Women Educational Leaders in Tertiary Education in Oman: Enablers, Challenges
and Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Although more women than men are entering higher education worldwide, their representation in senior educational administrative positions is paltry (Oram-Stering, 2015). This is also true in the Gulf state of Oman. Despite the enormous advancement made by women in the field of higher education, their ability to leverage their educational success to obtain senior faculty positions and progress their careers, while navigating the challenges posed by socio-cultural and religious practices and discourses in Oman, appears limited. Building on previous research in this area, this study explores the barriers faced by women academics as they progress to leadership positions, and exposes the experiences of Omani female leaders who have successfully accessed leadership opportunities in higher education.

The study aims to understand and highlight the reasons for women's uneven advancement to high-ranking positions in Oman's higher education institutions. In addition, it investigates contiguous factors that qualify some women for consideration for senior management positions, aiming to capture the views of current executives, their backgrounds and other characteristics pertinent to leadership roles. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this study, covering educational policy and administration by examining organisational and structural changes in addition to individual growth and development. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 female faculty members to attain the necessary data, providing a unique opportunity to examine the experiences of women as both faculty members and administrators, and to understand the ongoing gender imbalance within the study context.

The results of the study highlight key themes including sociocultural practices, motherhood, religious interpretations, personal attributes, institutional policies and conceptualisations of gender and leadership in the workplace. Furthermore, the study offers important insights to assist female academics seeking access to leadership positions in higher education. Moreover, it could benefit policy makers seeking to formulate plans to encourage women to pursue leadership roles in higher education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedication

To the loving memory of my mother, Tahra Salim AlKalbani (1955–2013) who taught me to persevere and prepared me to face life challenges with faith and humbleness. May Allah (SWT) rest her soul in eternal peace and grant her the highest paradise. Ameen

Declaration

I wish to declare that this thesis, or any part of it, has not been submitted for the award of a degree in this or other institutions of learning or universities.

Signature…………………………………………..

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ABBREVIATIONS

AD	Assistant Dean
AGCC	Arab Gulf Cooperation Council
BERA	British Educational Research Association
EfA	Education for All (a global movement led by UNESCO)
ESRC-REF	Economic and Social Research Council Research Ethics Framework
EO	Executive Officer
FTSE	Financial Times Stock Exchange
Gov	Government
HE	Higher Education
HoD	Head of Department
HoU	Head of Unit
ILO	International Labour Organisation
MENA	Middle East and North Africa region
MoD	Ministry of Education
MoHE	Ministry of Higher Education
NCSI	National Centre for Statistics & Information
OAAA	Oman Academic Accreditation Authority
SQU	Sultan Qaboos University
UK	United Kingdom

UN   United Nations

UNESCO   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNICEF   United Nations Children's Fund

US   United States

GLOSSARY

Term	Definition
Senior Administrator / Executive Administrator	An academic male or female who may currently serve as a senior lecturer, dean, assistant dean, director, deputy director, head of unit or head of department, who possesses a variety of higher education qualifications from a university or college (www.oac.gov.om).
Higher Education Leader	The term higher education *leader* should meet the standards required for a senior academic appointment, including substantial academic and administrative experience. This refers to deans, assistant deans, heads of units, directors, deputy directors, chancellors, vice chancellors, heads of centres and college presenters (www.oac.gov.om).
Qur'an	The sacred scripture of Islam given by *Allah* [God] to mankind, as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) over a span of twenty-three years.
Hadith	Principles and practices that make up the Muslim way of life by following the Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) own example, recorded in various authentic sources, including the Sahih Muslim and Sahih Bukhari interpretations (Beekun & Badawi, 1999).

Shari'ah Law	A religious code for Muslims, similar in some ways to the Bible, which acts as a moral system for Christians. *Shari'ah Law* refers to the Islamic system of law, as well as to the entirety of the Islamic style of life (Amanat & Griffel, 2007).
Ibadi	*Ibadi* Islam is 'a distinct sect of Islam, neither Sunni nor Shi'ite, that emerged in the early Islamic period and remains active today in small pockets of North Africa, and as the dominant sect of Oman' (Hoffman, 2014, p. 3).
Omanisation	A programme introduced by the Omani government in 1988, in order to replace expatriate labourers with Omani labourers (Al-Bulushi, 2012).

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Throughout history, women have played essential roles in many areas of public life, and have proved a positive influence for societal change. There remains, however, significant under-representation of female leadership in institutions (Robinson, 2015; Warner, 2014; Rabas, 2013; Coleman, 2011; Morrison, 2012; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Koneck, 2006). The literature highlights the challenges women encounter in accessing upper-level organisational leadership positions in comparison to their male counterparts. Women not only experience barriers and discrimination in accessing senior leadership positions, but also, once they achieve such positions, face a number of complex challenges.

A recent study by Catalyst (2016) concluded that a substantial gender gap exists on a global scale concerning the representation of women in leadership roles. The report highlights that, despite the current rise in the number of women occupying positions of leadership, these 'do not necessarily translate into greater gender equality' (p. 5). Women are under-represented as leaders in most aspects of working life, with the Global Gender Gap Report underlining that a study of sixty-eight countries revealed a greater number of skilled women workers than men across the globe, but that women represent 'the majority of leaders in only four', i.e. Iceland, Norway, Finland and Sweden (The World Economic Forum, 2015, p. 5). Hoeritz (2013) highlights that, in all institutions, women tend to be represented in positions of lower seniority (e.g. administrators, coordinators and office managers) rather than in senior executive positions.

It could be assumed that the situation is more equal in the educational realm, particularly since the majority of education administrators across the globe are women (Dougherty, 2009). Beer (2013) notes a significant increase in the number of women studying at universities, but highlights that this 'dramatic increase' does not match the 'growth in the number of women in senior leadership roles in universities' (p. 1). There remains considerable global concern relating to the low number of women who have risen to senior administrative ranks in higher education organisations. Although many researchers have confirmed the outstanding abilities of women, an institutional view of leaders and potential leaders anticipates that they will be male (Hoeritz, 2013). A number of studies relating to academia (Chavez, 2011; Krajcovic,

2011; Cook, 2010; Leathwood & Read, 2009) have noted that universities remain male-dominated, both in terms of academic culture and management practices, raising a number of issues concerning the unpremeditated factors contributing to this inequality. The disparity in access to higher education between the sexes (both as academics and administrators) can be traced back to the following: (1) women's delayed introduction to higher education; (2) women's different expectations; (3) a lack of structured networking and mentoring programmes; (4) family-related compromises; and (5) differences in communication between the genders that impede women's progress within higher education institutions (Bornstein, 2008; Doherty & Manfredi, 2006; Shah, 2004).

In addition to their lack of representation in leadership roles, women face many barriers preventing them from fulfilling their potential, including being promoted to leadership roles within their organisations. Sims LeBlanc (1994) describes these as 'those factors which circumvent or inhibit their entry into jobs, occupations, and organisations. Barriers are seen in the face of inequity' (p. 42). The study highlighted many such obstacles contributing to the lack of women in leadership positions, as well as their concentration in stereotypically feminine roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These barriers are embedded in the political, cultural, social and educational contexts in which such women live, and continue to play a significant role in stalling their advancement and mobility into leadership positions in higher education management (Morrison, 2012; Keohane, 2011). These barriers tend to be introduced by individuals or through administrative prejudice.

This situation can be clearly observed in the Gulf state of Oman. There has been a shift in the Omani government's leadership paradigm over the previous two decades, resulting in a notable increase in the number of women being appointed to important policy-making positions. This is considered to be a significant step, particularly for an Arabian Gulf society, in which the working environment is predominantly male (Al-Lamky, 2007). At the same time, Omani women (both educated and otherwise) are gradually moving away from the traditional assumption that they are best suited to the domestic sphere, and are now struggling against cultural boundaries in order to secure both their financial well-being and social status.

Despite the increase in the number of women in leadership roles in various sectors in Oman, few have made the breakthrough to upper-level management and leadership positions in higher education institutions. Despite the rapid increase in the number of women graduates in Oman, as well as the number of women enrolling in colleges as students, the degree to which they will

be able to leverage their educational success to obtain senior faculty positions remains unclear, along with their ability to progress in their careers and meet the challenges posed by socio-cultural and religious practices and discourses. It is reported that the educational sector employs the highest proportion of women in Oman, with 93% of all Omani workers in education being female, two-thirds of whom are classified as professionals, thus representing 82.7% of all Omani female professionals (UNICEF and MoD, 1996). Although the data reflects the growth in the number of women in the education sector, the statistics clearly demonstrate the slow growth in the number of women occupying the upper ranks of educational leadership, in particular higher education institutions, with women currently accounting for less than 7% of upper-level management positions at Sultan Qaboos University (The SQU Annual Statistic Book, 2014). It is notable that women are more likely to hold the position of directors, deputy directors, heads of units and heads of departments (i.e. 5%).

The SQU Annual Statistic Book (2014) stated that 31% of the total number of employees working in the nine colleges of the university were female. Nevertheless, despite such progressive indicators concerning women's employment in different colleges and centres at SQU (e.g. women represent 65.6% of the total number of employees at the Language Centre), there has, over previous years, been a noticeable reduction in the number of Omani women in senior academic administrative positions (Language Centre Annual Staff Location Document, 2013). It can be argued that, due to the availability of capable female candidates, more females should be found in leadership positions; however, the National Centre for Statistics & Information (2015) states that male Omani academics dominate the leading senior positions at SQU, with a low statistical visibility of female administrators. In addition, the University has, since its opening in 1986, failed to appoint a single female Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor or female Dean, with the exception of one recent female appointment in the College of Education. This has raised a number of questions for the current researcher, resulting in the present investigation of the issues involved, in particular seeing that a complete picture cannot be obtained solely through statistical data.

The present study, therefore, explores access to leadership positions by female academics, along with their experiences in a public higher education institution in Oman. The study examines, firstly, the impulse behind, and the barriers to, female progression in the working environment, and secondly, the impact on women's career advancement. This investigation into the experience of such female academics identifies the relevant information and provides

significant insights, in particular for those Omani female academics seeking to achieve senior leadership positions within higher education. The study highlights the different forms of bias, opposition and barriers impeding female access to leadership positions and the management of roles. The study focuses specifically on the ways female academics sanction practices within their professions in light of their personal representations, and their influence on the academic context in which they work.

There has been a number of research studies over recent years focusing on women in leadership and management positions (Fuller, 2015; Shah, 2015; Smith, 2015; Nguyen, 2012; Al-Abri, 2010; Adusah-Karikari, 2008; Madsen, 2008; Al-Lamky, 2007; Callan, 2001; Day, 2001). Nevertheless, there has been little research into the factors both obstructing and promoting the access and progression of female academics in senior administrative posts in higher education institutions in the Arab world in general, and in the Middle East in particular (Moore, 2012; Al-Shanfari, 2011; Kemp, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010). UNESCO (1993, p. 11) describes such women as a: 'select group of women who have risen to positions of influence within systems which are best described as patriarchal'. The current study, therefore, seeks to reinforce and build upon existing findings through an examination of the stories of Omani female leaders' experiences in accessing leadership positions in higher education. This study will establish information capable of being employed by policy-makers in formulating appropriate plans of action to promote and encourage women wishing to pursue avenues of professional development, and who aspire to achieve leadership positions. Chapter Two locates the study by means of a more detailed discussion of the context of Oman and the relevant research background.

1.2   Statement of the Problem

Oman is considered as one of the most dynamic Arab Gulf Cooperation Council countries (AGCC) (consisting of Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait) in relation to supporting an expanded role for women, thus enabling them to pursue responsibilities outside traditionally assigned roles (Al-Lamky, 2007; Lancaster, 2001; Riphenburg, 1998a). A fundamental statute of the nation declares equal rights and opportunities for all its citizens, and makes no differentiation between the sexes in relation to social rights and commitments, and employment in public office. This has led to a substantial increase in the female workforce in Oman. Women, however, remain poorly represented in positions of

authority and leadership in comparison with their male counterparts, including leadership positions within higher education organisations. Currently, women comprise the majority of students at SQU, yet only represent 7% of university senior leadership positions and 1% of university board members (SQU Annual Statistic Book, 2014). It is clear that female faculty members are far from participating in higher education management on the same footing as men (UNESCO, 1993). The present study, therefore, seeks to understand and identify the reasons behind the uneven advancement of women to high-ranking positions in higher education institutions. In addition, it investigates the contiguous factors that qualify women for consideration for senior management positions, along with establishing the perceptions of current executives, including their backgrounds, as well as any further characteristics pertinent to leadership roles.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to: (1) explore the success of female faculty members in the upper strata of higher education leadership; (2) provide insights into the various factors contributing to their career progression; (3) identify the barriers women encounter while pursuing leadership roles; (4) identify the impact of gender on career progression; (5) propose solutions to assist aspiring women professionals in general; and (6) implement changes in the institutions that support family-friendly lifestyles. In particular, the research examines the problems faced by Omani female academics, resulting in a detailed study capable of informing the relevant decision-makers. In this context, the study will:

1. Fill a gap in the literature, with the potential to establish an immediate impact on women aspiring to senior positions in AGCC societies.
2. Examine the relevance and applicability of earlier findings pertaining to women's career challenges, as outlined in several national and international studies.
3. Identify new theories regarding gender and leadership with the potential to influence traditional mind-sets and act as a tool for women's development.
4. Focus on factors contributing to the improved representation of women in senior positions within higher education institutions in a developing country.
5. Investigate policies endorsing gender equality in higher education institutions in an Arab country, in order to establish the potential for further improvement.

1.4   Significance of the Study

Oman was among the first AGCC states to recognise the significance of women in the national development and progression of the country (Al-Lamky, 2007). Despite the equal opportunities accorded to women in different government sectors, however, they remain under-represented and excluded, in particular when it comes to leadership roles in higher education institutions. In addition, despite their growing presence in higher education institutions, only a few women have risen to leadership roles within their colleges and departments. It is, therefore, predicted that this study will make a theoretical contribution to the body of knowledge related to higher education and gender in Oman, with particular emphasis on academic female leaders in tertiary institutions.

At a theoretical level, this study focuses on the gender imbalance in higher education institutions in Oman, investigating factors that empower and boost the careers of some academic leaders, but not others. This will identify the challenges faced by such women and assist them in the formulation of appropriate plans of action in conjunction with government policy-makers, ultimately promoting the career progression of both current and emerging female academics. This study will thus provide a number of rich case-study scenarios to underpin the impact of cultural, economic and educational factors on the career trajectories of female academics in higher education. A major contribution of this study will lie in its ability to explore the lived experiences of female Omani academics, thus offering insights into the contradictions, as well as conflicts, between the traditional cultural context and progressive policies in modern Oman.

Despite extensive research undertaken over previous decades on educational leadership in both Western and Asian countries, research has only recently begun to focus on women and leadership in the Middle East and AGCC countries (Moore, 2012; Kemp, 2011; Madsen, 2010; Yaseen, 2010). Furthermore, the majority of studies tends to focus on women in business leadership (Kemp, Madsen & El-Saidi, 2013) or political leadership (Al-Yousef, 2009; Al-Lamky, 2007). Therefore, the present study, with its focus on women academics, aims to make a substantial and original contribution to fill this gap in the existing scholarship. This study marks the first occasion on which researchers have calculated an overall percentage of Omani female academic leaders at SQU. This information provides a wider perspective concerning the position of Omani female academics in the map of leadership positions in the most

prestigious university in the country. Research is required to explore how, despite the continuing barriers, some female academics have risen to leadership posts, as identified in previous studies (Moore, 2012; Kemp, 2011; Madsen, 2010). It is expected that the data generated will provide a rich and stimulating portrait of the methods used by female academics to rise to the top of their profession, whilst simultaneously raising awareness concerning their development of leadership skills and response to the challenges faced in attempting to open doors for other female academics to serve in positions of influence across all higher education institutions.

1.5 Research Questions

The main questions addressed in this study reflect its objectives and guide the direction of the research. They are as follows:

RQ1. What factors do female Omani academics identify as significant for their access to senior leadership positions?

RQ2. What do female Omani academics perceive as barriers to their career progression?

RQ3. According to female Omani academics, which institutional mandates and governmental policies have facilitated women's access to academic leadership positions in Omani higher education?

RQ4. How can female access to leadership and gender equity be enhanced in higher education in Oman?

The research is designed as a qualitative study. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate for this research, as it investigates educational policy and administration, institutional and organisational systems and structures, as well as individual growth and development. For the present research, a single case-study design was employed, and thirteen women leaders in senior leadership positions, or with experience of such positions, were interviewed. This study is limited to a higher education institution in Oman, and focuses specifically on female Omani academics with knowledge and experience of working in this system. The conceptualised problem focuses on the discrepancy between the growing presence of women in higher education and their small number in leadership positions (Jackson, 2001).

Examining the personal experiences of these women is expected to provide an important framework for understanding the ongoing and significant gender imbalance in higher education in Oman.

1.6   Study Outline

The study consists of seven chapters, as outlined below:

Chapter One introduces the research background, providing an overview of the current position with respect to the role of women in higher education in Oman, as follows: (1) a statement of the problem; (2) the significance of the research and its purpose; and (3) the identification of the main research questions.

Chapter Two presents the context of the study through: (1) exploring the political, cultural and educational conditions of the country; (2) providing insight into the recorded implications of the delayed introduction of women into higher education; and (3) the related factors further obstructing their professional progression. The last part of the chapter focuses exclusively on Omani females, including an examination of the historical and current position of women working in different sectors in general, and in higher education in particular. This chapter considers the relationship between statistics and the monetary and political status of Omani individuals, focusing on understanding the complexities of the issues studied, and enhancing general comprehension.

Chapter Three consists of a literature review of the research on senior female academics, with a particular focus on women in higher education institutions in Oman. This includes a review of the literature concerning women's career aspirations and planning, in order to identify life experiences and situations contributing to the successful careers of these women, while also highlighting the perceived barriers. In particular, the literature review explores the following: (1) gender and leadership; (2) the under-representation of women in leadership positions; (3) gender and leadership in higher education; and (4) the status of women in higher education institutions in Oman.

Chapter Four discusses the research methodology and outlines: (1) the philosophical assumptions behind the research paradigm; (2) the sampling strategy; (3) the research methods; (4) the data collection procedure; and (5) identifies the main themes and sub-themes by means

of data analysis. This is followed by: firstly, information concerning the institutions being studied; secondly, a discussion of the role of the researcher in the present study; and thirdly, the ethical considerations.

Chapter Five presents and discusses the findings, focusing on the four research questions previously outlined. The chapter is divided into five sections, each of which addresses one section of the interview plan through representing the key themes drawn from the four research questions. (1) The first section debates the impact of upbringing and education on career development. (2) The second section focuses on the factors identified by female Omani academics as significant for their access to senior leadership positions. (3) The third section examines the challenges hindering women's ability to perform in academia and inhibiting their professional development. (4) The fourth section discusses the perceived impact of institutional policies and mandates on women's effectiveness as leaders. (5) The final section considers the proposed steps to enhance gender equity in higher education, and assist women to pursue senior leadership roles in Oman.

Chapter Six discusses the key findings of the current study in light of previous research, along with the interview data and contextual considerations. The discussion focuses on examining the professional lives of the participants within both the professional and private spheres, and how, in turn, they influence the academic context in which they work.

Chapter Seven forms an overview of the aims of the study, including the main findings in relation to the research questions and certain limitations inherent in this type of qualitative research. In addition, it examines the implications of the research findings for policy and practice, as well as offering recommendations for further research to enhance women's participation in leadership in higher education in Oman.

CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

2.1   Context

In order to understand the development of higher education in Oman, it is first necessary to establish the political, economic and social context in which its higher education has evolved during the previous forty-six years. This section examines the historical implications of the delayed introduction of women to higher education institutions in Oman, along with the associated factors facilitating or hindering the advancement of their careers. Mujtaba et al. (2010, p. 173) state that 'the leadership behaviours of people are likely to be partially shaped by their cultural contexts' and, thus, an understanding of the historical and behavioural context will establish the complexities of the issue and improve understanding.

The status of women in Oman has been influenced by the political transformation that has taken place since 1970. The circumstances of Omani women are now, in many respects, drawing level with Western standards (Al-Abri, 2010). At the same time, however, it is impossible to deny the impact of socio-cultural norms and practices that influence the lives of women in developing countries, in particular in patriarchal societies, such as those of the Arabian Gulf. In order to understand the struggles and determination of Omani female academics, it is first 'imperative to consider their role as women in society, and the effect of environmental forces that they encounter in their daily lives that influence their personalities, purpose and general outlook of life' (Al-Riyamy, 2010, p. 11). The majority of these forces is shaped by Omani culture, which is influenced by Islam. Common (2011) states that 'the important contextual factors that make Oman unique in the Middle East are as much a product of geography and history as of culture and economic change' (p. 216). Hence, it is first necessary to explore aspects of the region, in order to comprehend the issue under investigation.

2.2   The Area of Study

Oman is an Arab Muslim Middle-Eastern country, known officially as the Sultanate of Oman. According to the 2010 national census, Oman's total land area is 309,500 square kilometres and topographically diverse, i.e. consisting primarily of desert (82%), along with plains, highlands and mountains. It shares a marine border with Iran and is also bordered to the east by the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, to the west by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the

United Arab Emirates, and to the south-west by the Republic of Yemen (see Figure 2.1). Oman occupies a significant strategic location, being connected to Asia, Europe and Africa, while it also dominates the oldest (and most important) sea trade route in the world, i.e. that between the Gulf and the Indian Ocean (Ministry of National Economy, 2005). A report by the Ministry of Information (2014) states that the vital strategic location occupied by Oman 'has always been a major factor in determining its politics, options and approach to a wide range of issues and developments' (p. 5). Regionally speaking, strong relationships are in place between Oman and the five other neighbouring AGCC states. This is considered to be one of 'the most active regional forums with varied and various cooperation in economic, social and political issues' (Ministry of Education & UNESCO, 2013, p. 13).

Figure 2.1 Map of Oman

Source: maps.arcgis.com (June, 2016)

Oman has a total population of approximately 3.5 million, dominated by a young population profile, i.e. the majority of its citizens are below twenty years of age (Al-Shanfari, 2011; Mujtaba et al., 2010). This results in the majority of Omanis being either employed or still in education, resulting in a tendency for them to congregate in specific geographical areas, as discussed below (see also Figure 2.3). Ethnically, 71.6% of the population are Omani, with approximately 50% of the total population being male and 50% female (see Figure 2.2).

Women, however, make up only 27% of the workforce (Ministry of National Economy Census, 2010).

Figure 2.2 Demographics of Oman 2013
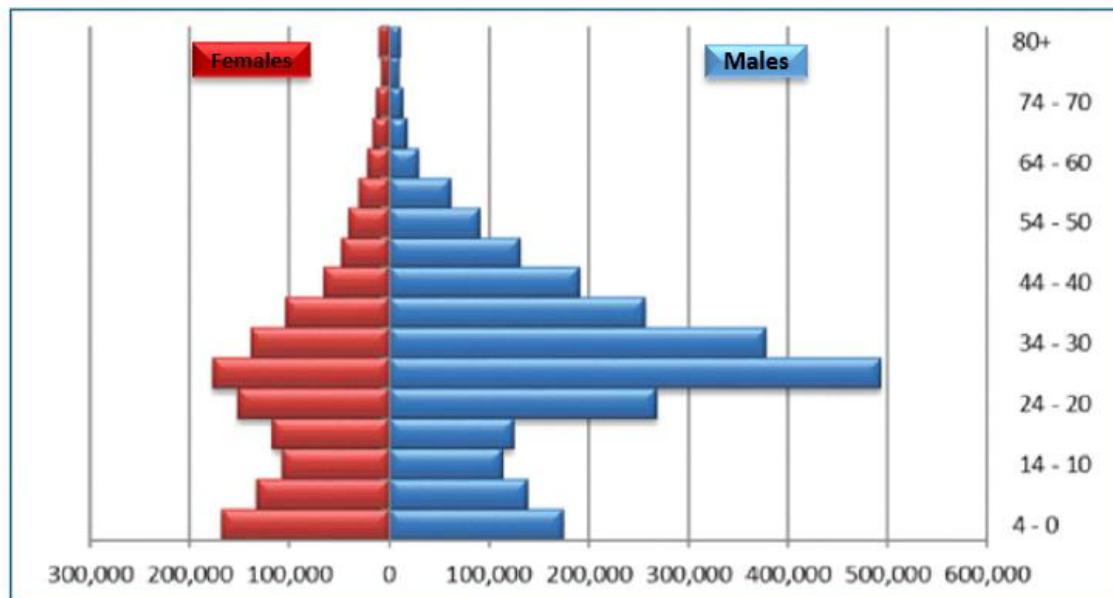
Source: National Centre for Statistics & Information, 2015

The Sultanate is a modern state, with its administrative divisions being among its most distinctive features. It comprises eleven governorates, each with their own unique 'administrative, geographical and economic significance and also comprises a number of *wilayats* (districts)' (Ministry of Information, 2014). Owing to the history of development in the Sultanate of Oman, the capital city, Muscat, is considered to be the core of the political, economic and administrative structure of the country. Statistics reveal that approximately 50% of the population of Oman inhabits the coastal areas of Muscat and Al-Batinah, while the least densely populated areas consist of the governorates of Musandam and Al Wusta (see Figure 2.3). Muscat has, over previous years, witnessed active development in all sectors and is involved in international economic activity. Al-Azri (2013, p. 15) states that currently: 'Muscat and the coastal areas have [a] culturally and occupationally diverse population'.

Figure 2.3 The Distribution of the Omani Population Across the Districts

توزيع سكان السلطنة (عماني/وافد) على مستوى المحافظة/المنطقة
Distribution of the Sultanate's Population (Omani/Expatriate) by Governorate/Region

محافظة مسندم
Musandam Governorate
31,425

محافظة البريمي
Al Buraymi Governorate
72,917

منطقة الباطنة
Al Batinah Region
772,590

محافظة مسقط
Muscat Governorate
775,878

منطقة الظاهرة
Adh Dhahirah Region
151,664

المنطقة الداخلية
Ad Dakhliyah Region
326,651

المنطقة الشرقية
Ash Sharqiyah Region
350,514

المنطقة الوسطى
Al Wusta Region
42,111

محافظة ظفار
Dhofar Governorate
249,729

سلطنة عمان
Sultanate of Oman

Source: Ministry of National Economy Census, 2010

2.3   Historical Context

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the issues under investigation, a number of historical elements relating to Oman need to be taken into account. Al-Azri (2013) notes that: 'Western scholars tend to divide Omani society and culture into two main areas: the interior, or "heart of Oman", on the one hand, and Muscat and the coast, on the other' (p. 10). Riphenburg (1998b) further identified two different identities that have shaped the history, society and economy of Oman. Firstly, there is tradition and tribal identity, which have been significantly influenced by *Ibadi* Islamic teaching. The interior of Oman (the *Ad Dakhliyah* Region – see Figure 2.3) is particularly isolated and tied to tribal traditional cultural norms, and many Omani scholars acknowledge the significant role played by tribes and tribal politics in shaping the identity of the Omani people and the characteristics of the country (Al-Azri, 2013). Secondly, there is an open and modernised identity, linked with Muscat and the coastal areas of Oman, and focused

on business and trade (Laden, 1967). Throughout the history of Oman, Muscat and the coastal area have been identified as being both socially and culturally diverse (Eickelman, 1989).

All Omanis are Muslim, with approximately half following the *Ibadi* School of Islam, which has been portrayed as "moderate conservatism" and whose principles are a blend of severity and resilience (Omani Sultanate Website). Oman has an important strategic location and has been historically linked to ancient civilisations (e.g. China, India and Mesopotamia), as well as the eastern Mediterranean, the Nile and North African regions. The Portuguese occupied Oman for 140 years (1508–1648), until driven out by the Ottomans and a Yemini leader in the latter part of the seventeenth century. Al-Azri (2013, p. 41) notes that: 'while it is true that Omani history has witnessed periods of internal and external conflict, Omani society has also enjoyed political and economic stability at different times'. In the early 1800s, Oman became the major economic power in the Arabian Gulf Region, primarily due to its strategic position on the Indian Ocean (Figure 2.1). It rapidly gained control over the coastlines of present day Iran and Pakistan, and colonised Zanzibar and Kenya. Oman remained in power for almost two centuries, finally losing its authority at the end of the nineteenth century, when the British took control over the country's economic, military and political affairs (Omani Sultanate Website).

These political developments have shaped both the structure of its population and its cultural diversity. Mujtaba et al. (2010) note that 'Omani culture is considered to be diverse and heterogeneous' (p. 176), primarily due to the population being made up of a number of different ethnicities and languages, i.e. Arab, Balushi, South Asian and African. Al-Azri (2013, p. 13) points out that this mixture is attributed largely 'to a history of maritime trade, tribal migration and contact with the outside world'. Although the official language of Oman is Arabic, Omanis tend to speak a number of other languages, e.g. English, Balushi, Urdu and various Indian dialects (as a result of the cultural diversity discussed above). This diversity and exposure have a significant effect on the Omani citizens' experiences and perceptions. This is because an individual's societal context is likely to influence her or his general perspective regarding different aspects of their personal and professional lives (Shah, 2009).

2.4   History of Modernisation

Oman is a member of the Arab Council Countries of the Persian Gulf region and the second largest country in the Arab peninsula; however, it was previously known as 'one of the least known countries in the world' (Haddad & Esposito, 1998, p. 144). Alrawas (2014, p. 1) referred to Oman as 'a country relatively out of the spotlight, unlike Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or the United Arab Emirates'.

Al-Balushi (2012, p. 1) states that Oman 'was behind in education, health, housing, and infrastructure, and was politically unstable until 3 July 1970, when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said took office'. The accession to power of Sultan Qaboos led to the country's modern Renaissance, heralding a rapid period of modernisation, which is still ongoing, while also leading to a global rise in the country's profile. Common (2011, p. 215) notes that: 'when compared to its immediate Gulf neighbours, such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Oman's development over the last forty years has been swift and remarkable'. Lancaster (2001, p. 24) states that Sultan Qaboos 'has worked tirelessly to transform his country from an insular backwater into the thriving, sophisticated regional hub of banking, commerce and industry we know as twenty-first century Oman'. The influence of Sultan Qaboos has led to Oman being rapidly welcomed into the League of Arab States.

In 2010, the United Nations Development Programme ranked Oman as the nation that had, on a global basis, achieved the greatest level of development over the preceding forty years. The country's strength lies in its enlightened leader and the loyalty of the citizens, along with its important strategic location. Omani society has been further influenced by economic, healthcare and educational factors, along with exposure to other cultures. Sultan Qaboos has encouraged the development of the government sector (including the creation of various ministries), whilst personally overseeing the structure and function of internal security, finance, defence and oil affairs (Al-Sinani, 2007). Since the start of production in 1967, the government has been supported by revenue from oil, which has been optimally utilised to support development and foster the wellbeing of citizens. Consequently, the national economy has grown by 8.3%, over the years exceeding the target growth figure of 7% set out in the government budget (Ministry of Information, 2014, p. 242).

A significant proportion of Oman's economy depends (unlike its neighbours) on tourism and trade in fish, and a number of agricultural products (e.g. dates). The nation has developed its

economic policy to ensure a continuing level of economic and political stability, and to increase job opportunities for young Omanis, while at the same time reducing its dependence on expatriate labour (Al-Gasmy, 1993). The Ministry of Information (2014) states that Oman has 'channelled a large portion of its spending into the creation of job opportunities in the government sector' (p. 242). In addition, it also encourages private sector companies to contribute towards the growth of the national economy. Al-Balushi (2012, p. 1) notes that this has been implemented through granting company owners 'various incentives such as free land, soft loans, low tariffs and free industrial estates, and has also subsidised programmes to offer higher education and training through private universities and training institutes'. Sultan Qaboos has laid down solid foundations and established explicit principles upon which Oman's Renaissance is based and continues to progress. In his Royal speech for the Council of Oman on 21 November 2015, the Sultan stated that '[w]e have always affirmed our continued attention to the development of human resources and we said that these resources take up top priority in our plans'. This strategy includes developing the human resource of the female population, with considerable focus on female education and development.

Oman's Renaissance has been based on an understanding of the country's essential requirements, both now and in the future, as highlighted in a report by the Ministry of Education & UNESCO (2013, p. 31): '[t]he country's constitution guarantees that all citizens are equal before the law in public rights and duties, and no discrimination is allowed on the grounds of sex, origin, language, colour, religion, sect, or social position'. This is clearly reflected in granting all those living in the country freedom to practise their religious beliefs and freedom of opinion, both verbally and in writing (ibid). Omanis have the right to represent their district and choose their representatives in the *Shura* Council (i.e. the elected parliament). They are also encouraged to direct their efforts towards developing the nation in all fields and across all levels, and thus 'the working [Omani] women became a symbol of the modern state and are considered a necessary human resource to increase economic growth' (Kemp & Madsen, 2013, p. 790). Women have been given the same rights as men (i.e. equal job opportunities, vote, appointment in senior government positions and running for parliament) and, as stated above, their circumstances are now beginning to draw level with those of their Western counterparts (Al-Abri, 2010). In his royal speech in November 2015, Sultan Qaboos stated:

> We are looking with satisfaction at the effort made by the government during the recent past in implementing our directives to employ thousands of our sons and daughters in

the civil, security, and military sectors, and we would also like to express our appreciation for the efforts made by the private sectors in this important domain.

2.4.1   History and Growth of Education in Oman

There were only three formal schools in Oman prior to 1970, with enrolment being exclusively reserved for male students, often personally selected by the sultan. Due to the absence of formal schooling, education took the form of *Kuttab* or *Quranic* schools, which focused on Islamic religious studies. The majority of adults were illiterate, and the inequality between the genders was revealed through unequal rights in education, as women and girls were forbidden from attending schools and given little opportunity to learn in the *Kuttab*. In Oman, as in many other Arab societies, women were also prohibited from participating in affairs outside of the household. Girls' knowledge, therefore, tended to be based primarily on any learning they could acquire from their Quranic gatherings, which were restricted to the family production system (i.e. participating in animal breeding and harvesting), always within the confines of the home and family (Al-Sinani, 2007, p. 22).

Within the context of the comprehensive development of the Sultanate, one of the Sultan's first priorities was to address the issue of illiteracy, believing that education, even 'under the shade of a tree' (Al-Said, 1970), was the most effective weapon against ignorance. The aim of Sultan Qaboos has been to foster educated and qualified Omanis capable of undertaking their tasks in a professional manner. He is primarily focused on ensuring that students excel in free education and technical training programmes (Ministry of Information, 1998). Al-Lamki (1999) notes that:

> The Government of Oman has invested heavily in the education and training of Omanis for the purpose of developing the indigenous human resources in order to assume more responsible roles in the running of Oman's affairs, and eventually, replace the expatriates who currently dominate the labour market. (p. 22)

Education in Oman has, thus, been 'transformed from being limited to the elite, to becom[ing] the right of every Omani' irrespective of gender (Al-Rahbi, 2004, p. 67). This was marked as one of the first clear departures from the traditional socio-cultural norms that discriminate against women and which had, for many years, left them restricted to their domestic duties.

Therefore, since assuming the throne in 1970, Sultan Qaboos has established thirteen new primary schools for both sexes, and approximately 700 students have been sent to neighbouring countries to complete their education. The majority of teachers were recruited from Egypt and Jordan as, at that time, the majority of adult Omanis could neither write nor read (Al-Abri, 2010). A general education system was introduced in response to the country's demands for the religious and general education of its citizens. Intermediate level students were sent abroad on scholarships to complete their education (i.e. high school). As a result, Oman has been rapidly transformed over the past forty-six years. There has been an increase both in the number of schools and in that of students (see Figure 2.4 & Figure 2.8). In 2008, there were nearly 1,300 schools across the nation, providing education from grades 1 to 12 for over 600,000 students (Ministry of Education & the World Bank, 2014).

