadership positions.

The literature on women and leadership in Western and European contexts is abundant. However, the lack of available information on the impact that Saudi women in leadership positions are making within the male-dominated workforce supported the need for further research. The study's findings help provide critical insights into how one Saudi woman in a top leadership position affected positive changes in the structure of corporate businesses.



### ***Study Purpose and Research Questions***

This qualitative study used a single-case approach to examine the perspectives of a successful Saudi woman in a top leadership role and understand strategies and actions that have proven effective in acquiring positions of power in a male-dominated field. This single case study explored the successful career of Huda Al-Ghpson upon becoming an executive director at Aramco. The research questions that guided the study are as follows:

- **RQ1.** As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, how does Al-Ghpson perceive her ascension to leadership in a male-dominated corporation?
- **RQ2.** As a Saudi woman in a high-rank leadership role, what perceived challenges did Al-Ghpson encounter while climbing the leadership ladder in a male-dominated corporation?
- **RQ3.** How do Al-Ghpson and her former colleagues and co-workers perceive her leadership style?
- **RQ4.** As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, what strategies or actions does Al-Ghpson perceive as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business?

### ***Theoretical Framework***

A theoretical framework focused the research on leadership and gender-related theories. Selecting the appropriate theories as a foundation helped focus on Saudi women in leadership. Transformational leadership was used as one theoretical foundation for the study. Leaders can be influential by incorporating one or more of the transformational leadership 5 I's, including idealized influence (idealized behaviors and idealized attributes), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Full-range

leadership was another theoretical basis for the study. The full-range leadership model explains how various leadership styles are combined for effective leadership (Avolio & Bass, 2004). The integration of Bass's (1985) full-range leadership theory combined with gender-related theories can equip top leaders with valuable insights to facilitate the promotion of women to leadership roles within STEM corporations. The case study was also informed by gender-related theories, mainly by the works of Eagly and colleagues (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Miller, 2016; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Cultural factors, mainly male-dominated social practices, have significantly shaped women's advancement in the Saudi labor force (Metcalf & Mimouni, 2011). Using these theories (transformational leadership theory, full-range leadership theory, and gender-related theories) as a foundation for the study helped support a focus on understanding the challenges women face that prevent workplace equality and achievement (Criscione-Nayylor & Bokunewicz, 2018).

### ***Research Design***

As an accomplished female leader in the STEM industry, Al-Ghpson is a source of inspiration for women seeking to pursue leadership roles, particularly in Saudi Arabia's future of female leaders. Accordingly, this study sought to explore Al-Ghpson's leadership style and identify the factors and challenges that contributed to her attainment of a prominent leadership position. For this study, a qualitative method using a case study approach was selected. Because this research aimed to investigate the experience of a single successful Saudi female leader, a single case study was best suited to capture a meaningful perspective of Al-Ghpson's successful leadership journey.

The qualitative approach helped provide a deep understanding of Al-Ghpson's challenges in achieving an executive position. Findings also help provide strategies for Saudi women

aspiring to become leaders. The philosophical orientation of the research was centered on comprehending Al-Ghpson's journey to successful leadership. As a result, a constructivist paradigm was followed, which entailed building a knowledge basis using insights and data from the data collection process. The methodology used three sources of data: interviews with the participant, MLQ completed by the participant and her prior employees and co-workers, and publicly accessible information about the participant.

### ***Summary of Key Findings***

Ten key themes emerged from the data analysis. In Chapter 4, the themes were presented and enriched by pertinent codes. Additionally, relevant quotes from Al-Ghpson were provided as evidence to support the themes and findings. The themes and findings were organized and presented by research questions.

**Research Question One.** Three themes were identified as relevant to answering the first research question: As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, how does Al-Ghpson perceive her ascension to leadership in a male-dominated corporation? The three themes were

- **Theme 1.1** Al-Ghpson has her own definition of success.
- **Theme 1.2** Al-Ghpson's self-discovery journey of leadership unfolded by trial and error.
- **Theme 1.3** Al-Ghpson's late mother was her role model and mentor.

For Theme 1.1, Al-Ghpson's definition of success is creating positive impacts on multiple levels, from individual employees and teams to the overall organization, and contributing to the global market. Her definition of success encompasses both personal and organizational growth, as well as fostering a positive and motivated work environment. Additionally, Al-Ghpson emphasized the importance of continuous learning and adaptability in leadership and devised her own unique framework for successful leadership. She referred to her

framework as the five Cs: commitment, competence, collaboration, contribution, and character. This finding extends the research of Hendon (2020), who noted how female leaders navigated a path to successful senior-level leadership via leadership traits, perspective, and perceptiveness.

Theme 1.2 emerged as relevant to the ascension to leadership. This was Al-Ghpson's self-discovery journey. Al-Ghpson aligned her leadership style with her personality and nature. She also learned through trial and error rather than solely relying on academic training. Al-Ghpson initially emulated a masculine leadership style, which created turmoil within her and low morale among her colleagues, before adopting a servant leadership style that awakened her natural feminine qualities, enhancing her leadership style and leading to greater success, as supported by the ideologies of the full-range leadership theory (Avolio & Bass, 2004).

Theme 1.3 emerged as relevant to ascension to leadership was Al-Ghpson's mother as a role model and mentor. Al-Ghpson perceived her ascension to leadership in a male-dominated corporation as a challenging journey due to the lack of female mentors in the company. This finding reflects the research of Allan et al. (2007), who shared that many women face barriers to job advancement; as a result, mentorship is more important for women than it is for their male counterparts. Al-Ghpson recognized the importance of mentoring and drew inspiration from her strong and independent late mother, who served as her role model and mentor, and whose resilience and optimism fueled her determination to succeed despite the constraints posed by her cultural environment.

**Research Question Two.** Three themes were also identified as relevant to answering the second research question: As a Saudi woman in a high-rank leadership role, what perceived challenges did Al-Ghpson encounter while climbing the leadership ladder in a male-dominated corporation? The three themes were

- **Theme 2.1** Al-Ghpson's core challenge was gender discrimination which was deeply ingrained and pervasive within Saudi culture.
- **Theme 2.2** Al-Ghpson experienced unconscious bias and sexism in the workplace.
- **Theme 2.3** No organizational resources supported Al-Ghpson's career advancement.

Theme 2.1 of gender discrimination in Saudi culture helps answer the research questions concerning women's challenges in a male-dominated corporation. The findings highlight how Al-Ghpson perceived challenges in a male-dominated corporation through three significant codes: biased mindset, stigma against single women, and the fallacy of work-life balance. She described growing up in a culture that marginalized women and considered them weak with limited intellectual capacity, leading to discriminatory practices that impacted her career advancement. Additionally, she described societal perceptions of unmarried women as not conforming to traditional expectations, creating a stigma for working in male-dominated corporate environments. Finally, she explained how she challenged the conventional notion of work-life balance, stating that achieving a balance in life goes beyond juggling work and family responsibilities and is a persistent challenge, particularly for women in societies where traditional gender roles dictate that women bear most of the responsibility for home and family care. These findings reflect Powell's (2012) study that emphasized women's advancement to senior-level positions as hindered by organizational barriers influenced by gender bias.

Theme 2.2 of unconscious bias and sexism in the workplace also speaks to the challenges women face in a male-dominated corporation. In the findings, Al-Ghpson noted that sexism and unconscious bias are pervasive in male-dominated corporations, particularly in high-tech engineering companies. She shared that women are often marginalized, and their opportunities for growth and advancement are limited. For example, al-Ghpson faced resistance and

skepticism from her male colleagues and bosses when she became the first woman to assume an executive position in her company. She identified three prevalent misconceptions about women: they lack the capability to handle demanding tasks, intellectual capacity, and skills to lead men. These gender biases led to the absence of female leaders, career advancement disparity, chauvinism, glass walls, harassment, and gender inequality. These findings are an extension of the research by Kabir (2020) highlighting how women wanting to advance their careers in leadership may experience challenges and be viewed as secondary to their male counterparts.

