

## The Uniqueness of Saudi Female Workplace: Challenges and Opportunities

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### **Abstract**

*In recent years, the Hofstede model of the cultural framework has captured the attention of scholars interested in the topic (Sivakumart & Nakata, 2001). This model explains that different cultures hold different values related to their work (Hofstede,1991). The argument of this study and also in other previous studies is that these values are not excluded to individual relations towards work itself, but also towards relationships with co-workers and as well as toward the organization and so forth. This paper contributes to the literature of cultural influence on the workplace especially Hofstede's theory by understanding the unique context of Saudi Arabia and its impact on Saudi female workplace. Provides a coherent picture of Saudi culture and avoids any bias since the researcher is a female who is born and raised and have worked in the Saudi Arabian workplace environment. Therefore, this paper envisions to explore the relationship between the religious and cultural environment of Saudi Arabia in the workplace of women. Yet, this paper would enrich the feminism theory from a new approach, an approach that deals with Islamic Saudi women in the workplace and whether veiling and segregation entail advantages or disadvantages to Saudi women.*

**Key Words:** Culture, Religion, Hofstede' Model, Saudi work cultural values, Saudi women workplace

### **Introduction:**

Studies are often aimed at understanding how culture explains patterns in the economic and social activities of individuals and groups. The impact of culture is extended to include organizations and how cultural values impact the structure as well as the employees in the organization. Even though there are many studies and frameworks that deal with this concept, Hofstede's culture factors is a cultural framework that has captured great attention in recent years (Sivakumart & Nakata,2001). Hofstede (1991) argues that people of different cultures hold different values related to their work. These values are not excluded to individual relations towards work itself, but also towards relationships with co-workers and as well as toward the organization and so forth. In his famous study of culture consequences, Hofstede (1980, 1991) identified different dimensions of culture based on a study of more than 70 countries. These dimensions are power distance, collectivism versus individualism, uncertainty avoidance and femininity versus masculinity.

Hofstede defined power distance as the degree to which differences in power and status are accepted in a culture. He asserted collectivism is the belief that taking responsibility for taking care of others is more valued rather than emphasizing one's interest. Femininity versus Masculinity contrasts how people value performance and competition rather than the quality of life and caring for others. Finally, uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree of how people prefer to avoid changes and uncertainty.

It has to be said that Hofstede's study is considered as a major catalyst in viewing and understanding cultures that apply dimensional framework and the findings of this study have served as the foundation for much of the work that has been done on culture and organizations (Matsumoto, 2000, AlGhamdi, Sivakumart & Nakata, 2001). Moreover, Hofstede's approach has been revered as "...a watershed conceptual foundation for many subsequent cross-national research endeavors" (Fernandes et.al., 1997, p.43). More importantly, Sivakumart & Nakata (2001) state that Hofstede's Model has been cited more than other regarded studies dealing with the same topic, culture. The model receives good reputation when many researchers cross different cultures agree with Hofstede's points which strengthen the study (Søndergaard, 1994; Sivakumart & Nakata,2001)

In terms of the Arab world, and Saudi Arabia particularly, the study reveals that Saudi Arabia scores high on power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, and femininity. Moreover, there are many Saudi studies validate Hofstede' work in the Saudi culture and they achieve significant findings supporting

Hofstede' approach at least in terms of Saudi culture. For such instance, Bjerke& Al-Meer (1993), AlGhamdi (2007), Al-Twajiri and Al Muhaiza (1996) and ALNoeim (2002) study the influence of Saudi culture on the workplace using Hofstede's cultural four dimensions. Their results support Hofstede's description of Saudi culture as one of high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, and femininity.

Many arguments, however, emerge against Hofstede's work. Many researchers go on to say that a survey is not an accurate instrument for determining differences among cultures (Schwartz 1999). Nasif & others (1991) think that the domestic population contains groups holding different ethics and it is not a homogenous whole as Hofstede's study assumes. Many scholars think the shortcoming that devalues Hofstede's study the most is the fact that the study is limited to one company (IBM) which means the possibility to provide accurate information on the entire culture is also limited (Olie 1995; Søndergaard, 1994).

Andersson & Togelius (2010) state that Saudi Arabia is unique among the world's countries in terms of separating the sexes. They think that it seems like the cultural claims merely function as a justification of an institutional segregation of women from men. Nevertheless, Vidyasagar & Rea (2004) insist that even though Saudi women face mostly the same difficulties that many women around the world struggle from, they are in a unique position within a highly restrictive society and culture.