The country has focused on increasing educational opportunities for both genders, with the number of girls exceeding that of boys by 6% (Ministry of Education & the World Bank, 2014). The goal of the Ministry of Education is to form policies that enable the education system of Oman to support the country's development, including 'self-sufficiency and the diversification of the economy and preparing Omani citizens to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century' (Ministry of Education, 2014. p. 22). By 2014, the education system, which was mainly dependent on expatriate teachers, had experienced a rapid development, and 83% of all teachers are now Omani, up from only 8% in 1972 (Ministry of Education & the World Bank, 2014).

Figure 2.4 Growth of Government Schools

	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2004	2009	2013
No. Schools	3	189	363	541	775	926	968	1010	1040	1042
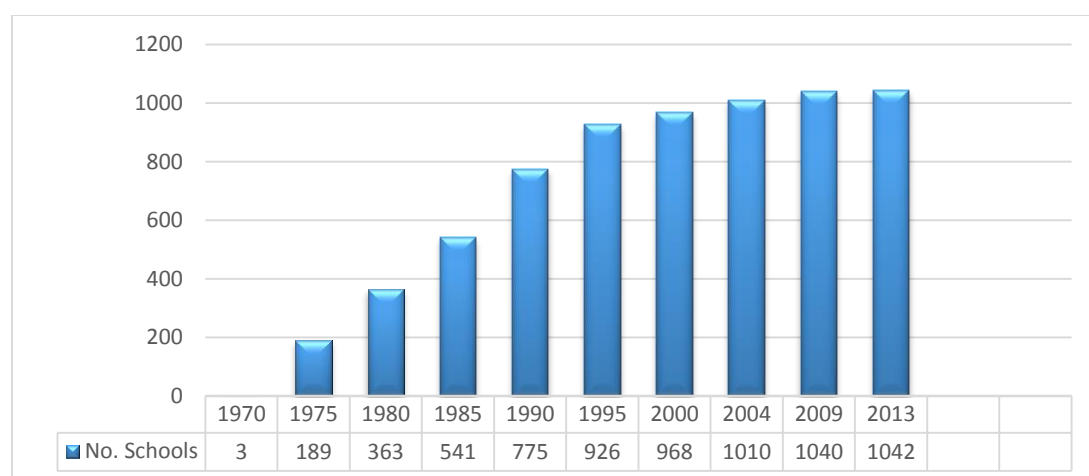
Source: National Centre for Statistics & Information (2015)

2.4.2 Development of Higher Education in Oman

The speed of financial and social advancement in Oman has, since 1970, prompted an increased interest in higher education (Al-Balushi, 2012). Since the beginnings of the Sultanate's Renaissance, the government has attached considerable importance to education in general, and higher education in particular. This has led to an expansion in primary schooling, resulting in a rapid increase in the number of students enrolled in secondary schools and an increased demand for higher education. A report from the Ministry of Education & the World Bank (2014) revealed a tenfold increase in the number of students enrolling into Oman's higher education institutions between 2003/04 and 2008/09, reaching 94%, including those studying abroad. This has led to the creation of a large number of institutions of higher education in a variety of fields (e.g. health, banking, technical and teaching) in order 'to meet the labour market's needs for qualified Omanis' (Ministry of Information, 2014).

The first government plan for higher education was the Royal Decree establishing the Ministry of Higher Education, with:

> A vision to ensure quality higher education that meets the requirements for sustainable development and a mission to promote a higher education system that: A) keeps pace with developments and changes in today's world; B) meets the requirements of sustainable development in the knowledge era, while preserving the cultural identity of Omani society; and, C) contributes to the progress and development of humankind. (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011)

Participation in higher education in Oman has increased dramatically over the previous three decades. Al-Rhabi (2004, p. 78) states that 'the growing economic importance of knowledge and skills has made higher education a necessity, rather than an option, and to find a decent job one must require further education'. Therefore, 'since building its first university in 1986, Oman has been one of the fastest growing higher education systems in the world' (Al-Barwani et al., 2009, p. 415). A recent report from the Ministry of Information (2014) revealed that in the academic year 2011/12, 9,807 domestic scholarships were awarded for BA degrees in a range of disciplines, along with 3,173 fully funded state scholarships for students to complete their higher degrees in foreign countries in a number of different fields (Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5 The Number of MSc/PhD Scholarships Awarded in 2013
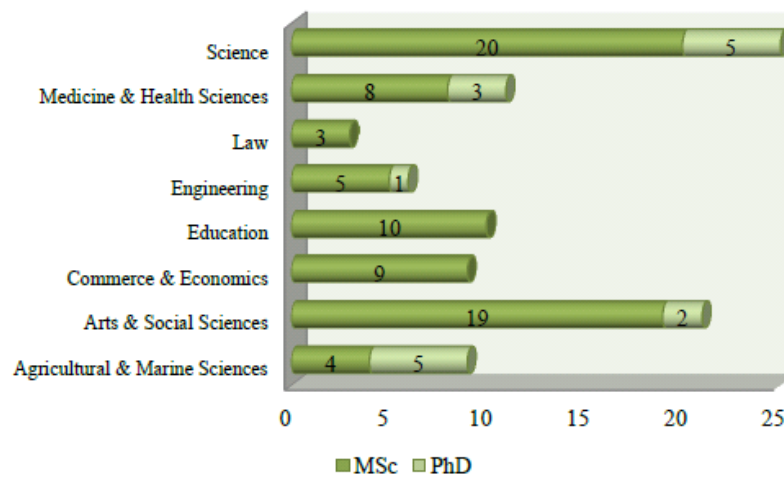
Source: Ministry of Information (2014) and Postgraduate Studies & Research Report (2013)

There are currently four vocational training colleges within higher education institutions, eleven government colleges and fourteen health institutes, all of which are supervised by separate government bodies (e.g. the Ministry of Higher Education; the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Manpower; the Ministry of Defence; and the Central Bank of Oman) and fully sponsored by the government. In addition, the rapid escalation in the demand for higher education has led to the establishment of eight private universities and nineteen private colleges linked to international universities around the world, providing opportunities for students to continue with their higher degrees. The educational status of Omani females (and that of the remainder of the population) has been radically strengthened as a result of this educational expansion (Al-Shanfari, 2011).

Figure 2.6 The Growth in Higher Education Institutions in Oman, 2006–2012

مؤسسات التعليم العالي
Higher Education Institutions

Legend:
- Sultan Qaboos Univ جامعة السلطان قابوس
- Colleges of Applied Sciences كليات العلوم التطبيقية
- Tech. College كليات التقنية
- Students in Health Inst المعاهد الصحية
- Institutes of Shariah Sciences معهد العلوم الشرعية
- Private Universities & College الجامعات والكليات الخاصة
- Univ. Abroad الجامعات والكليات بالخارج
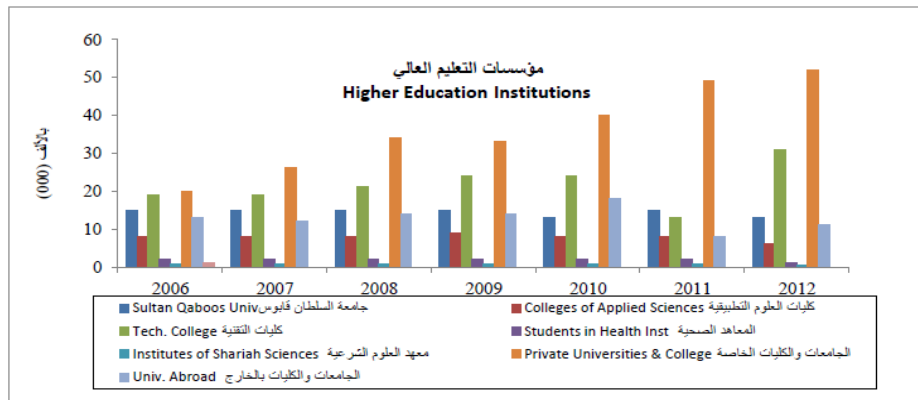
Source: National Centre for Statistics & Information (2015)

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is currently the only public university in Oman. It originated in 1986 with five colleges (i.e. Medicine, Engineering, Agriculture, Education and Science), and approximately 557 students. From its earliest days, SQU has been viewed 'as a powerhouse of expertise and knowledge for the whole of society and its institutions, and in response it has dedicated itself tirelessly to making that vision a reality' (Ministry of Information, 2014, p. 192). This has been transformed over a period of thirty years, with the establishment of a number of additional colleges, all of which offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, including doctorates: (1) the College of Medicine and Health Sciences; (2) the College of Arts and Social Sciences; (3) the College of Education; (4) the College of Economic and Political Sciences; (5) the College of Nursing; (6) the College of Law; (7) the College of Sciences; (8) the College of Agriculture and Marine Sciences; and (9) the College of Engineering. Student enrolment has expanded over the years, from 557 students in 1986 to over 5,000 in 2015, taking the overall number of students at the university to 15,521, 56% of whom are women (SQU Annual Statistic Book, 2014). SQU has thus made rapid progress, implementing high-level academic programmes and planning to produce outstanding graduates, who will make a significant contribution towards the development and promotion of the country in the global arena. SQU is considered a centre of expertise in Oman, furnishing valuable consultations and skill sets to different sectors (Ministry of Information, 2014). Since its opening in 1986, SQU has 'spearheaded the successful enhancement of education and development focused on the welfare and progress of Omani citizens' (Ministry of Information, 2014, p. 179). It has a strong presence in the academic world and has upheld its position among the AGCC's top universities (Ministry of Information, 2014).

2.5   Women in Oman

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the position of women in Oman, there first needs to be a historical overview of their status. Compared with other countries in the region, Oman has pioneered gender equality by giving women the freedom to interact in the public sphere and to join the workforce in large numbers. The lives of Omani women have been greatly enriched since the modernisation that occurred after the Renaissance in 1970 (Al-Sinani, 2007). The country has raised its global reputation to an unprecedented degree since Sultan Qaboos came into power in 1970. There is considerable evidence suggesting that under the leadership of Sultan Qaboos the government has, over the previous three generations, supported and encouraged women through increasing both their educational and working opportunities, thus increasing their productivity. Researchers have highlighted the rapid and unexpected growth in female participation in jobs traditionally reserved exclusively for males, i.e. law and science (Al-Lamky, 2007; Al-Hail, 2004). In a recent address to the Council of Oman, Sultan Qaboos (2015) stated that:

> The country, in its blessed march, needs both men and women because no doubt it resembles the bird relying on both of its wings to fly high in the horizons of the sky. How can this bird manage if one of its wings is broken? Will it fly?

The following sections provide a profile of the political, economic and socio-cultural conditions that have enabled Omani women not only to participate in the labour market, but also to seek senior roles and further development in different sectors actively, including higher education institutions. The information gathered differentiates between two main identified factors that may serve as enablers for women seeking career progression within organisations in Oman: (1) government policies; and (2) personal enablers.

2.5.1   Government Policies

2.5.1.1   *Development of Women's Status from 1970 Onwards*

As noted above, Oman's Renaissance was initiated in 1970, when the country introduced a policy of universal education that pertained to both genders, leading to an increase in the literacy of Omani women and ending the high levels of school dropout rates (Al-Shanfari, 2011). Al-Lamky (2007, p. 50) states that 'the gender scenario has also witnessed tremendous transformation, from no formal schooling for girls prior to 1970, to thousands of female

students participating at all levels of education in today's Oman'. The enrolment of female first-year students at higher education institutions in Oman now matches and (in some educational fields) exceeds male enrolment. This growth is illustrated in Table 2.7 by recent statistics from the Ministry of Higher Education.

Table 2.1 Students in Higher Education Institutions in Oman (Enrolment, Registered, Graduated) by Sex

Higher Education Institutions	2013/2012			2014/2013					
	Graduated الخريجين			Registered المقيدين			Enrolled student المقبولين		
	كلا الجنسين Both Sexes	اناث Female	ذكور Male	كلا الجنسين Both Sexes	اناث Female	ذكور Male	كلا الجنسين Both Sexes	اناث Female	ذكور Male
	No.								عدد
Sulatan Qaboos University	3,002	1,615	1,387	13,803	7,190	6,613	3,609	1,950	1,659
Technical Colleges	4,499	1,989	2,510	33,312	13,596	19,716	7,502	3,189	4,313
Colleges of Applied Science	1,233	789	444	6,574	4,632	1,942	1,648	1,259	389
Institute of Health	790	599	191	1,843	1,366	477	651	474	177
Institute of Sharia Sciences	388	187	201	528	185	343	135	38	97
Private University and Colleges	6,599	4,177	2,422	60,294	40,623	19,671	20,233	13,880	6,353
Militry and Security HEIs	164	3	161	337	9	328	202	4	198
Total	16,675	9,359	7,316	116,691	67,601	49,090	33,980	20,794	13,186

Source: Higher Education Statistics (2013–2014)

In 2012, 54% of graduate students from higher education institutions were female and 56% of a total of 32,345 teachers were female (World Bank & Ministry of Education, 2012). Women's share of earned degrees has increased dramatically since the 1990s, with women surpassing men in the acquisition of bachelor degrees in 2013 (NCSI, 2014). Furthermore, the government of Oman states that it is committed to ensuring the lack of any restrictions to women's development. This aligns with Varghese's (2011, p. 38) findings that 'the economic and social changes which took place in Oman during the past years had a great impact on the achievements of empowering women in Oman'. Although the country is currently undergoing radical changes in its developmental strategies, it recognises that Omani women should be given additional authority to enable them to achieve greater success in all working areas. Mujtaba et al. (2010, p. 176) state that the government's aim is to raise 'educational expertise in order for women to become more heavily involved in all aspects of the workplace'. This has led to a greater number of women now having degrees. According to the Manpower Survey of 2008,

the educational level of Omani women in the labour market was far higher than that of Omani males (see Figure 2.7), with 43% of Omani men in the workforce possessing qualifications below the General Diploma or lacking any qualifications (Ministry of National Economy, 2010), while 29% of women were university graduates.

Figure 2.7 Distribution of Omani Employees by Educational Level and Gender, 2008
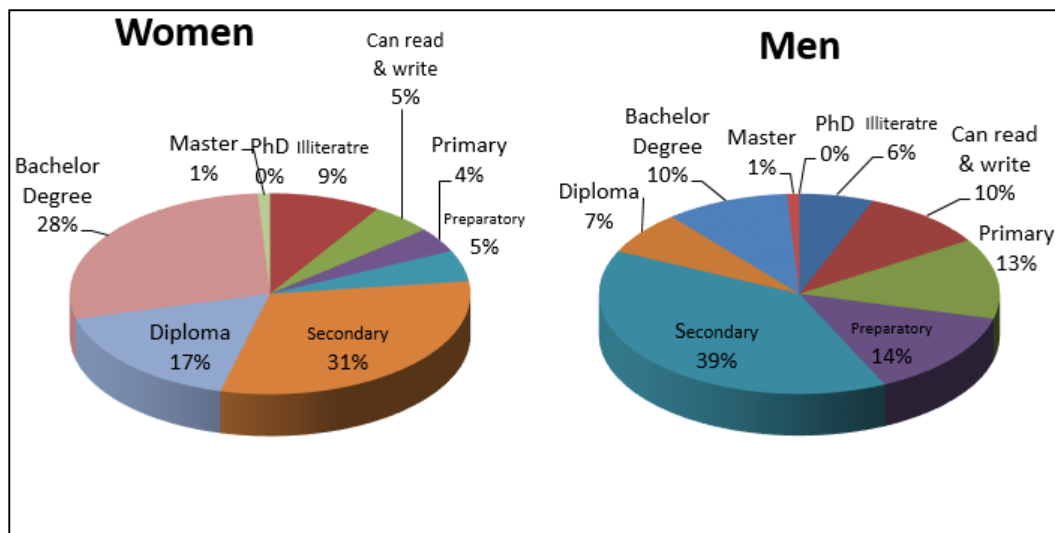
Source: Ministry of National Economy. Manpower Survey, 2008

Oman has experienced an extensive impact from female education, which has not only become a defining moment in the personal lives of individual women, but also for the position and outlook of women in Omani society. While, in the West, it was market forces and economic necessity that led to women's inclusion in the workforce, in Oman it was education (Al-Abri, 2010). 'Omani women hold the belief more firmly than men that academic qualifications are a route to gaining better positions in work' (Al-Harthi, 2011, cited in Kemp et al., 2014, p. 792). Within a fairly short period of time, women were no longer a minority in schools in Oman (see Figure 2.8). Figure 2.8 reveals a considerable change in female enrolment in schools in Oman between 1970 and 2010. Overall, there has been a continuous increase in the numbers of women enrolled in schools across all levels. One of the main reasons for this dramatic increase is that education has been viewed as a productive process, contributing to the progress and integration of Oman. Al-Abri (2010) states that education is:

The vehicle by which Omani women have been brought to their present position by a fast-track programme of action that has achieved in one generation what has taken several generations for women in Western societies. (p. 5)

Figure 2.8 The Increase of Female Participation in Schools, 1970–2010

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
No. Students	1136	31362	121644	210344	588880

No. Students
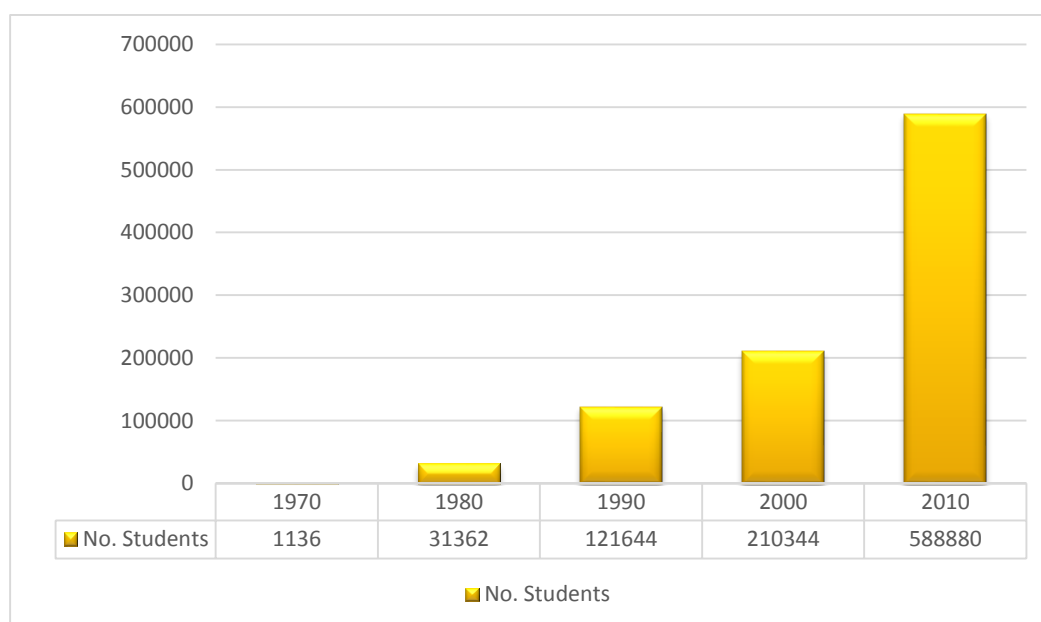
Source: Ministry of Education & the World Bank (2014) and National Centre for Statistics & Information (2015)

Thus, Omani women's educational attainments gave them the ability and confidence to fulfil roles that were once the exclusive privilege of men. This has made a significant impression on Omani society as the first explicit departure from traditional discrimination against women, and 'signalling the government's intention to open up for future generations of Omanis of both sexes the opportunity to enter into new and diverse ways of life' (Al-Abri, 2010, p. 21).

Sultan Qaboos has repeatedly called upon female Omanis to give their full support to the progress (and continuous development) of the country, thus, playing a crucial role and taking a greater part in the political life of their nation. In his Royal Speech in 2000, the Sultan stated that:

We call upon Omani women everywhere, in the villages and the cities, in both urban and *Bedu* communities, in the hills and mountains, to roll up their sleeves and contribute to the process of economic and social development […] we have great faith in the

educated young women to work devotedly to assist their sisters in their local communities to develop their skills and abilities, both practically and intellectually, in order to contribute to our Oman Renaissance which demands the utilisation of our entire national genius, for the realisation of our country's glory and prosperity. We call upon Omani women to shoulder these vital roles in the community and we are confident that they will respond to this call.

Belwal & Belwal (2014, p. 96) state that women currently make up '55% of the total workforce in Oman and contribute significantly in education, health, media, banking and other business sectors'. This percentage reflects a number of issues, the most significant being the effect of education and the government's vision in qualifying women to enter the workforce, and the constructive change in the attitudes of the Omani community concerning female involvement and participation in the labour force. In a speech in 2009, Sultan Qaboos emphasised the empowerment of women as being one of the nation's most important priorities, and considerable emphasis was placed in the country's fifth Five-Year Plan (i.e. 1996–2000) on the importance of Omani women's participation in the development of the private sector.

Al-Shaibany (2011, p. 45) notes that 'twenty-five years earlier, there were only about 8,000 working mothers in the private and government sectors taken together in Oman, compared to 32,000 now'. Sultan Qaboos has thus ensured that the process of developing the nation commences with its human resources, frequently describing women as representing half of Oman's potential. It is well known that the Sultan loved his mother dearly and since her death has maintained a commitment to women by furthering the work she established, including the Omani Women's Association, which plays a significant role in the voluntary sector and benefits girls and women. The Women's Association focuses on enhancing the self-image of Omani women and assisting them in continuing their studies in pursuit of their personal goals (Al-Sinani, 2007).

A fundamental statute of Oman declares equal rights and opportunities for all its citizens and makes no differentiation between the sexes in relation to social rights and commitments, or employment in public office. In addition, Sultan Quboos has designated 17 October as Omani Women's Day. In addition, the presence of women is found in various fields of government, including police departments, the armed forces and in public positions once exclusive to men (Chatty, 2000). This participation reflects 'the Sultan's desire to see working women gaining the trust and respect of the population' (Al-Abri, 2010, p. 22).

2.5.1.2   Women's Rights

During the Renaissance that took place in the early 1970s, the Omani government adopted a five-year development plan to achieve its objectives. During this fifth Five-Year Plan (i.e. 1996–2000), the Sultanate concentrated on the critical role of women by means of new policies and strategies to enhance their involvement in every sphere. Contrary to the assumption made by many, especially in the West, the Omani government is in favour of female participation and involvement in every sphere, with this being underlined by favourable regulations, awarding equal opportunities and equal pay, provided they have the same abilities and experiences (Goveas & Aslam, 2011). More specifically: (1) articles 80 to 82 in the Oman Labour Law clearly safeguard the rights and working conditions of Omani women; and (2) Article 67 of the Oman Labour Law awards women paid leave for maternity, childcare and upon the death of the husband. Women in Oman 'vote, drive, are members of the elected consultative council and occupy ministerial positions' (Arslanian, 2013, p. 9). In the Ministry of Manpower's sixth Five-Year Plan (2001–2005), 37% of the Ministry's SANAD[1] programme was provided to women between 2002 and 2004 (Goveas & Aslam, 2011), with increased job opportunities being available in both the government and private sectors, in order to ensure their effective contribution to the growth of the country's economy.

2.5.1.3   Omanisation as an Enabler for Women's Career Progression

A significant cornerstone of Oman's development has been *Omanisation* (the localisation of jobs), which was introduced in the country in 1988. Its aim is to prevent a continuing dependence on foreign labour by substituting foreign workers with Omani nationals in all workforces (Goveas & Aslam, 2011). This forms an effective strategy and an economic vision, established by the government to train and educate a young generation of Omanis, thus creating qualified citizens. A recent statement by the Ministry of Education & UNESCO (2013) concerning this governmental strategy notes that:

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[1] The SANAD programme 'promotes the launch of youth business ventures through the provision of loans and expertise to recent graduates. It was started in October 2001 under the Ministry of Manpower, with the objective to help promote and foster the development of small-scale enterprises in Oman' (UNESCO, 2015, p. 2).

[It] was accompanied by the increasing capacity of the private sector, thus opening wider horizons for the national manpower and moving from depending on the public sector as the main employer to the private sector, by providing the assets required to grow and expand. (UNESCO, 2013, p. 29)

One aspect of the plan of *Omanisation* is to encourage women to work alongside their male counterparts and 'to join the labour market and efficiently contribute to social and economic welfare' (Goveas & Aslam, 2011, p. 233).

The available statistics demonstrate that *Omanisation* reached 89% in the Civil Service Sector in 2009, with women representing over two-fifths of Omanis in this sector (42.3%) (Ministry of National Economy, Census 2010). The number of Omani women working in the Ministry of Education reached 83% (Ministry of Education & the World Bank, 2014). Rassekh (2004) states that: 'Omanisation seems to have contributed to the feminisation of the Ministry of Education, as [more than] 50% of all employees are women' (p. 34). The Sultan expects women to 'contribute to the movement for economic and social development, each according to her capacity, expertise, skills and position within the community' (Ministry of Information, 2005–2006, p. 29). This is further echoed by the Omani Consultative Council (*Majlis A'Shura*), which notes that:

Omani women are equal to their male counterparts in both their rights and duties, without any form or degree of discrimination. They also enjoy the right to participate in public affairs, gather and form associations, work and occupy public offices. (*Majlis A'Shura*, 2004, p. 2)

Within the context of *Omanisation*, the government and private sectors are currently initiating approximately ten training centres focusing on the development of a number of personal and professional skills in different regions in Oman, in order to improve the productivity of non-working women and encourage them to become effective members of society. The centres also provide additional facilities, including pre-school provision and initial training in information technology.

This has led to the emergence of women leaders in Oman over the past two decades, with the appointment of a number of Omani women to important policy-making positions. Currently, women play a number of major roles in the *Majlis A'Shura* and the State Council (*Majlis A'*

Dawla) and five women have been appointed as attorney generals to the legislature. In addition, Oman's permanent representative to the United Nations is female. Al-Lamky (2007) describes these leading official positions (which include female ministers, deputy ministers, ambassadors and members of parliament) as 'a significant departure from the traditional exclusive male-dominated decision arena' (p. 49). It is notable that 'the participation of women in education, employment and decision-making has grown considerably and it has resulted in the emancipation of Omani women in the twenty-first century, presenting an example for other Arab countries to follow' (Khan et al., 2005, p. 4). Al-Lamky (2007) stresses the significance of this development, in particular in relation to an Arabian Gulf society, in which men have dominated the working environment. Although these appointments have attracted considerable support, Oman still has a long way to go and may face many challenges in the future as, even where women have attained such high positions, much still remains to be done across all spheres.

2.5.1.4   *Omanisation and its Challenges*

Despite a significant growth has now taken place in women's participation, leading to Oman being considered 'the first state in the Arab Peninsula to enfranchise women and grant them the right to run for office. But, to date, it holds the second lowest rate of women in the legislature, after Qatar that has no woman representative in its parliament' (Al-Subhi, 2016, p. 56). The Ministry of National Economy Census (2010) notes that approximately 71% of men aged between fifteen and sixty-four years are economically active, compared with only 27% of women (Figure 2.10). Although there is an acknowledgement of the "tremendous transformation" that gender has undergone in Oman, it is argued that there remains a lack of equal opportunities, as 'the Omani labour force structure is heavily male-oriented' (Al-Lamky, 2007, p. 52). Haddad (1998) notes that the status of women's legal rights and their participation in the legislature are shaped by socio-cultural norms biased in favour of men. He states that: 'women are still treated as dependent on men in legal and administrative procedures, rather than as a person in their own right' (p. 148). The Manpower Survey (2008) reported a tendency in the public sector to prefer men over women when opportunities arise for graduate studies, training and employment, thereby hindering women's career progression. Many were previously of the opinion that female participation in the labour market is unnecessary 'unless they are widowed or divorced' (Al-Abri, 2010, p. 65).

Al-Riyamy (2010) also offers an illustrative example of the reflective impact of socio-cultural norms on women in Oman, pointing out that women are legally considered incapable of making factual decisions, leading to a male guardian being required to control a woman's legal affairs. This suggests that many underestimate the "invisible" political role a woman plays in her son's upbringing, including focusing his attention on matters concerning the community and influencing the decisions he makes as an adult (Al-Riyamy, 2010, p. 21). Women in Oman tended to be the driving force behind their children's progress due to the absence of their working husbands (Al-Abri, 2010). This partly contributed towards the positive stance of many Omani men towards women, which has resulted in an initial relatively positive acceptance of women in leadership positions.

Many women who could advance as leaders find their potential dampened 'due in part to men's unwillingness to share power' (Samier, 2015, p. 245). Samier (2015) attributes this attitude towards women to the 'social system and particularly the new patriarchy that arose with modernisation'. Dencker (2008) also emphasises that organisational personnel practices ultimately determine the opportunities for the promotion of women into leadership roles. Al-Abri (2010) emphasises that 'the law already enriches [Omani] women's rights by the government edict', so that the struggle against the discrimination faced by women 'does not address official or structural discrimination, but the attitudes of individuals toward cultural choices' (p. 22). Al-Lamky (2007) further reveals that (despite the transparent legal statements of equality) the unequal treatment of Omani women has continued due to the predominance of males in decision-making positions and "female legal illiteracy" concerning their rights (Al-Lamky, 2007, p. 52; Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour & Vocational Training, 1999). Despite these issues, Al-Abri (2010) affirms that the legal status of Omani women is much improved in comparison to that in many other AGCC members (i.e. Saudi Arabia), particularly in relation to the right to obtain a passport, travel abroad, run a business, open a bank account or enter into a marriage. Omani women are able to progress in their struggle for greater freedom and further personal development, with Mujtaba et al. (2010, p. 187) noting that they are considered an integral component of society.

Figure 2.9 Economic Participation Percentage for Omanis Aged 15–64 in 2010
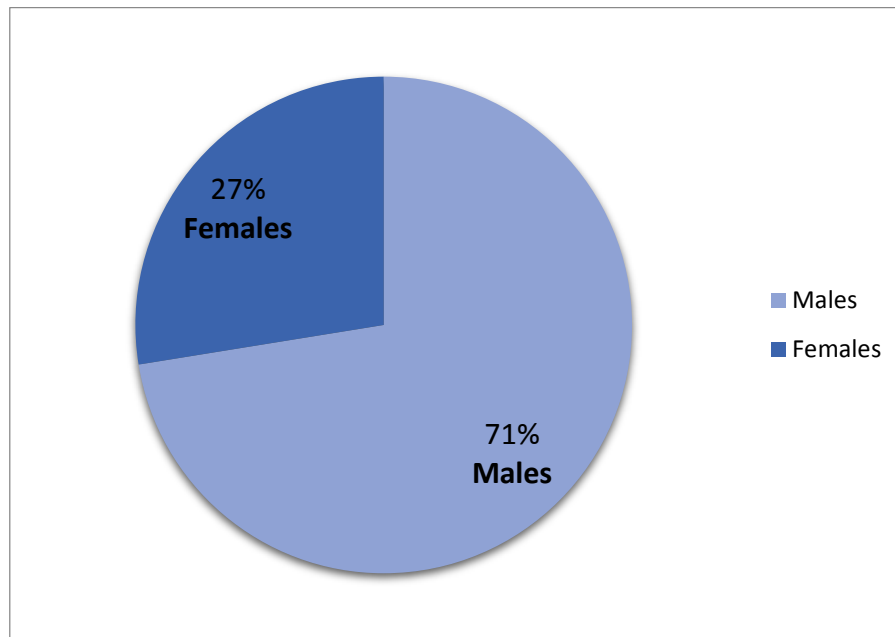
Source: Census, 2010

A further note must be made regarding a clear distinction between women's **legal rights** (i.e. as given by the government) and the **laws** derived from the social-cultural norms of families (which are guided heavily by custom and religion).Oman is still considered a patriarchal society, in which males are recognised as the main breadwinners of the family and are, therefore, given priority over women in the workplace (Al-Lamky, 2007). Recently, the National Population Committee (2011, p. 17) of the Ministry of National Economy reported that 'despite the increase in female participation rate in economic activities, it is still low compared to the participation levels of their male counterparts and that of the expatriate labour force'. In traditional Omani society, women lack equality of opportunity, due to 'a certain degree of "gender stereotyping", which influences Omani women's perceptions of "female-appropriate jobs"' (Al-Bulushi, 2010, p. 13). In addition, despite the efforts made by women and the emphasis on equal opportunities, female workers often find themselves restricted to low secondary administrative positions or in higher positions that are less prestigious than those available to men. Furthermore, until recently, many women have also faced discrimination due to employers' concerns related to the impact of a woman's family and domestic duties on her work (Al-Abri, 2010). Lahtinen & Wilson (1994) push this issue further, stating that '[l]egislation cannot by itself change the embedded power structure of organizations in which women are in a subordinate position. What we really need is a fundamental change in attitude

towards women and employment'. Change, however, is now taking place and women are eager to participate in the workforce and to improve their lives, influenced by the country's development and the new attitudes towards women entering the workforce.

2.5.2   Personal Enablers

Women's access to education in general, and higher education in particular, is a clear indicator of their status in any society (UNESCO, 1993). Arguably, access to a higher level of general education, or even higher education, does not guarantee the effective participation of women in senior management positions (Al-Shanfari, 2011; Madsen, 2010). Al-Subhi (2016, p. 14) confirms that 'education is the most powerful tool to achieve socioeconomic and political changes' for Omani women. Women acknowledge that hard work and educational accomplishment are ultimately rewarded by financial security for themselves and their families, but the opportunity to advance to leadership positions is also important to them (Al-Abri, 2010). What is evident is that education contributes to the development of women, not just for themselves but for their countries; however, this would require 'legislative back-up to support changes in the cultural attitude' towards increasing the participation of women in the workforce (UNESCO, 1993, p. 24) and the existence of solid support systems (Rabas, 2013; Al-Lamky, 2007).

The traditional Omani notion that "a woman's place is in the home" is based on an almost universal tradition among most Arab countries where the vast majority of men undertake paid work, whilst the women stay at home to care for their families. The concept of the "housewife", as found in most developed societies, however, has gradually evolved over previous decades and in particular since the Industrial Revolution. This evolution has been driven by changes in the patterns of labour along with the social and economic activity that arose in response to the pressures created by industrial development. Boushey (2009) states that:

> Women are more likely to work outside the home and their earnings are more important to the family's well-being than ever before in [Omani] history. This transformation has the propensity to change everything. At the most profound level, it changes the rules of what it means to be a woman – and what it means to be a man. Women are now increasingly sharing the role of breadwinner, as well as the role of caregiver, with the men in their lives. Even so, we have yet to come to terms with what it means to live in a nation where both men and women typically work outside the home and what we need

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to do to make this new reality workable for families who have childcare and elder care responsibilities through most of their working lives. (p. 31)

Since 1970, many Omani females (in particular those living in the capital city) have been school-educated and have reached positions that allow them to pursue their own professional goals, including the possibility of reaching the highest positions despite the existence of cultural and social barriers. A number of changes in the socio-economic status of the country has, however, come 'into conflict with the traditional cultural value systems tied to religious and tribal codes that control social behaviour' (Al-Azri, 2013, p. 17). An example of this concerns the issue of equality. On the one hand, equality is considered to be the foundation of contemporary Oman; however, on the other, 'pre-1970 tribal and religious values that are inconsistent with the pursuit of equality remain widely held and widely influential upon (individual) behaviour' (Al-Azri, 2013, p. 17). It should be noted that (in particular in rural areas) the issue of equality is viewed by the average Omani citizen largely from the perspective of cultural norms rather than the laws of the state. Chatty (2000) notes that:

The patriarchal state […] fails to recognise the transformative power of women's contemporary behaviour, which pushes the definition of 'accepted' or 'traditional' behaviour beyond that found in official documents and local regional legislation, with their largely male audience. (p. 243)

There is considerable evidence for the claim of the significant role of women's families, spouses and extended families in their educational development and career empowerment (Al-Subhi, 2016; Al-Abri, 2010; Khan et al., 2005). As Omani women became more aware of the changes happening around them, they also became anxious to move forward and explore alternative opportunities, but they could not do so without the support of their families. Indeed, the personal choices of these women may influence their plans to climb the corporate ladder, but this eagerness to move forward in gender-integrated surroundings cannot be accomplished without the consent and the approval of their families. Al-Lamky (2007) found that successful Omani women participants in her study were able to strike a balance between their careers and fulfilling their home responsibilities. They did, however, attribute this success to their supportive families and understanding spouses. Similarly, Al-Abri (2010) identifies the support mechanism that Omani women receive from home as a significant factor that contributes to their marked progression. Al-Rahbi (2004) notes that it is common nowadays in many Arab countries for male family members (i.e. fathers, brothers or husbands) to support

the women in their families in their pursuit of higher education degrees and following their career dreams even against the wishes of other family members.