Theme 2.3 of lacking resources also speaks to the challenges Saudi women face in a male-dominated corporation. Al-Ghpson perceived a lack of resources as a significant challenge in her male-dominated workplace, and she had to rely on self-development as her primary method for advancement. She created her development opportunities, valued solitude for mental clarity, and saw mistakes as valuable lessons. Al-Ghpson also faced challenges in networking due to the male-dominated nature of her work environment and struggled to find mentors. Still, she was fortunate to find a life coach who provided her with unwavering guidance and support. She also revealed that women were not receiving major company benefits and that developmental programs were mainly targeted at men, leaving women without growth opportunities. This reflects the ideas found in gender-related theories (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

**Research Question Three.** One theme emerged from the data analysis as relevant to answering research question three: How do Al-Ghpson and her former colleagues and co-workers perceive her leadership style? Theme 3.1 was Al-Ghpson is perceived as a transformational leader.

The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) report, based on Al-Ghpson's self-rating and her colleagues' ratings, revealed that Al-Ghpson's leadership style was predominantly

transformational, contributing to her accomplishments. This highly effective and optimal leadership style, as assessed by the MLQ, is characterized by a strong emphasis on transformational qualities and a significant focus on recognizing achievements. Her high scores in transformational leadership, derived from her own self-assessment and her colleagues' evaluations, imply that she stimulates and encourages her team, promotes innovation and creativity, and offers personalized support to her employees. These results are in harmony with the culture of Saudi Aramco Corporation, which prioritizes teamwork, employee growth, and innovation.

**Research Question Four.** Three themes emerged from the data analysis that helped answer the fourth research question: As a Saudi woman in a top leadership role, what strategies or actions does Al-Ghpson perceive as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business? These three themes were

- **Theme 4.1** Al-Ghpson advises female leaders to develop personal qualities and professional competencies.
- **Theme 4.2** Al-Ghpson recommends organizational support for female leaders.
- **Theme 4.3** Al-Ghpson' believes Saudi Vision 2030 is effective for female leaders.

For Theme 4.1, Al-Ghpson provided advice related to strategies or actions perceived as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business. Al-Ghpson perceived personal characteristics such as courage and self-confidence as essential qualities for women to embody in their leadership journey. She also stressed the importance of leading with authenticity to gain trust and be successful in leadership. In addition, Al-Ghpson advised women to establish credibility and trust early in their careers, maintain high ethical standards, and prioritize transparent and open communication to foster a positive work environment. All of these

suggestions are reflected in previous research, such as Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001), who noted the importance of establishing expectations for behavior and gaining employees' trust through modeling.

For Theme 4.2, Al-Ghpson's recommendations for organizational support for female leaders helped answer the research question concerning strategies or actions perceived as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business. In the findings, Al-Ghpson emphasized the need for a deliberate approach and top leadership support to develop the pipeline of female leaders in male-dominated companies. She also highlighted the benefits of diverse leadership in enhancing team capabilities and performance but acknowledged that challenges related to gender diversity and equal opportunities persist. Overall, Al-Ghpson suggested that implementing effective strategies at the organizational and personal level can help create a more inclusive workplace that values women leaders' unique perspectives and contributions.

The last theme of believing in Saudi Vision 2030 also supported answering the research question concerning strategies or actions perceived as effective in acquiring leadership positions in a male-dominated business. Abalkhail (2018) reported that Saudi Vision 2030 was created to promote job skills and make Saudi Arabia a globally competitive nation. This new vision for the Kingdom included a focus on the important contributions of women to the workforce and economy. The findings from Al-Ghpson support the importance of including women in the future of the Saudi workforce. In the interviews, Al-Ghpson recognized the importance of Saudi Vision 2030 in promoting women's empowerment and enabling their full participation in all aspects of the economy. She highlighted the impressive progress made in a short period, with women now represented in all levels of public and private sector organizations. Al-Ghpson



shared optimism about the future of women in Saudi Arabia, emphasizing the need to continue efforts to achieve greater gender diversity and inclusivity in the workplace.

### **Research Conclusions**

Upon examination of the themes, two conclusions can be made from the findings. The two conclusions are

1. There is evidence of cultural change happening.
2. The case study results highlight the recommendations for Saudi female leaders of organizations.

#### ***Conclusion 1: Evidence of Cultural Change***

In the findings, Al-Ghpson shared many examples of challenges and barriers experienced in her advancement to higher leadership positions over time. For this conclusion, evidence of change comes from reflecting on the past experiences of Al-Ghpson and the future vision of the Saudi workforce.

Concerning past experiences, Al-Ghpson grew up in a culture that marginalized women and discriminatory practices that impacted her career advancement. Additionally, Al-Ghpson shared how societal perceptions of unmarried women created a stigma for working in male-dominated corporate environments. The societal perceptions of unmarried women reflect the double bind theory, a gender-related theory that suggests that women are penalized for not conforming to societal norms and expectations of femininity and leadership (Ko et al., 2013). Finally, al-Ghpson provided examples of how she challenged the conventional notion of work-life balance, stating that achieving a balance in life goes beyond juggling work and family responsibilities and is a persistent challenge, particularly for women in societies where

traditional gender roles dictate that women bear most of the responsibility for home and family care.

Other past examples shared by Al-Ghpson included sexism and unconscious bias as pervasive in many male-dominated corporations, particularly in high-tech engineering companies. She identified several prevalent misconceptions about women, such as how women lack the capability to handle demanding tasks, intellectual capacity, and skills to lead men. In the past, these gender biases led to the absence of female leaders, career advancement disparity, chauvinism, glass walls, harassment, and gender inequality. The challenges that Al-Ghpson faced in a male-dominated corporation, such as gender bias, lack of resources, and unconscious bias, align with the social identity theory (Del Carpio & Guadalupe, 2019) and the glass ceiling theory (Kirk, 2019), which suggest that women are often blocked from leadership roles due to their gender.

Despite the challenges that Al-Ghpson shared, change is on the horizon. In contrast to the past stigmas that held women back, new efforts are being made to support Saudi women in the workforce. Saudi Vision 2030 is a revolutionary plan that seeks to diversify the Saudi economy and advance social reforms (Abalkhail, 2018). The Saudi government has pledged to increase the number of women in leadership positions and the workforce as part of this strategy. New opportunities for growth, development, and promotion for Saudi women will result from this, including easier access to training and educational options and more adaptable work schedules. In addition, a more inclusive workplace environment will be created by implementing policies and initiatives that support gender equity, eliminate unconscious prejudice, and dispel gender stereotypes, allowing Saudi women to realize their full leadership potential (Baker & Cangemi, 2016).

### ***Conclusion 2: Case Study Results Highlight the Recommendations for Saudi Female Leaders of Organizations***

Findings from the data analysis reflect many recommendations by Al-Ghpson directed toward Saudi women seeking advancement in organizational leadership. Al-Ghpson offered advice for women pursuing leadership, reflecting on her own experiences and the lessons she has learned. For example, Al-Ghpson suggested that leaders should be true to themselves and their values and not feel like they have to change themselves to fit into a particular mold or meet other people's expectations. She also emphasized the importance of trust in building relationships with colleagues and employees, suggesting that leaders be transparent and open and foster a work environment of trust and mutual respect. In addition, Al-Ghpson emphasized the importance of continuous learning and self-improvement, suggesting that leaders should be open to feedback and willing to seek out new experiences and knowledge. Ultimately, Al-Ghpson suggested that effective leadership requires a combination of personal qualities and characteristics, including authenticity, trust, resilience, and a commitment to ongoing learning and growth.