This concept leads to revealing two facts. In one hand, Saudi Women might be extremely influenced by cultural values. On the other hand, even more importantly, according to the strict segregation, most of the Saudi studies deal with males, not females even Hofstede's work itself which reflect the impact of Saudi culture on the male workplace from masculine perspectives. Hence, the researchers believe that the impact of culture on Saudi women has to be addressed. Studying women in Saudi workplaces demands studying the impact of religion and tradition that generate unique female workplaces in Saudi Arabia., In doing so, this paper aims to investigate the impact of culture on Saudi feministic workplace and validate the argument that Hofstede's findings could not be generalized to the whole domestic population.

In order to fulfill the purpose, this paper adopts questions to be answered through reviewing the literature dealing with Saudi culture which is: How do Saudi culture impact the Saudi women workplace?

The importance of this paper might be impeded in several points. In terms of feminism theory, there have been long term debates regarding the concept of Islamic feminism and whether it presents a new feminist paradigm or not (Wadud- Muhin, 1992). Others, however, see Islamic feminism as misunderstood and has to be addressed (Moghissi, 1999). On the other hand, many studies deal with Islamic women and particularly Saudi women as oppressed women and they are victims of their religion and culture. The focus of this paper, however, is the way gender roles were defined within KSA and the impact this had on the professional and career opportunities of Saudi women. It subsequently provides a coherent picture of Saudi culture and avoids any bias since the researcher is a female who is born and raised and have worked in the Saudi Arabian workplace environment. Therefore, this paper envisions to explore the relationship between the religious and cultural environment of Saudi Arabia in the workplace of women. Yet, this paper would enrich the feminism theory from a new approach, an approach that deals with Islamic Saudi women in the workplace and whether veiling and segregation entail advantages or disadvantages to Saudi women.

On the other hand, this paper contributes to the literature of cultural influence on the workplace especially Hofstede's theory by understanding the unique context of Saudi Arabia and its impact on Saudi female workplace.

In order to provide accurate answers, this paper is organized to describe Saudi culture, Saudi women and then the impact of Saudi culture on the Saudi female in the workplace. In the last main point, the researchers link Hofstede' work with Saudi cultural values as it is found from the literature review to rationalize Hofstede's findings and validate the applicability of the model in term of feminism.

#### **Literature review:**

To answer the question of the paper and investigate the impact of culture on Saudi women in the workplace, the definition of culture has to be addressed first. Tepstra & David (1985) state that "culture is a learned, shared, compelling, interrelated set of symbols whose Meaning provides a set of orientations for members of society" (P.10). Barnouw (1963) defines culture as "...a way of life of a group of people, the

configuration of all the more or less stereotyped patterns of learned behavior, which are handed down from one generation to the next through the means of language and imitation " (p. 6). As Hofstede (1980) emphasizes that the culture "Mental programming ... patterns of thinking and feeling and potential acting" (Hofstede 1991, p.4). Despite the fact there have been extraordinary efforts aimed at defining culture in different ways, there are commonalities. Culture is built by members of a particular group sharing values and interests among themselves, and these values cultivate a deep path from one generation to another. Jones(2007) emphasizes the importance of the word 'programming' in Hofstede's definition to notice that culture is not achieved easily and rapidly, but it is a slow process that includes "learning values (dominant beliefs and attitudes), partaking of rituals (collective activities), modeling against heroes (role models), and understanding symbols.."(p.3)

In terms of Saudi culture, according to Jones's point of view, it is largely influenced by the Islamic religion; hence, the reason Saudi Arabia is known as the land of Islam. Oil has also played a large role in the development of Saudi culture. Consequently, in order to explore Saudi culture, the role of religion and economic in shaping this society has to be discussed. In doing so, the following section will present important aspects of the Saudi Arabian culture and socio-economic fabric from the perspective of its influence on the women in the society and organizations.

## **Religion**

### **Saudi Arabia: the heart of Islam**

Today Saudi Arabia is one of the richest countries in the world and has valued views either in terms of Islamic views or economic influence. In terms of the Islamic standpoint, Saudi Arabia has its own distinguishable culture that differentiates it from any Islamic country in the world. All Saudi citizens are Muslim; this includes over 20 million natives born Saudis and more than six million immigrants from 135 nationalities (Al-Juwair,2008). More importantly, Saudi Arabia is the custodian of Meccah and Medinah, the holiest two cities in Islam. These cities are also vital to the Islamic religion because the Prophet Muhammad was born, spent his life and received Islam's holy book, The *Qur'an* inside their borders,(AlMunajjed, 1997). The Kaaba, which is located in Meccah, "...is the direction toward which Muslims everywhere in the world face while performing their prayers five times every day"(Al-Juwair,2008,p.45). In simple words, Saudi Arabia is the land of Islam.