In Oman, as noted by McElwee & Al-Riyami (2003), family links and powerful connections in the local cultural context facilitate access to institutions, employment and government services. Nowadays, families are more aware of the crucial role of women in the social, political, educational and occupational spheres in order to enhance their financial status (Al-Balushi, 2010). A recent study by Al-Abri (2010) revealed that an increasing number of young men prefer to marry women who are employed, concluding that the increasingly higher standard of life desired by both spouses necessitates the need for both to contribute to the family's income. This reinforcement from different members of the family gives women a better chance for educational and employment opportunities and frees them from the restrictive traditional role of homemakers. The higher education consultant, Ahmed Al-Shanfari, stated in an interview with the *Times of Oman* (2011) that 'these women are not studying to compete with men, but to change the old attitude that a woman's place is at home' (p.3).

These changes are reflected in the empowerment of Omani women in the workforce, with women playing an increasingly influential role and Oman being the first Gulf Cooperation Council state to welcome women as members of the Consultative Council, as well as in ministerial and ambassadorial positions (Ministry of National Economy, 2003; Al-Lamki, 1999; Riphenburg, 1998). Although the position of women in Oman has drastically improved over the past forty-six years, they are still far from accomplishing equality, mainly equality in progression (Al-Shanfari, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007). Al-Lamky (2007, p. 52) asserts that 'on the legal front, legislation for equal opportunities and rights often remains "ink on paper"', due to a lack of regulatory or auditing procedures concerning gender discrimination (Al-Lamky, 2007). Societal attitudes to women's right to progress have resulted in women remaining under-valued. It is no longer practical to ignore the under-representation of women in the workforce in general and their under-representation in leading senior positions in particular. Al-Balushi (2012, p. 2) notes that 'there is the need for a proper policy to ensure the recruitment of suitable leaders to run […] establishments in order to respond to the dynamic changes within the society'. The law already champions women's rights by government decree, so this is not an issue for authority or structural segregation, but rather the struggle for the acknowledgment of the contributions of women.

2.6 Summary

This chapter contextualised the research project through a brief overview of the history and geography of the Sultanate of Oman, in order to highlight the rapid expansion in all areas from 1970 to the present. The Omani way of life has been rapidly transformed, and the data outlined and summarised in this chapter highlighted the association between the demographic, political and economic status of the population, including how past and recent circumstances have affected women's participation in the workforce and their professional advancement. Insights from this chapter were crucial in developing the study research questions and the interview guide in later stages.

The following chapters discuss in further detail the issues introduced above, including: (1) traditional and cultural values; (2) religious and tribal codes; and (3) social behaviour in the Arab region, balanced by Western studies of gender equality and leadership roles in organisations in general, and higher education institutions in particular. The research further elaborates on the status of women in higher education institutions in Oman.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

There is a scarcity of research into the factors that both enable and prevent women from taking up senior administrative posts in the world in general and the Arab world in particular. The Human Development Index of 2015 states that, globally, 72% of men aged fifteen and above are employed, compared with only 47% of women (UNDP, 2015). The Catalyst (2016, p. 1) report states that 'high-potential women advance more slowly than their male peers, in terms of both career progression and pay, even though they employ career management strategies similar to men's' (see Figure 3.2). Odhiambo (2011) notes that 'improving women's participation in leadership roles is an important part of the struggle to improve the freedom, rights and opportunities of all women worldwide' (p. 657).

The literature discussed in the following sections focuses on Western studies of gender, culture and organisations, as well as gender equality and leadership roles within higher education, balanced by the available research focusing on the Arab world. The literature review illustrates distinctive issues recognised by women on both the personal and professional level while achieving and undertaking leadership roles (Cosimini, 2011). It reviews global literature that focuses on challenges faced by female leaders when accessing leadership positions in higher education, along with the personal and professional support available to assist them in overcoming such obstacles. In addition, it examines the relevant literature concerning strategies employed by successful females to balance the demands of work and family life in the Arab world and in the Middle East in particular. This study, thus, addresses a gap in the current literature by adding a unique component to the discussion of this subject.

Furthermore, this chapter offers a comprehensive examination of the organisational, cultural and societal context, with further disclosure about female leaders' wider support networks. In particular, the literature review explores: (1) gender and leadership; (2) the under-representation of women in leadership positions; (3) gender and leadership in higher education; and (4) Omani women's status in HE. This selection echoes that made by experts (locally and globally) examining females as significant leaders and in leadership studies generally.

3.2 Gender and Leadership

The current literature concerning leadership and other statistical sources from a variety of Western and Eastern countries highlight that irrespective of a recent global increase in the number of women entering the labour market, only a small number of professional women hold leadership positions (see Table.3.1). Table 3.1 provides an overview from previous research studies on women in leadership positions worldwide. The overview includes studies purposes, samples, methods and relevant findings regarding the participants' progressions and career development. The growth pattern of women in the labour force, and their representation in leadership roles, differs significantly across regions and countries (see Figure 3.1). Globally, a substantive gender gap exists in women's representation in relation to decision-making and leadership positions across many sectors of society (Catalyst, 2016). Studies also indicate that a large number of these highly qualified women are choosing to leave their careers and step down from positions of authority (Rabas, 2013). Throughout history, certain factors have hindered women from being accepted as leaders, leading to an underestimation of their capabilities regardless of their achievements. The Global Gender Gap Report states that: 'while more women than men are enrolling at university in ninety-seven countries, women make up the majority of skilled workers in only sixty-eight countries and the majority of leaders in only four [i.e. Iceland, Norway, Finland and Sweden]' (The World Economic Forum, 2015, p. 5). A small number of women in leadership positions worldwide, however, are making contributions both within and beyond their communities (Percupchick, 2011).

Figure 3.1 Gender Gaps in Labour Force Participation Rates by Region, 1995 and 2015
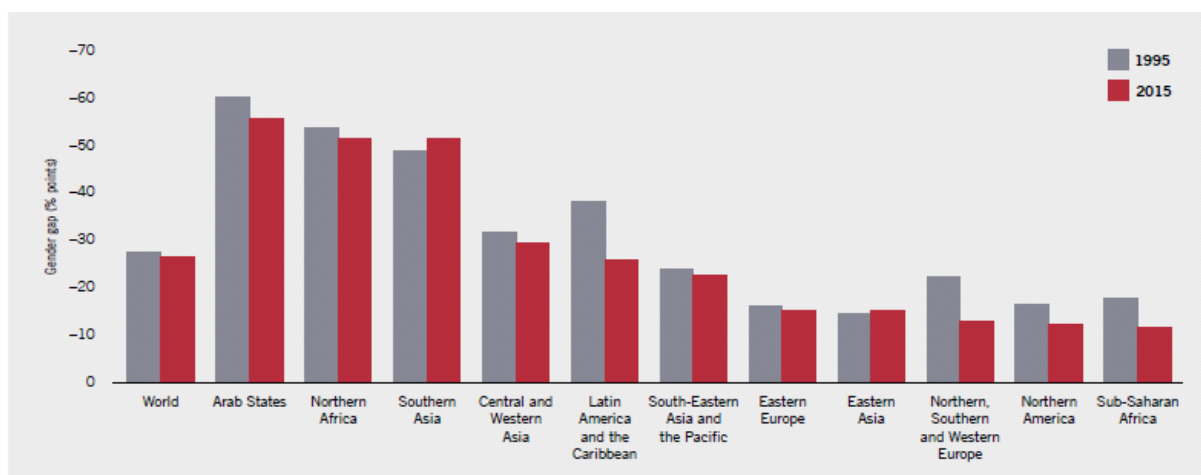
Source: ILO Calculations based on ILO, Trends Econometric Models, November 2016

Table 3.1: Overview of some studies on Gender and Leadership worldwide

Study	Study Purpose	Sample	Data collection Approach	Main Findings
Metz, 2005	To investigate whether managerial advancement of women was influenced by having children and how much effect this had on women's career advancement.	848 participants (209 with children and 639 without)	Quantitative study (Questionnaires)	The study confirmed having children negatively affects the relationship between work hours and managerial advancement.
Al-Lamky, 2007	To gain insight into the developing period of women's empowerment in Oman, endeavouring to capture chief characteristics, encounters and difficulties experienced by female pioneers in conservative, male dominated workplaces.	10 Omani women who achieved extraordinary levels of career success.	Qualitative study (Interviews)	The findings revealed that contrary to social perceptions and stereotypes, Omani female leaders' were highly motivated and ambitious. Additionally, early socialization experiences and support from their families helped women navigate their way into leadership positions. However, social values and societal expectations were among the challenges to their career progression.
Eagly & Carli, 2007	To analyze the lives of women in leadership roles by considering the major barriers obstructing their progression.	Broad (women leaders and potential leaders across many disciplines in the U.S.)	Mixed methods and document analysis of different scholars' work (scientist, sociologists, political scientists and experts in management and organizations)	The findings highlight women's pathway to leadership as "labyrinthine," or as a maze containing difficulties and hindrances. The findings suggested that women are disadvantaged in their positions due to discrimination and devaluation and not because of the assumption that there is a glass ceiling.
Al-Yousef, 2009	To map women's status in the Gulf Region, and their economic participation.	Articles and statistical analyses from the six Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC)	Quantitative gender analysis	The findings revealed considerable advances in the status of women in the GCC, but that the level of development and progression differed between countries based on certain unique factors associated with them.
Percupchick, 2011	To investigate the drivers and restrainers of female achievements in their place of work, and how these influence career advancement.	21 participants (executive level leaders, women and men)	Qualitative study (Interviews)	The findings suggested gender stereotyping and bias play a notable role in the experiences of females in the workplace and their progression towards leadership positions within an organization.

Table 3.1 Overview of Studies on Gender and Leadership worldwide (continued)

Study	Study Purpose	Sample	Data collection Approach	Relevant Findings
Davies, 2011	To review (on a national scale) the poor representation of women in posts at the top level in corporate boards in the U.K., relative to their male counterparts.	2,654 participants (senior women business leaders, entrepreneurs, executive search firms, investors, and below senior executive level)		The findings suggested to take a prompt actions to address reasons limiting the numbers of women reaching the boardroom. Offering suggestions with regard to what government and businesses could do increase the representation of women on corporate boards.
Varghese's, 2011	To measure women's empowerment in Oman by identifying: women's ability to make decisions in their households; focusing on women's solo economic decisions and the level of freedom and empowerment given to them in Oman.	150 Omani women	Quantitative study (Structured Questionnaire)	The findings showed that women in Oman are good decision makers and are more successful at household decision making and economic decision making than at social empowerment.
Nguyen, 2012	To explore the perceptions of Vietnamese female academic leaders concerning barriers encountered in their academic environment and facilitators for their career advancement.	11 participants (6 female deans and 4 male administrative leaders)	Qualitative study (Interviews)	The study claimed that the main barriers female academic faced were: (1) family obligations, (2) negative gender stereotypes about females as leaders, and (3) female academics' unwillingness to accept management positions. The major facilitators were: (1) self-effort, (2) strong family support, and, (3) a favorable or 'lucky' selection context.
Kemp, Madsen & El-Saidi, 2013	To investigate the presence or absence of Emirates' women in senior business leadership posts, to establish their position relative to an organization's staff.	954 organizations	A quantitative gender analysis	The study found that women in the United Arab Emirates were still under represented in senior companies and in top department leadership positions, although the situation was slightly more balanced in public services and health industries.
Rabas, 2013	To explore the leadership position of women working in higher education organizations from their personal experiences. The study described the motivations, fears, and barriers faced by women in HE leadership positions, as narrated by the participants.	12 participants (senior female academics)	Qualitative study (Demographic questionnaire)	The study found women were motivated internally and externally when in leadership roles, and that most barriers were externally imposed by the organization (i.e. recruitment and promotion process) and their colleagues.
Elena Kyriacou Savva, 2013	To investigate women's uneven participation in Cypriot primary schools' senior management and reasons for it.	23 participants (retired and in-service female principals)	Qualitative study (Interviews)	The findings suggested a range of factors resulting in women's disproportionate representation as primary school principals in Cyprus; e.g. a) Socio-cultural barriers, b) Institutional barriers, and c) Personal/Psychological barriers.

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3.2.1 The Under-Representation of Women in Leadership Positions

3.2.1.1 The Western Context

Although the current literature and research studies (Catalyst, 2016; Robinson, 2015; Sui Chu Ho, 2015; Morrison, 2012; Eagly & Carli, 2007) confirm women's capacity to become effective leaders, these remain extremely under-represented in leadership roles in many countries. At the global level, the Catalyst (2016) report emphasises that 'the higher participation of women in the labour force and their increased employment rates, do not necessarily translate into greater gender equality' (p. 5). Davies (2011) further notes that males and females tend to have equal entry to the workforce; however, 'this equality is maintained at junior management positions, but then suffers a marked drop at senior management levels' (p. 16). Davies (2011) illustrates this pattern (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2 The Talent Gap. Women on Boards, 2011
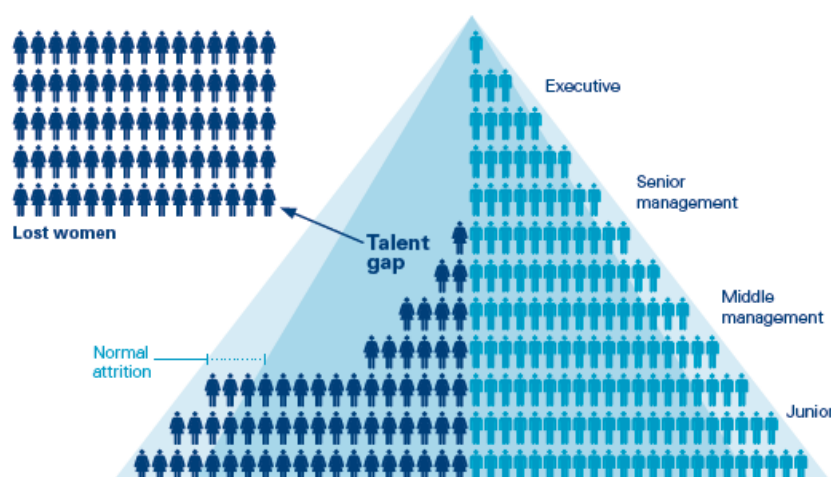
Source: Davies (2011) and Ioannidis & Walther (2010)

This phenomenon, which is illustrated in Figure 3.2, currently exists across a number of both developed and developing parts of the world. An international study of school leadership, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development (2008, p. 30, as cited by Sui Chu Ho, 2015) highlights the under-representation of women in leadership positions in the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, the UK, Finland, New Zealand, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. As reported in Catalyst (2016), however, 'countries such as Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands and Sweden have adopted initiatives to address gender stereotypes through educational programmes with a

view to promoting choices that do not fall in line with gender norms' (p. 43). This enables these countries to promote specific traditionally male-dominated occupations, as a means of increasing the development of women in such professions (Catalyst, 2016).

Evidence has also revealed that (despite the progress made since 1920) women, even in many developed countries such as the United States, remain disproportionately under-represented in leadership positions in both private companies and state government positions. Today, women hold almost 52% of all professional-level posts in the United States (Catalyst, 2014), but Warner (2014, p. 12) notes that: 'American women lag substantially behind men when it comes to their representation in leadership positions'. Furthermore, there has also been a continuous reduction in the number of women in senior management (Morrison, 2012). Despite the gains in attaining leadership roles in organisations (i.e. filling 16.9% of board seats), women in such positions continue to be devalued and struggle to achieve their potential (Morrison, 2012). Eagly & Carli (2007) reveal that women in the United States are required to navigate considerably greater obstacles to become leaders in comparison to their male colleagues. The researchers claim that the well-known concept of the "glass ceiling" (which will be discussed in the coming sections) is not an accurate boundary preventing women from reaching senior levels of authority in the workplace, but rather that women face complex (and even irresolvable) challenges at many stages of their careers, i.e. sex discrimination, domestic obligations and (at times) self-underestimation.

Meanwhile, if a woman does manage to reach the top of her chosen profession, she is required to be a 'superwoman' in order to succeed in the role and compete in what is still a man's world (Robinson, 2015). Women face a continuous struggle to prove themselves as leaders, along with their worth, leading to many experiencing health issues related to the subsequent high levels of stress (Robinson, 2015). Research has further established that leaders who fail to achieve an appropriate balance between work and their personal lives suffer from burnout, poor mental and physical health, regret, impaired relationships and unfulfilled dreams (Muna & Mansour, 2009). Many women prefer to keep silent and can question their own ability to perform in male-dominated environments (Kyriacou-Savva, 2013; Nguyen, 2012; Al-Shanfari, 2011). Warner (2014) notes that: 'it's now estimated that, at the current rate of change, it will take until 2085 for women to reach parity with men in leadership roles in [the US]' (p. 5).

A recent report from the House of Commons Library (2017) states that there are eight women in positions of power in the United Kingdom (including the Prime Minister), which accounts

for 36% of 22 Cabinet posts. This is considered the highest number ever (ibid). Cracknell et al. (2014) report that women candidates in the UK found it difficult to be welcomed by political parties. It can be assumed that a country such as the UK, which is ruled by a queen, would encourage greater participation and involvement for women. In England, as Davies (2011) states 'fewer women than men are coming through to the top level of organisations' (p. 4), further suggesting that clear plans need to be put in place to promote 'gender equality in the workplace, with flexible working and an equal pay act' (p. 4). It could be argued, however, that it will be some time before true equality is achieved in the UK.

By contrast, there has been a considerable increase in the percentage of women running for office and in senior management positions in countries such as Australia and Norway. In Australia, the percentage increased from 8.3% in 2010, to 15.4% in 2012 (Deloitte, 2015). Likewise, women's representation in Norway has recently increased from 6.8% in 2002, to 44.2%, which is considered significant growth compared to previous years, and is attributed to women's effort to 'compensate for the loss of family income when their husbands [become] unemployed' (ILO, 2015, p. 6). Davies (2011) indicates that such a notable growth in the inclusion of women on boards would 'achieve a significant increase in the proportion of female directors and thereby avoid any requirement for government intervention in the form of legislation' (p. 13). The under-representation of women at all levels, however, has not changed significantly in most parts of the globe.

3.2.1.2 *The Context of Developing Countries*

In addition to Western countries, the specific struggle faced by women is also observable in South-East Asia and the Pacific, although the percentage of women contributing to the family income there is far higher than men (ILO, 2015). For example, Yang (2008) notes Chinese women's lack of satisfaction with male dominance and the patriarchal system of Chinese society, while their participation in leading positions remains at a very low level.

In Vietnam, however, women are both the object and agent of change in empowering female leadership (Nguyen, 2012), with 'the numbers of women leaders […] modest in comparison with males' (Quy & Nga, 2008, cited in Nguyen, 2012, p. 136). Nguyen notes that women in Vietnam must stand up for their rights and 'be aware of and interested in, their career advancement' (p. 136), as an absence of such personal interest would lead to the government failing to make any commitments to further advancement (Nguyen, 2012). Thus, Nguyen

(2012) argues that in Vietnam the struggle is an inner, personal choice, rather than an imposition.

A similar situation exists in Africa concerning women taking on leadership roles. In Ghana, for example, women are traditionally 'very much involved in the most vital areas of the economy, food production and distribution' (Adusah-Karikari, 2008, p. 53), but fail to occupy decision-making roles in formal organisations. A 2015 World Economic Forum report reveals that Ghanaian women hold approximately 15% of management, professional and related positions, but that 'certain sociocultural practices and patriarchal frameworks, in particular, mitigate against women's progress' (Adusah-Karikari, 2008, p. 178). Similarly, in Kenya, women represent only 10% of political leadership positions (Odhiambo, 2011). Issues concerning historical, social and economic factors were observed as the main reasons for the disparities between male and female participation, and the lack of women in leading positions in Kenya and other neighbouring African countries (Odhiambo, 2011).

3.2.1.3 *Gender Leadership and the Arab Context*

The theories and models pertaining to Western, African and Asian countries may not hold in the Arab context (Samier, 2015) because of the differences in the social, cultural and religious infrastructures between these environments (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011, p. 9). Nevertheless, according to the Regional Gender Report of the World Bank (2006) concerning the status of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): 'women's labour force participation remained low and women were underrepresented in national parliaments and in other decision-making bodies' (p. 3). Over the previous forty years a number of rapid changes has taken place in the role of women in the Middle East. Samier (2015, p. 239) describes these as 'both constructive and destructive' and influenced by 'the social and political transformation and disintegration that [has] taken place'.

The extant literature has provided considerable evidence concerning the position of women in Islam, resulting in repeated controversy (Khimish, 2014). Khimish (2014) summarises two points of view from different periods as to whether Islam enhances or harms the position of women. The first states that Islam provides means to assess the activities of women in the public eye and that Islam maintains, rather than undermines, women's rights. This point of view has led scholars to believe that the Quran awards women a special status that upholds their rights and clarifies their obligation to their families. Islam gave women the right to

education, work and inheritance and the right to choose their spouses. According to most interpretations of Islam, women are able to exercise their rights to join different working fields 'as long as it does not compromise the fulfilment of their "primary role" in the family' (Neal, Finlay & Tansey, 2005, p. 479). Women are considered as having equal importance to men within society in the Quran and are not viewed as inferior (Abdul-Ati, n.d., cited in Mahmood, 2015). Islam promotes gender equality:

> O mankind, keep your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate (of same kind) and from them twain has spread a multitude of men and women. (The Quran 4:1)

Goveas & Aslam (2011, p. 233) provide an in-depth analysis of the rights of Muslim women, reporting that '[m]en and women are accorded equal rights in Islam'. This view is also supported by Al-Yousef (2009, p. 2), who argues that 'Islam established a woman's equality in her humanity with men; neither gender can be superior because it would be a contradiction of equality'. El-Saadawi (1982, p. 201) states: 'the Qur'an warns men not to be conceited and condescending towards women because of the responsibilities and privileges bestowed upon the male sex by *Allah* [God]'. In this context, the Quran advises men as follows:

> Do not be condescending and talk much of your kindness because Allah has preferred you to others [...] Men have the right to what they can earn by their efforts and women have the right to what they earn also. (Quoted in El-Saadawi, 1982, p. 201)

The second view states that the instructions of the Quran impose restrictions on the public contribution of women in society (Khimish, 2014). The scholars supporting this view argue that Islamic law 'in most Muslim countries does not provide for the principle of sex equality within the family' (Khimish, 2014, p. 135). Furthermore, recent religious movements in the Arab world have raised a large number of issues concerning women's place in society. In many cases these are intended to 'restrict women's roles and compel them to go back to their previous state of seclusion' (Khimish, 2014, p. 133). A number of studies has discussed the position of women in the Arab world from a cultural and proclaimed religious perspective. Sidani (2005, p. 508) argues that 'the strict religious understanding given by some scholars, in such countries as Saudi Arabia, could be understood as an unconscious attempt to provide a religious justification for various cultural norms and practices'. Al-Munajjed (1997) further states that:

Misconceptions about the role of women in the Islamic society can only be extirpated by differentiating between the teachings of Islam as a religion and a way of life and local customs and traditions, which are often conceived as part of it. (pp. 31–32)

According to Abdul-Ati (n.d., cited in Mahmood, 2015), Muslim scholars have argued that Muslim women have frequently been unable to practise their freedom and the rights given to them by Islam because of tribal mindsets and social-cultural norms. El-Saadawi (1982) confirms that women in the Arab world are exposed to 'different forms of oppressions (national, class and sexual)' (p. 206). She also emphasises, however, that this oppression is not part of Islamic practice, resulting instead from the patriarchal class system reinforced in Third World countries (El-Saadawi, 1982). The cultural norms reinforcing these practices impact on women's professional performance and participation (Shah & Shah, 2012), frequently forcing them to adjust their behaviours and contribution in accordance with what is deemed best for society. Khimish (2014, p. 134) underlines that 'there are always emphases that the social traditions and local customs are the main reason behind women's sufferings, rather than the religion itself'. This view is supported by Shah's (2009) assertion that:

The Islamic philosophy of education, or the Quranic teachings, may not be gender discriminatory, but the discourses that have been produced in articulation with multiple social, economic, political and cultural factors in different Muslim societies and legitimised in the name of religion, are often gendered. (pp. 132–133)

These researchers consider women's self-confidence as being influenced by society's expectations of female roles and characteristics, thus influencing women's exercising of leadership roles, and future achievements and successes (Al-Shanfari, 2011).

These findings suggest that the discrimination and under-representation of women 'reflect […] the traditional bias of leadership [as] a male domain' (Sikdar & Miltra, 2012, p. 146). Cooke (2000) states that Muslim women are 'cultural symbols, who are to remain with and preferably behind, their men. What matters, as always, is that women should be silent' (p. 153). Yaseen (2010) and Cooke (2000) share a concern that 'Arab traditions are coming under fire as more women are expressing their feelings of inequality and discrimination' (Yaseen, 2010, p. 64). Yaseen (2010) states that Arab women 'have been subject to restrictions of their rights and freedom', thus supporting Cooke's (2000) discussion of the way some Arab women are finding 'new ways of responding to age-old silencing strategies and are constructing from the margins

a discourse of power' (p. 152). Yaseen (2010) asserts that 'most of these practices [of discrimination] are based on culture and traditions, rather than religious beliefs' (p. 64).

A further note must be made that contrary to claims that Islam oppresses women and restricts them from seeking knowledge and being involved in the workforce, the Prophet Mohammed urged women to go to mosques and take part in religious events (Ahmed, 1992). In the early Muslim communities, women were given power and leadership and 'were active in all spheres, including Qur'anic interpretation and the transmission of Traditions and (were) also soldiers' (Cooke, 2000, p. 171). For example, the majority of the prophet's widows made considerable contributions to the *hadith* and many were considered reputable scholars, sought out for their knowledge. Samier (2015) argues that much of the destructive images and 'negative stereotyping regarding women in Muslim countries [are] based on practices that issue from politics and culture' (p. 244) rather than representations of the *Quran* and *Sunna* (ibid).

The opening up of economies in the Arab region for foreign investment has recently created a need for skilled labour, which has transformed both the composition of the workforce in this region and the nature of women's employment (Benson & Yukongdi, 2006). The World Bank report (2006) notes that, in some Arab countries (e.g. Algeria, Iran, Libya, Oman, Kuwait and Tunisia) the female share of the total labour force increased by at least 3% between 2000 and 2005, but 'the opposite occurred in Morocco and Djibouti, where the percentage of women in the total labour force actually decreased by 1%' because of political disputes in both countries (The World Bank, 2006, p. 4). In general, women are increasingly being permitted to enter the workforce and rise to leadership positions in both the public and private sectors in Arab states (Salloum, 2003; UNDP, 2002, p. 135; Al-Lamki, 1999; ILO, 1998, p. 218). Cooke (2000) claims that Muslim Arab women are 'becoming the agents of possible transformations in the societies in which their voices had traditionally not been heard' (p. 150). Al-Abri (2010, p. 59) affirms that 'women's educational levels [in Islamic and Arab countries] have changed their social status, with an observed increase in the age at first marriage, reduction in fertility and increases in the proportion of women entering the labour market'.

Women in the Arab world have been undergoing a continuous struggle over a number of decades to prove themselves and their worth in the workplace (Yaseen, 2010; Ameen, 2001). A small number of female Arab scholars have worked on constructing a new distinctiveness in order to occupy a rhetorical position to assist their involvement in the construction of knowledge (Cooke, 2000). Regardless of the fact that Middle Eastern women have achieved a

similar educational level to that of their male colleagues and their continued involvement in the workforce, however, they remain marginalised and excluded from senior managerial roles (The World Bank, 2006). This inequality has been primarily attributed to the patriarchal nature of Arab culture, which traditionally considers men as superior to women (Al-Bulushi, 2010). Dana (2009) notes that culture in such societal settings 'raises barriers for women's aspirations, simply because of the attitudes, learned behaviours and routine practices that are practised and reinforced' (p. 69). Similarly, Chatty (2000, p. 246) states that: 'women have been and continue to be, manipulated to represent symbolically the cultural integrity of the dominant culture in the country'. The result is that women fail to reach the same level of success as men, since obstacles (i.e. gender discrimination) act to trap women into lower management levels within their organisations (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011; Metcalfe, 2008; Moghadam, 2004). This, however, varies between countries and across cultures. Sidani (2005, p. 508) notes that 'in countries such as Lebanon and Egypt, the existence of a very expressive feminist movement, together in an environment of relative openness, has led to increased women's participation in the work area'. It is evident that women are confined to certain roles, imposed by their cultures and societies, and which reflect the way they view themselves and their participation in their community (Al-Shanfari, 2011) and that this, in turn, leads to a 'great intention in their attempts to reconcile their professional and traditional roles' (UNESCO, 1993, p. 21).

Previous reviews have demonstrated that women in certain AGCC countries have experienced changes and challenges similar to other Middle Eastern countries. The literature from the Arabian Gulf notes that citizens of the AGCC share, beside the geographical and historical context, many similar cultural elements, personal traits and managerial practices, which are deeply rooted in common values (Al-Twaijri & Al-Muhaiza, 1996). The available literature confirms that women have experienced a rapid social upheaval since the discovery and production of oil in the mid-1930s (Hamdan, 2005). It has been observed that women in AGCC societies are viewed as 'social agents', fulfilling a role. This means that economic activity is not allocated by gender, but through the family structure or production unit, wherein roles are assigned primarily according to 'natural capacities' (Al-Oraimi, 2013, p. 80).

The data presented in Figure 3.3 [adapted from the work of Al-Yousef (2009, p. 6)] reveals that the average percentage of female participation in all six countries is 19.2%, i.e. one fifth of the total labour force is female. Nevertheless, this varies between countries, with the highest levels of participation found in Qatar and the lowest in Oman. This picture, however, has

changed over the last couple of years with women representing over two-fifths of Omanis in the Civil Service Sector (42.3%) (Census 2010).

Figure 3.3 Female Labour Participation in the AGCC (2008)
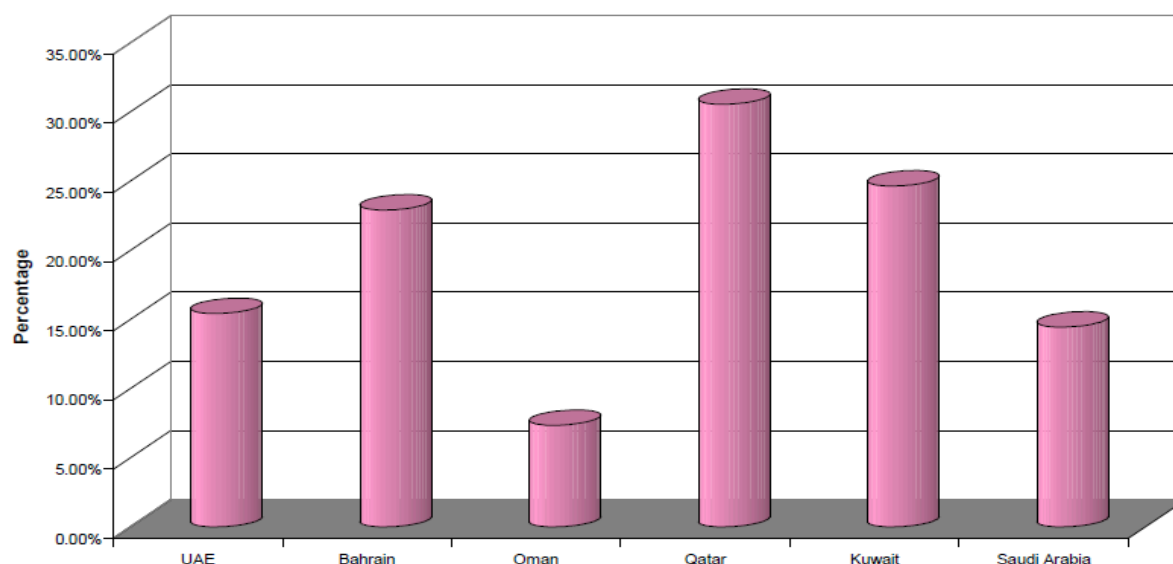
Source: Al-Yousef (2009)

Women in the AGCC have been, as in many Arab neighbouring countries, affected by 'society's traditions' (Al-Yousef, 2009, p. 3), as it is widely believed that they should remain within the domestic sphere (Al-Abri 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007). When they do manage to become involved in the work sector, it tends to be in clerical or support jobs, e.g. education and nursing (Al-Lamky, 2007, p. 49). It has been observed that much of 'the limited participation of women in the labour force is related to Arabian Gulf traditions and values which date back to the pre-oil era' (Abdalla, 1996, p. 38). Goveas & Aslam (2011, p. 236) emphasise that 'the majority of these [female] workers are concentrated in lower positions in the organisational hierarchy, with a small percentage in decision-making positions'. Al-Lamky (2007, p. 50) found that in the labour market of Arabian Gulf societies 'there is an internalised mind set, which gives preferential treatment, justification and acceptance for professional and leading men over women'. It is anticipated that this attitude towards Arabian Gulf women is 'not expected to change in the immediate future' and that 'the power of patriarchy and tradition still hold sway' (Al-Abri, 2010, p. 67).

Figure 3.3 shows female participation in the labour market across the AGCC and how it differs between states. There are, indeed, differences in the status of Gulf women, and the way they

have progressed, from one nation to another (Al-Yousef, 2009, p. 4). The reasons for this might lie on cultural factors, as in Qatar, religious factors, as in Saudi Arabia, and tribal influence, as in UAE (Al-Subhi, 2016). For example, women's participation in the workforce in Qatar has reached approximately 30.5%, in Kuwait it is approximately 25%, while it remains at a low level in Saudi Arabia and in the UAE (Al-Yousef, 2009). Meanwhile, in Oman, in a gender population of nearly 50/50, women currently make up 43.3% of the total workforce in the public sphere (Census, 2010). This, however, is probably the outcome of the economic growth and the efforts of the Omani government over time towards encouraging women to enter the workforce.

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to delve into the factors of these statistical discrepancies, it is noteworthy that a number of researchers believe that the differences among AGCC countries in terms of their socio–political systems and the structures governing women's opportunities reflect attitudes towards women (Al-Shanfari, 2011; Abdalla, 1996). Al-Doubi (2014) notes that in Saudi Arabia, in addition to governmental limitations on women's rights, there are considerable barriers to opportunities for Saudi women, resulting from the societal attitudes of many religious leaders, scholars, writers and even among women themselves. Al-Munajjed (1997) further confirms that there remain many Saudis who view female involvement in the workforce as 'non-essential and even against cultural values' (p. 2), while 'in Saudi Arabia the societal regime for females of all ages is still highly repressive' (Al-Abri, 2010, p. 93). The imposition of these social roles and gender stereotypes on women acts to inhibit their participation in the workforce and their striving towards leadership opportunities.