Emphasizing human capital and leadership development, Al-Ghpson's leadership style prioritizes human capital, where she views her employees as the organization's most valuable asset. Her emphasis on treating employees with respect and care reflects her commitment to leading authentically, tying in closely with the transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes leaders' roles in inspiring and motivating their followers to achieve their full potential (Bass & Avolio, 2000). By recognizing the value of human capital, Al-Ghpson's leadership style exemplifies the principles of transformational leadership, emphasizing the importance of inspiring and motivating employees to achieve their full potential. By prioritizing human capital and leadership development, Al-Ghpson exemplifies the principles of

transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Her leadership style emphasizes treating employees with respect and care and recognizing their value as the organization's most valuable asset. This approach creates a positive workplace culture that prioritizes employees' well-being, resulting in improved organizational outcomes.

In addition, findings showed how Al-Ghpson's experiences highlight the importance of targeted leadership development programs and support systems for women in male-dominated industries. Her struggles to find mentors and networking opportunities demonstrate a need for specific support structures tailored to women's unique challenges in such environments. As a result, these findings tie in with gender-bias theories, particularly the social role theory. For example, the social role theory posits that gender differences in personality traits and social behaviors arise from the roles men and women occupy (Scalambrino & Lowery, 2017). In the case of Al-Ghpson, she faced challenges in a male-dominated corporate environment, where societal norms and expectations dictate that women are less competent than men in handling demanding tasks and leading men, which initially limited her career advancement opportunities.

Al-Ghpson's experience of being the first female executive in a male-dominated corporation highlights the benefits that diversity can bring to a leadership team. By having leaders from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, organizations can make better decisions, as they have a more comprehensive understanding of the issues and opportunities. These findings reflect the ideas of the transformational leadership theory in that beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors through reflective experiences challenge assumptions and foster critical thinking (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Moreover, a diverse leadership team can also improve employee engagement and retention, as employees are more likely to feel valued and represented when there is diversity in

the leadership ranks (Saleem et al., 2017). Companies that prioritize diversity and inclusion are also more likely to attract and retain top talent from a range of backgrounds.

Al-Ghpson also recommended that organizations provide targeted leadership development programs that empower women, foster inclusive work environments, and support women's success in senior leadership roles. By empowering women, organizations can take steps to correct the past barriers women faced in seeking leadership roles. These ideas align with the feminist theory, which suggests that gender inequality results from power dynamics and patriarchy in society (Benstead, 2021). As recommended in the findings, to achieve these goals, organizations can provide women with access to leadership training programs and provide opportunities for mentoring and networking with senior-level executives. By following the recommendations offered by Al-Ghpson, organizations can attract and retain top talent, increase employee engagement and productivity, and ultimately improve their bottom line.

## **Implications Based on Findings**

### ***Implications for Scholarship***

The findings from the current study have several scholarship implications. The results also indicate the need for more research concerning advancing women to leadership positions by providing role models. Scholars could design educational tracts that support leadership via mentoring. National initiatives such as the Saudi Vision 2030 included goals to promote job skills so that Saudi Arabians are globally competitive (Abalkhail, 2018), which also supports the organizational inclusion of women. The Saudi Vision 2030, in addition to other global changes, supports a changing landscape in Saudi Arabia, providing new opportunities for scholars and researchers to study the changing nature of the role of Saudi women in leadership. Al-Ghpson was one of the first nationally recognized women leaders, and her achievements have helped

pave the path for many other Saudi women seeking senior leadership positions. These shifts in the workplace dynamics provide future scholars with many study opportunities to examine how changes have evolved in Saudi leadership and how the shift in workplace dynamics are perceived by employees at various levels of skill sets.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Implications for practice are also evident throughout the current findings. One implication is the value of diversifying at the leadership level. Another implication is developing more transformational leaders. The present study's findings may also support the organizational development of policies that support workplace diversity. This finding is beneficial to top leaders in organizations that support workforce equity. For example, Bass and Riggio (2006) postulated that transformational leaders could challenge and influence their employees by articulating a vision and recognizing individual talent. In addition, when leaders demonstrate positive qualities and characteristics, cohorts can identify with their leaders as role models. Finally, organizational leaders can also learn from the perspectives of Al-Ghpson, who emphasized that individuals would succeed in leadership if they embrace a wide range of leadership principles that emphasize identifying worker needs and fostering growth.

Promoting workplace diversity and actively supporting women's leadership development is crucial in today's globalized and dynamic business environment. Diverse leadership teams bring various perspectives and experiences to the table, enhancing decision-making processes and promoting innovation (Soklaridis et al., 2017). Companies with diverse leadership teams perform better financially and are more competitive in the market. Thus, organizations that prioritize gender equity in leadership positions can reap significant benefits in terms of talent retention, employee engagement, and business outcomes. In addition, women, traditionally

underrepresented in leadership positions, bring unique strengths, skills, and insights that can benefit organizations' growth and success.

The findings of this study may help organizations develop their talent pools. For example, the findings provide prospective Saudi female leaders with ideas and concepts on the importance of role modeling and analyzing the successful tactics and behaviors of other successful Saudi women who have attained a position of authority. The findings may help future researchers and academics develop educational tracks that support organizational growth through courses on management and leadership. Moreover, supporting women's leadership development is not just a matter of social justice but also an intelligent business strategy. The finding that transformational leadership is an effective style, especially among professional women, has important implications for practice. Leaders who adopt a transformational approach can inspire and motivate their employees by setting a compelling vision, providing support and feedback, and empowering them to take ownership of their work (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By fostering a culture of growth and development, leaders can attract and retain talented women who seek opportunities to learn and advance in their careers.

Finally, leaders can learn from Al-Ghpson's insights on the importance of identifying worker needs and fostering growth. By listening to their employees and providing opportunities for learning and development, leaders can create an inclusive and supportive workplace culture that values and rewards diverse perspectives and contributions. In sum, organizations prioritizing workplace diversity and supporting women's leadership development can build a stronger, more resilient, and more successful future for themselves and their employees.

### **Study Limitations**

Several limitations were identified for the current study. For example, the findings have limited generalizability. This limitation arises because the results of a single case study may not accurately represent the experiences of other female leaders in Saudi Arabia or other countries, as only one individual was examined. However, as suggested by Payne and Williams (2005), generalization in qualitative research is focused on generalizing a personal experience rather than generalizing to a larger population. Another limitation is the limited scope of data collection. For instance, it may not be feasible to adequately address the subject of women's leadership experiences in a male-dominated STEM profession with just two interviews. A further limitation relates to interpretation. While some of the data collected came from Al-Ghoson's publication, the majority of data came from personal interviews, which presents a possibility that the researcher's interpretation of the data collected could be subjective and lead to biased results. Creswell and Poth (2014) also highlight that the researcher's interpretation may pose potential limitations in qualitative research.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Through the findings of this study, there are many recommendations for future studies that could improve the overall understanding of Saudi Arabian women's experiences in top leadership roles in STEM industries. In addition, as the current study was a single-case study examining the perspectives of one top female leader, future researchers may consider conducting other case studies examining more women with leadership roles in the STEM field. More case studies would help researchers explore the common experiences that contribute to women's success in leadership positions and organizational challenges.



Apart from the challenges and supports found at the workplace, future researchers may also consider examining the impact of social and cultural factors on women in leadership positions in Saudi Arabia. Future studies on the Saudi Vision 2030 could examine the initiative's effectiveness in promoting gender diversity and increasing the representation of women in leadership positions across different industries, including STEM. Researchers could also investigate the impact of leadership development programs on women's career advancement and the organizational outcomes of having diverse leadership teams. By exploring the experiences and perspectives of multiple women leaders in various fields, researchers could gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to women's success in leadership positions and identify areas for improvement in supporting women's career development in Saudi Arabia. Understanding social and cultural factors, such as the role of family and social support networks, cultural norms and values, and religious beliefs in shaping women's career aspirations, could help organizations address needed support systems to help women succeed as top leaders in the workplace.

