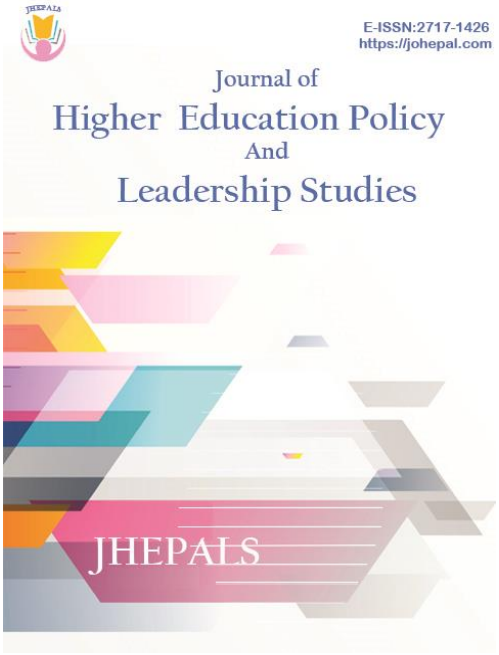
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Reflection on Female Leadership Experience in Higher Education

Yusra Mouzughi

President
Royal University for Women,
BAHRAIN

Email: ymouzughi@ruw.edu.bh

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Yusra Mouzughi *

Highlights

- Developments in female access to HE have been significant in recent history with women taking increasingly larger shares in accessing higher education programmes globally.
- Whilst access to education has increased, it remains just that – access. This increase has not been equally reflected in female leadership of HEIs and decision making bodies. Multiple reasons are attributed to this but most prominent are career breaks and caring responsibilities. Exclusion from after work social activities could also be a factor for this.
- A broad comparison of the UK and Arab world shows similar patterns but given the relative youth of some of the HE sectors in the Arab world, numbers of female leaders are significantly reduced.
- The global HE sector has witnessed a huge shift in the last few decades both in terms of structures and student expectations. Universities have generally adapted to this change to ensure their relevance and survival. Though HEIs are the most obvious custodians for merit based progression; the pace of change in female participation at leadership levels remains slow and given the pressures institutions are facing to respond to the global digitalisation revolution, larger female representation needs to be expedited.

Keywords: Female Leadership; Access; Arab World; Female Role Modelling; Support Networks

*Corresponding author's email: ymouzughi@ruw.edu.bh

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> *"A woman with a voice is, by definition a strong woman. But the search to find that voice can be remarkably difficult."*
>
> Melinda Gates

UK-Arab Contexts

Women have made great gains in the higher education field, possibly more so than any other field, with more and more women accessing higher education and higher percentages of degrees being conferred on women.

Yet, it is somewhat disheartening when you reflect on the fact that the first university ever set up was established by a woman. Fatima Al-Qurashiya more commonly known as Fatima Al Fihri, founded the world's first university in 895 CE in Fez, Morocco. Using her inheritance, she set up what is now the oldest operational university in the world, The University of Al Qarawiynn. The level of entrepreneurialism and thinking outside the box, especially for that time, is quite remarkable. How we moved away from women taking these types of entrepreneurial initiatives is hard to comprehend.

Even more disheartening is how little universities have changed in the past 1000 years since that very first entrepreneurial university was established. Until about 150 years ago when women more fully entered the realms of higher education, there has been a clear, simple and relatively unchanged formula - universities were places where men receive learning, from other men, more knowledgeable than themselves. There was no place for women and there was no need to create a place for them in these institutions of learning; for what need did women have of such sophisticated knowledge as that taught in universities?

The first woman known to earn a degree was Bettisia Gozzadind in 1237 who also went on to become the first woman to teach which she undertook at the University of Bologna in 1239. Yet this was not the norm and it took until the mid-1800s and early 1900s for universities to accept women into HEIs freely. The change that has taken place since then is nothing short of amazing. The last 150 years have seen a complete revolution in women's engagement in higher education and though this progress needs to be celebrated, there are still many challenges to be addressed. Globally, women have taken up learning in all disciplines and fields outperforming male counterparts in university recognized metrics such as access, retention, progression and assessment. Whist this is welcomed, valued and embraced; this leap in development for women's access to education seems to have stopped at just that – access.