Therefore, the majority of scholars agree that attitudes towards Arab women's roles in society result in women being locked into constraining traditional roles. Soweid (2014) argues that 'organisational, legislative and local infrastructure is needed in order to ameliorate the condition of working mothers in the Middle East region' (p. 200). Some researchers are convinced that 'despite the appearances of opulence, moderate advancement and educational achievements' (Abdalla, 1996, p. 37), the contribution of Arab women in the workplace has not yet evolved in comparison to their male counterparts.

3.2.1.4. Gender in Omani Society

Despite current progress as regards the enhancement and empowerment of women's political and social position in Oman, 'there continue to be pronounced imbalance across genders, reflecting local values, social traditions and historical gender roles" (UNDP, 2015, p.11). Studies within the Omani context suggest women's career options in Oman are constrained by social cultural contexts and societal belief systems that delineate gender practices and roles (Al-Azri, 2013; Al-Bulushi, 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007; McElwee & Al-Riyami, 2003). McElwee and Al-Riyami (2003, p. 340) note that in Oman (as in the majority of the modern nation-states of the Middle East), women, despite having apparent equality, 'are highly under-utilised, due to interactions of cultural, economic and educational forces that influence choices of career, career progression and labour marketability'. Additionally, 'challenges such as work-life balance constrain [Omani women's] quality of work life' (Belwal & Belwal, 2014, p. 96), in combination with the limited opportunities available to them economically, educationally, and in the job market itself (Al-Riyamy, 2010).

In recent years, female Omanis have been forced to navigate obstructive behaviour on the part of others, because of dominant assumptions (often presented as religious beliefs), that have fed into gender inequity, limiting women's progression in the work place. Women's participation within the labour force is complicated 'by the fact that the women are subject to a number of coded and unwritten social mores [customs] in a patriarchal, male dominant society' (McElwee & Al-Riyami, 2003, p. 339). Al-Bulushi (2010) explains, 'these culturally-defined expectations of women as homemakers are more marked in the deeply traditional rural areas of Oman' (p. 238). Arguably therefore, despite clear legal statements concerning equality issued by the government, gender inequalities are manifest and visible when examining the pattern of career progression across the gender divide in the workplace, especially in the rural regions.

Undeniably, practices in many parts of society 'are and have been gender discriminatory and oppressive for women' (Shah, 2017, p.5). The literature produced pertaining to, and from within the Omani context, conceptualizes this discrimination in reference to its status as an Arab Islamic country:

> Men and women in Muslim societies grapple with many gender issues ranging from the extent of the women's education and employment to their role in the family and the nature of their religious leadership and authority in Islam. (Esposito, 2011, p.102)

Traditionally in Omani society, men hold 'subordinate roles in the domestic [sphere] which often gets transferred to professional domain' (Shah, 2017, p.6). Thus, women were formerly reluctant to aspire to organizational leadership roles, due to religious presumptions (related to male dominance in the corporate sphere) about the consequent pressures this might place on their roles as wives and mothers (Al-(AlLamky, 2007; Rahbi, 2004). Without a doubt, Omani females' lives are driven by a heap of complex aspects coming from socio-cultural norms and deeply embedded assumptions made regarding men as natural leaders, which define limits and impose restrictions on women's progress towards influential positions. Despite the possible conflicts faced by Omani women on their journey towards equality, there is a clear indication that there is a transformation in cultural and traditional values arising from the status of women and the crucial part they play in the development of Oman. These aspects will be further investigated in the following chapters.

3.3   Gender, Leadership and Higher Education

3.3.1   Current Realities

In both the Western and Arab worlds, women have played a number of important roles in the history of higher education, often without recognition. Table 3.2 provides an overview of few examples from prior research in the field of leadership in higher education. The overview includes studies purposes, samples, methods and relevant findings regarding the participants' performance and career development. While some major findings (facilities and barriers) were discussed in this chapter, some references will be addressed in the following chapters.

Many studies have revealed that 'gender issues have been one focal point of research in the field of education, especially as they relate to the role women play in leadership capacities at present' (Morrison, 2012, p. 20). Coleman (2011) states that leadership:

> is a very gendered concept. In a wide variety of cultural contexts, leadership continues to be identified with the male. Even though women occupy positions of leadership and responsibility, there is a tendency to assume that the rightful leader is male. (p. 37)

Table 3.2 Overview of Studies on Gender and Leadership in Higher Education worldwide

Study	Study Purpose	Sample	Data collection Approach	Relevant Findings
Lahtinen & Wilson, 1994	To discuss barriers women face in their career progression in organizations	This article dealt with three different tools – structural (laws), individual (assertiveness training) and intergroup (mentoring)	The research study used an analytical approach.	The article suggested, that to get to equality in the workplace, there should be fundamental changes in attitudes in the organizations and emphasis placed on the importance of mentoring, training, flexible working hours and child care facilities for all employees.
Adusah-Karikari, 2008	To examine the experiences of women in Higher education (HE) in Ghana, highlighting the factors that helped them achieve their positions and challenges they faced as faculty and administrators	20 faculty members and administrators	Qualitative study (interviews and document analysis)	The results highlighted the underrepresentation of women in HE due to common conflicts in managing the roles of being wives, mothers and workers. The results also showed how the patriarchal culture of universities undermine women's authority and border their individuality. The study proposed policies that could be adopted to promote gender equality in HE.
Tripathi & Mukerji, 2008	To examine the prospect of universities in Arab Gulf Cooperation Countries (AGCC)countries on the various parameters of academic excellence, along with highlighting the progressing and development opportunities available within HE institutions	62 universities in AGCC	Quantitative study	The study suggested and developed a policy document that covered strategies that could help faculty face challenges they encounter in their HE institutions.
Kelly, 2011	To investigate a group of chief academic officers within academia and their life paths towards top positions	12 women CAOs	Qualitative study (interviews)	Women identified several barriers that limited women Chief Officer's career aspirations such as gender, family, racism, socioeconomic factors and societal expectations. The participants also offered future improvement strategies.
Hoeritz, 2013	To explore the impact of stereotypes on women as leaders in HE administration and how women are viewed as not having the qualities necessary to be leaders	3 participants (female leaders with many years of experiences in HE field)	Qualitative study (interviews)	The findings confirmed the presence of stereotypes in the women's work place and that the stereotypes gave the public general expectations of how women should behave in the roles assigned to them.

Table 3.2 Overview of Studies on Gender and Leadership in Higher Education worldwide (continued)

Study	Study Purpose	Sample	Data collection Approach	Relevant Findings
Morley, 2014	To discuss women academics' experiences and to investigate the under-representation of academic experts and producers in the global academy	72 participants	Quantitative study (questionnaires)	The findings demonstrated how sociocultural and organizational practices had a strong effect on women's active involvement in the academic world.
Khmush, 2014	To discuss the debates on Arab women's living in general, and specifically, their participation in public spheres. The study investigated perceptions about Islam and whether they have harmed or improved women's position	Studies, articles and books in both English and Arabic were used in this research.	The research study used an analytical approach by presenting and comparing different views regarding Arab women.	The study observed that social customs and cultural traditions, dominating in many Arab countries, are the reasons behind the declining position of Muslim women, more so than the religion itself.
Midkiff, 2015	To analyse women faculty's critique of feminism and their experiences as scholars in the North American university context	5 participants (at the levels of assistant, associate and full professor)	Qualitative study (interviews and document analysis of participants' curriculum vitae)	The findings suggested the existence of a wide gender gap in specific STEM fields at the investigated institutions. The study observed relationship conflict between the female faculties within the organizations.
Kem, 2015	To examine the shared experiences of current university presidents and deans to gain evidence to support the next generation of women leaders in academia	87 female presidents participated in the survey and 5 in the interviews.	Mixed methods study (survey and interviews)	The study revealed that women leaders having mentors assisted them in their career path. It also revealed that mentors with related goals, who assisted as role models, increased the effectiveness of mentoring.
Bullough et al., 2015	To propose a new framework that can be used in entrepreneurship education and training (EET), along with female leadership development programs for entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs	Female entrepreneurs as well as non-entrepreneurs (No number was provided by the researchers)	The framework was driven extensively by existing literature on women's leadership and entrepreneurship and women's entrepreneurship education and training.	The study concluded that having EET programs for women proved to be beneficial and effective for both academics and practitioners interested in creating EET programs with sustainable value.
Shah, 2017	To assess the impact of dominant discourses on Muslim women's academic professional lives and the women's personal perception of gender equality and its implications on their professional progression	3 Malaysian universities	Qualitative study (interviews)	The finding observed that inequality was noticeable among the female academics' patterns of career development and across the gender divide. At their work places, in the distributions of senior leading roles, women were absent in the top positions at the colleges and universities.

A 2012 EfA Global Monitoring Report identified that on a global basis there are more women than men enrolled in higher education institutions (UNESCO, 2015). Regional variations exist (with fewer women than men enrolled in higher education in sub-Saharan Africa, and fewer men than women studying at this level in North America, Western Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean) but, interestingly, this 'dramatic increase in the number of women students has not been matched by growth in the number of women in senior leadership roles in universities' (Beer, 2013, p. 1). The under-representation of women (in particular at the higher levels of academia) has been well-documented over a number of years (Shah, 2015; Chavez, 2011; Krajcovic, 2011; Cook, 2010; Leathwood & Read, 2009). Similarly, Oram-Sterling (2015) notes that 'even with women accessing education at a much higher rate than men across the globe, their numbers in educational leadership positions are still sparse' (p. 3). Thus, while globally the majority of educational employees are women, this is not the case when it comes to leadership positions (Dougherty, 2009 cited in Oram-Sterling, 2015). Donovan et al. (2005, p. 249) further observe that in higher education 'a much greater proportion of women are concentrated in junior positions, while fewer and fewer women gain senior academic posts'.

In practice, even in the world's most developed countries, universities remain male-dominated, both in terms of academic culture and management practices (Chavez, 2011; Krajcovic, 2011; Cook, 2010; Leathwood & Read, 2009). Furthermore, there is a widespread assumption that senior management and executive roles within organisations are exclusively male (Heilman, 2001). Singh (2008, cited in Morley, 2014) states that 'in 70% of Commonwealth countries, all universities were led by men in 2007' (p. 118). Cunneen & Harford (2016) note that educational leadership 'remains a male dominated arena' (p. 147), further stating that the structure and image of the leader within the workplace 'remain[s] effectively vested in the masculine' (Cunneen & Harford, 2016).

Over previous decades, women have participated in higher education as students, staff, faculty members and administrators, frequently serving in the background while men have occupied the dominant and visible leadership roles. While not all of these roles are typically associated with leadership, women have contributed significantly to the evolution of higher education. It should be emphasised that although at present academia is not a male environment, inequality still exists in higher education, and women remain a long way from participating on the same footing as men. The percentage of women in higher education may differ among countries, but there are many similarities.

It is, therefore, crucial to identify the significance of gender in relation to females' experience and practices of authority and power across societies and cultures. Hall (1996) states that 'as individuals, they cannot be separated from the society and culture in which they work and in which assumptions about men and women in public and private, in work or within the family, prevail' (p. 12). Gender disparities in access to higher education can be traced back to: (1) a delayed introduction to higher education; (2) the different expectations of women; (3) a lack of structured networking and mentoring programmes; (4) compromises relating to family; and (5) differences in communication between genders that can impede women's progress within higher education institutions (Bornstein, 2008; Al-Lamky, 2007; Doherty & Manfredi 2006; Shah, 2004). Considerable attention has also been paid to the stumbling blocks in the career paths of many women as a result of: (1) the expectations given to gender roles; (2) the glass ceiling; (3) motherhood; and (4) being the primary caretaker for family members (Tomas, Lavie, Duran & Guillamon, 2010). The impact of these factors, however, varies across societies, including at times within a social group (Shah & Shah, 2012).

3.3.2   Factors Affecting Women's Career Progression

Researchers and workers in the field of higher education have outlined a set of factors that can either facilitate or inhibit the professional growth of women into leadership roles (Robinson, 2015; Shah, 2015; Morrison, 2012). There is a crucial need to further investigate and understand the several identified factors that affect personal and professional lives of women leaders as potentially both obstructing and empowering influences.

3.3.2.1 Domestic and Familial

A number of researchers have found that women leave their jobs before having the opportunity for further advancement (Shah, 2015; Smith, 2015; Adusah-Karikari, 2008), surmising that the family-work balance has a major impact on the progression of women in leadership roles. Nguyen (2012, p. 126) supports this, stating that '[w]omen are more reluctant to demonstrate their leadership skills in public or to socialise with colleagues to build professional networks' due to the pressure of family responsibilities that continues to interrupt their professional progression and longevity in such positions. Indeed, family responsibilities, lack of adequate child-care facilities and the absence of a right to parental leave in some countries, are all considered crucial internal factors in preventing female administrators from advancing further in their work environment (UNESCO, 1993).

Studies have revealed that the impact of a woman's family responsibilities on their working lives is a primary external barrier discouraging them from working up the career ladder, as well as a major reason for those women who do subsequently leave their leadership roles (Robinson, 2015; Morrison, 2012). The Human Development report (2015, p. 12) states that 'female participation in the labour force and employment rates are affected heavily by economic, social and cultural issues and care work distributions in the home'. Simone (1987) notes that (in contrast to men) female academics are more likely to: (1) remain unmarried; (2) be separated; (3) report having less stable relationships; (4) have fewer children; and (5) perceive their families as a burden in relation to their profession. The researchers note that women tend to experience greater difficulties than their male colleagues in terms of managing both their professional and family responsibilities (Cosimini, 2011). In part, this is due to men not having to make the same choice between family and career (Curran, 2001). Coleman (2011) states:

> Family responsibilities are thus identified as one of the main reasons for women's subordinate positions in the labour force. The other remains the continued stereotyping of women as supportive and subordinate rather than being in charge. (p. 4)

Many researchers (e.g. Smith, 2016; Coleman, 2011; Cosimini, 2011; Slan-Jersulim & Chen, 2009) view the lack of balance between work and family as leading to a significant degree of conflict. These dual roles can result in pressures arising from the conflict between the demands of family and work, resulting in overload (Cosimini, 2011). Metz (2005, p. 228) states that 'having children weakens the relationship between work hours and managerial advancement', while Greenhaus et al. (1999) state that:

> Women's family responsibilities can severely limit their careers in ways that do not generally affect men. Women tend to choose occupations that are compatible with their family's needs. They also limit their aspirations for career advancement, reduce their behavioural and psychological involvement in work, adjust their work schedules for family reasons and turn down opportunities for career development and growth that would interfere with their family responsibilities. (p. 409)

There is a tendency for all societies to expect women to shoulder more domestic burden than men (Fuller, 2015; Smith, 2015; Nguyen, 2012; Al-Abri, 2010). Metz and Tharenou (2001, cited in Metz, 2005) also assert that in Western societies 'many women believe that family responsibilities are a barrier to their advancement', with time spent taking care of dependent

children and elderly relatives being experienced as particularly restricting. In the UK, for example, it has been observed that women experience excessive domestic segregation in comparison with men and are expected to take 'more responsibility for childcare and domestic matters' (Fuller, 2009, cited in Fuller, 2015, p. 181). Smith (2016) focuses on motherhood in the UK as 'influencing the career decisions of women with children and those who planned to have children' (Smith, 2016, p. 85). She reinforces the significance of a support system to enable women to cope with the double load of professional commitments and family responsibilities. She argues, however, that labelling support systems as existing to support women, rather than parents, reifies again the notion that women should cope with the double load and not men. This accords with Deem (2003), who indicates that motherhood has a negative impact on women in terms of promotion and on holding managerial posts in higher education institutions in the UK, while fatherhood does not have the same consequences.

Lahtinen & Wilson (1994, p. 17) state that: 'it is assumed that women's domestic commitments will take precedence'. This creates a number of distinctive challenges for women wishing to progress in their career, due to its impact on the attitudes of their colleagues and superiors (Metz, 2005). Midkiff's (2015) study on the status of working women in the United States indicates that many women 'are disproportionately penalised economically for childbearing and other unpaid care' (p. 378), describing the impact of her participants' academic careers on choices 'regarding motherhood and conversely how motherhood has impacted their choices regarding their careers as academics' (p. 388). Thus, many women in her study decided not to have children and were not comfortable addressing women's issues, including 'caretaking responsibilities and childbearing or any other work that has traditionally fallen to women' within their professional environment (Midkiff, 2015, p. 388). Midkiff further discusses the ways in which women are economically disadvantaged due to what is known as the 'mommy tax' or the 'caring tax' (Crittenden, 2010, p. 91), according to which women pay nearly three quarters of the highest care tax payment in the United States (Midkiff, 2015). A similar study was conducted by Crittenden (2010, p. 91), revealing that '[t]he mommy tax is obviously highest for well-educated, high-income individuals and lowest for poorly educated people who have less potential income to lose'. This leads to the conclusion that such economic pressures discourage many women from having children and starting families if they wish to advance and succeed professionally.

As for traditionally patriarchal societies, studies reveal that marriage forms a crucial parameter, encumbering women's career progression. Khan et al. (2005) note that, in such societies, women's participation in the labour force tends to decrease upon marriage, as is also documented and supported in research for the following regions: Oman (Al-Bulushi, 2010), Pakistan (Shah, 2015) and Africa (Nguyen, 2012). Al-Bulushi (2010) notes that Omani women are more reluctant to progress in their profession following starting a family, due to 'the conflict at a personal level, [which] is compounded by powerful beliefs about the "suitability" of women's roles' (p. 257). Shah (2015) similarly contends that motherhood and the prioritisation of domestic roles shaped by religious beliefs is seen by many as highly constraining, and undermines women's positive contribution to, and extra-familial role in, society. Consequently, this pressure (as a result of their own perceptions and those of others) of occupying a subordinate role 'may lead to a justification of women holding the supporting roles, leaving men typically to play leadership roles' (Pounder & Coleman, 2002, p. 125).

Although a number of researchers have suggested caring responsibilities towards family as a main constraint to women's career development (Smith, 2015; Al-Doubi, 2014; Nguyen, 2012; Al-Bulushi, 2010; Madsen, 2006), others offer a range of examples from some countries demonstrating the positive effect of close family members as the primary support enabling women to advance in their careers (Kemp, Madsen & El-Saidi, 2013; Al-Abri, 2010). Recent studies (Al-Doubi, 2014; Al-Abri, 2010) acknowledge that the emotional, financial and physical support from family members is among the primary factors enabling female career progression and educational development. Watson (2008) reveals that having such emotionally supportive networks has proven to be vital to the professional achievements of female leaders. Thus, in order to enable them to integrate work and family life and maintain a sense of balance, women need to obtain support 'from their husbands, especially in nuclear families, and from their siblings and in-laws in extended families' (Belwal & Belwal, 2014, p. 113).

Researchers in Middle Eastern countries (Al-Doubi, 2014; Al-Shanfari, 2011) stress the influential role of family members (and in particular parents and spouses) in promoting a harmonious working environment conducive to professional progression. Successful female leaders often have support from family members and close relatives, which empowers them to move forward and pursue their professional dreams. Such support largely comes in the form of providing childcare and helping to take care of the household (Al-Shanfari, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010). Male family members, and in particular fathers and husbands, play an important role

in enabling women to progress in their career. Many researchers (e.g. Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011; Al-Riyam, 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007; Madsen, 2006) have demonstrated the considerable impact men are able to exert on female leaders' professional orientation, attitudes and progression, highlighting the significance of male support for women professionals' career journeys. Correspondingly, a study of female academics in Ghana, conducted by Adusah-Karikari (2008), established that the strongest support received by female academics came from their spouses, who eased the isolation they felt in their new positions as women in university leadership roles. Adusah-Karikari (2008) reveals that supportive spouses assisted female academics in making appropriate choices relating to the organisation of their professional and personal lives.

3.3.2.2 *Gender-Based Experiences*

Previous studies on women's career development have concluded that the 'the progress of women's career to leading positions is impeded by gendered attitudes and practices that exist within organizations' (Abalkhail, 2017, p.167). In recent decades, leadership opportunities in work place are identified by many traits, skills and characteristics that are associated with successful leaders, acknowledged and valued by their subordinates (Kern, 2015). Madsen (2008) states that:

> In today's constantly changing environment, higher educational institutions must have leaders who are capable, strong, smart, strategic, ethical, honest, motivating, inspirational, competent, innovative, creative, networked, organised, empowering, perceptive, reflective, collaborative and insightful, because higher education faces extraordinary challenges nationally and leaders with exceptional capabilities are needed to help institutions meet these challenges. (pp. 12–13)

The increase in the number of female leaders in many industries and professions has led researchers to investigate the differences between male and female leadership styles, skills and abilities, resulting in an argument that gender differences may exist when it comes to attitudes towards leadership, leadership traits and behaviours (Moorosi, 2015; Robinson, 2015; Rabas, 2013). Recent research (e.g. Percupchick, 2011; Hough, 2010) has identified that definitions and portrayals of leadership styles are not (and have never been) particularly gender-oriented, being initially centred on a male leader (Percupchick, 2011). Hough (2010) recognises the outstanding capabilities of women as leaders, although she also believed that 'leadership

potential for administration and the ideal of a leader, still conforms to the image of a male administrator' (Hough, 2010, p. 1). There remains a widespread negative perception of women leaders, particularly in contrast to their male counterparts. This view is based on gender stereotypes and is evident in a number of studies (Heilman, 2001; Eagly & Steffen, 1986, 1984; Bakan, 1966). As previously discussed, research has revealed that even when women are promoted to leadership roles, they remain categorised as 'less agentic (e.g. competitive, individualistic) and less communal (e.g. kind, nurturing)' than men (Heilman, 2001; Diekman & Eagly, 2000, p. 1172; Eagly & Steffen, 1986, 1984). The assumption persists that a leader should demonstrate a list of attributes and qualities in order 'to be perceived and considered by others as [such] (Hough, 2010, p. 14). Grogan & Shakeshaft (2009, p. 75, cited in Kagoda, 2015) support this view, arguing that women are frequently 'believed to be unfit for administrative jobs, due to their supposed inability to discipline, command respect and to possess rational and logical approaches to leadership'.

These stereotypes lead to many obstacles for women to access (or even maintain) leadership positions 'by perpetuating the misconceptions that women are innately different from male leaders and do not possess the requisite leadership qualities' (Bucklin, 2014, p. 170). Heilman (2001) notes that this tends to appear more frequently in workplace relationships, stating that 'despite producing the identical work product as a man, a woman's work is often regarded as inferior' (p. 662). Rabas (2013) found that the under-representation of women results from the fact that they tend not to follow a male leader's career path in ascending the corporate ladder. A number of studies has demonstrated that certain leadership approaches and styles are specific to women who successfully implement change within their workplace and beyond.

Kelly (2011), Madsen (2008), Callan (2001), and Day (2001) refer to the differences in leadership styles, traits and behaviours between male and female leaders as significant reasons in accessing leadership roles at their institutions. Thus, Dines (1993, p. 22) asserts that 'women in advanced industrialised societies, as well as those in the developing world, still suffer from the myth that women are too emotional or too illogical for senior management, or best suited to the domestic maintenance aspects of administration'. In addition, negative expectations concerning the performance of women are reinforced in many work settings, which 'prevent a woman's accomplishments from being evaluated in an unbiased manner' (Heilman, 2001, p. 662). Consequently, women have been 'victims of an unfair evaluation process' (Kern, 2015,

p. 27). Pounder & Coleman (2002) are particularly revealing in their views regarding women's roles:

> From a female perspective, the downside of this process is that the view of women as nurturing may lead to a justification of women holding supportive roles, leaving men typically to play leadership roles. (p. 125)

The literature has charted women's participation in different occupations in a number of cultural contexts (Shah, 2015; Al-Shanfari, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010; Shah, 2009; Adusah-Karikari, 2008; Al-Lamky, 2007; Sacheti, 2007; Madsen, 2006; Rhode, 2003). Researchers recommend that, due to this increase in women's participation in the paid labour force, 'perceivers should think that the typical attributes of women have changed more than those of men' (Diekman & Eagly, 2000, p. 1172). Furthermore, a number of commentators have pointed to female stereotypes, discrimination and social perceptions of women as inferior, as potential reasons for their exclusion from leading positions in higher education (Tomas et al., 2010). The perception continues to prevail that administrative leadership positions are generally held by men as part of their masculine role in society (Morrison, 2012), suggesting that 'national culture likely affects how leaders are expected to behave' (Bullough et al., 2015 p. 263). Therefore, the literature proposes that, in order to succeed in this male-dominated world, many women have found themselves forced to 'conduct themselves with the same masculine styles as their male peers, to gain an advantage in their positions' (Drury, 2011, p. 10), e.g. being task-orientated or following a specific career path, in order to become accepted in the current masculinised setting (Madsen, 2006). By contrast, Bullough et al. (2015) suggest that individuals should adopt their own characteristics and leadership style in order to be successful, as each has his/her own capacities, skills level and motivation. The development of these skills and leadership styles is beyond the scope of the present study; however, such elements should be considered as contributing to the issues related to female leadership.

3.3.2.3 Organisational Structures

The literature provides evidence on the way organisational structures, norms and values disadvantage women in their career advancement at an institutional level (Morrison, 2012; Al-Shanfari, 2011; Keohane, 2011). In some ways, 'policies and process in higher education can act as barriers against women assuming leadership and management positions' (Nguyen, 2012, p. 127). Acker (1990) proposes the existence of an organisational attitude behind these gender

contrasts as a consequence of organisational structure, rather than any differences in the character of men and women. Goveas & Aslam (2011, p. 236) state that a further significant factor with the potential to hinder women's opportunities towards development consists of 'the unavailability of structured human resource policies and strategies addressing women workers, [which] has proven to be a major obstacle to women's progress and development'. Sui Chu Ho notes that 'gender inequalities in staff recruitment, appointment and promotion exist in educational institutions, such as universities' (p. 87). This, however, has been dismissed both by those in authority and the general public (Sui Chu Ho, 2015).

It may be that hierarchal organisational structures create a setting in which women feel out of place due to gender variances (Morrison, 2012; Al-Shanfari, 2011; Keohane, 2011), resulting in many women leaving or stepping down from a position in a workplace in which their leadership abilities are being questioned. Fuss (1989, p. 17, cited in White, 2003) states that: 'most [women] are aware that their personal experiences of discrimination relate to wider political issues of power within the university'. This conflict is further compounded by many jobs being designed around men's objectives, and that many institutions are reluctant to support the women within their workforce vis-à-vis any potential career conflicts (Rhode, 2003). In the Arab world, El-Saadawi (1982) observes that the hope that Arab women will become an effective political power 'will force the society to change and polish the structures which maintain women victims of the crudest, most cruel and sometimes most sophisticated, forms of oppression and exploitation' (p. 206).

There is a view too that the culture of long and fixed working hours forms one of the major barriers, since these can be prohibitive for women with family commitments (Airini et al., 2011; Al-Bulushi, 2010). Other factors detrimental to female advancement are the lack of effective policies towards women returning from maternity leave and discrimination against women during selection and promotion, as a result of the tendency to support 'people like us' (Mann, 1995, p. 147). To date, women have remained subject to inadequate pay and respect in their roles, despite holding leadership positions (ibid). Cunneen & Harford (2016) point out that women face the additional issue of the 'lack of an organisational culture which supported childcare-friendly practices' (p. 161), while Keohane (2011) views the conflicts faced by females in the workplace as a result of the fact that:

> [f]ew organisations (or nation states) have workplace practices that support a family friendly lifestyle, including high quality, reliable, affordable child-care facilities,

flexible work schedules while children are young and support for anyone with a sick or aging parent […]. It takes two committed partners, healthy children, lots of stamina, enough money to pay for good childcare and housekeeping, strategic planning worthy of a mid-size firm and a fair amount of luck. (p. 9)

In addition to the lack of family-friendly facilities in the workplace, along with the "anti-feminine design" of working hours, women are also required (in accordance with the society in which they live) to be fully responsible for their family (Al-Bulushi, 2010). This can create feelings of pressure and entrapment, which may also contribute to under-representation in management and leadership roles (Al-Abri, 2010; Al- Bulushi, 2010).

What emerges from the reviewed studies is a strongly shared view that the societal and cultural expectation that leaders are male remains predominant (Williams, 2000). This gender stereotype obstructs women from advancing through the organisational hierarchy, with Heilman (2001) finding that it 'can derail even the most competent woman's ascent to the top' (p. 671). Feminist scholars view societal and cultural expectations as embedded in early childhood learning and subsequently reinforced throughout adulthood (Thorne, 1994). Studies of female leadership suggest that 'societal attitudes toward appropriate gender roles discourage women from seeking leadership positions' (Baran, 2012, p. 4). In the majority of societies worldwide, women have traditionally shouldered the bulk of family responsibilities and remain primarily responsible for their children and the care of the elderly, whereas men are viewed as financial providers, and are associated with physical professions, such as the military and national defence (World Bank, 2006). Many women desire to maintain both a profession and their family life, but this is not equally a priority for men, which thus negatively impacts on female aspirations. This obstacle reflects the wider experience of women working in institutions, particularly when pursing administrative positions. Many female academics abandon their administrative roles, due to a 'lack of personal time for themselves, marital strains, feeling as though they are missing out on their children's lives and feelings of guilt'. These obstacles are not recognised by men in administrative roles (Rabas, 2013, p. 34). In short, there is a general indication that careers are designed around the orientations, priorities and goals of men, and the leaders of organisations are reluctant to devise meaningful programmes to address the conflict between women's careers and domestic commitments (Rhodes, 2003). Schein (2010) states that:

Cultural forces are powerful because they operate outside of our awareness. We need to understand them, not only because of their power, but also because they help to explain many of our puzzling and frustrating experiences in social and organisational life. Most importantly, understanding cultural forces enables us to understand ourselves better. (p. 7)

Judging from the lack of women in many top management positions, the glass-ceiling phenomenon remains prevalent, despite governmental imposition of laws and policies of equal opportunities. The glass ceiling has also become 'the most representative metaphor comprising the whole range of invisible hindrances which women come across on their way to the top' (Kyriacou-Savva, 2013, p. 33) and remains an 'unseen barrier that inhibits women from climbing the corporate ladder as far, or as fast, as men' (Rabas, 2013, p. 28). Dines (1993, p. 22) argues that:

[t]he glass ceiling is not so much a function of the relative regency of equal opportunity policies and practices, as it is an indication that, at the highest levels, these policies are honoured more in the breach than in the observance. (p. 22)

The underpinning reasons for such barriers include 'stereotypes, visibility and scrutiny; questioning of authority and credibility; lack of "fit" in the workplace; double outsider status; and exclusion from informal networks' (Catalyst, 2004, p. 3). Hammoud (1993) notes that there is an assumption by many employers that women are less productive at work due to their 'families responsibilities [which] make them subject to absenteeism' (p. 42). The glass ceiling thus arises, not because of the inability of women to function efficiently in their responsibilities, but due to a woman being unlike her predecessor, i.e. a man (Milwid, 1990; Kanter, 1977), and this can negatively influence women's own interest in pursuing leadership roles. Heilman (2001) observes that even women who succeed and reach exclusive leadership roles still find their skills underestimated, with their success generally being attributed to factors that do 'not necessitate seeing the woman as competent' (p. 665), e.g. the working environment or their work colleagues (Heilman, 2001).

This Literature review also provides examples of the central role played by women in high administrative positions and, in particular, those with experience in the development of novices, including shaping their attitudes and beliefs (Al-Bulushi, 2010). Many countries and organisations are working towards improving career progression opportunities for women. Al-

Lamky (2007) states that '[i]n most developing countries, the state plays a major role in the formation of the social policies, development strategies and legislation that shape opportunities for women' (p. 63). Belwal & Belwal (2014) suggest that government intervention is required to assist women in progressing in their careers and that governments should have specialised awareness programmes aimed at both family members and society in general, in order to 'support working women in ways which are needed above and beyond the legal support system' (Belwal & Belwal, 2014, p. 113), i.e. leadership-development programmes that address women's needs and encourage potential leaders, thus creating a supportive environment (Eddy et al., 2015). Calizo (2011) observes that higher education institutions wishing to create the means for women to advance into leadership roles need to take part in leadership development programmes, which, he found, encouraged his female participants 'in terms of their leadership self-efficacy, career aspirations and career paths' (p. 3), besides identifying gender-related challenges which will be helpful for them and their institutions.

Research identifies a number of strategies and approaches (i.e. mentoring) that women can follow in order to progress in their profession (Bynum, 2015; Resnick, 1990; Parsloe & Parsloe, 2009; Lahtinen & Wilson, 1994). Recent studies agree on the positive outcomes to the mentee (protégé), leading to mentoring being an effective tool in boosting the development of a leader, 'enhanc[ing] productivity and creating a resilient workforce' (Washington, 2010, cited in Bynum, 2015, p. 69; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng & DuBoise, 2008). Those who are mentored tend to report 'that they are more satisfied with their careers, have greater commitment to their organisations and are more likely to mentor others in turn' (Johnson, 2007, p. 78). Furthermore, Foster & MacLeod (2004) state that 'many people ascribe their success or accomplishments to the most influential person in their life'. Parsloe & Leedham (2009) assert that:

> [t]he aim [of the mentor] is to help and support people to manage their own learning, in order that they may develop their skills, improve their performance, maximise their potential and enable them to become the person they want to be. (p. 67)

Parsloe & Parsloe (2009) point out that the purpose of mentoring and coaching is 'to help and support people to take control and responsibility for their learning' (p. 61). The literature, thus, suggests that mentoring plays a vital role in supporting women aspiring to advanced leadership positions (Bynum, 2015), as 'one of the reasons for the lack of women in upper-level administration is the lack of mentoring' (Bynum, 2015, p. 70), i.e. either formally or informally. Bynum (2015) further demonstrates the benefits and advantages of 'peer mentoring' (p. 70),

which eventually will improve the leadership chances for women in all sectors. Lahtinen & Wilson (1994, citing Fagenson, 1990) state that many women would be able to advance within an organisation if they had access to inside information, which they could only acquire through mentoring. The goal of mentoring is to assist academic women in professional development in an organic fashion, while also enabling the mentor to benefit from the experience (Al-Bulushi, 2010). The key aspect is that mentoring can be mutually beneficial, as 'growth in another always inspires growth in ourselves' (Resnick, 1990, p. 19).

It has become evident to the present researcher from the literature review that women working in administration have at times been influenced by a series of factors that could either hinder or empower their advancement to leadership roles. On the one hand, the attitude most frequently expressed by several researchers is that there exists a canvass of significant (and potentially competing) challenges that have an impact on women and their ascension to administration positions, and which are shaped by personal, organisational and socio-cultural forces (Fuller & Harford, 2016). These forces (factors) could yield an unpleasant atmosphere, resulting in discriminatory socio-cultural and organisational practices. On the other hand, enablement was determined in terms of internal and external support, training, professional development and mentoring at focal points in women's career progression. Other crucial drives for positive change and female empowerment were identified as legislative frameworks, government intervention and a supportive environment (Eddy et al., 2015; Belwal & Belwal, 2014; Calizo, 2011).