### **Final Thoughts**

This qualitative study has provided valuable insights into the challenges and gender discrimination faced by Saudi women in leadership roles within the male-dominated STEM field. The researcher's personal experience, as someone who comes from a technology background but was unable to pursue a career in STEM due to societal constraints, has fueled the desire to illuminate the complex context of Saudi Arabia's evolving landscape for women in these fields.

The groundbreaking leadership journey of Al-Ghpson at Saudi Aramco serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration for other female leaders aspiring to break the glass ceiling in

traditionally male-dominated fields. By highlighting the strategies, actions, recommendations, and implications drawn from Al-Ghpson's story, this dissertation aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on female leadership and empowerment in the workplace.

It is essential to recognize that Saudi Arabia is a country in transition, with significant strides being made toward gender equality and women's rights. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge the persistent barriers and biases that continue to hinder women's progress in STEM fields. This research serves as a call to action for policymakers, educators, organizations, and individuals to work together in creating a more equitable and inclusive environment for all.

The researcher hopes that this dissertation will not only shed light on the unique challenges faced by Saudi women in STEM leadership roles but also spark meaningful conversations and inspire further research into the strategies and best practices that can empower and support women in their pursuit of excellence in male-dominated fields. By doing so, we can collectively work towards a future where gender discrimination becomes a relic of the past, and women's voices and contributions in STEM are fully recognized and celebrated.

## **Summary**

The goal of this qualitative research study using a single case approach was to examine the perspectives of a successful Saudi woman, Huda Al-Ghpson, who held a top leadership role in a globally recognized organization, Saudi Aramco. The aim was to understand her identified strategies and actions that have proven effective in acquiring positions of power in a male-dominated field. This single case study explored the successful career of Al-Ghpson upon becoming an executive director at Aramco. In conclusion, this study sheds light on the leadership journey of Al-Ghpson's experiences showing that women in leadership positions in Saudi Arabia have faced gender bias and still experience a lack of resources and unconscious bias. However,

the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative aims to increase the number of women in leadership positions and the workforce and create a more inclusive workplace environment by implementing policies and initiatives that support gender equity and eliminate unconscious prejudice. In addition, another conclusion from the study includes Al-Ghpson's recommendations for Saudi Women and leaders of organizations. Al-Ghpson stressed that effective leadership requires a combination of personal qualities and characteristics, including authenticity, trust, resilience, and a commitment to ongoing learning and growth. The study also suggested the need for targeted leadership development programs and support systems for women in male-dominated industries tailored to their unique challenges in such environments. Further research on this topic could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of successful women leaders in Saudi Arabia and inform organizational managers on implementing strategies to promote and support women as senior leaders in the workforce. With the proper support and opportunities and the continued introduction of initiatives that support workplace diversity, Saudi women have the potential to become leaders and agents of change.

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## APPENDIX A

## Huda Al-Ghosen's Biography

**HUDA M. AL-GHOSON**  
**Bio Summary**

Ms. Huda Al-Ghosen was the Executive Director of Human Resources at Saudi Aramco. She is the first woman to be named a permanent executive director in the company's history. As the head of Human Resources she was responsible for all Human Resources management and development programs in the company including workforce planning, staffing, leadership and professional development, compensation and benefits, organization consulting, performance management, retirees' services, and labor relations to more than 66,000 employees from 80 different nationalities.

Al-Ghosen joined Saudi Aramco in 1981; and she worked in financial planning and policy design functions in various organizations including Medical Services, Industrial Relations, Finance, Community Services, Facilities Planning and Human Resources. In 2006 she was appointed the director position of Human Resources Policy and Planning department, and in 2009 she was promoted to the general manager position of Training and Development. In 2012 she became the executive head of Human Resources and remained in the position until her retirement in December 2017.

**Education and Training**

Huda holds an MBA from the American University of Washington, D.C., USA and a BA in English Literature from King Saud University in Riyadh. She attended advanced management programs and received executive training at Cornell University (1988), Oxford University Saïd Business School (2007), The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London (2008), and the University of Michigan Ross Business School (2011).



### **Board Memberships - Current**

- Saudi National Bank – Board Member
- BUPA Arabia – Board Member and Chair of the Nomination & Remuneration Committee
- Saudi Telecom Company - Member of the Nomination & Remuneration Committee
- The Chopra Foundation (not for profit), New York – Board Member
- The Hevolution Foundation (not for profit) - Member of the Nomination & Remuneration Committee

### **Other Positions - Past**

Member of the Board - Vela International Marine Limited

Member of the Board - Yanbu Aramco Sinopec Refinery Company (YASREF)

Member of the Board - Johns Hopkins Aramco Health care Company (JAHA)

Member of the Board - Saudi Aramco Asia Company (SAAC)

Member of the Board - Saudi Aramco Development Company (SADCO)

Member of the Board - Saudi Aramco Investment Management Company (SAIMCO)

Member of the Board - General Organization of Social Insurance (GOSI)

Member of the Board - Credit Suisse bank Saudi Arabia

Member of the Board, NRC and Executive committees - Institute of Public Administration (IPA)

Member of the Women Advisory Board - TATA Consultancy Services Company

Member of the Leadership Advisor Board of Saudi Electricity Company

Chair of the Board of Trustees- Arabian Society of Human Resources Management

### **Recognitions and awards**

Al-Ghpson was ranked by Forbes magazine fourth in its list of most powerful Arab women in the field of executive management. She also received the 2014 Arab Woman Award from the Arabian Business magazine naming her one of the most influential figures in the energy domain. Moreover, she was selected the Business Woman of the Year at the Arabian Business 2015 Achievement Awards, and honored with the Women in Leadership Award from the Bilateral US-Arab Chamber of Commerce in 2016. In 2017, she received the 17th Middle East Women Leaders Excellence Award, and the 2017 Gold Award for Excellence from the Arab's Women Council for Social Responsibility.

She also received recognition and achievement awards for her educational outreach efforts and women development programs from numerous bodies, including:

Saiid Business School Leadership Program Outstanding Alumna, Oxford University, 2017

Middle East Excellence Awards Institute, 2016

Dar Al-Hekma University, 2016

Saudi Arabia General Investment Authority (SAGIA) 2014

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2011

The Ministry of Education, Total Quality Management Administration, 2011

**Book Publication** – Al-Ghpson published her memoir “Unbounded” in 2022 in both English and Arabic. The book is distributed throughout the Middle East, Europe and the US

## APPENDIX B

## IRB Approval

Pepperdine University  
24255 Pacific Coast Highway  
Malibu, CA 90263  
TEL: 310-506-4000

**NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH**

Date: November 16, 2022

Protocol Investigator Name: Maha Alotaibi

Protocol #: 22-08-1899

Project Title: Against All Odds: A Qualitative Exploratory Case Study of the Successful Executive Leadership of Huda Al-Ghosen

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Alotaibi:

Thank you for submitting your amended exempt application to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at [community.pepperdine.edu/irb](http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, IRB Chairperson

cc: Dr. Lee Kats, Vice Provost for Research and Strategic Initiatives

Mr. Brett Leach, Regulatory Affairs Specialist

APPENDIX C

CITI Certificate



Completion Date 15-Sep-2021  
Expiration Date N/A  
Record ID 43538874

This is to certify that:

**Maha Aldaajani**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

**COVID-19: Public Training Series**  
(Curriculum Group)  
**COVID-19: Back to Campus (Fall 2020)**  
(Course Learner Group)  
**1 - Basic**  
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**Pepperdine University**

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.



Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at [www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w66082769-11a8-4dff-934d-da81dff491d0-43538874](http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w66082769-11a8-4dff-934d-da81dff491d0-43538874)

## APPENDIX D

## Informed Consent Form



## Graduate School of Education and Psychology

## INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

**IRB #: 22-08-1899**

**Formal Study Title:** Against All Odds: A Qualitative Exploratory Case Study of the Successful Executive Leadership of Huda Al-Ghosen

**Authorized Study Personnel**

**Principal Investigator:** Maha Aldaajani, MA

Mobile: 1 (####) ####-####

**Invitation:**

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

**Why are you being asked to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a Saudi female leader who attained leadership roles in the STEM corporation of Saudi Aramco.

You must be 19 years of age or older to participate.

**What is the reason for doing this research study?**

Over the past few decades, Saudi women have struggled to obtain leadership roles—especially in STEM fields. Facing cultural and conventional gender bias was a significant barrier to Saudi women’s representation in leadership roles. The purpose of this study is to explore your successful career journey in obtaining positions of power in a male-dominated industry and the challenges you faced along the way. Furthermore, the study aims to determine strategies proven

successful to your career advancement and attaining leadership roles. Most importantly, Saudi women aspiring to be leaders will learn from your leadership experience as you will be a role model to follow.

**What will be done during this research study?**

You will be asked to complete 2 rounds of semi-structured virtual interviews. Each interview will last 2 hours and may extend to 3 hours if needed. The researcher will ask you a series of questions aimed at exploring your leadership style, strategies you practiced ascending to positions of power, and challenges you faced throughout your career obtaining a high-rank leadership role as Executive Director of Human Resources at Aramco. By signing this form, you consent to be video recorded (the interviews will be conducted via Zoom).

You will also complete an online-based survey called the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). You will respond to statements and rate yourself as a leader according to the scale. The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

**How will my data be used?**

Your interview responses will be transcribed, analyzed, and aggregated in order to determine the findings to the established research questions.

The data collected from the interviews will be transcribed and coded for validity and reliability purposes. Upon an initial coding taking place, the data will then be shared with a carefully selected doctoral peer reviewer with an earned degree from the same program as part of the peer-debriefing technique. In peer-debriefing, the reviewer's coding will be used as comparison to the researcher's coding to mitigate any bias and ensure the accuracy of what is interpreted from your provided commentary. Through member-checking, you will then be provided a copy of the transcribed coding to verify the information determined from the recordings. Upon your approval this information will be used all or in part of the findings section of the dissertation.

**What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

This research study presents minimal risk of emotional and/or psychological distress because the interviews involve questions about your leadership practice. You may also experience fatigue from long interviews and/or boredom as a result.

**What are the possible benefits to you?**

You are not expected to get any benefit from being in this study.

**What are the possible benefits for other people?**

Your responses will be used as data for a doctoral dissertation focusing on leadership development for Saudi women aspiring to become leaders in unconventional industries. While there are no direct benefits to you, the information produced in this study will benefit the scientific society by adding up to the base knowledge in the literature. Additionally, findings from this study will help in educating emerging Saudi female leaders in successfully advancing to leadership positions in STEM corporation.

**What are the alternatives to being in this research study?**

The alternatives to participating in this study is nonparticipation, participation is voluntary.

*However, if you decide to not participate or stop participating before, during or after the research begins, this dissertation research study will terminate.*

**What will being in this research study cost you?**

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

**Will you be compensated for being in this research study?**

There is no compensation, financial or otherwise, for your participation in this research.

**What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?**

Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

**How will information about you be protected?**

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect privacy and confidentiality of your study data. The data (including interview recordings) will be stored electronically and secured on the researcher's password-protected computer. No one has access to these interview recordings but the researcher. If you approve, the interview video recordings will be retained indefinitely for future

research and presentations. If you reject, the recordings will be deleted upon publication of study results.

**Please, mark your choice below:**

Interview video recordings will be...

Retained indefinitely for future research and presentations.

Deleted upon publication of study results.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

**What are your rights as a research subject?**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

*For study related questions, please contact the investigator listed at the beginning of this form.*

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

Phone: 1(310) ###-####

Email: [gpsirb@pepperdine.edu](mailto:gpsirb@pepperdine.edu)

**What happens if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?**

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (“withdraw”) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

**Documentation of informed consent**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Participant Name:**

---

*(Name of Participant: Please print)*

**Participant Signature:**

---

*Signature of Research Participant*

---

*Date*



## APPENDIX E

## Interview Protocol

**Protocol #:** 22-08-1899

**Project Title:** Against All Odds: A Qualitative Exploratory Case Study of the Successful Executive Leadership of Huda Al-Ghoson

**Interviewer:** Maha Aldaajani

**Date:** 12/15/2022

**Interviewee:** Huda Al-Ghoson

**Time:** 8:30pm PT

*Script:*

*I'd like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in the interview aspect of my study. As I mentioned, my study seeks to explore your leadership at Saudi Aramco. The aim of this study is to examine the perspectives of your ascension to an executive role in a male-dominated field, the challenges you faced along the way, and to document the best strategies of leadership.*

[Recording 1 Begins]

*You completed a consent form that was sent to you via email prior to the interview. The consent indicates that I have your permission to video record our conversation. Are you still ok with me recording (or not) our conversation today?*

[Ask if the participant has any questions about the consent form]

*Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recording or keep something you said off the record.*

*Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? [Discuss questions]*

*If any questions arise at any point in this interview, please feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.*

--Table of interview protocol --

### Interview Protocol

[Note: the researcher will use phrases such as “Tell me more”, “Could you give me an example?”, “Could you explain that?” as prompts to solicit more detailed information when needed.]

Topic	Interview Question	Follow-up question
<b>Grand Tour</b>	<b>Q0:</b> To begin the interview, tell me about how you became a senior leader at Saudi Aramco.	How did you lead?
<b>1) Measurement of Success</b>	<b>Q1:</b> How do you define your success as a female leader at Aramco?	What qualities or characteristics do you have that make you a successful leader?
	In your book, you mentioned “ <i>What characterized the handful of advanced-echelon women at Saudi Aramco was that we were all talented, successful, strong, and knowledgeable, although I was the only one among us who would make it to executive rank. I am not aware of what factors hindered their paths, some of which could have been personal.</i> ”  <b>Q2:</b> Can you share why you think these women, including yourself, were advanced and labeled as successful?	Can you provide details or examples of characteristics among the women that may have been recognized by leaders?
	<b>Q3:</b> What do you believe are the top factors that contributed most to your career success in a male-dominated profession?	

Topic	Interview Question	Follow-up question
	<p><b>Q4:</b> In your memoir, you mentioned that the “<i>Key to the learning experience was mentoring by other accomplished women in the company.</i>”</p> <p>Describe how education, mentoring, or role models helped you on your journey to attain senior leadership roles.</p>	
<b>2) Challenges</b>	<p><b>Q6:</b> What made it challenging for you to obtain your position?</p> <p>Describe how you perceive the idea of a glass ceiling concerning women and advancement opportunities to senior leadership</p>	<p>Do you experience resistance when you are leading men? If yes, explain.</p> <p>Have the opportunities or challenges for women changed over time?</p>
	<p><b>Q7:</b> Describe situations where you may have experienced prejudice based on your gender?</p>	<p>How often did this happen to you?</p>
	<p><b>Q8:</b> Describe any workplace environmental attitudes or stereotypes that you found discouraging while seeking senior leadership.</p> <p>Have you witnessed or experienced a double dilemma (or no-win situation) when working on proving yourself as a leader?</p> <p>Can you provide an example?</p>	<p>Double-bind dilemma</p> <p>Being a woman, you’re rejected as a leader. Being masculine, you were also rejected as a leader.</p> <p><b>How did you figure out this dilemma?</b></p>
	<p><b>Q9:</b> As a female leader in a male-dominant profession, what resources were available to you that helped you advance in your career?</p>	<p>Describe the challenges/benefits of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Networking</li> <li>- Mentorship</li> </ul>