For decades we have been grappling with matters of employability and arguably this has been across genders, but evidence shows that women are more hindered in their onward career progression due mainly to childbirth and caring responsibilities. So, though at the start of their careers, securing a job for women and men may be equally challenging, progressing onto a leadership role for women is much more difficult than it is for men. The data has emphasized this phenomenon over and over again and it seems futile to re-iterate here. This under representation of women in key decision making roles has meant though that those few who do achieve key positions 'at the table' have an even bigger role to play in paving the way for others. They are constantly watched, evaluated and hopefully

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celebrated for their achievements, but the pressure can be relentless and as Professor Louise Richardson, first female Vice Chancellor of Oxford University UK aptly put it, "I will look forward to the day when the first female anything is not celebrated" (Muscat University, 2019).

In academia in particular, where the pursuit of knowledge is heightened and the meritocracy should be at its most prevalent, signs of progress have been clear. The UK for example boasts some re-assuring statistics with regard to female leadership of academic institutions including 29% of HEIs having a woman Vice-Chancellor or Principal, and 27% of governing bodies being chaired by a woman (WomenCount, 2018) which is significant progress from the 17% and 12% respectively in 2013 (Jarobe, 2013). This is comparable with US universities where 30% of universities are led by females and is ahead of the figure for the top 200 universities globally where only 18% are led by women (Eleraqi & Salahudin, 2018). Promoting female representation in senior positions is a noteworthy achievement, however this is only one part of the solution and securing a pipeline of qualified candidates at Professorial level to take on future leadership positions (this being a pre-requisite in most institutions), is an area of continuing work for the UK higher education sector.

Having worked in the UK HE sector for over two-thirds of my own academic career, the pattern of academic progression is very clear. At the risk of over simplifying what is in fact a complex and varying phenomenon, there is a trend for young male career academics to work their way up to administrative or academic leadership positions in an almost linear pattern with time invested for research and self development programs – not forgetting the involvement in after-work social activities which further enhance opportunities for collaborative research and/or career progression. Female early career academics on the other hand, demonstrate a pattern of non-linear progression accommodating young families and caring responsibilities which leads to bursts of academic/research/self-development activity depending on the availability of time and/or access to care. This is not to mention lack of involvement in after work social activities which the majority of women are either excluded from by virtue of their other commitments or choose to exclude themselves from. Ultimately, taking periods out of the work environment – however short – affects career progression, and leads to a large proportion of female academics being 'stuck' in mid academic ladder positions having been surpassed by male colleagues to leadership posts. This forms one of the main challenges for the UK system in ensuring a pipeline of suitably qualified, experienced and viable female leaders of HEIs to recruit from.

On a more international perspective, female leadership of Higher Education Institutions in the Arab world does not fare well with less than 7% of Higher Education Institutions in the 22 Arab states being led by females (Eleraqi & Salahuddin, 2018). Historically, and in the Arab world in particular, teaching has been very closely linked with women and teaching has been generally dubbed a female vocation – especially at primary and secondary levels but leadership of teaching institutions has, and remains, a male dominated endeavor. One must question the reason why women are seen as fit to actively take part – even dominate – the teaching profession but are not provided with the opportunity to drive the decision making in that profession.

Whilst the broad context for women progressing in leadership tend to be similar in many parts of the world, there is a distinct difference between countries where family ties

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are very strong or access to childcare is financially viable, compared to countries where the focus is more on the nuclear family, and childcare is expensive. In the Arab world for example, extended families provide support for childcare and in-house help is common to many families. Thus arguably, some of the obstacle faced by women in the UK are not the same for women in the Arab world. However, these differences have not translated into better leadership progression opportunities for women in countries where support networks are stronger.

One possible explanation for the apparent lack in female leadership of HEIs in the Arab world is the relative youth of these institutions in this part of the world and in particular in the Gulf region. Many HEIs are under 50 years of age and developing leadership programmes specifically to address the gap in female representation in top management of universities will undoubtedly take time to mature and yield desired outcomes. The lack of obvious role modelling further compounds the issue. Similar to the UK, women in many parts of the Arab world are also excluded from the 'boys club' where social barriers prohibit women from engaging in social settings – the very settings where many of the decisions are made (Al-Ubaydali, 2022).