3.4 Leadership Roles in Current Higher Education Institutions

3.4.1 Across Cultures

Recent studies focusing on women's leadership have transferred the focus from a comparison between the genders to the benefits that both offer to the workplace (Kern, 2015). The literature highlights the global challenges faced by higher education institutions and offers insights into the policies employed to deal with these complex situations. Al-Balushi (2012) notes that:

> Globalisation, massification and marketisation have all impacted on higher education throughout the world. The traditional and the new entrepreneurial universities in Europe, North America and most developed countries, have responded to these

pressures through restructuring their strategies and their missions, as a result of which major changes have started to take place in most universities worldwide. (p. 5)

Al-Balushi (2012) further states that this is largely due to the 'new pressures' emerging 'to balance leadership and management, to balance management with collegiality and to balance leadership with the institutional changes and society's requirements' (p. 5). This has led to the need for both genders to work together to overcome such challenges, and address the drivers and restraints impacting on the progression of female educators in the workplace. These factors include: (1) political, economic, institutional and socio-cultural (Shah, 2015; McDermott et al., 2011; Adusah-Karikari, 2008; Al-Lamky, 2007); and (2) personal/internal, i.e. family-related issues; early socialisation; women's lack of confidence; lack of female mentoring; fear of failure; and the stereotyping of roles (Lumby, 2015; Rarieya, 2015; Sui Chu Ho, 2015; Morrison, 2012; Shah & Shah, 2012).

Western researchers have underlined the tangible factors for women lagging behind men in accessing leadership positions (Smith, 2016; Smith, 2015; Kelly, 2012; Airini et al., 2011; Cosimini, 2011; Richmond & Allison, 2003; Dimmock, 2000). Strachan et al. (2010, p. 66), however, note that 'research is needed that is undertaken in diverse cultural contexts'. Furthermore, Coleman & Reader (2012) note 'a dearth of literature in the field of educational leadership that draws on the experience of those outside the Anglophone world' (p. 14). This leads to the need to recognise that, despite the existence of a number of shared themes and issues faced by women in accessing and exercising leadership, the socio-cultural context plays a significant role in determining the factors facilitating (or hindering) women's academic advancement. The culture and ethos of leadership tends to 'differ in fundamental ways across nations' (Fullan, 1992, p. 18). Sui Chu Ho (2015) notes that 'the Anglo-American theories underpinning most research are inapplicable to non-Western societies' (p. 86). Shah (2010, p. 27) further argues that 'people from diverse ideological and ethnic backgrounds conceive, perceive and practise educational leadership differently, drawing upon their beliefs, values and knowledge sources.' It is, therefore, important to broaden the understanding of the issues present in different cultural contexts and in particular in relation to developing countries. The present thesis initially explores the Western context, in order to establish the issues surrounding gender inequality in leadership, as distinct from those of developing countries.

It is significant that even in the most developed countries 'the impact of […] gender imbalance enforced in earlier centuries is still evident' (Dougherty, 2009, p. 11). Women tend to experience the same under-representation and discrepancies in comparison with their male counterparts in a variety of positions and institutions and within education in particular (Rabas, 2013). Reynolds (2000) notes a clear absence of women in educational administration throughout Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. A specific example from the United States highlights that 'there is still discrimination among higher education institutions against women as compared to men in the form of academic ranking, income earnings and the time it takes to receive tenure' (Robst, VanGilder & Polachek, 2003, cited in Rabas, 2013, p. 18). The American Council on Education (ACE) report indicates that, despite the increase in the number of women holding leadership roles in higher education (Rabas, 2013; The American College President, 2002), they still have a lower level of representation in comparison with men holding leadership positions within the same organisations (Rabas, 2013). Madsen (2012) reports that 'in 2006, women accounted for 23% of college and university presidents, which is up from 5% of presidents in 1975' (p. 132). Similarly, in the UK, women were under-represented in senior administrative positions at all levels of university and represent only 13% of full professors (Doherty & Manfredi, 2010). The situation has not been different in New Zealand where women represent only 16.9% of the universities' leading positions (Odhiambo, 2011).

A similar position also exists in Australia, where female academics tend to work part-time and fall back down the academic ladder (in particular in relation to promotion) more frequently than male academics, as a result of the restrictions and difficulties related to family responsibilities, i.e. childbearing (Ramsden, 1996). This leads to the availability of fewer promotional prospects and little time or opportunity for self-development. The 2015 Human Development Report states that '[w]hen women have no choice but to give priority to unpaid work and stay out of the labour force, they make large sacrifices, perhaps missing the chance to expand their capabilities in the workplace' (UNDP, 2015, p. 13).

Similarly, a recent study by Eliophotou-Menon, Koutselini & Charalambidou-Solomi (2015) investigates the status of women in educational leadership in higher education institutions in Cyprus, along with the gender gap. Their findings reveal that in all six universities investigated in the study, 88.2% of faculty members were male, which 'certainly reflects the status of

women across the globe in education' (Oram-Sterling, 2015, p. 5). The three underlined factors contributing to the gender gap in Cyprus were considered to be social and educational barriers, and it was women's own choice not to enter into the academic field. Further significant factors cited in the study were the lack of institutional support in relation to childcare, and flexible working hours. The study concludes by highlighting the need for additional institutional policies aimed at increasing the number of women participating in academia.

3.4.1.2 *The Context of Developing Countries*

The World Bank report (2000) on the status of higher education institutions in developing countries states that 'developing countries are currently under great pressure to meet increased demand for higher education and many are finding it hard to keep up' (p. 52). The small number of existing research studies focusing on developing countries have recognised a number of factors explaining the inequalities faced by women in higher educational institutions, including political, socio-cultural, economic and institutional (Sui Chu Ho, 2015). In 2015, Chinese women represented only 17% of senior posts (e.g. legislators, senior officials and managers) (Catalyst, 2016), while in academia, only four out of thirty-four pro-vice chancellors are currently female, and no female vice-chancellor has yet been appointed. Yang (2008, p. 353) reports on the top-down policies affecting the development of Chinese women, arguing for the existence of a continuous struggle to establish 'a harmonious society composed of both men and women'.

In a number of African countries, researchers into women's academic role in educational leadership found that African women are still 'tied down by culture and still treated as second-class citizens by society' (Kagoda, 2015, p. 155). Adusah-Karikari (2008, p. 8) notes that in developing societies 'women may be flooding into universities [...]; however, they do not appear to have the same opportunities as their male colleagues'. Socio-cultural barriers 'inhibit women from becoming leaders in the field of education in developing countries' (Sui Chu Ho, 2015, p. 87) and have a considerable impact on women who do manage to achieve leadership roles. The gendered cultural and social values in these settings 'have put women at [a] disadvantaged position in society' (Sui Chu Ho, 2011).

Kagoda (2015) addresses the under-representation of women in educational leadership in Uganda, along with male domination in all educational sectors. She highlighted a number of factors (e.g. culture and tradition, lack of personal qualifications, domestic work and lack of

mentors and support) challenging female academics in Uganda. She further notes that the few women who achieved leadership positions in educational institutions experienced a lack of support, 'especially from fellow women; and are downgraded by men' (p. 75). Much of the extant literature supports the study, e.g. Lumby (2009) found that contemporaries, students and parents sometimes view women in leadership positions as a disgrace, an attribute that is deeply discrediting in Africa. These attitudes influence real social and organisational practices that continue to favour men over women and promote gender inequality in higher education institutions (Lumby, 2009).

A similar pattern has been recorded in Ghana by Adusah-Karikari (2008), who notes a lack of any significant change, despite the increase in the number of women in some leading positions in educational institutions in Ghana. The majority of her participants cited conflict in managing their highly demanding roles as mothers and wives and the impact this had on their choices in relation to their career progression. They also highlighted the role of society in maintaining gender stereotypes. Adusah-Karikari's (2008) study indicates that 'the patriarchal culture of the universities serves to undermine women's authority and frames their identity in subordinated paradigms' (2008, p. 5). A similar pattern is evident in Kenya where women are still fighting 'a (visible and invisible) battle to achieve gender equality', especially in higher education institutions (Odhiambo, 2011, p. 674). Odhiambo (2011), for example, suggests that the reasons why women are lacking in key positions in African universities is likely related to a combination of common historical, economic and social factors that affect them negatively and hinder their progression.

3.4.1.3 The Arab Context

Universal education was adopted in the Arab world for both men and women and became a sacred law of Islam, thirteen centuries prior to the civilisation of the West (Saddique, 2000). Higher education in the Arab world, however, began to be considered as a source of development in the mid-1950s. The UNESCO (1998) Regional Conference Declaration notes that higher education in the Arab region has failed to achieve its objectives. The announcement recognised certain key issues affecting higher education in the region, i.e. an increase in population; deficient budgetary assets; inflexible administration; lack of improvements to institutions and projects; powerlessness to address understudies' issues; shortcomings in the connections between higher education establishments, and general and secondary education institutions; and societal and human improvement requirements (UNESCO, 1998). Not all

countries in the Arab region, however, experience identical problems, challenges, successes, weaknesses or deficiencies (Qasem, 1998).

There were only ten universities within the Arab region during the Second World War (1939–1945); however, the current total is 203 (UNDP, 2004). Thirty-six of these higher education institutions were established during the 1990s and are located in Sudan, Jordan and Yemen (UNESCO, 2003). In addition, there are five private universities in Oman, along with one governmental university (MoHE, 2015). Given that in 1970 the country lacked any schools, this is an impressive achievement. The previous century has thus witnessed a remarkable development in higher education and in particular in the number of universities and the unprecedented number of students of both genders enrolling to study. Despite this quantitative expansion in the Arab world, however, recent research focusing on academic faculties in higher education has revealed a persistent gap in gender mainstreaming. Thus, in 2013 women formed 21.6% of all academics in Jordan. There was a higher portion of male staff in a professional role (94.3%) than female (5.7%), with no female vice-chancellors in any of Jordan's twenty-one universities (Khyami-Horani, 2013). In Kuwait (which is one of the most liberal countries in the AGCC and promotes women's involvement in every sphere), 60% of the undergraduate population is female, but only 2% of its university vice-chancellors (Khyami-Horani, 2013).

Available research highlights a number of educational leadership theories concerning the factors hindering women's participation in leading posts in the Arab world. The main socio-cultural factors affecting women's involvement in the workforce include heritage; identity; religion; patriarchy; conflict between work and family commitments; women's role within the family (Ahmed, 1992); the lack of structures; quality control; and the existing governing bodies of higher education institutions. The UNESCO (2003) report on higher education in the Arab region for the period 1998–2003 states that:

> What seemed to be lacking in the region as a whole were systems that provide sound governance to education as a whole and higher education and particularly the institutions that provide guaranteed quality, ensure accountability and set measurable standards of performance for programmes, faculty and students alike. (p. 26)

There is a wide recognition that the economic burdens of life for Arabian women encourage them to pursue their education as a means of entry into the job market. Yang (2008, p. 17) points out that 'the level of education that women have received becomes the standard for

measuring the level of civilisation and development of a society, since women's social status has been lower throughout history'. Kabeer (2005, p. 13) emphasises that 'education, employment and political participation is considered essential to the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment', while Al-Shanfari (2011, p. 69) adds that '[e]ducational equality is a prerequisite for general equality for women'. Education is, therefore, considered one of the most important resources for empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the developmental processes of their countries. In addition, higher education institutes are viewed as 'training units, where the labour force is made' (Issa & Siddiek, 2012, p. 146). This leads to higher education being considered as the 'preservation and continuity of development' (p. 146).

Female entry into higher education has increased dramatically over recent decades, as over half of graduating students in all AGCC countries are females, suggesting a high recognition from these countries of the importance of achieving gender equity in university enrolment. Statistical records, however, demonstrate that the number of women admitted is heavily concentrated in specific academic domains, e.g. the arts, social sciences and education. This is partially due to the majority of females tending to specialise in areas considered suitable for women in their communities (Al-Shanfari, 2011). Data established by Tripathi & Mukerji (2008) concerning female enrolment in specific subjects at AGCC universities demonstrated that: (1) 'Oman has the highest ratio [of women] in the Education discipline (86%)'; (2) 'Bahrain has the highest percentage (41%) of students graduating in Social Science, Law and Business'; (3) 'Qatar has a similar percentage (38%) as that of Bahrain in Social Science, Law and Business'; and (4) 'Saudi Arabian Education is again the most sought-after discipline' (p. 154). Nevertheless, the trends regarding the enrolment of female students represent a structural setting with mixed implications for women. Firstly, there is an increase in the number of women enrolled in higher education institutes and women enjoy greater opportunities to participate within the university. Secondly, despite this progress, the degree to which women will be able to leverage their educational success to obtain an academic faculty position enabling them to progress in their careers is unclear. The Arab world is moving positively towards women's educational and political empowerment. The majority of studies, however, highlight the empowerment of women and the development of gender studies, without invoking the overall organisational change in higher education institutions (Cosimini, 2011; Krajcovic, 2011; Yang, 2008).

3.5   Women, Higher Education and the Case of Oman

It should be noted that the position of women within the academic world, along with equality between the genders, are crucial elements of higher education in Oman, as in many other countries, both Arab and Western. Although women in Oman play a visible role in the affairs of their country, they continue to struggle to close the gap with men, particularly in relation to leadership roles in the workplace, as stated previously. Al-Lamky (2007) points out that:

> [t]he ambivalent attitude towards women has undoubtedly taken its toll as women strive to fulfil their espoused economic role in a modernising society, yet are constantly held back by the heavy weight of customs and traditions. (p. 60)

Al-Bulushi emphasises the conflict and stress experienced by women because of the identity determination made 'by themselves and others as they try to cope with a proliferation of roles and expectations' (Al-Bulushi, 2010, p. 8). Similarly, UNESCO (1993) states that the cultural and religious mores in many Arab countries have led to strict segregation in schools and work, leading to a lack of preparation for girls to enter the workforce, thereby limiting their career horizons. Al-Shanfari (2011, p. 51) stresses that 'women must have faith and confidence that they have the capabilities and the capacities to make significant contributions to the human race', while Sikdar & Miltra (2012, p. 146) note that 'women in society have to struggle to overcome social barriers to find gainful employment outside the home, often attributed to reasons of gender difference'.

It is vital for women in Oman to achieve a higher education degree if they are 'to improve the quality of their economic, social and cultural life standards' (Al-Abri, 2010, p. 322). Many women who access higher education acknowledge that the ability to pursue higher degrees has made a considerable positive change to the roles they can play in society (Al-Abri, 2010). Education strengthens women's empowerment when it comes to decision-making, which 'not only affects their own lives, but the lives of those around them […], those they encounter at work and the society in general' (Al-Abri, 2010, p. 335). It has been widely assumed that educated Omani women are treated equally in both official and private discourse, particularly following the appointment of a number of Omani women to senior public positions in 1997. Al-Abri (2010) states that:

[f]rom the Omani viewpoint, if a woman has obtained a higher education qualification and professional status, then she could very well attain some higher position in society (as a minister, for example), which would then enhance her status, irrespective of the family from which she might come. (p. 90)

There is a lack of implementation of this expectation, however, when it comes to the involvement of women in Omani higher education institutions. Like other HE institutions in developing countries, SQU perpetuates the gender division of professions, as stated in the previous chapter. Although women comprise the majority of both higher education students and graduates, they lack representation as leaders of those responsible for running the colleges and universities (Higher Education Statistics, 2014). They, therefore, still need further support and encouragement to enable them to attain high educational expertise. It might be assumed that the leadership in such institutions 'would reflect the demographic of the majority' (Chliwniak, 1997, p. 14). The data, however, reveals that 63% of Omani academics working in the nine colleges of SQU in 2011 were male, with only 18% being female (SQU Annual Statistic Book, 2014).

The Planning and Statistics Department at SQU (2015) notes that, across all colleges, female academics are significantly under-represented in middle and upper management positions and over-represented in low-level positions. Furthermore, the data reveals that the higher the administrative grade, the fewer the women; the majority of senior administrative and academic positions are reserved for males. At the time of the present data collection, there were nine men in senior leadership positions on the University Council and twenty-seven men in senior management positions on the Academic Council (see Table 3.3). The statistical data with regard to female Omani academic employees occupying leading positions at SQU reveals that the percentage of women in more senior leading positions remains around 7%. Detailed information regarding all SQU leaders in the university's history is published on the university's website and reveals that (despite the availability of qualified female candidates) out of 3,104 academic staff at nine colleges at the university, no woman has ever been placed in the senior leadership team, prior to the appointment of a single Dean and three Assistant Deans (SQU Annual Statistic Book, 2014). This is a clear indication that the growth of female participation is slow and men continue to outstrip women at SQU, especially since the highest management position ever held by a woman at the university has been that of Dean.

Table 3.3 Gender Composition of the Leadership Team

Top Leadership Positions		Total	Men	Women	Ratio of Women
University Council		10	9	1	11%
Academic Council	Top* Management	28	27	1	4%
	Dean	14	13	1	7%
	Assistant Dean	22	19	3	14%
Total		74	68	5	**6.7%**
*Leaders above the Director Level					

Source: SQU Annual Statistic Book (2012)

According to information given by the Vice Chancellor's office, an additional position of an Assistant Vice Chancellor for External Cooperation was added to the top team in 2008 and offered to a female academic (see Figure 3.4). This post, however, has no significant impact on the academic council and, therefore, no authority when it comes to university decisions concerning the process of promotions or the distribution of jobs.

Figure 3.4 Sultan Qaboos University Organisational Chart (2015).
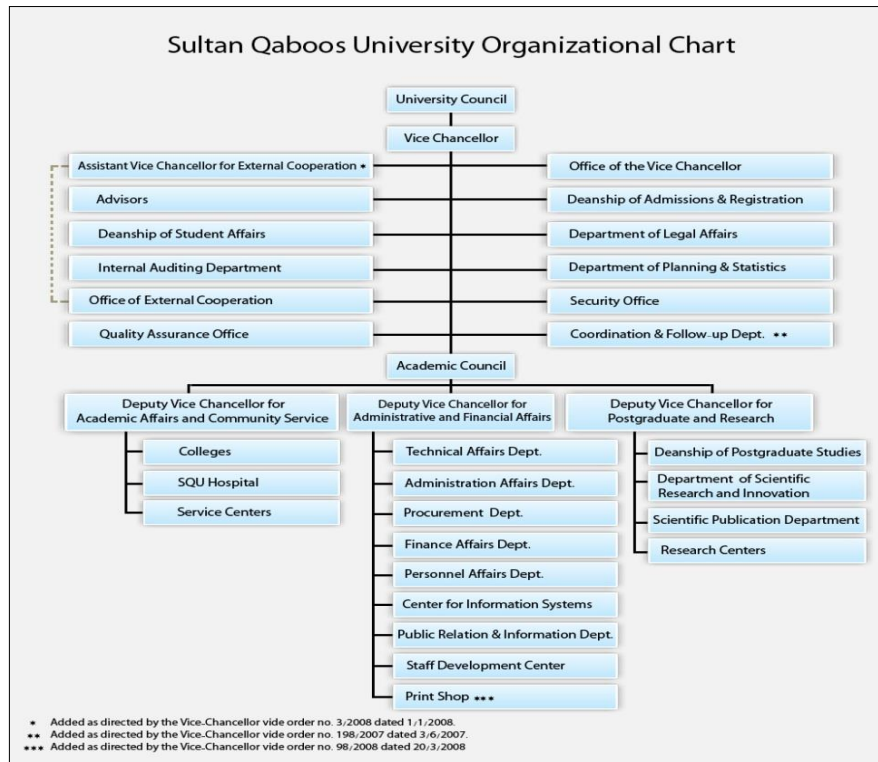
The figures demonstrate that, despite a small number of female academics holding senior positions in higher education institutions in Oman, the percentage of female academics in senior management roles remains very low and has not increased since 1986. The present study, therefore, seeks to investigate this phenomenon by studying senior Omani female academics who succeed in reaching senior management positions and who appear able to confront the challenges that others experience as insurmountable (Al-Lamky., 2007). This study explores the strategies developed by these successful women in achieving their current leadership positions and the factors they found to be supportive. The aim is to develop strategies capable of supporting women with ambitions to achieve leadership roles. As Yang (2008, p. 9) points out, 'the identification of barriers to gender equity in higher education systems and suggestions for institutional changes, will not only help women's access to higher education and women's advancement in academia, but also enhance the efficiency of educational management'.

3.6 Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature focusing on female leadership and the barriers leading to inequality in the representation of women in senior administrative posts in higher educational institutions. The literature focused on Western studies discussing gender, cultural factors and the outlook of organisations, before moving on to consider research focused on the Arab World. Specifically, the review examines how organisational culture impacts gender equality and leadership roles within higher education. This literature was reviewed in order to support a debate concerning the position of women on a global basis, with a specific focus on the status of women in the Arab Gulf State of Oman. This overview is significant for locating the position of the present study, as it provides a framework within which to comprehend the lives of the participants.

This chapter also undertook a comprehensive examination of the organisational, cultural and societal context. One recognisable element in investigating the barriers faced by women in gaining leadership positions is the overlapping of such boundaries, leading to women experiencing more than one boundary during their quest for leadership positions. It was noted that (despite the number of scholars focusing on the issue of female leaders in the Arab world) few research studies have attempted to study female academics in senior leadership posts. To date, the most notable research has focused primarily on women under-represented in the political, economic and social arena in the Arab world. Thus, there is a need to address this gap and demonstrate how gender and work influence the career advancement of women in higher education, as this is essential for females who 'want to be competitive in today's educational market' (Chavez, 2011, p. 6). The present study, therefore, contributes a number of significant insights into the current understanding of the perceptions of female Omani academic leaders in relation to women's progression to leadership. Against this background, this study will develop potential strategies and plans for addressing this issue.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

4.1   Introduction

The current study examines the views, opinions and experiences of female Omani academics currently (or previously) employed in middle or upper management at SQU. In addition, it examines how they have constructed their career progression and professional development. The research study focuses on the following four questions:

RQ1. What factors do female Omani academics identify as significant for their access to senior leadership positions?

RQ2. What do female Omani academics perceive as barriers to their career progression?

RQ3. According to female Omani academics, which institutional mandates and governmental policies have facilitated women's access to academic leadership positions in Omani higher education?

RQ4. How can female access to leadership and gender equity be enhanced in Higher Education in Oman?

Due to the exploratory nature of the research questions, the study adopted a qualitative approach located within the interpretive paradigm. Nelson et al. (1992, p. 2) notes that: 'the choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked and the questions depend on their context'. This approach is summarised in Figure 4.1. The primary tool for data generation consisted of open-ended interviews focusing on: (1) understanding the views of the participants; and (2) identifying main themes and sub-themes by means of data analysis.

Figure 4.1 Methodological Framework
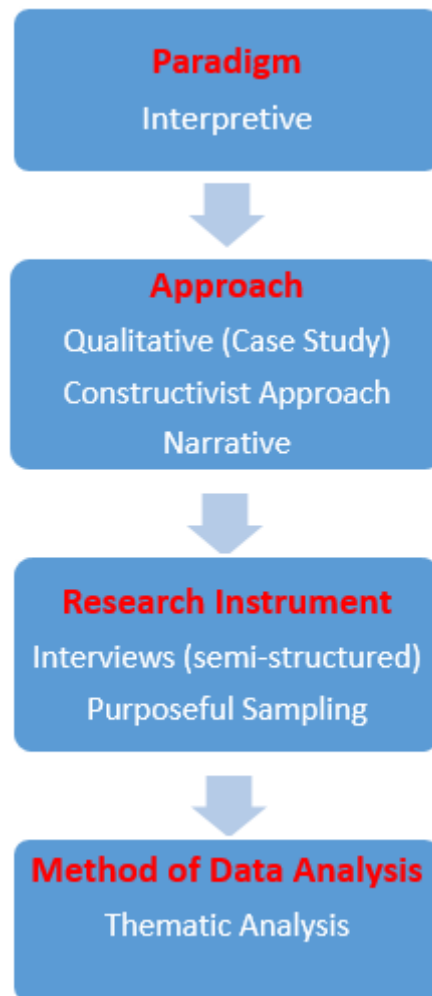
This chapter, firstly, discusses the research paradigm and the conceptual framework employed to conduct the study. Secondly, it discusses: (1) the use of the qualitative approach; (2) the sampling strategy; (3) the case profile of SQU; and (4) the data collection process. Thirdly, there is a discussion of the methods employed in the research study, as well as the pilot study undertaken prior to conducting the interviews for the main study. Finally, the chapter discusses the role of the researcher and issues related to ethical considerations and trustworthiness.

4.2   Research Paradigm

The study is situated in an interpretive paradigm. Morrison (2002) cited the definition of a paradigm formulated by Bassey (cited in Morrison, 2002, p. 12) as 'a network of coherent ideas about the nature of the world and the function of researchers which, adhered to by a group of researchers, conditions the patterns of their thinking and underpins their research actions'. Interpretive paradigms were developed in the 1960s, based on a belief that it is impossible to view the world as an objective reality, but that it must be understood in terms of subjective interpretations of human behaviour and experiences (Bryman, 2004). In adopting this interpretivist approach, the present study confirms social reality to be based on meaning, reflection, interaction, interpretation and action (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Bryman, 2004).

Omair (2008, p. 32) states that 'organisations and careers operate in social contexts', and accordingly the focal point of the current study consists of how the behaviours and values of the participants are defined within the context in which they live. Consequently, many of the substantial influences on an individual are based on 'social and power structures, political decision-making, general economic trends […], and wider societal norms and structures' (ibid). Furthermore, the use of interpretivist ontology permitted the researcher to investigate phenomena in their familiar surroundings, endeavouring to make sense of, or 'to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Krause (2009, p.760) notes that this is due to: 'people impos[ing] order on the world perceived in an effort to construct meaning; meaning lies in cognition, not in elements external to us'. The aim of this current study is, therefore, to explore the challenges and experiences faced by women in leadership positions in Oman, in order to establish evidence of gender disparity in Omani HE institutions.

Denzin & Lincoln (2005, p. 3) state that this method of inquiry 'involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world'. The characteristics of this paradigm can be summarised as follows:

1) The researcher is the primary instrument in the data collection (Merriam, 1998).
2) The data collected is articulated in the participants' own words and as a result of their own experiences (Holstsein & Gubrium, 2013; Merriam, 1998).
3) The focus of the research and its outcomes concerns 'the myriad *hows* and *whats* of everyday life'. (Holstsein & Gubrium, 2013, p. 266).

The aim of this study is to understand a specific phenomenon, group or set of interactions (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 2000). The study is underpinned by a constructivist epistemology, which focuses on 'the socially constructed character of lived realities' (Holstein & Gubrium, 2013, p. 56; see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Guba & Lincoln (2005) note this as a means by which 'the knower and the known interact and shape one another' (p. 22). Giarelli & Chambliss (1998) state that the epistemology of the interpretive paradigm involves 'the study of the social practices by which communities develop a basis for warranted belief and action' (p. 23). This is significant for this research study, as female faculty members frequently view the structure of organisational power as having been constructed by the men dominating senior management at their institution. Creswell (2013) states that it is vital to define and describe each case within certain parameters, i.e. a specific place and time. This current research is bounded: (1) in space (i.e. a public university in Oman); (2) in time (i.e. from the opening of SQU in 1986 to the present); and (3) by population (i.e. middle and upper management female Omani faculty members at SQU).

The aim of this study is to develop a substantive theory to explain the career progression of female Omani academics in leading positions in SQU based on their personal views and experiences as HE administrators. The data was gathered by means of in-depth interviews, in which reality was constructed in a narrative manner between the study participants and the researcher. The research questions focused on how the participants constructed and experienced their roles and career trajectories. Additionally, the study's empirical findings are also reported in a narrative manner. Therefore, as discussed in the following section, qualitative narrative methodology is considered both appropriate and justified.

4.3   Conceptual Framework

Merriam (1998) states that a theoretical or conceptual framework 'is the structure, the scaffolding, and frame of [the] study' (p. 45), arguing that 'qualitative research is designed to inductively build, rather than to test, concepts, hypothesis, and theories' (p. 45). The present study is located within a qualitative paradigm. It follows a social constructivist framework embedded in interpretivisim (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Creswell (2013) notes that in social constructivism, 'individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work' (p. 24). The social constructivist approach seeks to explore the views of the participants by sharing the meanings of experiences, which vary between individuals (Creswell, 2013). Consequently,

the framework for this study is to 'rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation' (Creswell, 2013, p. 24), aiming at establishing the facts by means of interaction in the lives of individuals and their associates through the existing historical and cultural norms (Creswell, 2013). Weick (1995, p. 31) states that individual actions contribute to the formation of 'the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face'. Cohen et al. (2007, p. 409) view this as 'an iterative and on-going process, involving, at times, the reproduction of existing structures and at times their transformation'.

This framework assisted the researcher in investigating the experiences of female academics as observed through the lens of their current reality. Their narratives, thus, enabled the researcher to focus on aspects of the social realm identified by participants as being either enabling or constraining (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 12). Social constructivist epistemology assumes that 'knowledge, in some areas, is the product of our social practices and intuitions or the interactions and negotiations between relevant social groups' (Gasper, 1999, p. 855). Thus, the focus of the present research concerns interpretation and meaning-making, rather than accessing specific facts or statistics (Cohen et al., 2007).

Burr (1995, p. 3) outlines four key assumptions underpinning the broad label of "social constructivism": (1) The assumption of 'a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge'. This encourages individuals to question whether their view of the world is impartial and based on observation, as social constructivism emphasises the importance of being wary 'about how the world appears to be' (ibid, p. 3); (2) The assumption of 'historical and cultural specificity'. This questions whether all understanding of the world is static or predictable, rather than a production of culture and history, i.e. 'we should not assume that *our* ways of understanding are necessarily any better than other ways' (ibid, p. 3); (3) The assumption that 'knowledge is sustained by social processes', i.e. the social constructivist understanding of the "truth" considers it to be a production of social processes and interaction with others, rather than based on an 'objective observation of the world' (p. 3); (4) The assumption that 'knowledge and social action go together', i.e. human understanding of reality can be formed in a variety of ways, yet each 'different construction also brings with it a different kind of action from human beings' (ibid, p. 3). Burr (1995), therefore, considers that the constructivist descriptions of the world accept some forms of action and eliminate others. Gergen (1996) suggests that 'it is the individual as socially constructed that finally informs

people's patterns of action' (p. 146), i.e. 'social actions will work in the interest of more powerful groups and against those in weaker positions' (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 410).

These tenets of social constructivism have important implications for the current research process, including the understanding of what is being studied, and how such a study is undertaken. The present study focuses on the identity of the factors leading to the under-representation of women in leadership and upper level management positions at SQU, and thus the aim of this inquiry transfers its focus from questions relating to the nature of individuals or society, towards an examination of how certain phenomena (or forms of knowledge) are generated through social interaction (Burr, 1995). The current study focuses on identifying new ways of understanding social practices and changes. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of the historical and cultural context in relation to social justice and diversity within HE institutions, with a specific focus on gender. In additional, a social constructivist epistemology has consequences for the "how" questions. Michailakis & Schirmer (2014) note that "how" questions focus on how different observers shape and apply social problems (p. 431). This was illustrated in the several participants' descriptions of how they managed the conflicting demands of work and personal life. The collected narratives enabled the researcher to examine how individuals made sense of their careers. The accounts of the female Omani academics are expected to extend the findings and limitations of previous studies from a unique conceptual framework, and so establish innovative and pertinent conclusions concerning the under-representation of women in HE institutions in the Middle Eastern region in general, and in Oman in particular.

4.4 Methodology

4.4.1 Qualitative Approach

The qualitative interpretive research approach was selected for this study due to: (1) the nature of the research aims and the research questions. Prasad & Prasad (2002, p. 4) argue that qualitative approaches are particularly suitable when trying to understand 'the way in which participants make sense of their socially constructed world and especially by enhancing our understanding of, among others, the symbolic dimensions of organisational life'; (2) the philosophical assumptions guiding the study; and (3) the inquiry strategy supporting an understanding of the disproportionate under-representation of female Omani faculty members in HE institutions. This section examines the components of this qualitative research design,

i.e. (1) selection; (2) guiding philosophical assumptions; (3) the inquiry strategy; and (4) further aspects of the design approach.

Creswell (2013) and Denzin & Lincoln (2013, 2005, 2000 and 1994) emphasise 'the impact of qualitative research and its ability to transform the world' (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Creswell's (2013) definition of qualitative research emphasises the process and the use of distinct approaches of inquiry (e.g. the narrative):

> Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of an interpretive/theoretical framework that informs the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry; the collection of data in natural settings is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. (p. 44)

Creswell (2013) elaborated on the concept of a 'complex, holistic picture' (p. 15) by correlating the qualitative approach to a complex narrative 'that takes the reader into the multiple dimensions of a problem or issue and displays it in all of its complexity' (p. 13). Furthermore, focusing on the experiences of people in their natural settings, goes beyond statistics and examines the situation beyond the numbers. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature in the field, as well as serve as a basis upon which to advocate change.

There has been substantial rise over recent decades in researchers' inclinations towards qualitative methodologies when addressing real-life issues and dilemmas. Qualitative research considers themes, theories and general patterns emerging from the data, thus attempting to make sense of the world through real-world data, paying 'closer attention to the interpretive nature of inquiry and situating the study within the political, social, and cultural context of the researchers' (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). The present study forms an in-depth investigation into the current phenomenon of the under-representation of female Omani academics within the real-world context at SQU. A qualitative inquiry can, thus, be viewed as a narrative of personal journeys through social pressures that can be distressing or disappointing, while also inspiring and invigorating (Siah, 2009, p. 82). The use of in-depth interviews enabled the current researcher to probe deeply into the rich experiences of the participants (Patton, 2002). The aim accorded with that of Creswell (2013, p. 48), i.e. 'to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimise the power relationship that often exists between a researcher

and the participants in the study'. During the interviews, a sense of connection (i.e. a power relationship) developed between the researcher and the participants, due to the latter being given the opportunity to review the interview questions, and collaborate and give feedback during the data analysis. Thus, qualitative research is of particular benefit in understanding experiences and interpreting the meaning of events, by obtaining a more comprehensive view of the topic being studied. Since it is exploratory in nature, it is particularly helpful for researchers investigating a phenomenon with unknown variables. Thus, qualitative research is characterised by a focus on interpretation, rather than quantification, and emphasises subjectivity over objectivity, while retaining a relatively flexible process of inquiry (Cassell & Symon, 1994).

4.5   Site Selection

As previously discussed, the primary purpose of the present study is to understand the experiences of female Omani academic faculty members in leadership roles at SQU. The selection of SQU was based on the following criteria: (1) SQU was the first public university to be established in Oman, and pioneered the introduction of female faculty members into HE; (2) SQU is recognised as the most prestigious HE institution in the country; (3) the majority of female political appointees, and leading female members of government, have worked as academics at SQU at some point in their careers (Al-Shanfari, 2011); (4) SQU is a student-centred, public university, located in Muscat, which has undergone considerable change over the previous three decades, in response to social and economic developments, and continues to play a crucial role in national development.

These advancements, however, fail to reflect the actual involvement of Omani female academics in crucial administrative and academic roles, with the percentage of male Omani academic faculty members across the nine colleges outnumbering those of the Omani female faculty by 63% in 2011 and 2012 (SQU Annual Statistic Book, 2014). Additionally, the statistical percentage concerning female Omani academic employees occupying leading positions (e.g. deans, assistant deans, directors, deputy directors, heads of departments and heads of units) remains at approximately 7%. As noted in the preceding chapters, it could be assumed that leadership roles in such an institution would reflect the demographic of the majority, which (considering the availability of capable female candidates) would suggest a

greater percentage of female leaders (Chliwniak, 1997, p. 14). This study therefore aims to investigate this phenomenon, firstly, examining the background and experiences of successful female faculty members in administrative leadership roles and, secondly, drawing up recommendations and advice for women wishing to become leaders in HE institutions. This single-site study provided the opportunity to focus in more detail on the lived experiences of the participants within the context of the culture of SQU. It also facilitated a broader understanding of the enabling factors and challenges influencing female participants within the context of the institution's culture.