Topic	Interview Question	Follow-up question
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developmental programs</li> </ul> As it relates to management & senior leadership?
	<p>After you were promoted to GM, you shared, <i>“Because my duties were spread over many locations, I often traveled by car or company plane to acquaint myself with the staff at the training centers, where, to date, no woman had ever been granted access. In the beginning, my visits to all-male centers were a culture shock and a blow to the belief system of many of the men who worked or studied at these centers the majority of whom were very traditional.”</i></p> <p><b>Q10:</b> Can you provide some examples of challenges you faced during this time?</p>	Can you share how you addressed some of the challenges you faced when you started traveling to male-dominated centers?
<b>3) Leadership Effective Strategies and Practices</b>	<p><b>Q11:</b> Describe the strategies and practices that you deem effective in obtaining positions of power and leadership.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Describe examples/situations where your leadership worked/failed and why?</li> <li>- How did you handle conflict?</li> </ul>	Follow-up: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trust</li> <li>- Strong Morals</li> <li>- Motivation</li> <li>- Innovation</li> <li>- Coaching</li> <li>- Rewarding</li> <li>- Monitoring mistakes</li> <li>- Passive (acts upon mistakes/not involving)</li> </ul>

Topic	Interview Question	Follow-up question
	<p><b>Q12:</b> In your book, you emphasize that <i>“For women to succeed in our male-dominated business environment, they needed guidance, and a lot of it, to develop and cultivate their minds to their fullest potential and to liberate themselves from prejudice, intolerance and old doctrines about their capabilities and potential.”</i></p> <p>Can you share some examples of successful strategies that have helped other women get promoted and recognized as leaders?</p>	
	<p><b>Q13:</b> How has the workforce changed in the past decade to support and encourage a more diverse senior level of leadership, including women?</p>	<p>How can companies ensure a consistent pipeline of women leaders?</p>
	<p><b>Q14:</b> What incentives are new or upcoming that empower women to seek senior leadership positions?</p>	<p>Are schools, universities, or organizations sponsoring programs to encourage women internships that will promote leadership success?</p>
	<p><b>Q15:</b> What is some of the advice you would share with young women entering a male-dominated profession?</p>	

Topic	Interview Question	Follow-up question
	<p><b>Q16:</b> Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience that you think would be relevant to this study?</p>	

**End of Part #1 of the Interview:**

*-Mark the question last asked-*

*I believe we reached the time limit of our first interview. Before we end this part of the interview, do you have anything to say that you believe is important and that we didn't cover in this part of the interview?*

*If yes, [interviewee continues to speak]. If not, "Thank you Huda Al-Ghoson for your time."*

[Recording 1 Ends]

**Resuming the Interview, Part #2**

[Recording 2 Ends]

*-Resume the interview, pick up from the last question asked-*

**Concluding the Interview:**

*Before we conclude this interview, is there something about your leadership experience that you think is important that we have not yet had a chance to discuss?*

*If yes, [interviewee continues to speak]. If not, "Thank you Huda Al-Ghoson for your time sharing your story."*

[Recording 2 Ends]

## APPENDIX F

## Peer Debriefing Form

Dear Peer Debriefing,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. The table on the next page is designed to ensure that my research questions for the study are properly addressed with corresponding interview questions. You will see the research question on the left-hand column, and the interview questions related to the research questions on the right-hand column.

Please look at the table on the next page so that you may review each research question and the corresponding interview questions. For each interview question, consider how well the interview question addresses the research question and mark the options (a, b, or c) accordingly.

If the interview question is:

- a. Directly relevant to the research question, please mark “**Keep as stated.**”
- b. Irrelevant to the research question, please mark “**Delete it.**”

Finally, if the question:

- c. Can be modified to best fit with the research question, **please suggest your modifications in the space provided.**

You may also recommend additional interview questions you deem necessary.

Once you have completed your analysis, please return the completed form to me via email at [maha.alotaibi@pepperdine.edu](mailto:maha.alotaibi@pepperdine.edu). Thank you again for your participation.

Sincerely,  
Maha Aldaajani

### Research Questions and Corresponding Interview Questions

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions	Keep, Delete, or Modify		
<p><b>RQ1.</b> As a Saudi woman in top leadership roles, how does Al-Ghpson perceive her ascension to leadership in a male-dominated corporation?</p>	<p><b>IQ1.</b> How do you define your success as a top-management leader at Aramco?</p> <p>Follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tell me about your career journey and how you became a senior leader.</li> <li>- How do you identify yourself as a leader in the engineering field?</li> </ul>	a. Keep	b. Delete	c. Modify
	<p><b>IQ2.</b> How did you become a senior leader?</p> <p>Follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When you began your career many years ago, did you ever imagine that you would have a leadership role in this corporation?</li> </ul>	a. Keep	b. Delete	c. Modify
	<p><b>IQ3.</b> What qualities do you have that make you a successful leader?</p> <p>Follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Describe your management and leadership style that led you to an executive position and success.</li> <li>- Explain how an effective leadership style is significant to gaining an executive position.</li> </ul>	a. Keep	b. Delete	c. Modify
	<p><b>IQ4.</b> What do you believe are the top factors that contributed most to your career success in a male-dominated profession?</p> <p>Follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Describe any success strategy that moved you beyond a corporate barrier and the motivation to lead in that particular position.</li> </ul>	a. Keep	b. Delete	c. Modify
<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>				
<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>				
<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>				
<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>				



Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions	Keep, Delete, or Modify		
		a. Keep	b. Delete	c. Modify
	<p><b>IQ5.</b> Describe how education, mentoring, or role model helped you on your journey to attain senior leadership roles.</p> <p>Follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who inspired you to become a leader and why?</li> <li>- Are there female or male mentors who supported you as you developed? (Yes?) Explain how mentorship contributed to your advancement to an executive position.</li> </ul>			<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>
<p><b>RQ2.</b> As a Saudi woman in top leadership roles, what perceived challenges did Al-Ghpson encounter while climbing the leadership ladder in a male-dominated corporation?</p>	<p><b>IQ6.</b> What made it challenging for you to obtain your position?</p> <p>Follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What has been the most significant barrier in your career?</li> <li>- Tell me more please.</li> <li>- Have you struggled with structural factor, such as networking and social events, to gain your executive role? (Yes?) Tell me more, please.</li> </ul>			<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>
	<p><b>IQ7.</b> Describe situations where you may have experienced prejudice based on your gender?</p> <p>Follow-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Highlight ways in which being female particularly posed obstacles in your career advancement.</li> <li>- Would you say external factors, such as Saudi cultural mindset, impeded your career advancement. (Yes?) Please, tell me more.</li> </ul>			<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions	Keep, Delete, or Modify		
	<p><b>IQ8.</b> Describe any workplace barriers or stereotypes that you found discouraging while seeking senior leadership.</p> <p>Probes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Glass ceiling!</li> </ul>	<b>a. Keep</b>	<b>b. Delete</b>	<b>c. Modify</b>
	<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>			
	<p><b>IQ9.</b> Do you experience resistance when you are leading men?</p> <p>Probes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Why?</li> <li>- Tell me more!</li> </ul>	<b>a. Keep</b>	<b>b. Delete</b>	<b>c. Modify</b>
<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>				
	<p><b>IQ10.</b> How did you overcome these challenges?</p> <p>Probes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motivators?</li> <li>- Experiences?</li> </ul>	<b>a. Keep</b>	<b>b. Delete</b>	<b>c. Modify</b>
	<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>			
	<p><b>RQ4.</b> As a Saudi woman in top leadership roles, what strategies or actions are does Al-Ghosoan perceive as effective in acquiring leadership positions in male-dominated professions?</p>	<p><b>IQ11.</b> How can companies ensure a consistent pipeline of female leaders?</p>	<b>a. Keep</b>	<b>b. Delete</b>
<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>				
	<p><b>IQ12.</b> Describe the changes you would like to see in Saudi corporations that will allow more women influx to senior management and leadership positions?</p>	<b>a. Keep</b>	<b>b. Delete</b>	<b>c. Modify</b>
	<p>Suggested modification:</p> <p>I recommend adding the following interview questions:</p>			
	<p><b>IQ13.</b> What programs are schools, universities, or organizations sponsoring to encourage women internships that will promote leadership success?</p>	<b>a. Keep</b>	<b>b. Delete</b>	<b>c. Modify</b>
<p>Suggested modification:</p>				