It must be noted that Saudis practice a specific type of Islam, wahabism. "Wahabism is a rigid, very puritanical sect reflecting Islam as it was practiced during the lifetime of Mohammed, over 1,400 years ago" (aConnell,2008,p.4). Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab was the reformer of the religious practices that were common in that era. His reformatory call has spread in the Arabian Peninsula and expanded to benefit the Islamic world and has had advantages on peace and security in the region and other places. Wahabism was established on the principles of religious and moral reform. It has cultivated radical changes in Saudi society. A major change that this Islamic sect brought about was the transformation of the Arabian Peninsula from warring, fragmented tribes to a unified kingdom. Hence, the King of Saudi Arabia has succeeded because of the convergence of religion and the power of politic. On the other hand, Wahabism would not be well known without strong support from Saudi political authorities.

Since King Abdulaziz established the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, he has embraced wehabism as a guide. Further, the legal system in Saudi Arabia is based on the Islamic Law or *Sharia*. "*Sharia* is defined as the path and guidance of all aspects of Muslim life including daily routines, familial and religious obligations, and financial dealings" (Dahlan, 2011,p.5). Al-Juwair, 2008 states that "...Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world that applies the Shariah [law] of Allah and whose constitution is the Holy Qur'an"(p.45). As such, Saudi people see Islam as the core of the "Value Agreement" which is the basis of their daily life and the factor that controls their behavior (Al-Tahlawi,2008).

### **Saudi Arabia: The Heart of Oil**

In addition to the religious role that Saudi Arabia plays in the Arab and Muslim world, Saudi Arabia owns more than a fourth of the world's known oil reserves (Mishra,2007). Before the discovery of oil in the

1930s, Saudi Arabia was a nation of poor Bedouins and scattered tribes that depended on agriculture cultivation, and fishing as its main economic activities. However, this situation has completely changed and Saudi Arabia is now one of the richest countries in the world (Pharaon, 2004; Mahdi,2008). According to the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA), Oil revenues alone yield an average of \$1 billion per day extracted from the production of 10.2 million barrels of oil and 7.1 billion cubic feet of natural gas. The report also shows that “...the year 2010 yielded a gross domestic product of \$435 billion, a trade surplus of \$154 billion, and a budget surplus of \$109 billion” (cited in Flynn, 2011).The oil’s revenue is wisely invested to modernize the country across all possible facets. The infrastructure has been developed and the regions have been linked by road networks. Nevertheless, there are at least 30 national and international airports with a large skilled national aircraft labor force. Saudi Arabia also has the largest water desalination capacity in the world with a completely developed water distribution network in addition to huge electric generation capacity. The education and health sectors are also well developed; public hospitals and an extraordinary number of schools, colleges, and universities are scattered throughout the country (Pharaon, 2004). As a result of the economy’s massive growth, the country’s social structure has been altered and the middle class has flourished.

In addition to economic growth, there have been other factors that have contributed to the changes in Saudi society. Education is one of the key factors that play a main role in the rapidly altering Saudi society. According to Viola (1981), the number of schools tripled from 247 to approximately about 7000 between 1970 - 1975 and the enrollment has since increased. Also, a large number of Saudi students are being educated in the west. In the 1980s, Salamesh(1980) indicated that every year 2500 to 3000 Saudis returned to their country after graduating from the United States. This number has doubled since 2006 when king Abdullah funded thousands of annualscholarships to study overseas.

#### **Saudi Women and Tradition:**

Despite the fact that a Saudi family is traditionally a male-dominated unit, women have a significant influence in the home. The structure of Saudi society is first built on the family, then the tribe or community and lastly the whole society, which is governed by the king. The authority in each ring is embedded in the man who could be the father, the head of the tribe, the head of the society and /or the king. The exclusive perspective of male power over women is more a traditional perspective than a religious one. While the Quran, Hadith, and Shari’a give distinct instruction to present a woman’s role and position, there has been difficulty implementing this guidance. Badawi (1971) indicates that the Quran refers to the difference between the sexes, which drives the weaker sex to protection, not to superiority as many Arabs have misinterpreted. On the other hand, Islam commands the man to be responsible for his wife, mother, and sister. His responsibility includes not just protecting her but also paying her expenditures even when the women are in the workplace and has her own money. Al-Hibri (1982) state that even though the Qur’an generally indicates that men have a responsibility to provide for women, this responsibility does not mean they have absolute authority over women, nor does it mean that women are not able to help and provide for themselves. Nevertheless, the *UNICEF* report about women in Islam articulates that “the Qur’an makes it clear that the sole basis for superiority of any person over another is piety and righteousness”(p.12), not gender, skin color or nationality:

“Oh, mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other, Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (one who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)” (Qur’an 49:13).

Also, in one of his sayings, the prophet Mohammed asserted that “Men and women are equal halves”, which means they are complementary to each other in building the society. Moreover, the Quran emphasizes the equality between men and women in humanity, duties, and rights in several positions and mentions man and women 23 times for each one (Harun,2001).