4.6   Research Sample

A purposeful sampling procedure was employed to identify research participants, as suggested by Cohen et al. (2011), who argue that sampling decisions are based on the researcher's 'judgment of typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought' (p. 156). Bryman (2012, p. 418) defined this sampling technique as 'essentially strategic […] entail[ing] an attempt to establish a good correspondence between research questions and sampling'. Thus, individuals are selected for their relevance to the study, and to ensure that 'the research questions should give an indication of what units are to be sampled' (Bryman, 2012, p. 416). The women involved in this study grew up in an Omani context, which therefore influenced their working experience at SQU.

The aim of the current researcher was to investigate the lived experience of a specific population (i.e. qualified female Omani academics working in leadership roles at SQU), capable of providing rich information, and 'offer[ing] useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest; sampling, then, is aimed at insights about the phenomenon, not an empirical generalisation from a sample to a population' (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Therefore, the study sample included participants who could 'purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study' (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). The aim was to 'acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 157). Although the participants differed from each other in terms of key characteristics (e.g. self-confidence; self-reliance; being relationship-oriented; and having good communication skills) (Bryman, 2012), their retelling of, or reflection on, the events can be used as portraits to represent the university staff community in the presentation and analysis of the study findings.

The study participants were identified by means of: (1) recommendation from the Deanship of the Research Office; (2) assistance from the college dean's office in identifying appropriate key administrators; and (3) several faculty members who act as important links and could be conceived as gatekeepers- these included Omani college coordinators, administrators, admin assistants and so on. They also helped the researcher's attempts to contact possibly interested participants at the university (with years of experiences in senior positions and recently stepped down). As the researcher was familiar with SQU (having previously worked there as a faculty member), the participants were selected according to the following criteria: (1) female Omani academics who had been working in the field of HE for a number of years; and (2) who were either currently employed, or had been employed in middle or upper management (e.g. unit heads, deans, assistant deans, directors, deputy directors and heads of units) at SQU. Further detailed information regarding the women participants will be discussed in the following chapter. There was a specific focus on participants involved in the policy and administrative system of the university, in order to provide a series of snapshots of women's leadership careers and indicate how policy-makers perceive the system at SQU. Thus, the findings illuminate the perceptions of a variety of leaders and administrators.

This study does not aim to provide findings capable of being applicable to the general population, but rather to place, as asserted by Denscombe (2003, p. 13), 'an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency'. Twenty-five female academics were identified as potential participants, but only thirteen proved willing to participate. Interviewing a more diverse group of participants could have provided a more diverse set of responses. Given the scope of this research, however, the most appropriate actions were followed and, therefore, the current researcher is appreciative of the individuals who volunteered their valuable time. This sample can be considered adequate, due to, as noted by Kelly (2011, p. 53), the intent being 'to explore the experiences of these particular women rather than to draw conclusions regarding the overall population of females'. It is not the sampling size that dictates strategy in qualitative research, but 'to be clear about the sampling method you employed, why you used it, and why the sample size you achieved is appropriate' (Bryman, 2012, p. 426). The sample selection has been guided by the focus of this study, i.e. enhancing understanding and allowing individuals who may not otherwise be heard express themselves (Creswell, 2008). The investigation took place at SQU over a five-month period, from 1 July 2014 to 23 December 2014.

4.7   Research Method

This research employs a qualitative research design, based on the constructivist approach, and includes semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to guide the collection of empirical data. The epistemological and ontological approaches in this research are based on constructivist methods, which are particularly effective at eliciting answers from participants, as part of their social systems affected by social interaction (Omair, 2008). Further, scholars have suggested that researchers use a blend of methods to resolve the issues in the research process (Creswell, 2013; Cohen et al., 2011). The present study, however, incorporated a rich data collection method and interviews, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and a holistic description of the processes involved. Gillham (2000) states that:

> [q]ualitative methods enable you to carry out an investigation where other methods are not practicable; to investigate situations where little is known about what is there, or what is going on; to explore complexities that are beyond the scope of more 'controlled' approaches; to 'get under the skin' of a group or organisation to find out what really happens – the informal reality which can only be perceived from the inside; to view the case from the inside out, to see it from the perspective of those involved; to carry out research into the processes leading to results rather than into the 'significance' of the results themselves. (p. 11)

Thus, in order to present an in-depth understanding of this topic, the data was collected through interviews with thirteen female academics with experience of senior leadership roles. As noted above, an interview guide was developed, based on the research questions and the issues identified in the literature, e.g. personal and professional obstacles; compromises and barriers; and personal losses (Bender, 1980).

4.7.1   Interviewing

Interviewing is a tool commonly employed for data collection. An interview is a form of conversation with both a purpose and a structure. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 2) note that 'it goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views in everyday conversations, and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach, with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge'. Shah (2004) asserts that, in qualitative research, 'interviewing is perceived as a participative activity to generate knowledge, a two-way learning process, where the

subjectivities of the research participants influence data collection and the process of "making meaning"' (p. 552). Byrne (2004) views qualitative interviewing as particularly beneficial as an exploration strategy for establishing an individual's mentality and qualities, aspects that can be sensed by a direct conservation, but not detected by a questionnaire. Drawing upon feminism, Byrne (2004, p. 182) suggests that "qualitative interviewing has been particularly attractive to researchers who want to explore voices and experiences which they believe have been ignored, misrepresented or suppressed in the past'. Interviews assist researchers to gain an improved understanding of the phenomenon being studied (O'Neil, 2011), while allowing the flexibility to react immediately to issues raised by participants, including to ask pertinent questions and discuss issues they find important, while bearing in mind the broader aims of the study.

Four types of interviews can be conducted in the course of a research project: (1) structured, (2) semi-structured; (3) unstructured; and (4) focused. Cohen et al. (2011, p. 414) outline the characteristics of the four interview formats, which are summarised in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Types of Qualitative Research Interviews

Type of interview	Interviewer	Characteristics
Structured interview	Little freedom	• Closed situation • Content and procedures are organised • Wording and sequence of questions are determined by a schedule • No modification
Unstructured interview	Greater flexibility and freedom	• Open situation • Content and sequence at the discretion of the interviewer • Guided by the research aims • Carefully planned
Semi-structured interview	• Can prompt the interviewee, as well as probe further • Develops rapport with the interviewee	• Flexibility in the way issues are addressed • Respondent has freedom to speak spontaneously • Predetermined order
Focused interview	• Expedient • Plays an active role	• Focuses on respondent's subjective responses • Known situation, which has been analysed previously by the interviewer

Source: Cohen et al. (2011, p. 414)

4.7.1.1 Semi-structured interviews

The adoption of semi-structured interviews was considered appropriate, primarily as they enable an improved understanding of individuals' interpretations of their own personal experiences. They were employed to capture each participant's view of her career progression, as each individual's experience is unique and, in this research context, dependent on the highly politicised climate associated with such leading posts. The study sample were asked to reflect on and discuss their struggle to reach the top of their profession, and also for their perspective on the cultural challenges to females' advancement, as well as the potential risks and their consequences. The semi-structured nature of the interviews accommodated the participants' responses and emerging viewpoints, while providing a degree of structure and direction to each interview (Merriam, 1998). The interviews ensured that 'interviewees and interviewers [were] always actively engaged in constructing meaning' (Silverman, 2006, p. 116).

As a result of the logistical challenges of interviewing the participants in Oman while studying in the United Kingdom, a number of interviewing methods were employed, e.g. face-to-face; telephone; and Internet communication. Many researchers (i.e. Booth, 2008; Green, 2006; Oppenheim, 1992; Nias, 1991; Dicker & Gilbert, 1988) have drawn attention to the importance of the use of the telephone, Internet, voice and video communication to data collection. While there are both benefits and drawbacks to the use of telephone and internet communication, many researchers argue that telephones and synchronous online platforms form a 'useful supplement or replacement to face-to-face interviews' (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014, p. 603; see also Oppenheim, 1992; Nias, 1991; Dicker & Gilbert, 1988). King & Horrocks (2012, p. 79) summarise the reasons for researchers increasingly making use of such methods as follows: 'physical distance from participants, availability of participants, and the nature of the interview topics'.

Robson (2002, p. 270) states that the 'telephone is increasingly being used because of the saving in time and resources it permits'. Many researchers treat this as a valid method, rather than a cheap alternative to conventional interviews (King & Horrocks, 2012; Shuy, 2002). One drawback of this form of interviewing, however, as stated by Creswell (2005, p. 216), is that 'the researcher does not have direct contact with the participants', and therefore is unable to observe body language and non-linguistic signals, which may eventually 'affect the researcher's ability to understand the interviewee's perceptions of the phenomenon' (Creswell, 2005, p. 216). King & Horrocks (2012, p. 81) express further concerns that participants might

'misunderstand the nature of the interaction' or might fall into their 'habitual mode of telephone use' (ibid). A number of studies (i.e. Miller, 1995; Oppenheim, 1992; Harvey, 1988) have therefore recommended that the interviewer must prepare with 'careful prompts and probes, including more than usual closed questions and less complex questions' (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 291), and also bear in mind the duration of the interview, including ensuring that the participants are fully aware of the time required (King & Horrocks, 2012).

A large number of technologies now allow synchronous video, as well as audio, interaction at a distance, i.e. remote video techniques (King & Horrocks, 2012, p. 83). Deakin & Wakefield (2014, p. 603) assert that: 'research is no longer limited to face-to-face accessible participants, as online methods have facilitated access to global research participants'. King & Horrocks (2012, p. 79) point out the recent rapid increase in online interviewing, with Internet voice and video communication having advanced in quality and affordability, leading to increasing numbers now using web-calling as their principal, or secondary, means of voice communication (Green, 2006). O'Connor & Madge (2003) point out that:

> [t]he attraction of cyberspace lies in its versatility as a research medium, offering possibilities in an arena not restricted by geography, and where researchers can interact with participants in ways which may not be possible in the real world. (p. 133)

The online interview should be regarded as a viable primary option for the researcher, rather than as a secondary choice, i.e. when impossible to undertake face-to-face interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). In part, this is due to the former mitigating the distance of space, which enables research to be easily internationalised without the associated travel costs (O'Connor et al., 2008). Online interviews can be valuable for researchers who wish to contact participants who are otherwise difficult to reach (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Researchers have previously argued against using this synchronous video interviewing, doubting 'the reliability and the quality of video-conferencing via webcam' (Hewson, 2007, cited in King & Horrocks, 2012, p. 84). Such problems, however, have now decreased or been eradicated. It was immediately apparent that, for the purpose of this research, online interviewing was a more practical solution than face-to-face interviews, due to logistical considerations and geographical challenges (as noted above) of interviewing participants in Oman while studying in the United Kingdom. This tool also gave the participants the option to respond according to their own convenience, i.e. with regard to both time and place.

Experimentation with various different versions of free video-conferencing software, led to the decision to use Skype, i.e. the most commonly used platform for face-to-face remote conversation, and successfully used as an interview forum by many educators (Booth, 2008). Skype is a software application for Internet-based telephoning, available to download without cost, and without any charge to either the participant or the researcher, beyond the use of an Internet connection. A further advantage was that Skype was familiar to HE faculty members in Oman, as Booth (2008) asserts that 'many university faculties use Skype heavily in collaboration and teaching' (p. 161). This software was, therefore, deemed to be an ideal platform and the most effective online service for this research study.

A number of researchers have argued against the use of such methods for interviewing, as they raise issues 'relating to interview design, the building of rapport and ethical problems' (O'Connor et al., 2008, p. 605). The present researcher, however, does not believe that remote interviewing raises any significant ethical issues, beyond those already familiar and previously addressed. King & Horrocks (2012, p. 83) highlight a number of relevant issues, including: (1) obtaining written consent to record the interviews; (2) ensuring calls take place in private venues, in order to secure confidentiality and anonymity; and (3) using a telephone or computer located at the research university for security. It could also be argued that the key to a successful remote interview is good preparation and having a clear understanding of the nature of the media employed (King & Horrocks, 2012).

4.7.2 Interview Guide

An interview guide was prepared in advance, listing the questions and issues to be explored during the interview (see Appendix 4). Patton (2002) views an interview guide as serving 'to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed' (p. 343) and to provide 'topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject' (p. 343). An interview guide outlines the primary subjects the researcher wishes to cover, yet is adaptable when it comes to how the questions are addressed. It also provides participants with the flexibility to guide the interview towards their primary area of interest (King & Horrocks, 2012). Lincoln & Guba (1985) emphasise that the planning and conducting stages of the interview are of particular importance, as their purpose is to set a preliminary framework (or structure) for the interview process, and to ensure that the individual interviews for data

collection adopt a standardised process. This ensures that the key elements of the subjects are discussed with all participants, although not necessarily in the same sequence. Thus, careful attention needs to be given to the various phases of the interview (Cohen et al., 2011).

The interview guide for the current study was developed on the basis of an inclusive review of the literature and the specific questions of the current research. The information was primarily drawn from Western literature and relevant work by Omani scholars (to obtain in-depth understanding of Omani women participation in the workforce). The aim was to investigate the enabling factors, challenges and impact of gender found in the existing literature, in relation to: (1) the perception by the female faculty members themselves; and the (2) impact of such issues on HE leaders, with specific reference to the context of Oman. Robson (2002, p. 270) points out that semi-structured interviews have 'predetermined questions, but the order can be modified, based upon the interviewer's perception of what seems most appropriate'. He added that the wording of questions can be changed and explanations given for specific questions, if and when needed, while questions inappropriate for particular participants can be either omitted or replaced (Robson, 2002). The order in which the questions were put remained flexible, according to the circumstances of each interview (see Appendix 4 and Appendix 5 for the Interview Guide Sample).

4.7.3 Interview process

Interviews were conducted either in person or through Skype, with faculty members at SQU, all of whom were female Omani academics working in middle and upper management. As stated above, a total of thirteen out of twenty-five individuals contacted agreed to participate. Each interview lasted for a minimum of forty-five, and a maximum of sixty, minutes. Robson (2002, p. 273) states that 'anything under half an hour is unlikely to be valuable; anything going much over an hour may be making unreasonable demands on busy interviewees'. This was reflected in the circumstances of the current study, with the participants being academics in leading positions, and consequently having very tight schedules. As envisaged, this led to many preferring to be interviewed in their homes, or via video-conferencing, rather than in their offices.

A follow-up email was sent to participants who expressed an interest in being part of this study. It was necessary to schedule different timings for each interview during the data collection procedure, due to the researcher residing in the United Kingdom and the sample participants

being in Oman. The participants were emailed a list of possible dates and times for the interview suitable for both sides, followed by the actual interview dates and times being confirmed with each participant in a telephone conversation. Care was taken to be flexible in accommodating their requests and ensuring their comfort.

As a result of careful planning, it was possible to conduct a number of the interviews face-to-face, during the researcher's visits to Oman, while others took place over Skype, which allowed for improved flexibility for both researcher and female participants, in particular regarding the time and place of the interviews. The researcher asked the participants beforehand about which method they preferred. Five participants indicated a clear preference for personal one-on-one interviews. This assisted the participants of the current study, who were thus able to be interviewed in accordance with their tight schedules. Many participants praised the method of video-conferencing and were willing to talk at length online. The participants being interviewed over Skype provided a contact number upon scheduling their interviews. The School of Education at the University of Leicester provided a room for the researcher to conduct the interviews. Each Skype interview took place at around the same time, in order to correspond with the end of the working day in Oman. This worked very well for both the participants and the researcher, due to the four-hour time difference between Oman and the United Kingdom, and therefore all interviews were conducted within the University of Leicester's working hours.

A number of brief follow-up interviews were also undertaken with some of the participants, to clarify information and to fill in gaps noted during the first analysis, i.e. most of the participants excluded to mention the role played by their mothers in their personal and professional progression. When conducting the interviews, two participants concentrated on their mothers as effective components in their lives. Therefore, the researcher chose to immediately question the participants about the role of their mothers in their instructive and professional success. As anticipated by the researcher, for some participants, their mothers were role models and wellsprings of motivation. These mothers had persevered in intense circumstances; this was especially true of individuals who had borne immense obligations because of the absenteeism of their working spouses. Revisiting this information revealed the crucial impact of the participants' mothers, as discussed in detail in the discussion chapter.

In addition to preparing a schedule, prior to each interview, permission was sought from each participant to record their interview (see Appendix 5). In order to ensure informed consent,

each individual was provided with the reasons to record, including the use of direct quotations. Researchers tend to prefer audio-recording, as they believe it has an impact on the interviewing process (King & Horrocks, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002, p. 380) notes that 'no matter what style of interviewing you use and no matter how carefully you word questions, it all comes to naught if you fail to capture the actual words of the person being interviewed'. King and Horrocks (2012, p. 44) agree, stating that 'it is strongly preferable, if not essential, to have a full record of each interview'. For this reason, it is recommended that interviews should be recorded, in order to provide more accurate interpretations of the participants' statements, in particular when a significant amount of time may lapse between interviews for the same project.

Recording interviews also allows the researcher to preserve everything said in the interview for future data analysis (Merriam, 1998), thus avoiding the consequences of distraction, i.e. the process of a researcher taking detailed notes. It also enables the researcher to 'concentrate on taking strategic and focused notes rather than attempting verbatim notes' (Patton, 2002, p. 383). In addition, field notes detailing the context of the interviews were taken prior to, and following, each interview, in order to reflect the researcher's own reactions to the participants' responses and capture their non-verbal communication. These field notes were essential for the subsequent transcription, and further strengthened the credibility of the research study. The research followed the suggestion of King & Horrocks (2012) to write such notes 'on a copy of the interview guide itself, as this [helped me] subsequently to locate the notes within the course of the interview' (p. 48). Bryman (2012, p. 482) points out that: 'qualitative researchers are frequently interested, not just in what people say, but also in the way that they say it'. After the interviews, the response of each participant to each question was reviewed, followed by key comments and themes being extracted with the assistance of the notes taken during the interviews.

Yang (2008, p. 128) notes that: 'the one-on-one interaction between an interviewer and an informant tends to build up the kind of intimacy that is common for mutual self-disclosure'. Thus, the informal, semi-structured interviews gave the freedom to probe the interviewees and elicit elaborations on their original responses. It also assisted the researcher to follow the line of inquiry presented by the participants. The questions were given to each participant prior to their interview, which reduced the amount of time required in both face-to-face and online interviews to clarify the questions. Furthermore, this enabled the participants to prepare by

reflecting upon their experiences, while also enabling them to express their ideas using their own words, instead of fitting their thoughts and understanding into pre-set categories determined by the researcher. The interviews contained twenty questions, including ones concerning perceptions and experiences relating to customs, traditions, organisational changes and career advancement (see Appendices 4 and 5). The researcher correctly anticipated that this would elicit a rich set of in-depth narratives from the participants.

Each interview began with a welcome message and an expression of appreciation. The study was then introduced, along with a brief explanation of the rationale and the anticipated beneficial outcome. Secondly, the researcher put forward a number of general questions, including: (1) 'Can you talk about your experience growing up as a woman?'; (2) 'What made you decide to pursue an academic career?'; and (3) 'Could you briefly explain the responsibilities of your job?' These questions were open-ended, and also designed to encourage the participants to commence with the most familiar aspect of the subject under discussion. This enabled the interview to open in a relaxed and less formal manner, particularly appropriate to gaining information concerning attitudes and feelings:

> The structured open-response interview is most appropriate where a speedy and descriptive account of a topic is needed, where factual information is to be collected, and where the nature and range of the opinions of the interviewees concerning the topic of the research are not well known in advance. (Cassell & Symon, 1994, p. 17)

The questions required the participants to relate their personal experiences, thoughts and opinions pertaining to their academic leadership experience, in order to investigate the factors acting to empower a proportion of academic leaders, both across the gender divide and in relation to other variables. I was grateful that the participants were able to share important aspects of their journey towards success. By remaining in the background, I ensured the conversation developed naturally, frequently leading to topics being covered earlier than planned. Following the interviews, all interviewees were thanked for their participation and informed of the process of transcribing the interviews.

The interview transcripts were subsequently emailed to each participant for verification. This provided an opportunity for participants to rescind any part of the interview they deemed inappropriate or too sensitive, i.e. personal and professional barriers; professional compromises; and personal struggles to close the gap between themselves and their male

counterparts. A list of codes and themes was then drawn up based on the interviews and uploaded to NVivo for data analysis.

Power and Reflexivity

Although researchers have often been viewed as having backing in the form of institutional and organizational power (Henry, 2003), when conducting the current study I variously experienced power and powerlessness throughout the different phases of my study. Das (2010) also reported a similar experience when conducting research as an Indian researcher with a group of British Indian participants. Several researchers have also supported the supposition that the assumed dominant position of the researcher is subject to questioning (Das, 2010; Tang, 2002). I, however, agree with Grenz (2005), who observed that assumed power is not processed by anyone, neither the participants nor the study researcher; therefore, it is difficult to conceptualise power under these terms. There is a considerable shift in power between the interviewer and the interviewee in such research; this is shaped by different aspects of the research encounter and ultimately frames both the produced data and the study's outcomes.

I felt powerless in two instances: firstly, while trying to recruit participants from a relatively limited population as a student, as I did not enjoy sufficient institutional support. This was not an easy task, especially since I was attempting to schedule face-to-face initial appointments with senior faculty administrators. Secondly, I feared the participants would lose interest during the validation phase of the study, as they were all busy and working to tight schedules.

The researcher, like the participants, is an Omani female academic who has worked in an HE institution system for a long time. The researcher is a former senior faculty member, who has worked in different executive management positions at SQU. The status of the researcher (my seniority) partly influenced the research process, especially when it was necessary to contact middle management to shape their interaction with the researcher. The researcher, therefore, willingly made personal disclosures to place the participants at their ease and reduce the sense of a hierarchical relationship separating the participants from the researcher. During the interviews, for example, I invoked examples from my own experiences when moving up the career ladder and shared some of the challenges I have encountered both personally and professionally. My 'purpose was reciprocate the vulnerability and level the power between the participants and the researcher' (Das, 2010, p.19). This method facilitated the interview process and helped the participants feel comfortable sharing their own experiences. Additionally, the

fact that I am a female Omani faculty member who has worked within the system helped me to forge close ties with many of the participants as we shared similar social and cultural norms. This made me feel empowered through mutual understanding, and made it possible to address sensitive issues, such as the customary difficulties women encounter as females in an Islamic region. This helped to create a comfortable and friendly environment while I was conducting the interviews. As a researcher, I consider mutual understanding essential to access the voices of participants to successfully collect inclusive data that will be of benefit to other groups at higher education institutions in Oman.

4.8   Pilot Study

Stewart (2016, p. 1) defines a pilot study as a 'small study to test research protocols, data collection instruments, sample recruitment strategies, and other research techniques in preparation for a larger study'. A pilot study focuses on the processes of the main study 'in order to evaluate feasibility, time, cost, adverse events, and effect size' (Hulley et al., 2013, p. 14). In many respects, it is similar to the main study. It was essential to conduct a pilot study for the current research, as it formed 'a potentially valuable insight' (Hulley et al., 2013, p. 14). The pilot study assisted the present researcher in identifying potential problem areas and any aspects that were either missing or needed to be modified in the research instrument prior to implementation of the full study, in order 'to improve the chances of a clear outcome' (Hulley et al., 2013, p. 14). Pilot interviews are also utilised to review and refine 'a research question, figure out what methods are best for pursuing it, and estimate how much time and resources will be necessary to complete the larger version, among other things' (Crossman, 2016, p. 1).

I.   Conducting the pilot study

The participants of the pilot study differed from those in the main study. The study was undertaken at SQU with eight out of ten female Omani academics who had responded to requests to take part in the pilot, and were selected on the basis of their similarity to the research study population, i.e. currently holding middle and upper management positions at different colleges at SQU, as well as having been academic employees for many years. After completing the pilot interviews, the participants were requested to critique the questions and write notes on the interview guide. This was followed by a discussion focused on fine-tuning the subsequent interviews. The pilot participants, therefore, provided constructive feedback on the whole process and questions. These interviews were all later transcribed. A range of methods,

such as coding and categorising, were utilised in order to highlight similarities and differences in the perception and experiences of the pilot participants (further details will be given later in the chapter).

II.   Outcomes of the pilot study

The process of obtaining ethical approval and finding the appropriate sample from a relatively limited population proved time-consuming. The pilot study provided the opportunity to create an improved plan for the main study. It was crucial for the researcher to develop effective strategies for managing time and organising a work schedule to cover the entire process.

The participants of the pilot project provided meaningful feedback concerning the clarity of the questions, leading to the guide being refined in accordance with their advice. It was further refined by additional guidance from the researcher's supervisor, and the researcher's own analysis of the interviews, e.g. the pilot participants recommended having a small number of open-ended questions at the beginning of the interviews, to encourage participants to open with the most well-known part of their lives, thus making them feel at ease. King & Horrocks (2012, p. 37) divide questions into: (1) background/demographic questions; (2) experience/behaviour questions; (3) opinion/value questions; (4) feeling questions; (5) knowledge questions; and (6) sensory questions. The researcher followed the suggestion of King & Horrocks (2012) organising questions into sub-sections, although the order of the questions did not necessarily follow the same sequence. This strategy enabled the researcher to build a warm and caring relationship between her and the participants.

4.9   Data Analysis

Bogdan & Biklen (2003, p. 54) describe qualitative analysis as 'working with data, organising it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others'. The data collected from the interviews was stored in a database and organised into categories based on the emergent themes, which included: socio-cultural practices, motherhood, religious interpretations, personal attributes, institutional policies and conceptualisations of gender and leadership in the workplace. Patton (2002, p. 432) states that no formula has been established that a researcher can follow to transform raw data into findings. He adds that 'directions can be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer'. Robson (2002, p. 456)

agrees with this view, pointing out that: 'there is no clear and accepted single set of conventions for analysis corresponding to those observed with quantitative data'. Clearly, this depends on the investigator's approach to the data, along with a consideration of alternative interpretations and a presentation of the evidence (Yin, 2003). Rubin & Rubin (2005, p. 226) state that analysis is exciting because 'you discover themes and concepts embedded throughout your interviews'. The researcher here focused on analysing the themes, rather than on generalising the subject under investigation, in order to gain an improved understanding of 'the complexity of the case' (Creswell, 2013, p. 101).

In this study, thematic analysis is based on the principle of 'fitness for purpose' (Cohen et al., 2007). Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 79) define thematic analysis as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes [the] data set in (rich) detail'. Bryman (2012) considers it to be one of the most common approaches to qualitative data analysis, while Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 78) view it as 'a foundational method for qualitative analysis' adding that this method 'provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other forms of qualitative analysis'. Braun & Clarke (2006) further emphasise that thematic analysis should be regarded as a method in its own right. Consequently, Boyatzis (1998) views it, not as a specific method, but as a tool to be employed across a number of different methods. As demonstrated in Figure 4.2, it provides a flexible and useful research tool, capable of providing a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This study aims to maintain a balance between thematic analysis and an explanation of the phenomena, while ensuring flexibility in using emerging themes. This prevents the analysis from being constrained, thus losing one of its key advantages (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Hence, Braun & Clarke's (2006) steps of thematic analysis primarily informed the data analysis.

Figure 4.2 The Different Phases of the Thematic Analysis
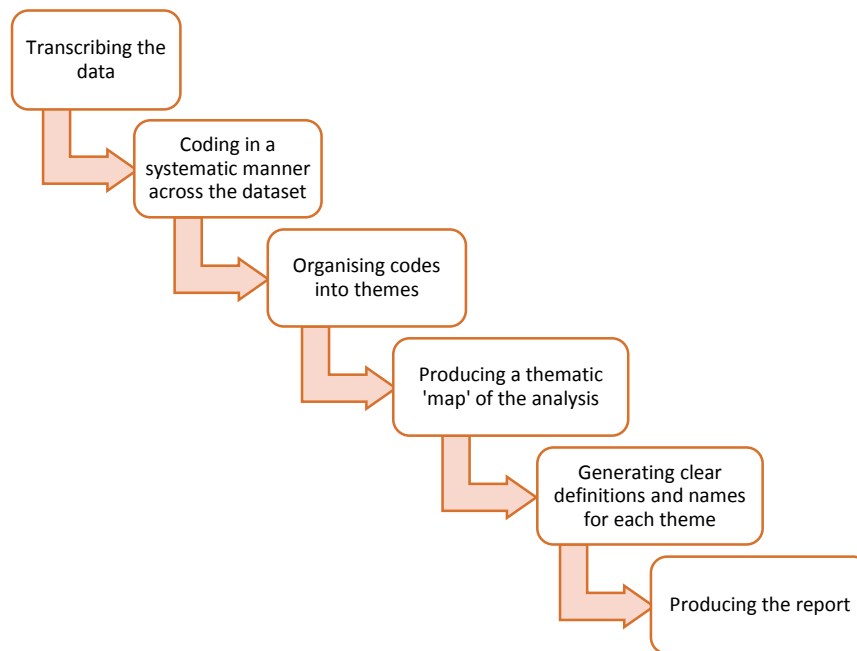
Source: Braun & Clarke's (2006) Phases of Thematic Analysis

Braun & Clarke emphasise that themes do not depend on 'quantifiable measures' (i.e. the number of times a related factor was mentioned), but rather on whether they highlight a crucial aspect of the research questions (2006, p. 81). Bryman (2012) states that this form of analysis lacks 'an identifiable heritage, or has been outlined in terms of a distinctive cluster of techniques' (p. 578), and thus 'the themes and the sub-themes are the product of a thorough reading and re-reading of the transcripts or field notes that make up the data' (ibid, p. 579).

During the initial stage of coding (i.e. the first step of the data analysis), the researcher transcribed all audio-recorded interviews and then reviewed each transcription in its entirety, observing that 'some themes are unique to an individual case' (King & Horrocks, 2012, p. 149). Strauss & Corbin (1998) state that: 'coding highlights problems, issues, concerns and matters of importance to those being studied'. An analysis of the interview data gave the researcher insights into how individuals make sense of, and act upon, their own experiences. The transcripts were read line-by-line (open coding), noting down themes and itemising them into categories as they appeared in the data. This technique facilitated the identification of 'something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represent[ed] some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). This format assisted in the initial categorisation process of the main concepts in the findings. Bell

(1993, p. 127) asserts that 'a hundred separate pieces of interesting information will mean nothing to a reader unless they have been placed into categories […] grouping, patterns and items of particular significance'.

The judgement of the researcher is vital in identifying a theme within any particular analysis. The researcher, however, was very careful in this process, so her own beliefs and concepts of the investigated phenomenon would not lead the findings. In order to reduce researcher bias and increase the validity of the study, care was taken to employ a number of strategies recommended by social scientists (e.g. Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Hertz, 1997). This usually happens through reflexivity where the researcher 'will try to make explicit how intersubjective elements impact on data collection and analysis in an effort to enhance the trustworthiness, transparency and accountability of their research' (Finlay, 2002, pp. 211–212). In this case, the researcher had to step back and observe the study participants objectively, which helped answer the epistemological question 'what do I know?' (Hertz, 1997, p. viii). In the second step back, the researcher reflected on the observation itself, which provided her with the second crucial question suggested by Hertz (1997, p. viii), 'how do I know what I know?' To achieve this, the researcher allowed all the study participants either to confirm her understanding of the data interpretation or to correct it, which assured their involvement in the sense-making process of the researcher's own investigation. Guillemin & Gillam (2004) assert that 'a reflexive researcher is one who is aware of all these potential influences and is able to step back and take a critical look at his or her own role in the research process' (p. 275).

Further, interview notes were read from start to finish, thus attaining a holistic view of the data. This approach was adopted in a study by Tanko (2015), in which he interviewed a group of academic leaders and senior faculty members in a public university in Ghana. Preliminary notes were made in the margins of the analysis data. When analysing the data, the researcher considered two major items: (1) the most common themes; and (2) the most unique responses. The thematic analysis in this study went beyond simply counting phrases or words in a text, moving on to identifying both implicit and explicit ideas within the data (Guest et al., 2012).

The present study was set up in January 2014, at a time when NVivo had a high profile amongst the qualitative research software used at the University of Leicester, being advertised in the research training courses for all new students. By the time the researcher completed her first NVivo training course, analytic memos on each completed interview throughout the data-collection period was already developed. At a later stage, these were added, along with full

verbatim transcripts, into NVivo, thus removing the need to perform the above manual analysis of the data. Welsh (2002, p. 5) notes, however, that researchers should 'recognise the value of both manual and electronic tools in qualitative data analysis and management and […] not reify one over the other, but instead remain open to, and make use of, the advantages of each'. Therefore, at the end of the manual process, the researcher decided that it was necessary to use the NVivo software package to address the themes emerging in the study. Initial concerns related to the speculation of Woods et al. (2015) that such a tool could not be helpful in data analysis, as a result of technical issues arising from other data analysis software. Conversely, researchers such as Cohen et al. (2011), Kelle & Laurie, (1995) favoured the use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Kelle & Laurie (1995, p. 27, cited in Cohen et al., 2011) highlight that:

> [c]omputer aided methods can enhance: (a) validity (by the management of samples); and (b) reliability (by retrieving all data on a given topic, thereby ensuring trustworthiness of the data), without losing contextual factors.

Therefore, a decision was made to use NVivo for data management, analysis and modelling. Richards (1999, p. 4) argues that NVivo offers a range of tools for 'pursuing new understandings and theories about data, and for constructing and testing answers to research questions'. This software assists in labelling and coding (called *noding* in NVivo) the data in such a way so that the researcher can query specific words or phrases. It provides several tools for managing rich text records, skimming and advancing content, coding the information outwardly or from categories, and commenting on or gaining access to data records precisely and quickly (NVivo, 2015). It is important to keep in mind that such programs 'do not analyse the data for the researcher. Rather, the researchers utilise the computer program to assist in the analysis' (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011, p. 71).

In the current study, the transcripts and interview notes that were in MS Word format were imported into NVivo after being saved as Rich Text Format files. Figure 4.3 is an illustration of document browsers, displaying all the files (i.e. memo files and participants' demographic information) saved in the document browser in NVivo. Some features in these files include the nodes linked onto these files, their size, and the dates on which these files were created and amended.