Research Questions	Corresponding Interview Questions	Keep, Delete, or Modify		
		I recommend adding the following interview questions:		
	<p><b>IQ14.</b> What strategies and actions do you recommend other women to use to help them acquire leadership positions in male-dominated professions?</p>	<p><b>a. Keep</b></p>	<p><b>b. Delete</b></p>	<p><b>c. Modify</b></p>
		Suggested modification:		
		I recommend adding the following interview questions:		
	<p><b>IQ14.</b> What is some of the advice you share with young women entering a male-dominated profession?</p>	<p><b>a. Keep</b></p>	<p><b>b. Delete</b></p>	<p><b>c. Modify</b></p>
		Suggested modification:		
		I recommend adding the following interview questions:		
	<p><b>IQ15.</b> Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience that you think would be relevant to this study?</p>	<p><b>a. Keep</b></p>	<p><b>b. Delete</b></p>	<p><b>c. Modify</b></p>
		Suggested modification:		
		I recommend adding the following interview questions:		

## APPENDIX G

## MLQ Leader's Invitation/Informed Consent

**INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH SURVEY**

IRB #: 22-08-1899

**Study Title:**

Against All Odds: A Qualitative Exploratory Case Study of the Successful Executive Leadership of Huda Al-Ghoson

**Invitation:**

Dear Huda Al-Ghoson,

My name is Maha Aldaajani. I am conducting a study on your leadership journey at Saudi Aramco. In order to participate, you must be 19 years of age or older.

**What is the reason for doing this research study?**

This research project focuses on your career rising to a high-rank leadership role as Executive Director of Human Resources at Saudi Aramco. This study aims to explore your leadership style, your strategies for career advancement, and the challenges you faced along the way. In order to participate, you must be 19 years of age or older.

**What will be done during this research study?**

Participation in this study will require approximately 15 minutes. You will be asked to complete an online-based survey called the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). You will respond to statements to rate your leadership. Participation will take place online.

**What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

This research study presents no more than minimal risk. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

**What are the possible benefits to you?**

While there are no direct benefits to you, the information produced in this study will benefit the scientific society by adding up to the base knowledge in the literature. Additionally, this study's findings will help educate emerging Saudi female leaders in successfully advancing to leadership positions in STEM fields.

**How will information about you be protected?**

Your survey answers will be stored initially with MindGarden.com (the survey website) in a password-protected electronic format. Data will later be downloaded and stored in the

researcher's password-protected personal computer. The researcher will delete your data from the survey website once the study is complete.

What are your rights as a research subject?

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator:

Maha Aldaajani

Email: Maha.Alotaibi@Pepperdine.edu

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

Phone: 1(310) ###-####

Email: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

What happens if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw") at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with Pepperdine University.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Documentation of informed consent

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By completing and submitting your survey responses, you have given your consent to participate in this research. You should print a copy of this page for your records.

## APPENDIX H

## MLQ Rater's Invitation/Informed Consent

**INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH SURVEY**

IRB #: 22-08-1899

**Study Title:**

Against All Odds: A Qualitative Exploratory Case Study of the Successful Executive Leadership of Huda Al-Ghpson

**Invitation:**

Dear Rater,

My name is Maha Aldaajani. I am conducting a study on Huda Al-Ghpson's leadership journey at Saudi Aramco. If you are 19 years of age or older and have worked previously with Huda Al-Ghpson, you may participate in this survey.

**What is the reason for doing this research study?**

This is a research project that focuses on Huda Al-Ghpson's career rising to a high-rank leadership role as Executive Director of Human Resources at Saudi Aramco. The aim of this study is to explore Al-Ghpson's leadership style, her strategies for career advancement, and the challenges she faced along the way.

In order to participate, you must be 19 years of age or older and have worked previously with Al-Ghpson at Saudi Aramco.

**What will be done during this research study?**

Participation in this study will require approximately 15 minutes. You will be asked to complete an online-based survey called the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). You will respond to statements to rate Huda Al-Ghpson's leadership. Participation will take place online.

**What are the possible benefits to you?**

While there are no direct benefits to you, the information produced in this study will benefit the scientific society by adding up to the base knowledge in the literature. Additionally, this study's findings will help educate emerging Saudi female leaders in successfully advancing to leadership positions in STEM fields.

**What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

This research study presents no more than minimal risk. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this survey. However, a potential risk of breach of confidentiality always exists, and the researcher has taken the steps to minimize this risk as detailed in the next question below.

How will information about you be protected?

Your survey answers will be stored initially with MindGarden.com (the survey website) in a password-protected electronic format. Data will later be downloaded and stored in the researcher's password-protected personal computer. Your data (name and email address) is stored in safe and secured locations: The researcher's personal computer and MindGarden.com website. Only the researcher can access these locations with encrypted login credentials. Your name and email address will not be shared or distributed. More importantly, your name and email address will not be linked with your survey responses. Your responses are anonymous. The researcher will delete your data from the survey website and from her personal computer once the study is complete.

What are your rights as a research subject?

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator:

Maha Aldajani

Email: Maha.Alotaibi@Pepperdine.edu

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

Phone: 1(310) ###-####

Email: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

What happens if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study ("withdraw") at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the researcher, Huda Al-Ghosen, or with Pepperdine University.

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Documentation of informed consent

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By completing and submitting your survey responses, you have given your consent to participate in this research. You should print a copy of this page for your records.

## APPENDIX I

## Excluded Artifacts

Artifact	Citation	Reason for Exclusion
Aramco Web Article Speech Highlights by Al-Ghpson	Aramco. (2017, January 4). <i>Sharing experience at forum highlighting women's role in oil industry.</i> <a href="https://www.aramco.com/en/news-media/news/2017/highlighting-womens-role-in-oil-industry">https://www.aramco.com/en/news-media/news/2017/highlighting-womens-role-in-oil-industry</a>	Information is not significantly different from interviews and not relevant to answering research questions
Aramco Web Article Speech Highlights by Al-Ghpson	Aramco. (2017, September 27). <i>Workforce well-being investment highlighted.</i> <a href="https://www.aramco.com/en/news-media/news/2017/workforce-well-being-investment-highlighted">https://www.aramco.com/en/news-media/news/2017/workforce-well-being-investment-highlighted</a>	Information is not significantly different from interviews and not relevant to answering research questions
YouTube Q&A video with focus on conference Highlighted Al-Ghpson	YouTube. (2017, April 10). <i>Q&amp;A with Huda Al Ghpson, executive director HR at Saudi Aramco at ASHRM 2017.</i> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pa2En79eM9Y">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pa2En79eM9Y</a>	Focus of video does not help answer research questions
YouTube Video from HR Conference with introduction to the meeting by Al-Ghpson	YouTube. (2016, September 27). <i>ASHRM 2016: Huda Al Ghpson.</i> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9920wWW050">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9920wWW050</a>	Focus of video does not help answer research questions
YouTube video of conference interview with Al-Ghpson	YouTube. (2016, April 4). <i>Huda Al Ghpson, chair of ASHRM, interviewed at ASHRM 2016.</i> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NP08pFeI2U">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NP08pFeI2U</a>	Focus of video does not help answer research questions
YouTube 15 second video introduction to Al-Ghpson	YouTube. (2016, February 29). <i>Introduction to Huda Al Ghpson, Chair, ASHRM.</i> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4k0JBcfKz0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4k0JBcfKz0</a>	Focus of video does not help answer research questions