The Saudi government believes in the equality between men and women and this idea is reflected in several articles in the Saudi constitution. For example, Article 11 states that, as it is cited in Human Right Watch (HRW) (2008):



“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights, in particular:

- (a) The right to work as an inalienable right of all human beings;
- (c) The right to free choice of profession and employment, the right to promotion, job security and all benefits and conditions of service”(p.73).

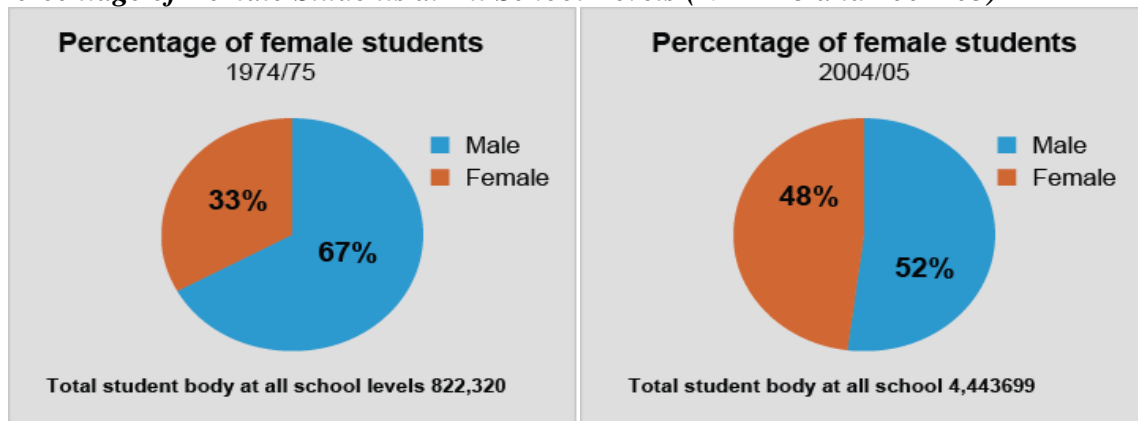
Despite government efforts, most Saudi men, as well as most Arabs (Muslims or not), are conservative and they absorb old traditions which emerged even before Islam. AlMunajjed (2009) touches a sensitive nerve when she writes the following about Saudi culture: “a mixture of local norms and traditions, social beliefs, and principles emanating from the patriarchal system stand in the way, exerting a considerable influence on women’s lives...”(p.7)

These traditions affect women in different ways; however, this paper focuses on two crucial points: education and segregation.

### 1) Education:

Traditionally, the common perspective was that in order to protect the virtue of women, they had to stay at home. Their education was restricted to the house, where they were taught how to read the Qur’an and the basics of writing (Vidyasagar&Rea, 2004). It was only in the late 1950s and early 1960s that important steps were taken to open the first schools for girls in Saudi Arabia. The government faced severe challenges to reconcile the traditional norm and women’s right to be educated and active members in the society (AlSuwaigh, 1989). In 1960, 15 girls’ schools were established to teach 5000 female students (AlMunajjed,2009). The latest Ministry of Education statistics reveal that there were 17000 schools for girls and 15000 schools for boys in 2009 (Saudi Cultural Mission (SACM,2011). Gender equality among school students has been shown in national results indicating that there is significant progress in achievement. Statistics from the Ministry of Education indicate that there has been an undeniable increase in progress in the number of female students at all school levels. This increase has been “...over a period of 30 years, from 272,054 in 1974– 75 to 2,121,893 in 2004–05” (AlMunajjed,2009,p.4). Also, the percentage of female students at all school levels increased from 33 percent in 1974–75 to 48 percent in 2004–05” (AlMunajjed, 2009,p.4) (see Exhibit 1).

*Exhibit I: Percentage of Female Students at All School Levels (1974–75 and 2004–05)*



Source: SAMA, 2008, Ministry of Education. Adapted from ( AlMunajjed, 2009,p.5)

Vidyasagar&Rea (2004) articulate that higher education has also expanded remarkably over years and the education of women has been of high priority for the Saudi government to the point where Saudi women are now more highly educated than Saudi men. Saudi culture mission state that women make up 625 of total students enrolled in higher education. The Princess Noura University (PNU), which opened in 2011, is the first women’s college in Saudi Arabia and the world’s largest women only university. This institution is a witness of the Saudi government’s concern of women. It is important to mention that the educational opportunities that are

provided for women have not been exclusive to Saudi Arabia, but include scholarships program to attend university abroad(SACM, 2011).