Figure 4.3 All documents in NVivo
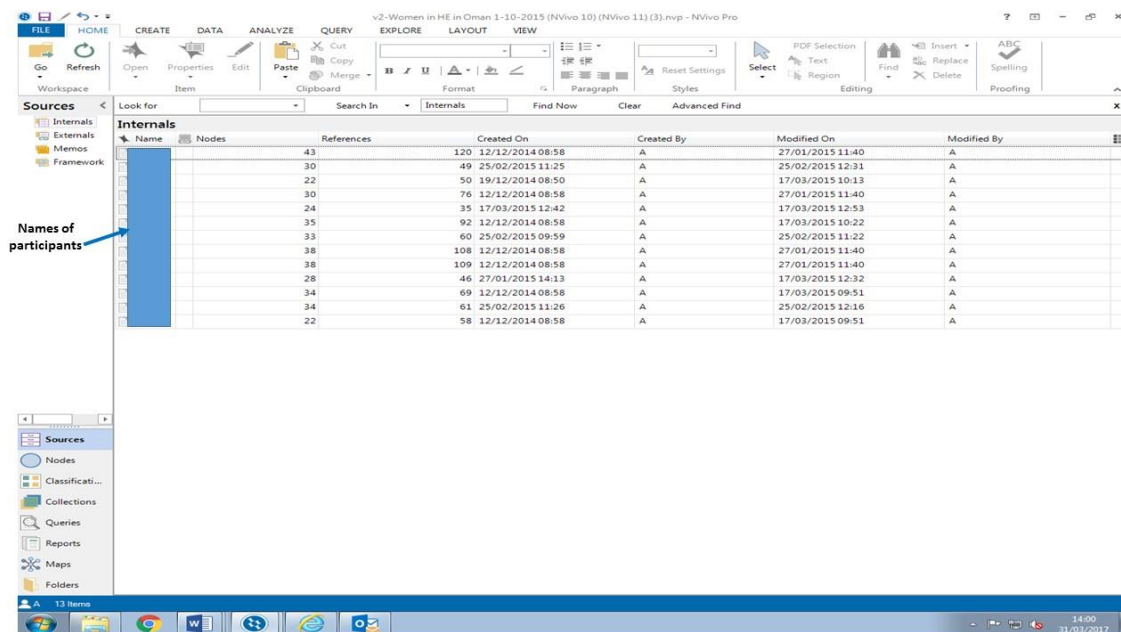
Since the researcher had already prepared the main categories upon which the literature review and research questions were based, a list of these codes (called 'nodes' in NVivo) was prepared: family, positions, religion, motherhood and gender. These five nodes were used initially in the pilot study (see Appendix 8). At a later stage of the study, the transcripts and data analysis were revised with the pilot study participants. Additionally, during this stage of thematic coding of the interview data, the software mapped the entire transcript and identified other primary domains or themes through a word cloud and more categories were assigned as main nodes: socio-cultural practices, motherhood, religious barriers, personal attributes, institutional policies, and gender and leadership in the workplace. Then, to each of these main-node sub-categories (called "child nodes" in NVivo) the following were added: educational background, career challenges and perceptions of women leaders, family background, and glass ceiling barriers which were found to be linked with one another. Furthermore, a few nodes identified as significant in the study were added, such as interest in administrative posts, personal choice and future plan, which could not fit into a tree (called "free nodes" in NVivo). Figure 4.4 shows some of the main codes (in blue dots). Each code related to one of the four research questions.

Figure 4.4 The Current Study Tree Nodes and Associated Free Nodes

These core themes and sub-themes of the study data analysis are outlined in the word cloud in Figure 4.5. McKee (2014) notes that:

> Word clouds are a method for visually presenting text data. […] They can shed a surprisingly new light on what would otherwise be viewed as 'ho-hum' data. [They] are especially impactful when shaped into an image that reflects [the] topic or theme (p. 3).

Most of the participants fell into two or three core themes, each with further sub-themes. The core themes and sub-themes were all identified in accord with Opler (1945, p. 199), i.e. by '(1) how often [they] appear; (2) how pervasive [they are] across different types of cultural ideas and practices; (3) how people react when the theme[s are] violated; and (4) the degree to which the force and variety of [the] theme[s]' expression is controlled by specific contexts'.

Figure 4.5 Thematic Data Analysis of the Four Research Questions

Source: Core themes and sub-themes in NVivo 10, 2015

Furthermore, the NVivo program possesses tools for recording and connecting thoughts from the participants' multiple points of view, and for observing and investigating patterns related to the data and ideas gathered. During this stage, the coding is carried out using the categories that had been identified through two stages: (1) line numbering, in which a segment from a text was chosen; or (2) highlighting a specific quotation to be coded. The next step was bringing all the segments that fell under the same code together, and all the transcripts were coded in a similar manner. The data was later arranged around the research questions and the study goals. A table was produced at this stage to make sense of the chosen themes and how they relate to the participants (see Appendix 10), and the nodes were reviewed to highlight the patterns that emerged from the current study (see Appendices 8, 9 and 10 for sample NVivo thematic analysis). The above steps required extensive time and effort, and everything had to be covered at an early stage. It was noticed, however, that coding using NVivo provided considerable flexibility compared with manual coding. The program 'gives the researchers the opportunity to play around with their data and familiarise themselves with the package sufficiently to be able to code confidently' (Basit, 2003, p. 152).

4.10 The Role of the Researcher

The researcher was the sole investigator in this study, and has ample relevant experience (twenty-two years) as a middle and senior administrator in HE institutions in Oman. Her relationship to the study forms a significant factor, as, in qualitative research, the researcher is acknowledged to be the agent determining: (1) which information constitutes data; (2) the interpretations made; and (3) the hypothetical frameworks constructed. Easterby-Smith et al. (1994) observe that this approach 'focuses on the experiences and explanations of the individuals concerned' (p. 85). Creswell (2013) thus advises researchers to include information concerning their background and inform the readers of what he or she as a researcher will gain from the study, due to the impact of such factors on the interpretation of the data. There needs to be an exchange of experiences between both the interviewer and the participants, including a sharing of a cultural, organisational and educational context, including the consequent ideas, meaning and thoughts (Omair, 2008). Wolcott (2010) argues that participants:

> [h]ave the right to know about us. In addition, they do not want to know whether we played in the high school band. They want to know what prompts our interest in the topic we investigate, to whom we are reporting, and what we personally stand to gain from our study. (p. 36)

The researcher's perspective on leadership has been formed through her experience as a researcher, administrator, Head of Unit, lecturer, academic, student, parent and citizen. As discussed in previous chapters, these experiences led her to view leadership through the lens of constructivism. She was therefore able to develop compatibility and validity with the participants in this study by drawing on her own experiences, along with her familiarity with the administration of HE institutions in Oman. The choice of constructivism was primarily supported by the fact that this paradigm uniquely views the researcher as a primary instrument in data collection (Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, the researcher has come to appreciate the detailed descriptions of the rich data collected, conveyed primarily in the participants' own words (Merriam, 1998). In addition, the benefits of constructivism in this study were established by the equal emphasis placed by this theoretical framework on both process and outcomes, as well as the fact that the researcher is interested in the 'how' of the significant factors (Merriam, 1988).

Merriam (1988) views the particular significance of the researcher in qualitative case studies in him/her being 'the primary instrument' (p. 19), collecting and interpreting data. The researcher, therefore, requires good listening skills that enable him/her to listen to, and learn from, the participants. The researcher should not approach such participants as an expert, but should remain open to new thoughts and ways of looking at the data collected. As a female from the same cultural background as the participants, the researcher is confident she has had a significant impact on the process and success of this research. Due to the shared background, the participants were comfortable discussing sensitive issues, generally not voiced publically in Oman, including the subject of gender and issues relating to difficulties encountered by women as mothers, spouses and female leaders in a traditional Islamic society.

The research design of this study was, to some degree, influenced by the researcher's own subjective beliefs, perceptions and definitions, while she may also have been influenced by the participants involved in the study. It is, however, hoped that this mutual influence, which is accepted by both post-modernism (Lyotard, 1984) and social constructivism (Gergen, 1999; Berger & Luckmann, 1966), will not prove problematic. The literature concerning female academics as part of an ongoing endeavour to identify methods to surmount exclusionary practices perpetuating social inequalities for women in academia, and a broad range of published materials concerning the investigated context were analysed under a constructivist lens.

4.10.1 Rapport

King & Horrocks (2012, p. 48) state that the creation of a rapport forms an essential ingredient in successful qualitative interviewing, in particular when, as in the current study, interviewees occupy senior management positions with hectic schedules, and thus little time to devote to interviews. The literature suggests a variety of techniques for building rapport, with some being specific to a particular type of interview and others used in all forms of interviews (Dundan & Ryan, 2010). In constructivism, the interviewer attempts to view the participants through the interview process, 'share their meanings and interpretations of social reality, not only through words and text (what they say), but also how a discourse is communicated during the interview' (Ellis & Berger, 2003, p. 76). The researcher was fully aware of the culture in which the interviews were conducted, and was thus able to generate trust by being courteous and facilitating conversations without judgement or expressing critical opinions (Silverman, 2006).

The positive outcomes of such actions include the availability of a richness of data that can 're-humanise research' (Gephart, 2004, p. 455). Having previously worked as an academic in Oman, conscious of Omani cultural norms, the researcher was able to gain the trust of the interviewees and put them at ease. As suggested by Oakley (1981), only questions that felt comfortable to the researcher were asked, while she drew on her own experience as a senior administrator in the HE sector in Oman to develop a rapport with the interviewees and establish credibility. This was supported by her personal knowledge of the HE hierarchy and bureaucracy in Oman, as well as the working environment at SQU. The research background was introduced with care, emphasising the importance of participation in the study. Moreover, a positive atmosphere of trust and candour was cultivated, which motivated the participants to reflect freely on their own personal experiences, and thus share their views and perceptions.

4.11 Ethical Considerations

Due to qualitative data analysis frequently focusing on individuals and unique cases or instances, it raises 'the question of identifiably, confidentiality and privacy of individuals' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 542). Therefore, ethical issues in qualitative research 'arise in many phases of the research process' (Creswell, 2013, p. 65). Creswell (2013, p. 57) notes that these may occur 'prior to conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, during data collection, in data analysis, in reporting the data, and in publishing a study'. This study adhered to the University of Leicester's Ethical Guidelines and the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2011). A series of organisational and personal consents were later secured prior to the start of the investigation.

First, approval for this study was obtained from the University of Leicester's Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 1). The application included: (1) the interview protocol; (2) an outline of the purpose of the study; and (3) a copy of the written consent form subsequently signed by the participants. Then, letters of approval for conducting the study were authorised by the Ministry of Higher Education and Sultan Qaboos University. Later, a formal invitation letter was emailed to the thirteen participants. From the outset of each interview, the participants were asked to read, complete and sign a consent form (see Appendix 1 for a sample consent form). Kvale (1996, p. 112) states that informed consent 'entails informing the research subjects about the overall purpose of the investigation and the main features of the design'. The University of Leicester's ethical framework relating to informed consent was followed. This

confirms that each participant signed the informed consent before taking part in the research, and is affiliated with: (1) the Economic and Social Research Council Research Ethics Framework (ESRC-REF); (2) the United Kingdom Data Protection Act (1998); and (3) the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2011). The participants were provided with detailed information concerning: (1) the purpose of the study; (2) issues of confidentiality and their rights as participants; (3) the fact that the interviews would be recorded; and (4) the possibility of identification due to the small sample size. The aim of the consent form was to emphasise the 'participants' confidentiality and explain how it would be ensured and protected' (King & Horrocks, 2012, p. 45). This included: (1) the security of the recorded tapes; (2) the identity of those able to access them; and (3) that the transcripts would be anonymised.

The consent forms were followed up with phone calls to assure participants that the risk of identification was minimal (as it will be explained later in the chapter). Consent needed to be revisited several times between fieldwork and writing, to ensure that the participants were fully aware of the nature of the information they had agreed to disclose. Information given to the participants included methods, purpose, demands, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and outcomes (Israel & Hay, 2006, p. 61). In addition, the interview questions were forwarded to all participants prior to the interviews. Floyd & Arthur (2012, p. 3) state that allowing interviewees to view the questions beforehand is designed to 'minimise potential physiological, psychological and emotional harm'.

The validity and reliability of the research study depends upon the ethics of the investigator (Merriam, 2009). As a female Omani, who has previously worked as a member of the academic faculty at SQU, the researcher was able to ensure that cultural practices were observed, so that participants felt at ease throughout the interview process and comfortable enough to respond openly to questions. Every measure was taken to ensure the integrity and cultural sensitivity of the study. Although the University of Leicester's Research Ethics Committee (along with various institutions and professional associations) has developed policies, guidelines and a code of ethics, actual ethical practices are dependent upon each individual researcher's personal values and principles (Merriam, 2009).

The primary consideration of the present research was to protect the participants and their right to privacy. Firstly, they were assured that the risks were minimal, since their names, titles, colleges (and any other identification markers) would remain confidential. The identities of the

participants were protected by replacing each name with a code name, i.e. "Participant 1". In addition, arbitrary numbers, which bear no relation to a particular hierarchy or position at the university were used. Secondly, with the permission of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded, in order to ensure the preservation of verbatim data for use in data analysis (Merriam, 1988). The participants were, therefore, assured that their words would not be taken out of context. In addition, the confidentiality of the data was protected by storing field notes on a password-protected personal computer. During the data analysis, the printed materials (e.g. notes and other handwritten materials) were stored in a locked area, and, once the analysis had been completed, kept safe in folders under lock and key. Furthermore, institutional data from documents to corroborate further the participants' perceptions concerning the under-representation of female Omani academics in senior positions at SQU were used. In order to ensure the integrity of the study, the interview questions were presented in a manner that was non-judgemental and non-threatening. Participants were informed of their right to refuse to respond to any question/item, and to withdraw from the study at any point should they wish, without any pressure. All collected data was recorded without bias or assumption.

4.12 Trustworthiness criteria

Lincoln & Guba (1985) describe trustworthiness as the power of an inquirer to convince both the target audience and him/herself that the conclusions drawn from an inquiry are rigorous and worthy. Trustworthiness was employed to confirm the validity and reliability of the current research. Lincoln & Guba (1985) further state that trustworthiness relates to determining the extent to which research results can be viewed as authentic and credible, i.e. indicating that "trustworthiness" can be achieved through a focus on credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

4.12.1.1 Transferability

The present study focuses on the transfer from validity to transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), achieved by providing an in-depth description of: (1) the background of the study (see Chapters 1 and 2); (2) the participants; and (3) the themes selected for investigation. Therefore, such a description allows the reader to make a confident judgement of the applicability of the findings to other contexts and backgrounds. The decision concerning transferability, however,

requires careful consideration (Kuper, Lingard & Levinson, 2008), and it is the reader's responsibility to transfer, but not to form, a generalisation from the data.

4.12.1.2 Credibility

Williams & Morrow (2009) suggest a number of categories concerning credibility to which all qualitative researchers must attend, i.e. 'integrity of the data, a balance between reflexivity and subjectivity, and clear communication of findings' (p. 577). This was established, firstly, by member-checking (i.e. participants were asked to annotate the raw data of the transcripts and check if there were any statements they wished to omit or paraphrase); and secondly, by collaboration (i.e. engaging participants as co-researchers, including considering their views when forming the research questions and information collection procedures) (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Moreover, the participants were shown the content of the final report, in order to assure them that it reflected their own words. Besides, the study data is presented and discussed in the backdrop of relevant documents, including datasets and annual reports collected from the university's Centre of Staff development, Deanship of Administration and Registration, university's website, its human resources department and the media.

4.12.1.3 Dependability

Lincoln & Guba (1985) consider that a close relationship exists between credibility and dependability, as the latter could not be achieved without the former. The researcher, therefore, employed a number of external strategies to enhance dependability. Firstly, the research data of the present study was cross-checked and shared with the thesis supervisor and members of the community in the field of HE to establish accuracy and clarity, and obtain feedback concerning the plausibility of the emerging findings. The data was also cross-checked against: (1) the comprehensive field notes taken during the interviews; and (2) the draft transcripts of the participants' interviews. The process of sharing the interpretations of the participants' point of view clarified a number of areas of miscommunication, i.e. the majority of the participants omitted to mention the role played by their mothers in their personal and professional progression. Revisiting this information revealed the crucial impact of the participants' mothers, as discussed in detail in the discussion chapter. Guba (1981, p. 87) termed this method 'stepwise replication', viewing it as a means for a researcher to achieve dependability.

4.12.1.4 Confirmability

The final criterion of study trustworthiness concerns confirmability. Guba (1981) suggests the use of triangulation to verify that the available data is consistent with the offered interpretation given by the researchers. Creswell & Miller (2000) consider that this could be undertaken on three levels: (1) the researcher; (2) the participants; and (3) individuals external to the research project, e.g. readers and reviewers. Reviewers frequently challenge research assumptions and raise queries concerning the methods and interpretations employed (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In the present study, the data was tested by peer debriefing, i.e. an expert in the phenomena under investigation reviews and evaluates the research. In this case, senior academics at the University of Leicester and SQU, as well as the study's supervisors, gave feedback, which assisted in achieving a more in-depth understanding of the data.

4.13   Summary

This chapter addressed the purpose of the study and outlined the most appropriate research paradigm and research design to address the research questions of the study. Firstly, there was a justification for the adoption of the interpretive study as the research approach. Secondly, there was a discussion of the profiles of the study participants. Thirdly, the chapter discussed the pilot study that assisted the researcher in forming the interview protocols to be modified prior to the main research study. Fourthly, there was a detailed discussion of the research procedures and instruments of data collection and data analysis, which were developed based on an inclusive review of the literature and the specific research study questions. Thus, this chapter focused on: (1) the role of the researcher; (2) ethical considerations; and (3) the trustworthiness criteria of the research.

Guided by the methodology discussed here, the following chapter examines the findings emerging from the data and the answers to the study questions. In the spirit of qualitative research and narrative analysis, the anonymised individual voices and experiences of the participants in this study will be shared by means of selected excerpts from the interview transcripts. The depth and richness of the information they shared will provide a positive influence on the future of women in HE in Oman.

CHAPTER FIVE: THEMES AND FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the data collected from interviews with 13 senior female Omani academics at Sultan Qaboos University, a higher education institution in Oman. Over the past two decades, women have increasingly attained responsible leadership positions that were traditionally reserved for men. The aim of the study was to collect data from female leaders about women in leadership roles in order to provide insights into their career paths and formulate recommendations for specific future actions and interventions that could be implemented in higher education institutions in Oman. The data is presented and discussed in the backdrop of relevant documents, including datasets and annual reports collected from the university's website, its human resources department and the media.

This chapter is divided into four main sections, each of which addresses one of the segments of the plan that guided the interviews. The first outlines the demographic information of the study participants. The second section focuses on the factors that female Omani academics identify as facilitators for their access to senior leadership positions, and is followed by a section that looks at the challenges that emerged as they developed in their career, and which hindered their ability to perform and their professional development. The fourth section discusses the perceived impact of the institution's policies and mandates on women's effectiveness as leaders, while the last section considers the strategies the participants adopted to overcome the challenges they encountered, and the proposed steps to enhance gender equality in higher education.

In order to facilitate the presentation of the findings, this chapter is organised according to the thematic analysis of the collected data as identified by the researcher and the NVivo 10 program through the examination of repetitions, transitions, similarities and differences, and etic categories (theory-related material) (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). These themes are closely aligned with the research questions introduced in Chapter 1 and, therefore, the findings are presented under the themes drawn from the research questions and the literature review that guided the interview schedule.

5.1.1 Demographic Information

All participants were Omani, born and raised in Oman. They grew up in the Omani Renaissance, a new era inaugurated by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, and their upbringing reflected the changes in society. With the establishment of a "modern" Oman in the early 1970s, the government adopted a policy of education for all, which greatly increased female participation at all educational levels and also encouraged women to work alongside their male counterparts (Goveas & Aslam, 2011). The participants were deans, assistant deans, heads of departments, and executive officers in the arts, humanities, social sciences, political sciences, sciences, engineering and finance faculties of the nine colleges at SQU. For the sake of anonymity and confidentiality, the participants were given code names (e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2 etc.). The data revealed the respondents' career paths by focusing primarily on their perceptions and views regarding women's access to leadership, their individual leadership practices, and the skills they deem necessary for effective higher education leadership, and also by exploring the influence of culture and context.

In tracing the pathway to leadership roles, the career paths of the participants varied in their initial stages, reflecting some of the cultural and familial challenges they confronted whilst obtaining their degrees and starting their careers. Table 5.1 provides the demographic information of the participants. As shown, all interview participants had higher education qualifications, with six holding PhD degrees and seven holding master's degrees, all of which were obtained overseas, primarily at Western (US or British) universities. All participants held professional leadership roles in their colleges/departments at SQU. They all had a minimum of six years of experience in their field and a maximum of 20 years of experience. All were highly experienced academics with publications in refereed journals, and book publications. They were frequently hailed as an expert in their field. They were either currently employed or had been employed in middle or upper management roles as deans, assistant deans, directors, executive officers, heads of units and heads of departments at SQU. In general, all women in this study had earned a faculty rank as demonstrator, lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor and full professor.

All participants were married, and all but one had children. Although they all work in the capital city, Muscat, they came from different regions (districts) in Oman, which had a significant effect on their perceptions regarding some issues that will be discussed later in Chapter 6.

Table 5.1 Overview of the Faculty Interviewed

No.	Position	Years of Experience	Qualification	Marital status
1.	EO	10+	MA	Married with children
2.	EO	6+	MSc	Married with children
3.	HoU	10+	PhD	Married with children
4.	HoD	6+	PhD	Married with children
5.	EO	10+	MA	Married with children
6.	HoD	6+	PhD	Married with no children
7.	DR	10+	MSc	Married with children
8.	HoD	6+	MA	Married with one child
9.	EO	10+	MA	Married with children
10.	AD	6+	PhD	Married with children
11.	AD	6+	PhD	Married with children
12.	HoD	10+	PhD	Married with one child
13.	EO	10+	MA	Married with children

HoU = Head of Unit   HoD = Head of Department   AD = Assistant Dean

EO = Executive Officer   DR = Director

The participants shared their experiences of education, career journeys and work, and offered very insightful explanations on them. The following examination of both the professional and personal spheres of female leaders will offer an understanding of various catalysts that facilitated or hindered their progression.

5.2   Participants' Perceptions of Factors Significant in Accessing Senior Leadership

Positions

This sub-section addresses the first research question, and explores the factors that female Omani academics identified as significant for their access to senior leadership positions, and which shaped their future and influenced their personal development and career progression. These factors are grouped under the following four themes: impact of upbringing, educational background, job transition and leadership style, as presented in Figure 5.1. These themes were drawn from the interview data by using the NVivo 10 programme and were subsequently verified manually.

Figure 5.1 Core Themes and Sub-Themes for Accessing Senior Posts in Higher Education Institutions (Family)
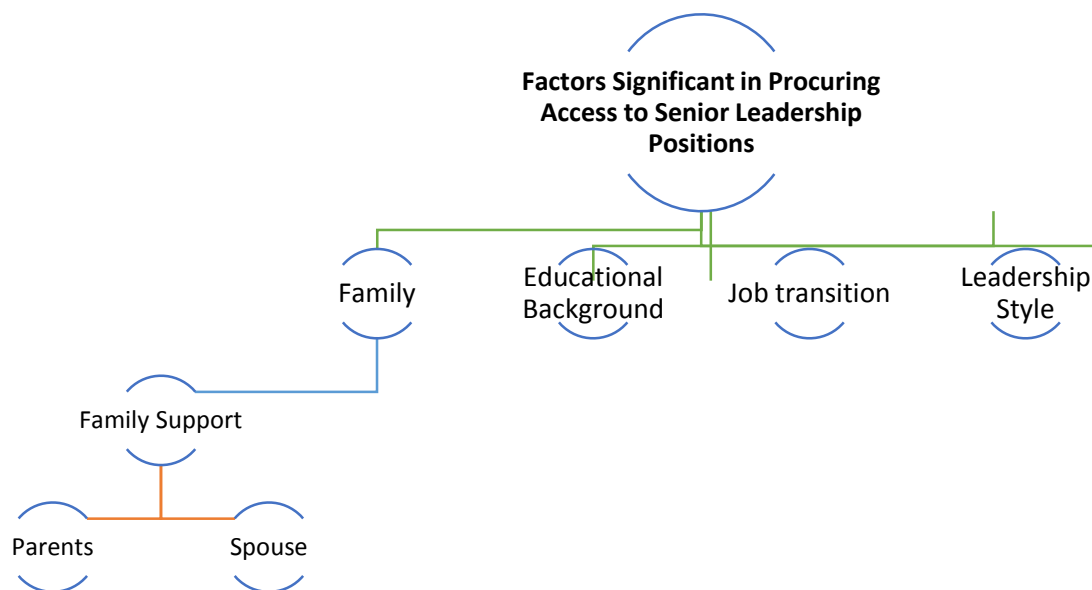
5.2.1   Family Support

In terms of family support, the participants emphasised the significance of a support system and of balancing their personal and professional lives, whilst maintaining that these were intertwined. In most cases, their family situation and the way they were brought up shaped their independence, which allowed them the freedom to pursue their education at first and their career at later stages. Many participants indicated that they owed their professional development and career progression to the support of their family, believing that it was the

hidden force that shaped their ability to develop and progress. In some cases, the participants described certain family relationships that exerted a particularly significant influence on their career orientation. These included relationships with their mother, father, brothers and husband, who showed faith in the participants and who were considered to be role models at various stages of the participants' lives. For married participants, especially those with children, support from their husbands was deemed most important. The next two sub-sections discuss the support that the participants received from their parents, and later from spouses, and its impact on their education and careers.

5.2.1.1 Role of Parents

Most participants highlighted the crucial roles their parents played in their professional success. In discussing their parents' role in their education, the interviewees recounted some of their experiences, which were both challenging and rewarding. The participants emphasised that their parents gave them unceasing support, especially when it came to pursuing higher education. Although all mentioned that their parents had never completed educational degrees, they were nevertheless aware of the value of education and were willing to support the participants' pursuit of it. In reflecting on the role her family played in her life, Participant 12 made the following observation about her experiences:

> I grew up in a family with seven girls and six boys. […] We were six girls after having one elder brother. My father did not treat us as females [i.e. he didn't treat them differently to the boys]. He depended on us [the girls] to do many things at home. Even when he drove around our village, we were with him all the time. My two eldest sisters finished high school, but once they got engaged, they did not continue their education. The custom at that time was that once a girl is engaged, the best place for her is her husband's house. My third sister, however, got high scores in high school and she was able to get a place at the university.

Participant 12 stated further that despite having parents who had no direct experience with higher education, they gave her and her sisters all the support they needed to move forward with their educational degrees. She further remarked:

> Thank God! My sister proved herself and she was appointed as a lecturer at the university. We all followed each other's path and entered the university. We felt that

we had a role model whom we admired and looked up to. We had the right support within our family.

She pinpointed that previously there was no family expectation for girls to attend universities, but that her father permitted them all to attend regardless. He supported all his daughters in their decision to move forward in their education, even when other family members (uncles and male cousins) expressed a lack of belief in, or acceptance of, girls' education.

Similarly, Participant 6 believed that obtaining a higher education degree would not have been possible without her family's consent and positive support. Her parents not only valued education, but they also provided opportunities and supported her financially when she decided to pursue her higher educational qualifications. She explained:

> I have a very supportive family, Praise be to God, who supported every decision I made, even my decision to attend university. They knew that if I entered university I would have to complete my higher education qualifications and they totally supported me and funded my study abroad.

Familial support and encouragement appears to have played a critical role in these women's career advancement and in overcoming the community challenges they may have encountered in their career progression. Participant 2 shared her family experience and explained how her parents helped her develop independence:

> I grew up among seven boys, and I was the eldest among them. I was given confidence and trust from my family from a young age, so I took on responsibility a bit early in my life.

She explained that these responsibilities gave her the skillset she needed to be successful. She added that this helped her in later stages of her life to fulfil the requirements of a senior level position in higher education 'successfully and effectively'. Participant 10 described similar experiences of freedom and space she received from her parents in order to pursue her own interests regarding her education, and which facilitated her access to higher education. She was the first among her siblings to pursue education outside of her village. She observed that:

for my family to feel comfortable having one of their daughters live alone in a flat and to be in charge of her daily life was a huge step. I was the first in my family to do so, but I was followed by my sister later in her education choice.

In a similar vein, Participant 4 stated: 'I got 100% support from my family. […] They encouraged me to pursue my higher education degrees' at a time when girls were not even supposed to enter universities.

In reflecting on the role their parents played, all participants cited their parents' assistance and positive impact as being crucial facilitators in their professional development and career success. These positive attitudes are reflected in the following excerpts from the interviews. Participant 2 agreed that her family had a vital impact on her progression: 'In my case, my family was a huge support. They encouraged me to move forward and even move ahead in my career'. Participant 13 noted that the positive effect of her family and their support shaped her personal and professional development. She observed:

I do believe that if a woman gets support [for progressing in her career] from her family first and then from her partner, that would be really great. I was lucky to get all the support that I needed. Indeed, this builds the woman's confidence and forms her leadership characteristics.

Similarly, in speaking about her decision process, Participant 9 confirmed the impact of her family and their full support in encouraging her to move forward, expressing: 'I was supported by my family to excel in my work. I had all the support I needed from them. They wanted me to be among the best. They provided me with freedom to identify and explore both academic and vocational opportunities from young age.'

Some women specifically attributed their ability to pursue further education and move forward to their 'caring' fathers, who provided the support and encouragement they needed to progress further. In these cases, the women's fathers did not attempt to guide their daughters into roles perceived to be appropriate according to culture and customs. They were not the traditional, aloof, non-communicative and authoritarian fathers, but on the contrary provided their daughters with the freedom and the options to choose what suited them best. Participant 6 elaborated further on this point:

My father was a great supporter and he was very civilised and he respected all my decisions. He knew how he raised his daughter, so there were no worries at all.

In reflecting on her education and career progression, Participant 12 mentioned that her father's continuous support and encouragement influenced her professional life:

My father did not treat us as females. He did count on us, the girls, to do many things […] My father faced a lot of pressure from our neighbours and family regarding letting [my eldest sister] go and finish her higher education. Everyone disagreed with my dad. Based on tradition and the customs, she shouldn't have gone for her further education. According to them, her only destiny was marriage.

She commented that, as a result of growing up with such an encouraging father who had treated all his children equally, she developed self-confidence and a sense that all people are equal. She elaborated further on the support she received:

I can say clearly [with confidence] that I was lucky with the men who surrounded me in my life. Both my father and my eldest brother were huge supporters for us. They were there for us at all times. […] My father believed in us and always encouraged us. If it had not been for the intervention of my father, I would not be here today.

Participant 11 expressed a similar sentiment regarding her father as one of the factors that affected her career progression. She noted that he played a significant role in her future success: 'He was very supportive. The trust was there'. She described how her father was a vital support throughout her undergraduate and graduate years, including in her specialising in higher education and her development as an assistant dean. She described the impact of her father during her undergraduate years:

My father wanted one of his kids to enter the university. He used to see me growing and being nurtured whilst I went through the different stages of education and encouraged me all the way through. When I finished high school and got a scholarship to study abroad, he asked me to enter SQU as it was a great honour to work there. It was my family's dream to [have one of us] enter SQU and I felt so proud for accomplishing it.

The participants described the close father-daughter relationship they had with particular fondness. Whilst such descriptions varied, almost all of the participants shared that they received either direct or indirect support from their fathers to move forward and seize the opportunities they encountered. Participant 10 made several comments throughout her interview about what a 'great father' she had. She attributed the growth and successes in her educational path to her father's determination to stand up for her rights against his family and traditions:

> It was a huge burden on my dad, as he was under continuous pressure from his family about my educational path. Although he believed in my educational choice and freedom, he had to continue fighting with his family for my rights.

The researcher, however, noticed that the participants talked about their parents' effect on their lives in general and about their fathers' attributes in particular, with the exception of two participants who focused instead on their mothers as powerful elements in their lives. Therefore, the researcher decided to ask a direct question to the participants about the role of their mothers in their educational and career advancements. For some participants, their mothers were their role models and source of inspiration. These mothers had endured tough lives, particularly those who had to carry huge responsibilities due to the absence of their working husbands. Participant 3 recounted her story:

> A strong woman who wore the father's hat so many times in her life raised me. Since my father worked in a different country, she always made important decisions in such a confident way. When I remember those days, I feel amazed about how she made this look so easy at that time. I have definitely learned to be a patient and confident person from her. I am a passionate mother just like her. I always tell her that I understand why we thought she could do the impossible when we were little kids, but what I don't understand is why we still think that she can do the impossible even now. Once she told me, 'Because I really can'.

Similarly, Participant 5 recounted her mother's experiences as a housewife and the responsibilities that came along with the absence of her father while working abroad:

> My mother is one of those strong, struggling, patient, classic women. She married my father at a very young age, and helped him all the way through. She was a housewife,

a friend, a sister and a mother. She managed to raise eight girls and two boys in the absence of my father, who travelled around the Gulf countries.

She then specified her mother's amazing talents, saying that 'she was an engineer when it came to building, a plumber when it came to fixing, a farmer, a trader, a supervisor and much more. She is a super woman and still is'.

For Participant 3, her mother was also the primary source of personal support and her adviser, helping her to re-evaluate many of the crucial decisions in her career. It was her mother's authoritative and powerful personality that she admired the most and that made her who and what she is today:

> My mother was there for me in every step I took towards my success. She was a great adviser and a wise woman to depend on. She was a great example of a powerful woman who stood up for her rights and made great accomplishments in her life. She was my role model!

Participant 3 elaborated further by saying how the loss of her mother affected her badly and made a huge difference in her career decisions in later stages. She explained how she was able to travel and focus more on her work when she had her mother around:

> I used to travel a lot and attend many conferences around the world for my own professional development, but never thought twice when it came to my children. I knew that they would be safe and looked after by my mother at her house.

She admitted that she experienced significant adjustments in acclimatising to her new administrative role after losing her mother, describing the transition as 'intolerable'.

In sharing a similar experience, Participant 12 also elaborated on the role of her mother and her attitude towards her daughters, providing insights into the force that shaped her leadership personality and skills:

> My mother was a strong woman who had a huge influence on us. She used to give us advice and she always said don't let people treat you as a female. We know it is not wrong to be treated as a female, but in our tradition that meant that, we should be soft and dependent. She wanted us to grow up strong. She even let us play when we were

children with our male neighbours. At that time, the concept of male and female segregation did not exist at all. We all played together.

As the above quotations suggest, the types of support that these women received from their parents varied and included facilitating the different educational opportunities they needed, trusting in their ability to make correct decisions, and granting them the freedom to follow the path that was right for them. The participants also indicated the significance of their parents in shaping their leadership characteristics and skills. These findings about family support are consistent with the reviewed literature, which suggests that individuals from family-oriented cultures are more likely to get support from their extended family (Metz et al., 2001).

5.2.1.2   Support from Spouse

The participants acknowledged and expressed gratitude for the guidance and encouragement from their husbands. They admitted how they had been positive influences on their career, and maintained that finding the "right" husband is vital to career success. Many stated that it would be virtually impossible for them to manage their dual roles without the support of their spouses. Apart from helping the participants to become more focused on their work, husbands assumed other important roles. For instance, Participant 12 explained how her husband offered practical assistance, including helping her to develop a publishing career and providing her with opportunities to undertake research, as he was among the academic faculty and in a similar field. His empathy and support were much appreciated:

> I honestly never thought that I would have someone who is more supportive of me than my father is, but my husband supported me at every step. My husband is an academic and we got married when I came to the university. He supported me when I wanted to pursue my further education. He was there for me until I finished my PhD. He kept on encouraging me, showed faith in the work I developed, and discussed my research with me. He even provided me with funding to do research.

She went on to describe how her husband's support improved her abilities and 'gave [her] full confidence at work'. She explained how his support was also demonstrated by a lack of interference in the process of her work. She recalled:

We work in the same place, but he never interfered with my work or imposed himself on me. Many people thought that his presence would affect me negatively. On the contrary, he was a huge supporter and gave me all the space to flourish and succeed in my career.

Participant 1 remarked that she received similar support from her husband, noting that he nurtured her interest in research and encouraged her to work towards her doctoral degree:

My husband was the one who encouraged me to move further in my career. He even tried to persuade me to do my PhD, but I wasn't interested in doing it.

In sharing a similar experience about the importance of spousal support, Participant 11 talked about the positive influence of her husband:

I could proudly say that my husband continues to give me the support that my father gave me before. Now we both share the responsibilities of my work obligations and decisions. My husband supported my career and he has been there for me through my academic progress too. He accompanied me on all my academic and professional trips.

In commenting further on her husband's support, she stated that he did not meddle with her work, and that he allowed her the freedom to pursue her career:

My husband understood my job responsibilities and understood what comes with it, especially in a mixed gender environment. He was a great supporter. Along with that came trust and respect.

In another case, Participant 6 said that she was fortunate to have her husband around, as he helped her to appreciate her own worth and gave her confidence in herself. He was a sympathetic listener when she was tired and frustrated by work. She stated additionally: '[m]y husband did not mind at all my position. He knew my work obligations and was supportive'.