Artifact	Citation	Reason for Exclusion
YouTube Video with highlights from Al-Ghpson's book <i>Unbounded</i>	YouTube. (2022, March 21). <i>Unbounded</i> . <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ci-NI1JDaLs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ci-NI1JDaLs</a>	Focus of video offers information on her achievements and highlights from her book. Focus does not add new information or help answer research questions.
YouTube video of Al-Ghpson presenting at an HR conference	YouTube. (2017, January 4). <i>Tackling the barriers to develop and retain skilled talent – A Saudi Aramco perspective</i> . <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_b486GWsawY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_b486GWsawY</a>	Focus of video does not help answer research questions
YouTube video highlights Al-Ghpson's early life	YouTube. (2020, May 26). ملخص قصة حياة #هدى الغصن. <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1KKTPNwors">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1KKTPNwors</a>	Focus of video more on personal life. Significant information on challenges and leadership style not included.
HR Organization Interview with Al-Ghpson	ChangeBoard. (2017, January 18). <i>Engineering local careers: Interview with Huda Al Ghoson of Saudi Aramco, part one</i> . Changeboard. <a href="https://www.changeboard.com/article-details/14568/engineering-local-careers-interview-with-huda-al-ghoson-of-saudi-aramco-part-one/">https://www.changeboard.com/article-details/14568/engineering-local-careers-interview-with-huda-al-ghoson-of-saudi-aramco-part-one/</a>	Information is not significantly different from interviews and not relevant to answering research questions
HR Organization-Part II of Interview with Al-Ghpson	Appleton, M. (2015, July 5). <i>Engineering local careers: Interview with Huda Al Ghoson of Saudi Aramco, part two</i> . Changeboard. <a href="https://www.changeboard.com/article-details/16009/engineering-local-careers-interview-with-huda-al-ghoson-of-saudi-aramco-part-two/">https://www.changeboard.com/article-details/16009/engineering-local-careers-interview-with-huda-al-ghoson-of-saudi-aramco-part-two/</a>	Information is not significantly different from interviews and not relevant to answering research questions
Press Release about Al-Ghpson's promotion	Saudi Press Agency. (2009). <i>Al-Ghpson Named GM for Saudi Aramco's Training Program</i> The official Saudi Press Agency.	Information does not add significant data to answering research questions

Artifact	Citation	Reason for Exclusion
	<a href="https://www.spa.gov.sa/685333?lang=en&amp;newsid=685333">https://www.spa.gov.sa/685333?lang=en&amp;newsid=685333</a>	
Web Article highlighting HR tips from Al-Ghpson	Saudi Aramco News. (2017, September 27). <i>Workforce Well-being Investment Highlighted</i> . Workforce Well-being Investment Highlighted. <a href="https://www.aramcoexpats.com/articles/workforce-well-being-investment-highlighted/">https://www.aramcoexpats.com/articles/workforce-well-being-investment-highlighted/</a>	Information is not significantly different from interviews and not relevant to answering research questions
Report on HR practices written by Al-Ghpson	Al-Ghpson, H. (2015). <i>Women leaders in the Gulf: The view from Saudi Aramco</i> . McKinsey Quarterly.	Information is not significantly different from interviews and not relevant to answering research questions
Foundation Website information that include bio on Al-Ghpson	The Chopra Foundation. (2011, November 10). <i>Board of Directors - The Chopra Foundation</i> . The Chopra Foundation - Committed to Creating a Peaceful, Just, Sustainable, Healthy, and Joyful World. <a href="https://choprafoundation.org/about/directors/">https://choprafoundation.org/about/directors/</a>	Information is not significantly different from interviews and not relevant to answering research questions
Web News Article on Al-Ghpson's achievements	Saudi Gazette. (2015, July 30). <i>First woman to oversee 60,000 employees in Saudi Aramco</i> . Saudigazette. <a href="http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/131130">http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/131130</a>	Information is narrow in scope and does not add to the findings that answer the research questions
Web Magazine Article with highlight on Al-Ghpson	Forbes Middle East. (n.d.). <i>200 Most Powerful Arab Women - 2014: Executive Management</i> . Forbes ME. <a href="https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/list/200-most-powerful-arab-women-2014-executive-management">https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/list/200-most-powerful-arab-women-2014-executive-management</a>	Information is not significantly different from interviews and not relevant to answering research questions
Web Article with biographical information on Al-Ghpson	Oil & Gas. (2015). <i>Huda Al-Ghpson: Power List</i> . <a href="https://www.oilandgasmiddleeast.com/lists/31652-huda-al-ghpson">https://www.oilandgasmiddleeast.com/lists/31652-huda-al-ghpson</a>	Only has a small amount of information that does not add depth to the findings

Artifact	Citation	Reason for Exclusion
Web report has information on Al-Ghpson's background	Arab News. (2018, December 21). <i>Face Of: Huda Al-Ghpson, executive director of HR at Saudi Aramco.</i> <a href="https://www.arabnews.com/node/1424151/saudi-arabia">https://www.arabnews.com/node/1424151/saudi-arabia</a>	Only has a small amount of biographical information that does not add depth to the findings
Article on Top women leaders that mentions Al-Ghpson	Birch, K. (2023, February 22). <i>Top 10 female leadership firsts in Saudi Arabia.</i> Business Chief EMEA. <a href="https://businesschief.eu/leadership-and-strategy/top-10-female-leadership-firsts-in-saudi-arabia">https://businesschief.eu/leadership-and-strategy/top-10-female-leadership-firsts-in-saudi-arabia</a>	Only has a small amount of biographical information that does not add depth to the findings
Biographical information on Al-Ghpson including achievements	The Chopra Foundation. (2022). <i>Huda Al-Ghpson Appointed To Chopra Foundation's Board Of Directors.</i> Huda Al-Ghpson Appointed to Chopra Foundation's Board of Directors. <a href="https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/huda-al-ghpson-appointed-to-chopra-foundations-board-of-directors-301512190.html">https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/huda-al-ghpson-appointed-to-chopra-foundations-board-of-directors-301512190.html</a>	Only has a small amount of biographical information that does not add depth to the findings
Small introduction of Al-Ghpson	Energy Council. (n.d.). <i>Huda Al-Ghpson, Saudi Aramco: Top 275.</i> <a href="https://energycouncil.com/event-speakers/huda-al-ghpson/">https://energycouncil.com/event-speakers/huda-al-ghpson/</a>	Only has a small amount of biographical information that does not add depth to the findings

## APPENDIX J

## Thematic Codebook Sample

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
Resilience	The importance of self-belief and determination in achieving success as a leader. Huda emphasizes the need for strong self-confidence and a deep-seated drive to pursue one's goals.	"Only a few non - conventional women, I among them, stood their ground, unfazed by the prospect of a backlash."
Resistance	Resistance to women in leadership positions. It also represents the resistance faced by women in advancing their careers, despite their talent, success, and strength.	"Men refused to work with me. Men resisted reporting to me."
Fear of retaliation	If women had complained to management, they would have been punished.	"Complaining to management would have been fruitless. Besides, I knew the drill. I would end up the one being punished."
Authentic leadership	Serving others. Thriving and prospering.	"And my highest achievement is leading authentically and serving the men and women in my domain to transform their lives, achieve their full potential, and thrive."
Scrutiny	Women in advanced positions at Saudi Aramco were under close scrutiny and often assigned challenging projects to test their abilities.	"I felt I was constantly being tested and challenged as others tried to make up their minds about my capabilities."
Need for change in leadership	Leaders needed to act as role models and communicate messages about the value of diversity in the workforce.	"I emphasized that with organizational prejudices so deep-rooted, a change in tone had to start at the top."