Historically, the main role of women is not just in Saudi Arabia but also in most countries was to be a good mother and housewife. This concept even affects the educational policy in Saudi Arabia. According to Article 153 of the Saudi Policy on Education states, “A girl’s education aims at giving her the correct Islamic education to enable her to be in life a successful housewife, an exemplary wife, and a good mother.” Consequently, the purpose of educating the girl is to make her a good wife and mother and to prepare her for ‘acceptable’ jobs that suit her nature such as teaching and nursing (HRW,2008).

Additionally, the cultural belief that women have to be protected by staying at home has not been gradually changed unless there is a true Islamic spirit. Explicitly, it is documented that the Prophet’s wife, Aisha, was active in both social and political arenas (Hayani, 1980) and she was well informed about medicine. In simple words, Aisha opened the locked door and provided legitimacy for women to penetrate the two professions of teaching and medicine (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). However, Al Munajjed (1997)indicates that this embraced thinking affect the tendency toward the fields of education and training for women. As it is demonstrated in Exhibit II, women’s degrees are concentrated in education and teaching, human sciences, natural sciences, and Islamic studies.

## 2) Segregation

Even though Aishah was well known in medicine in addition to teaching, the acceptance of the idea of women working at hospitals is not common due to the existence of a stronger rooted ideological and traditional perspective which is segregation; women are spatially segregated from men, which lead us to discuss segregation in Saudi culture. Segregation is the most important feature that influences the public life in Saudi Arabia. Segregation does not allow women to mix with unrelated men in Saudi Arabia (AlSagaf, 2004). This practice can be seen in schools, universities, restaurants, and banks. Hence, women cannot work or study in mixed spheres except in hospitals. In this way, the Saudi government is different from other Islamic countries because it enforces complete sex segregation. According to the Human Right Watch (HRW) report, this policy is not seen as discriminatory since both men and women are involved (HRW, 2008). In fact, as Le Renard (2008) articulates the strict segregation between women’s and men’s in the workplace, the public sphere, and socializing spaces has been legally upheld since the 1960s.

It has to be noticed that segregation rather than veiling is not a religious mandate; it is a social and traditional principle. Men in the Arab world, feel their honor is attached to the behavior of women, including sisters, daughters, and wives. So, they feel it is their responsibility to protect the chastity of one’s women by enforcing rules of modesty (Borneman, 2009). This attitude could be said to promote segregation and wearing the “abayah”.

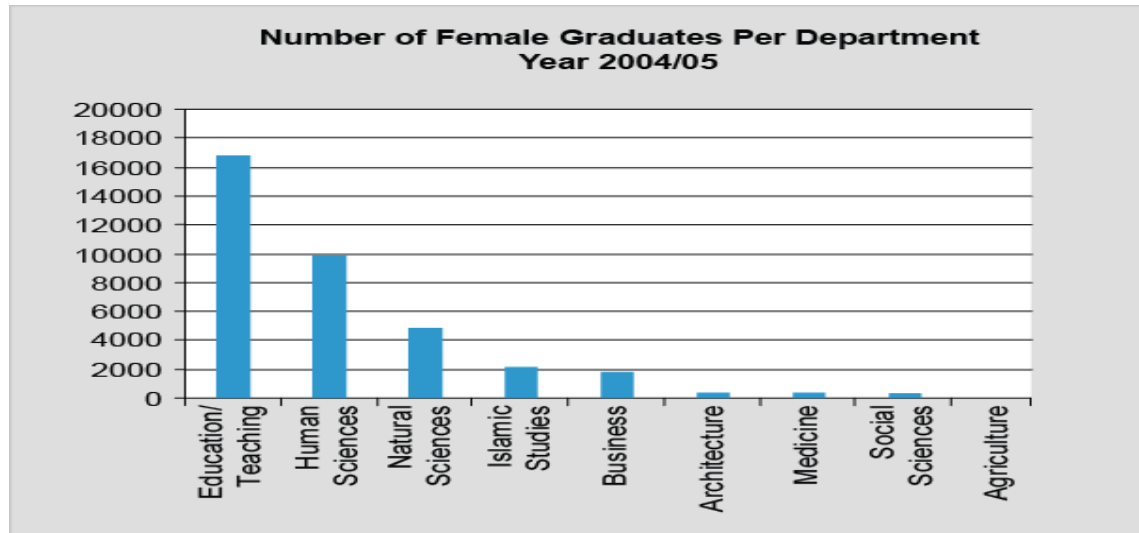
Le Renard (2008), a French scholar, studies the segregation phenomena in Saudi Arabia by living the experience. She describes how the “abayah” is used quite differently from other Islamic countries. She adds that the “abayah” is worn as a passage through the mixed public space. In her words:

“For instance, in the girls’ section of King Saud University, students arrive concealed under their ‘abaya, maintaining a correct covering because of the possible inspections at the entrance. As soon as they have gone through the entrance, a special room permits the removal of one’s overcoat. Once beyond this point, the university girls’ section looks like a vast luxuriant garden surrounded by walls. Except for the compulsory long skirt, students exhibit a keen awareness of the latest Western fashions”(p.616).