On a more positive note, an evident shift has been observed, at least at public sector level, where women have been very prominent in leading ministries, regulatory bodies and national universities in the region. Oman is a prime example where both ministers for education and higher education have been women for the last 11 and 18 years respectively and in Bahrain where both the national University of Bahrain and the Higher Education Council are currently led by females.

Personal Reflections

As a 'female leader' who has worked in the higher education sector for over twenty years, I have witnessed an immense shift in the landscape including developments in how we teach, engage, discuss and promote our respective universities and programmes. Our research competitiveness and our access to vast amounts of knowledge have been real game changers. I have observed first-hand the transition of 'students' to 'customers' and have become very comfortable with terms such as the international 'footprint' of an institution and the more recent additions during the COVID pandemic such as the shift from 'emergency delivery mode' to 'meaningful student engagement'. I feel privileged to have also witnessed the development of more learner-centered, ethically and environmentally conscious institutions which have been humbled over time to recognize their role not in ivory towers for the elite, but as part of the fabric of the societies in which they operate.

What I have not witnessed over these years is an equally large shift in female presence at leadership level. Whist every effort is made to involve women, recruit women, train women and retain women; this still feels imposed and at times, almost a nod to political correctness. This might be what is required for this transitional period until we reach more acceptable levels of female representation, yet undeniably, this seems like a long and drawn out process, one for which we may not have the time for, given the speed of change at all other levels.

Through experience of working in both the UK and the Gulf, I have observed different versions of the same reality – a reality where women have to constantly re-affirm their

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credibility, justifying their presence at meetings, conferences and leadership venues. Providing positive role modeling is a responsibility that many underestimate, especially if the role model herself is going through her own struggles and internal challenges.

As a young girl with absolutely no idea of what I wanted to do with my life, I was only ever certain of one thing; I wanted to be recognized for being me, not for being my father's daughter, my brother's sister or my husband's wife. I did not want my identity to be linked to a male relation. Now, having held the position of the first and only female Vice Chancellor of a university in the Sultanate of Oman, I can directly relate to the aspirations of a generation of females who strive to take part in essential decision making, impacting policy and national development. A generation of women who seek to be recognized for their own talents, strengths, and contributions at every level of society.

Final Thoughts

Looking ahead, as our higher education world evolves, it is somewhat worrying that we are still having these debates and writing these articles! We talk about the future of education, but the future is here. The digital revolution has already taken place. We are dealing with a generation of learners who simply will not be able to comprehend our old methods of teaching and a job market that simply does not want to receive our product if it is not ahead of the digital curve. Yet, we are not preparing our next generation of academics and researchers to deal with this reality. Our response to the demands of our future have to be as bold and brave as the change we are witnessing. Whether it is male or female, our focus must be on equipping ourselves for a very different world.

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Human Participants

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Prof. Yusra Mouzughi assumed the role of President of Royal University for Women in May 2021 with clear plans to take the institution to its next level of growth and development. Professor Mouzughi is a highly motivated and innovative academic leader with over 20 years' experience in the Higher Education sector. She has a proven track record of delivering to strategic objectives and a passion for providing a quality educational offering that is relevant to the workplace. She is a committed individual with a unique understanding of both Western and Arab cultures and an ability to motivate staff and students incorporating a deep understanding of the links between industry and academia, coupled with a natural personal presence and an articulate approach to negotiation. Educated in the UK, Professor Mouzughi has a PhD in Knowledge Management from Liverpool John Moores University, where she continues to act as a Visiting Professor. She built her academic career in the UK where she worked for more than 14 years developing expertise in education management with a particular focus on Doctoral programmes. She has established a cross disciplinary research profile spanning knowledge sharing and the sustainability agenda. Before taking up the role as President of the Royal University for Women, Professor Mouzughi was the Vice Chancellor and acting Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs at Muscat University for over 5 years. Notably, she was also the first female head of a University in Oman.

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