Many western feminists initially saw covering as a symbol of disgrace on women; however, this perspective has changed with time. Most recently, different women have asserted the veil opens the door for women to be active in the public sphere (Yamani, 1996).Vidyasagar & Rea (2004) highlight such freedom in their study on the experience of 28 Saudi women doctors working in Saudi Arabia and how they deal with segregation and veiling. They found that most of the interviewees were satisfied with covering and explained covering in relation to their religious beliefs even though it seems it is custom.

Furthermore, segregation is the product of inherent Arabic traditional ideology. In other words, this practice is related to old Arabian thought. Evidence that segregation is based more so on social beliefs than religious ones is noticed in the differences of implementing segregation; different regions have different rules. Explicitly, Riyadh, the middle region, has strict rules to ensure complete segregation while these rules have been remarkably decreased in the western region where less conservative people live.

*Exhibit II: Female Graduate Degrees by Department (2004–05)*



Source: Ministry of Education. Adapted from (AlMunajjed, 2009, p.16)

### **Saudi women and the workplace:**

Working Saudi women are encouraged by the fact that Islam supports and rewards hard work (Naseef, 1999; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Vidyasagar & Rea state that work for women in Islam is a right and religious men see it to be an advantage when it does not harm or abuse their femininity or dignity. On the other hand, social principles and traditions ban women from working alongside men. Saudi law, however, does permit women to work with males either as doctors or patients (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004).

Flynn (2011) provides a framework from which to explore the Saudi labor force by comparing it to the national market model designed by the US Department of Labor in the 1940s. He finds that in 2008, only four million Saudis were in the labor force, including more than three million male workers and approximate 700,000 female workers. However, about 400,000 of these labor force participants are unable to find work; this number boils down to a 25% rate of unemployment among women in the workforce and a 6.9% rate of unemployment among men in the workforce. Comparative analysis of workforce statistics from the United States and Saudi Arabia shows remarkable differences. Women represented 47% of the US labor force in 2008, a figure that has grown steadily since the 1960s. Conversely, only 16% of the Saudi national labor force is female. Moreover, while U.S female unemployment in 2008 was 5.5%, unemployment among Saudi females was 24.9%. Flynn attributes that to obstacles facing Saudi women to enter into the Saudi labor force which limits women's options.

However, statistical analysis of the labor force in Saudi Arabia and the US is not comparable, particularly for women. As noted previously, while women have participated in the American labor force since the 1960s, Saudi women had just started attending schools during this decade. Flynn realizes this fact and predicts that the Saudi female labor force participation rate would most probably increase since the United States experienced the same pattern in the second half of the 20th century.

According to Exhibit II, social values might be tangible in driving majors and fields that Saudi women are exposed to. Teaching, rather than others job, is the most favorable job that Saudi society encourages women to participate in. AlMunajjed (2009) clearly points out this trend in her words:

“Due to cultural restrictions and biases in relation to the expected role of women in society, the system of education has been reinforcing gender-segregated cultural norms. This explains the high concentration of women in education, as teaching is generally perceived as a female job and a social extension of a woman’s cultural role as mother and housewife”(p.16).

Even worse, the idea that Saudi women might be driven by what Saudi society values and prefers more than what the job market needs could explain the high rate of female unemployment in Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, it has to be said that most Saudi women live luxurious lives and have their own business; according to Saudi Cultural Mission(SACM) in the U.S.A, Saudi women own 40% of family companies, 30% of brokerage accounts,10% of real estate management in addition to one fifth of commercial businesses. The report also states that Saudi women own \$12 billion in cash funds (SACM, 2011).

In terms of the public sector, according to Ministry of Civil Service in 2008, the number of Saudi working women in this field represents one third of the public workforce and this number will gradually increase in the next few years (Cited in Al Otaibi, 2011). It has to be said the system of Saudi Civil Services encourages Saudi Women to attend work life. The Saudi Universities Law, the Civil Service Law, and the Labor and Workers Law treat women and men equally (HRW,2008; AlMunajjed, 2009). As for the Saudi Civil Service system, women and men have the same opportunities in employment, salary, training, and vacations. More significantly, women are more privileged in terms of vacations associated with social values and Islamic principles. Consequently, motherhood vacation is a full-paid vacation and granted for the mother from 40 days to three months, and she has the right to have a motherhood vacation up to three years continuously or intermittently to take care of her child. Moreover, Islam demands the widow to stay at home for four months and 10 days; in doing so, a full-paid vacation is granted to the widow. Additionally, the woman who has to accompany her guardian (her husband or father) in his overseas scholarship for work or study, has the right to have a vacation up to 10 years (Ministry of Civil Service, 2012).

While many human rights’ advocates, as well as many westerners, think segregation in Saudi Arabia harms Saudi women and inhibits them from gaining more opportunities as their male counterparts(HRW,2008), others, such as Le Renard (2008), have different perspectives. After living the Saudi women experience, Le Renard goes on to say the paradigm of segregation between women’s and men’s workplaces and socializing spaces are instituted legally among a discourse on modernization. She adds that even though women are exclusively separate from the public sphere, female public spaces remarkably exist in schools, universities, nonprofit organizations, government departments, women’s administrations, coffee shops, and shops. She states, in simple words, “In Saudi Arabia, the barriers separating male and female spaces are solidifying while female spaces are becoming increasingly wide and diversified, ranging far beyond the private sphere”(P.612).

More importantly, Le Renard sees the paradigm of segregation as a golden opportunity that provides equal paid work for Saudi women. She states that it differs from what is seen in other countries in the region, where the women struggle to be accepted into a pre-existing male public sphere. Moreover, Darweesh (2008) also shares Le Renard’s perspective about spatial segregation in Saudi Arabia. Darweesh asserts that working in departments and administrations allocated to women allows them to achieve the highest job positions without male competition. This position could be the chairperson of female departments, manager of a female bank branch, principal of girls’ schools and dean of girls’ colleges.

### **The impact of Saudi social values on the female workplace:**

According to the previous discussion, it is clear that Saudi culture is unique and its values are a combination of the religious and traditional. As Hofstede (1980) emphasizes that the culture is similar to a black box that we see it but we do not know what it contains. Besha et al (2009) argue that “Most organizational scholars and observers recognize that organizational culture has a powerful effect on the performance and long-term effectiveness of organizations” (p.1). Referring to Hofstede’s argument on organizational culture Besha et al (2009) describe that “according to most authors in the area agreed on important traits of organizational



culture as holistic, historically determined, related to anthropological concepts, socially constructed, soft and difficult to change. Understanding organizational culture is important” (p.2).

But relying on what it is known about Saudi culture makes analyzing its impact on the female workplace easier to be expected. Hofstede (1980, 1991) identifies four different dimensions of culture based on a study of seventy-two countries (AlGhamdi, 2007). This study analyzes how a country’s cultural values affect its organizational culture . These dimensions are power distance, collectivism versus individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and femininity versus masculinity. The previous discussion about Saudi and Ethiopian cultures, however, heightens our sense about whether Hofstede’s findings reflect Saudi and Ethiopian cultures or not and if the Saudi culture findings could be generalized on Saudi Female workplace. The following points serve previous demands.

Power distance refers to how cultures deal with inequality between individuals and how a person accepts inequality in power as normal (Latham,2007). According to Saudi culture, where the compliance and loyalty to the head of the family, tribe, country under the shadow of Islam, it is obvious that Saudi Arabia has high distance power, which is associated with Hofstede’s finding.

Consequently, managers in high power distance cultures are not expected to interact socially with subordinates or even negotiate with them regarding work assignments (ALNoeim,2002). Although women in Saudi Arabia are accustomed to having a man as the head or a leader in their life, their workplace leader, or authority will be with only another women. Saudi Women see other women having equal power among themselves, so, the female manager informs her employee about what she has to do rather than demands she does it. Simply put, Saudi women do not want to be instructed on what to do from other women. Hence, Saudi female workplace tends to be low power distance rather than high power distance as it is found in a study conducted by Bamefleh and others (2016).

Islam supports constrained individualism; this means an individual has the right to achieve his/her goal unless it causes any harm for the group or the community. On the other hand, Islam also encourages Muslims to cooperate and help their society. To reconcile these two concepts, the Saudi government demands Saudi companies to create employment opportunities for local citizens. Also, another form of contribution is *awqaf* (a type of Islamic and *Sharia* endorsement), which allows Muslims, if they want, to share their wealth with other poor members of the society (Dahlan &Klieb,2011). Islam also demands that individuals help other society’s members and share happiness and sadness with them. Gannon (2004) reveals an important fact that “Saudis are quick and generous with praise for others and like to highlight their own accomplishment, as well” (p73).

Aspects of Saudi Arabia’s constrained individualistic and collective culture impact both female and male workplaces in the same way. At work, collectivists have to take everyone’s opinion into account in addition to having a tight relationship between employees and preferring to work in groups (AlGhamdi, 2007). Individualistic cultures rely mostly on self achievement more than anything else, however. Nevertheless, Hofstede (1991) articulates that collective culture is also a high context culture (like China and Japan). Explicitly, Saudi female employees have “...a high emotional involvement with each other and information flows more indirectly from one person to another or from the social system to the person” (ALNoeim,2002, p.48). However, since Saudi Arabia seems also to be a constrained individualistic culture, the workplace could be a combination of personal goals and group goals, competition, and harmony within the group (Latham,2007).

Uncertainty avoidance means that a high ranking indicates a society’s low level of tolerance for uncertainty or change (Connell, 2008). Consequently, strict rules and regulations are adopted to implement sustainability and avoid change (Hofstede, 2006). It is obvious that Saudi culture has high uncertainty avoidance since the government has embraced strict rules (segregation) to maintain social values. This value could affect the workplace in how selecting good managers. Hofstede (1991) indicates that managers in high uncertainty avoidance society have to be selected according to the basis of seniority with regardless to individual advancement, also employees would be stressed in unclear situations (Latham,2007). Hofstede (2006) states that people in an uncertainty avoiding culture are emotional and motivated by inner motifs. That explains what type of incentives is preferred and how employees, either women or men, can be motivated. It might be assumed that intrinsic motivation has a main role in Saudi female and male workplace.

According to Hofstede (2006), when a country experiences a high degree of gender differentiation, males dominate and control females; this is a masculine culture. He also adds masculine cultures value personality traits such as ambition and competition, while feminine culture values interpersonal relationships (Hofstede, 1991). In Saudi Arabia, it is easy to notice that Saudi Arabia is a masculine culture since males are dominant and they control the women. But as discussed previously, women are not controlled as much as they are protected. Saudi women live privileged lives, well-paid job with high opportunity to attain high positions. Nevertheless, there is an emphasis on caring and concern for others; this concept is shaped by Islamic demands and tribal systems (AlGhamdi, 2007). Therefore, Saudi culture could be seen as a feminine culture. Gannon (2004) emphasizes the strong relationships between Saudi society members. He goes on to say that Saudis feel they even friends have to see each other frequently. In a feminine society, there is solidarity in relationships; also compromise and negotiation are the best way to resolve conflicts (AlGhamdi, 2007). It has to be said that, according to Bamefleh et.al (2016) Saudi females have a low level of masculinity, which means a high preference of femininity for females. Femininity describes the value of relationships and being in a family. Since male levels of masculinity exceed the females', Saudi males think about competitions more than the relationship between the employees.

### **Conclusion:**

From previous discussions, Saudi Arabia has changed since the discovery of the oil and is now one of the richest countries in the world. Since the discovery of oil, the Saudi government has tried to develop the country through all facets such as infrastructures and education. As such, women have engaged in education. However, tradition is still highly influential in Saudi culture, which is seen in segregation. It is obvious that cultural, traditional and religious influences on the place of women in society and within the workplace, although changing with time, still remains to be significant. Today, the Saudi government is facing a dilemma: reconciling women's right to build their society as a religious demand in one hand and respect the traditional values, on the other hand. To overcome this dilemma, the Saudi government has created a public sphere for women. Although the government places many efforts to advance the place of women in society we see that much more remains to be done.

Obviously, Saudi women are in a unique position within a highly conservative society. Traditional norms rather than job marketing compel Saudi women to be teachers more than any other occupation. This fact leads to the reality that Saudi women, as well as the government, will face a dilemma of Saudi female unemployment in the next few years. On the other hand, Saudi women have found support too. Segregation enables Saudi women to obtain a highly prestigious and well-paid career. As noted before, the Saudi Civil Service encourages Saudi Women to attend work life. Working Saudi women enjoy equal rights with men, thus earning the same monthly salary as men do in addition to the unique types of vacations which only allocated to the women. On the other hand, according to the Islamic creed, she is not responsible for supporting her family; family expenditure in the Saudi social culture is only the man's duty (Darweesh,2008). In the shadow of this concept, some, if not most, Saudi Women enroll in work life neither to earn money nor gain job security; most of them work to fulfill their growth needs and to prove themselves. Nevertheless, Le Renard (2008) insists that the strict segregation of women in Saudi cities should not be understood as a mere consequence of traditional norms; it is "...urbanization that has progressed and as the modern state's authority has spread over the territory" (p.10). On the other hand, Hofstede's crucial finding in his study reveals that Saudi Arabia is a feminine culture rather than masculine culture; this finding seems to support the idea that Saudi men do not control Saudi women. Rather they protect and take care of them as it is their responsibility.

In conclusion, one can say that Saudi female workplace culture exhibit not so different levels, within the context of the four dimensions of Hofstede's Model except in terms of power distance. Further, the women could face a challenge of a glass ceiling if they work in a mixed workplace due to a traditional perspective. However, more studies should be conducted to study this aspect.

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