In one way or another, it was shown in the interviews that having the right support was significant in the lives of these women and allowed them to accumulate the experiences they needed in order to advance to the next level in their careers.

5.2.2 Educational Background and Opportunities

Figure 5.2 Core Themes and Sub-Themes for Accessing Senior Posts in Higher Education Institutions (Educational Background)
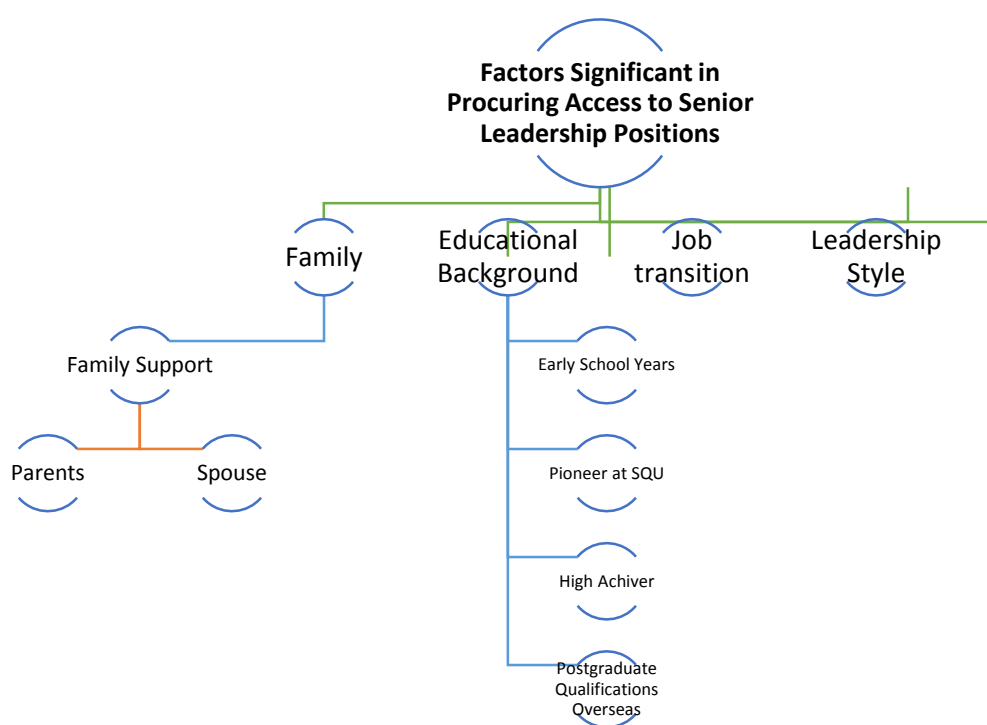
All participants recognised educational background as a core factor in their career progression and effective leadership, and agreed that it had opened doors for them. Education not only met the intellectual needs of the participants but also served as the means for social, political and economic mobility. The respondents mentioned their belief that their early school years significantly affected their lives and their ability to progress later in their educational degrees. In some instances, the participants referenced their specific disciplines, with Participant 7 citing her background in English language as providing 'a solid base' in her personal and professional life. She stated that: "I do believe that my start in a bilingual school opened for me many doors and it was the foundation that helped me later in my career'. She believed that the experience she gained at that stage of her life was critical. Her interest in the English language, as she indicated, was inculcated during her years in primary school, reinforced further in high school, and cemented through her university studies. She assumed that her advanced knowledge of the language gave her credibility, respect and an advantage over many of her colleagues.

Participant 3 credited her personal administrative strengths to her tutors in school. She mentioned how she had been encouraged by her teachers at different points during her early education. She said that these teachers had a profound effect on her, and that they believed in and motivated her by being generous with their praise. She felt that they had trained her to be an independent and confident person:

> I was a very active and talkative child. Nowadays they call such a child "hyper" or "over-active". But I was lucky to have teachers who understood my needs. When I was in high school, my English teacher made me the English Club President and it was such a rewarding experience. I guess from then on, I knew I could be a great leader.

In reflecting on the participants' professional development, it also emerged that their experiences as undergraduates had a high impact on their career choices. All the participants reported that studying at SQU was a critical point in their career development. According to Participant 13:

> To be a graduate of SQU was a huge accomplishment in my family. It was even rarer to be appointed as a teacher at the university. It gave me a big push and prestige. It opened for me many doors.

Participant 9 explained the importance and benefits of being a graduate of SQU. She noted: 'First of all, SQU is the only government [i.e. public] university in Oman. It is the dream of every Omani student'. She further described the positive impact her time there had on the development of her personal attributes. She was very proud to be an alumna of the University. Other respondents made similar comments about the benefits of being SQU alumni, as the university is known to accept only the highest achievers. As Participant 2 noted:

> I was the talk of the town when I entered the university. My parents were so proud of me. The experience was amazing, especially since I was among the first students who entered the university. I felt I was so special and this gave me confidence. It was a significant turning point in my life.

Participant 10 acknowledged that being a pioneer at the university, as one of the first female students who entered in 1986, gave her an advantage that enabled her to carve out distinctive

roles for herself in academia. Participant 13 expressed that being a graduate of SQU changed her direction in life, and subsequently her career:

> I was appointed [to the university] because I was among the top ten students at the College of Education. I felt that it was an excellent opportunity to work at the university. It is much better to be here. You have a better chance to develop and have the right training. I even have a better chance to continue my studies.

In a similar theme, Participant 9 conceded that, in hindsight, being a high achiever and attending SQU turned out to be a 'blessing'. It was a great chance that helped to lay the foundation for the development of her career: 'I was lucky to be among the students who were chosen to be at SQU. I was at the top of my batch, so was appointed to the university as an academic'. As a result of her experience at SQU, she placed a higher value on her learning opportunities and became keen to acquire new knowledge. Thus, family support and educational experiences emerged as significant factors in developing and supporting career directions.

All participants also agreed that their postgraduate degrees cemented their experiences and knowledge, and it was only upon earning them that they were able to attain executive positions in higher education.

As all participants acquired their postgraduate qualifications overseas, primarily in European and American universities, the experiences they gained from spending time studying abroad not only prepared them for their academic careers but also had a positive impact on their personality. A number of them credit Western culture for 'allowing the freedom and the individuality that really helps to foster creativity'. Furthermore, the separation from family and friends while they were studying abroad helped them to develop independence and perseverance. They felt that during this time they experienced significant personal growth in terms of interests and knowledge, which were critical to their career development in academia. They reported that they had gained strength from the difficulties they encountered and the obstacles they faced while studying abroad. They described being able to embrace the positive aspects of individualism, such as 'thinking outside the box' with a view to fostering creativity and innovation. The experiences they gained paved the way for their academic careers:

Overseas education offered me a lot and made a huge change in my personality. I was a very shy person and had never travelled abroad. I felt that I wouldn't survive the first year. I had to toughen up and explore. I learnt many things that I wouldn't have known if I just studied in Oman. (Participant 3)

Participant 10 also observed that studying abroad had changed her life. She explained that her time abroad resulted in a dramatic change in her life, which made her stronger and keener to follow her dreams:

I decided to get married in my first year of my PhD studies. It wasn't a wise decision as I had many things to learn. I had a passion for knowledge, and I wanted to learn as much as I could as a researcher. I was under a lot of pressure. I had my first child and the second during my study years. I had to be a mother, a wife and a student in one go! It wasn't easy, but I was up to the challenge. Those six years were good ones, and they prepared me for my career today.

In reflecting on their careers, other participants also highlighted the impact of their academic background and how it contributed to their professional development and work progression. Participant 12 stated adamantly that: 'Of course, having the right educational background qualified me to get the positions over others'. Participant 13 made similar comments regarding the benefits of having the right academic qualifications: 'It is important [to have the right qualifications]. I got a leading post two years after earning my MA. I do believe that the right education opens doors and opportunities'. She had a Master's degree, which she felt was sufficient academic preparation for her to fulfil the requirements of a senior level position in her institution; however, she stated: 'a woman would need more in order to be respected in higher education institutes and to get a higher post than male colleagues could get with an MA'. She explained that women in academia need their degrees in order to make others recognise their competence and not 'doubt their abilities'.

5.2.3   Job Opportunities and Appropriate Skills

Figure 5.3 Core Themes and Sub-Themes for Accessing Senior Posts in Higher Education Institutions (Job Opportunities and Appropriate Skills)
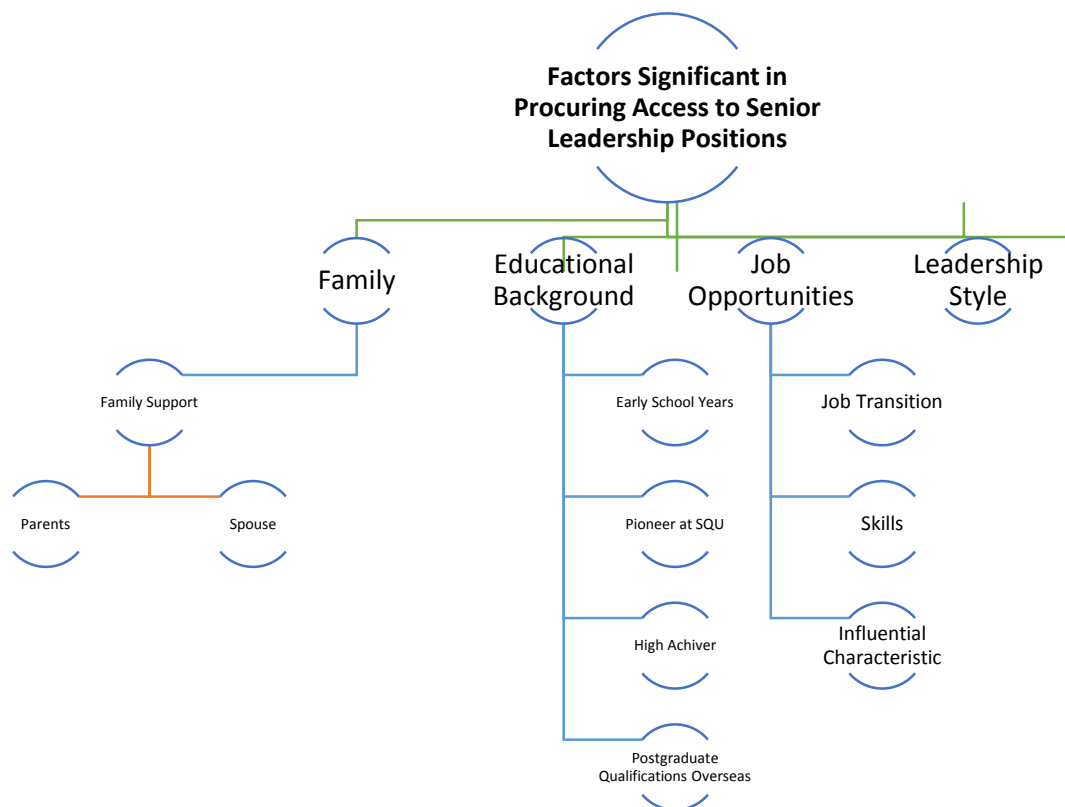
Another important factor highlighted by the participants was their job transition. Overall, they appeared to identify two paths in the professional development process. In the first, the transfer into administrative roles occurred based on certain abilities and skills that were identified by senior leaders in their colleges/departments, whereas in the second, the women were promoted directly from faculty to senior administration upon completion of their PhD degree.

On the first path, of incrementally shifting into leadership administrative roles, many participants mentioned that they were selected for their respective administrative posts based on certain skills and abilities. As Participant 1 explained:

It wasn't something I sought out; I was offered the post of Executive Officer by the previous [Executive Officer]. We had a good working relationship and she knew I was reliable […]. We complemented each other and we worked well with each other. She offered me the post and I accepted it.

It emerged that none of the participants had actively sought their positions; a position became vacant and they were asked to take the job on a permanent basis. As Participant 1 noted: 'I did not have to fight to get the post that I am in now. I got it by default. I was offered the post and I accepted it'. To shed light on a similar experience about how she reached her current leadership post, Participant 2 related her story:

I can honestly say that there was no competition from the male side. This helped me gain my current post. You know how the situation is here at our centre. Unfortunately, our male colleagues here don't go after such posts [i.e. program coordinators or course coordinators]. They just don't bother. Women are more into it.

Many participants pinpointed several job skills that they perceived as instrumental to their career efficiency. In general, they expressed the view that people skills and social skills, such as being able to build rapport, work successfully with others and establish positive relationships, were of particular significance in enabling them to lead effectively. Participant 10 explained that in both external and internal roles, social skills enabled her to establish rapport and be an effective leader within her college. Externally, as an assistant dean, she had to be sociable, diplomatic and flexible, whilst internally she had to be people-oriented. On the whole, she believed that she had made effective use of her individual and social skills, as illustrated by how she fulfilled her role as a leader in her college:

The dean of the college chose me, and I knew that many people were not happy about her choosing me. It wasn't easy at all. I had to try to gain a lot of support from my colleagues in the college, which meant attending lots of social events, speaking in different settings and getting along with everyone around me. I had to be friendly and had to know how to get along with students, staff and faculty.

While all study participants addressed the significance of their personal skills and abilities, their responses reflected a variety of perspectives relating to interpersonal skills, behaviour, communication and serving others. The sorts of tasks and the positions the women held varied

generally. In describing factors that facilitated her professional advancement, Participant 1 cited her own essential characteristic, which she felt was the ability to deal with conflict in her leadership position:

> To me, it's all about the skills. I do see myself dealing with matters professionally. What happens at work stays at work. I deal with everything in a professional manner. I also know how to deal with conflicts in a very humane way, which makes my work unique. I deal with the conflicts in a way that shows each person what is expected from him or her.

Further discussing the point about having the right skills, Participant 3 stressed the importance of communication skills as a prerequisite for effective leadership:

> I guess I do have the skills to be a leader. However, I don't think I would be able to lead if I sat in my office and didn't communicate well with the people around me. My strength is in having good communication skills. I always get this comment from my colleagues, and I am usually the problem solver when it comes to dealing with people, while arranging my department's events and official gatherings.

Meanwhile, all participants emphasised the significance of establishing professional networks, and many stated that they had been welcomed and encouraged to apply for academic positions by their supervisors and colleagues. In this respect, their social and professional relationships seem to have been the vehicle to obtaining a higher administrative job in higher education institutions. In addition, three of the participants were promoted from the faculty directly into senior administrative positions at the assistant dean level because, as they stated, they were identified as possessing the skills and talents that would enable them to succeed in these jobs. Participant 11 especially appeared to have been quite successful in this:

> The type of skills that I possess helped me to get to my leading post. I am very approachable and friendly, and I guess these personal qualities made the Dean choose me to be his Assistant Dean. I am also a very active person… [The Dean] came and asked me to take the post and if he did not believe in my abilities, he wouldn't have offered it to me. People at the dean's office saw how hard I worked and they, too, encouraged me to accept the post. They all believed in me. They tried to extend all the support and collaboration I needed.

Participant 10 made similar comments:

> I know that the skills my direct boss saw in me were the main reason for her choice, but I also came to know that with the position I took, I should make sure that I improve my skills further in order to get to where I want to be. I trained myself.

Participant 4 also discussed her most influential characteristic, stating that: 'The interpersonal and networking skills I have might have been one of the major factors that helped my career progression'. Although she acknowledged that her institution is still a male-dominated place and that female academics are often in peer groups composed mainly of men, she did not express a sense of exclusion from the male-dominated networks. She stressed the importance of establishing networks of relationships, which reflected positively on her work progression. She stated that: 'I am a sociable person and I have a good relationship with all my colleagues'.

In contrast, Participant 11 expressed mixed feelings regarding elevating individuals from the faculty level directly to senior administrative posts. Upon her return from the United Kingdom, where she completed her PhD, she was appointed Assistant Dean. In contrast to the women who assumed leadership administrative roles over a period of time, Participant 11 described the experience as disappointing, as she was not prepared for such a position:

> They made me an assistant dean a couple of months after my arrival [back in Oman]. Apparently, they had no one else for the job at that time… These posts are key positions that deal with the crucial matter of the colleges. Most academics, and I am one of them, want to start writing and publishing and establish their research before thinking of administrative, killing [demanding and time-consuming] posts.

In her view, stepping down at that point in her career was the best decision she ever made. Rather than serve her institution through such an administrative position, she wanted to serve it through her research and publications.

5.2.4   Leadership Style

Figure 5.4 Core Themes and Sub-Themes for Accessing Senior Posts in Higher Education Institutions (Leadership Style)
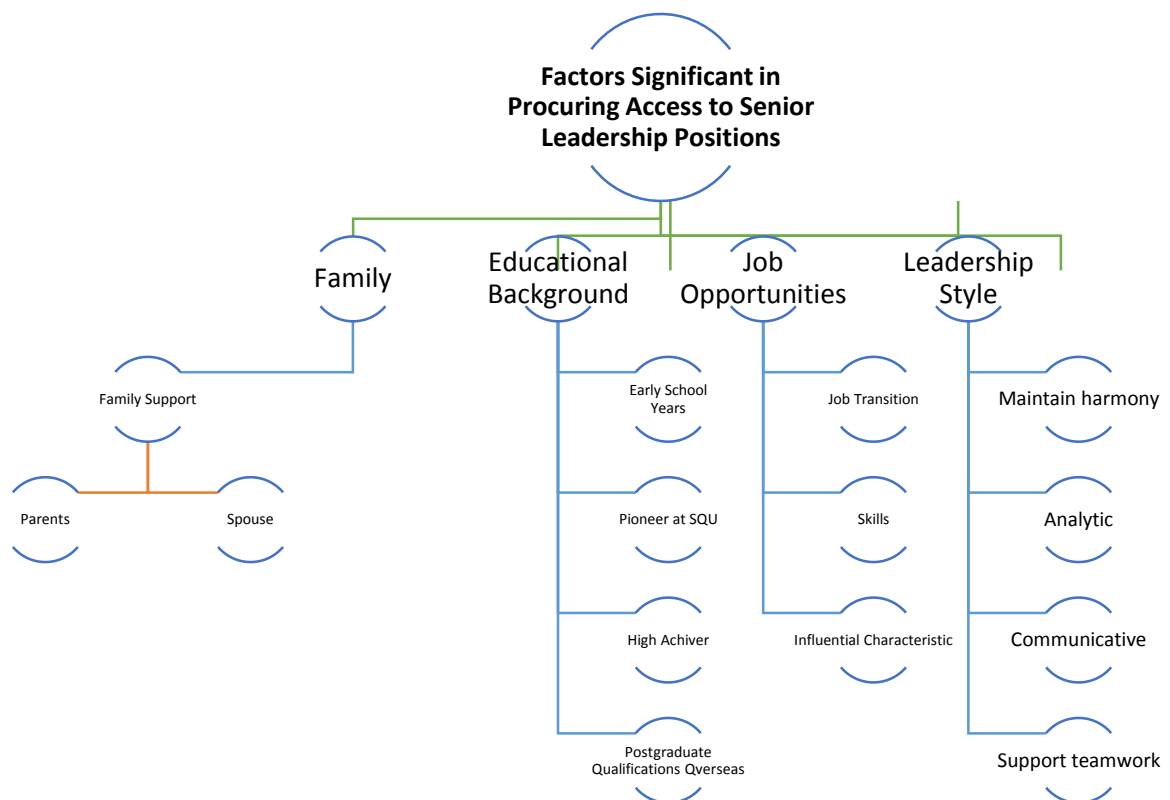
All respondents recognised leadership style as a core competency for access to higher education leadership posts. Although the self-reported styles varied amongst the participants depending on the specific nature of their work, certain common elements were manifested in their practices at work, which testified to their ability to think, analyse, plan and assess possible solutions to problems they encountered. The data provided by the respondents during the interviews revealed a comprehensive range of aptitudes and leadership styles, which they perceived to have enabled them to grow into effective leaders at the university. Participant 2 described how her leadership style was the reason behind the opportunities she was given to advance in her career:

> My leadership style and the way I handled things at work enhanced my opportunities
> to be nominated for many advanced administrative posts. The way I approached

different matters [at work] was one of the main reasons that made me advance and achieve the place that I am in now.

An important aspect of leadership in this research context was maintaining harmony, as acknowledged by the majority of the participants. In talking about this trait, Participant 5 expressed that harmony is essential in creating a stable and constructive workplace where individuals can work effectively in teams:

It's important to achieve stability and harmony in the workplace. We know that we have to achieve a positive workplace atmosphere, [so we] try to create a stable work environment where people communicate and deal with things positively. So I strive for those. Because I think that, as a leader, I can't achieve anything if I don't have this positive manner with my team.

Participant 7 made similar comments, stating that 'a basic component in demonstrating sympathy towards the group and sustaining agreement is the leader's ability to seek exciting, comprehensive and obliging alternate points of view'. Reflecting further on her own experience, she stated:

I do consider myself a diplomatic woman rather than being firm. I guess this ability to deal with people helped me a lot in my career progression. I have the quality of being a good listener. People appreciate this quality in me. I don't impose things on people.

Another respondent, Participant 3, indicated that she was able to inculcate team spirit, as well as promote teamwork. She stressed that her focus on team building and teamwork resulted in the successful accomplishment of tasks and the resolution of difficulties that came up. She believed in delegation, which involves entrusting responsibilities to staff, thereby imbuing them with a sense of ownership and responsibility for their work. Accordingly, this ability afforded her the advantage of serving effectively as a leader at her centre:

As a leader I knew I could not find solutions to problems I encounter at work by working alone. I always stressed the importance of working together as a team. I believe my success in the tasks was because I always enhanced my team's confidence. I tried to ensure that they had considerable freedom in decision-making about the tasks they were in charge of.

All participants emphasised the importance of people in relation to their success as leaders. It appears that a significant factor of being an effective leader was building and nurturing relationships with those around them, both within and outside the university grounds.

5.3   Participants' Perceptions of Barriers to Progression towards Leadership Roles

In spite of the policy changes promoting women's access to senior roles, women are still under-represented at senior faculty and administrative positions in higher education institutions in Oman. This section, therefore, addresses the second research question of this study by focusing on the obstacles and challenges Omani women academics experience as faculty members and administrators. A number of factors that hinder the ability of female academics to work effectively or inhibit their professional development have been identified by previous studies (Robinson, 2015; Smith, 2015; Eddy, 2009; Metz, 2005; Greenhaus et al., 1999). This study also highlighted similar factors that are summarised in Figure 5.2. These factors are discussed under the themes of culture, family, religion and gender and are considered to be among the most significant obstacles to the professional advancement of female professionals in the Arab World (Al-Lamky, 2007; Ameen, 2001; El-Saadawi, 1982).

Figure 5.5 Core Challenges that Affect Female Academics' Ability to Perform or Inhibit their Professional Development
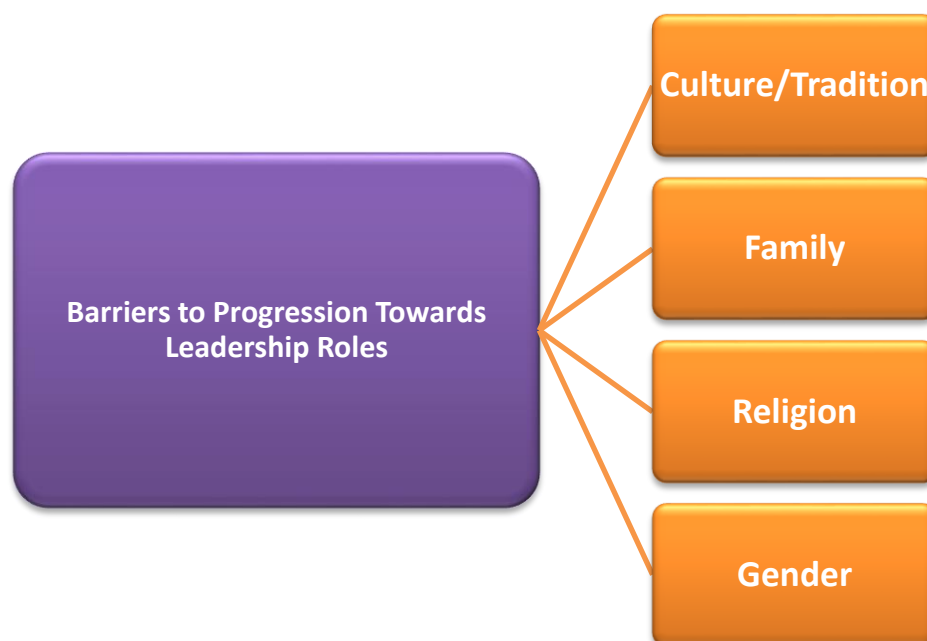
5.3.1 Culture

In describing the difficulties, they faced in advancing their careers, some participants mentioned that the combination of culture and tradition hindered their ability to perform in their jobs and influenced significantly their professional choices. Measuring its impact on their careers, they viewed culture negatively and indicated with dismay that their freedom to lead had been constrained by it. More specifically, the women reported that their extended families (such as their uncles and male cousins) had attempted to steer them towards roles that were perceived culturally as appropriate for their gender:

> [o]ur lives were influenced by our traditions largely. The people around us always had a say in the way we were brought up. Many things we did were not pleasing to our neighbours and our family members. They did not like the idea of us, the girls, moving around, finishing our higher education, and working at the university. (Participant 12)

In a similar vein, Participant 10 described how tradition and customs had affected her throughout her life and played a significant role in her career progression:

> Yes, tradition and customs had a big and significant effect on my work progression. I come from a very conservative family where women are not allowed to mingle with and be exposed to men. In my community, we are controlled by many restrictions, such as the belief that men should lead and women should be less exposed and voiceless. Women should be calm and not sharp in their answers. If you are a decision-maker, tradition and customs force you not to argue but to try to make peace with everyone.

Furthermore, she was quite dissatisfied with the attitude of the community towards women, as people generally did not want them to succeed and prove their social value. She described the working culture as one saturated by male tradition, male dominance and male-centred thinking:

> Sometimes even the 'golden' opportunities, community-wise, are more available to men than women. The freedom that women have to lead or move around in this institution is quite limited. There are many good chances for men to go to university because of the general tradition and customs that surround us. The culture here is more of a controlled and regulated environment. For this reason, many women tend not to

seek leadership posts or seize these opportunities because they know that they are reserved for men, culture-wise.

In a couple of cases, the participants agreed that tradition and customs at times served to limit their aspirations rather than facilitate them. They felt that male domination overshadowed and devalued women's contributions. They identified cultural and traditional values as having a significant influence on how they think and act as leaders. According to Participant 10:

> [As a leader] you don't see yourself as the main deciding element or the focal point of gravity in the universe. Rather, you are only one in a larger unit of the world. You have to follow the rules, and for us, the rules are our cultural values.

In a similar vein, Participant 7 perceived that there were always issues to think about. She noted:

> I guess we as women who are part of this culture always think of tradition and customs, and it does guide most of our acts. We always wonder whether people in our community will accept our action or task. We take some time to think about our actions before we go ahead and do them.

Participant 9, who believed that tradition affected women to a certain extent, expressed a similar view: 'People until now still question the reality of women being among men. This kind of picture is still there'. Participant 11 echoed this sentiment:

> [Tradition] is a crucial and important factor. I guess most of the challenges and the barriers we face as working women fall under tradition. […] It is part of our tradition and customs that a woman's place is in the home.

In these women's experiences, it was only through hard work and dedication that a positive change could be made. Participant 12 said: 'Today, you will notice that men and women feel proud to say that they have friends and working colleagues of the opposite gender'. She happily went on: 'Even my male siblings have accepted the fact that we are successful leading women. They are proud and supportive of us. By all means, the influence of customs and tradition has started to become less over time'. Similarly, Participant 1 acknowledged that, to her, the opinions of the wider community were fairly insignificant: 'If you are [as a woman]

comfortable with what you do, others don't matter. I have the approval of both my family and husband, and they matter to me the most'.

Participant 13 also felt that it was very important to pay special attention to changing the concepts of traditions and customs regarding women pursuing careers outside of the home:

> I suggest we start from the bottom. We should change this mindset. We should change our view; women should no longer fall behind or be restricted to certain jobs. They should have equal and fair chances as men do. I believe there is no red line in jobs when we have a job or a task to fulfil. I do know that this red line will be there only if you draw it for yourself.

Unfortunately, however, in many situations, societal expectations concerning appropriate careers for women helped shape the participants' choices and restricted their possibilities. Even though these women partook in leadership roles, the culture was consistently described as male-centred, and one where women's leadership was not valued or accepted by many.

5.3.2   Family

Another impediment to the advancement of women to leadership positions was family. On the one hand, the family's support for women pursuing higher education shaped the participants' abilities to become effective leaders. On the other hand, family emerged as a barrier to their professional commitments and career journeys. Omani women in academia carry a double burden. In addition to their academic pursuits, they also have to meet traditional obligations towards their families. Irrespective of the career a woman chooses, the duties and expectations of a mother and a wife are stressed as her primary goals. Consequently, women have to adjust their own lives to cope with often conflicting employment and family roles. The participants identified the difficulties they often faced while trying to manage both their personal and family lives, as well as their leadership positions. In patriarchal societies such as Oman, gender roles are fairly rigidly defined and expectations are deeply embedded. In reflecting on the family's impact, Participant 9 stated:

> For me personally, family was one of my main challenges. Both my family and marriage played an important role in my decisions regarding my career progression and the posts that I accept or seek. Family does matter!

In order to advance in Oman's higher education institutions, one's publications, research and service to the community are considered. Primarily, the acquisition of a PhD is emphasised to the point of becoming a prerequisite for promotion. For instance, only PhD holders are qualified to become Vice Chancellors (presidents) of a university in Oman. Seven of the faculty members I interviewed had yet to pursue their PhDs. In spite of their strong desire to do so, certain difficulties had hindered them from attempting that goal. The most prevalent factor seems to be family considerations. For instance, as travelling abroad is often required in order to get a PhD, some participants admitted that they could not compromise their family life in order to achieve this goal:

> I was planning to do my PhD, but I didn't go. It would have required travelling abroad for about four years. I couldn't do it, as travelling with five children would be tough on me and, more importantly, I knew very well that my husband might not compromise. I am waiting for an opportunity here at SQU or I might do it online or part-time; I figured that would be more feasible for me. (Participant 5)

In describing the impediments associated with their positions, the majority of the participants reported sacrificing time with their families due to the professional choices that they made. A few of them, who were mothers, felt remorse about the fact that they spent so little time at home, and expressed that they would rather be there for their children even if this was to the detriment of their careers: 'I think many women are in the same situation as me. Family obligations come first' (Participant 9). Similarly, Participant 6 stated:

> I guess [family] was and will always be a major factor. My family and children are my priority. I have to think of them first and how my decisions will affect them before going ahead. Even in pursuing a higher post, I have to think about how it will affect my own family.

Taking the argument further, Participant 4 conceded that '[f]amily commitments do slow you down a bit'. She explained that despite having the support of her parents and husband in the progression of her career, she had many plans after her PhD related to academic research, but was unfortunately 'not able to succeed in this point due to family obligations'.

In reflecting on their professional development, some women admitted that personal sacrifices were found to be necessary when attempting to balance work and family. Women in academia

continually have to negotiate their way around social expectations, as the patriarchal society of Oman expects women to adjust their lives to cope with their family responsibilities. Participant 2 chose not to seek a higher post because of the potential for conflict between her work and family demands. She discussed how she had to postpone opportunities for advancement due to the needs of her family. She made decisions at different stages of her career in consideration of the impact such choices would have on her whole family rather than focusing only on herself:

> the reason for rejecting the positions that were offered to me was mainly because of my family. I wanted to offer more time to my family. I knew if I accepted a higher position, then it was going to be more demanding.

As Suggested by the participants, most women end up having to sacrifice their careers for their families, which is why increasingly fewer women are found in higher positions. In recounting how she had to forego an opportunity to advance in her career due to family commitments, Participant 11 stated:

> Whether I like it or not, I, as a woman, had to share the time between family matters and professionalism. Unfortunately, I had to step down from my post. I had to weigh many options. I felt that I was doing an injustice to my family and my daughter. I was doing my best, but I was not satisfied. I am a perfectionist, so I felt that I did not do much here [both in her job and as a mother]. I felt that I was not doing well with my family and that I was not a good mum. Staying in my post would have been at the expense of my family.

In some cases, the participants alluded to societal expectations that have created a dynamic where women are supposed to be the primary caregivers for the children and where family and household responsibilities fall mainly on women. Two participants (including one who does not have children) further elaborated that professional married women are expected to work long hours and still be the loving wives and mothers who spend quality time with their families. Furthermore, in commenting on the struggle that female faculty experience, Participant 6 said that although she does not have children, she observed that her female colleagues had more to manage than the men in terms of both their children and work responsibilities. Additionally, in describing the attitude of the higher authorities when it came to hiring male or female academics at her college, she noted:

We have certain criteria [for vacancies], and both genders should be qualified enough to get the job. We do talk to female applicants [more than male applicants] about the obstacles that come with the job. The assumption is that women are different than men. They have responsibilities to their families. They need full family support… Honestly, I know that people in high [positions of] authority want us to focus only on one gender.

Similarly, Participant 4 agreed that there is hesitancy nowadays about hiring women at the colleges. She felt that there are fears about women being preoccupied with their family responsibilities at the expense of their commitment to the institution. She explained that, based on statistics, the majority of top graduate students are women (60%) and according to the university policy, their departments should hire top students. She recalled, however, how it was tough to choose a female candidate because of the previously mentioned assumptions and unfortunately, they were right! Many female candidates showed hesitation and unwillingness to leave their families to pursue their higher degrees when they were asked in their interviews. She stated they actually hesitated in their reply even if 'they said yes'. Interestingly, Participant 3 indicated that she conformed to societal norms regarding women and their family responsibilities: 'I admit that my family comes first and then my work. I don't believe that it is different with men, but when it comes to men, they have their wives, who they know will take over if they are away'.

In pursuing their professional goals, all participants with children said that they were responsible for many of their household chores in addition to taking care of their children. Many women also believed that they were expected to be the caretakers in their families (Slan-Jersulim & Chen, 2009). Participant 9 stated that 'the pressure of being female started to come up [when she got married]. It is not just being a working woman, but a wife, then a mother. The conflict started from that time'. She went on to say that getting married 'literally changed her whole perspective"'. She explained that she was no longer as keen as she used to be to pursue or seek a higher post than the one she had at the time.

While none of the participants perceived their families as a burden, there was the acknowledgment that taking care of their children affected their professional lives, adding a degree of pressure and challenge to the pursuit of their professional goals. In particular, Participant 11 recalled how complicated her life became when she was appointed assistant dean after earning her PhD:

I was very lucky that I became one of the first assistant deans at SQU, but unfortunately, I had to step down. There was a mix of circumstances then. At the time when I got the post, my daughter was only one year old. She needed attention, but I had to put her in day-care. Besides, when I received that administrative post, it was just created, so I had to establish everything. It was a massive amount of work and was very time consuming, with lots that needed to be done… The post was for three years, I struggled with it, and I did my best in it. I pushed myself over the limit for the job, but I felt that I was not doing any justice to my family and my daughter.

When discussing this challenge, she further expressed her personal belief about the significance of being a woman, which required her to adjust her own professional aspirations and which she felt prevented her from doing her job effectively:

Women are caring givers and have many responsibilities that they have to think about besides their career. In my case, my family and child had to be my priority and I knew it would have affected me even academically. I counted the years of my career and I know I could have achieved more if I was male.

In another instance, Participant 3 described how she had to find a way to combine the multiple roles of being a mother, a wife and a professional:

My family isn't an obstacle, but it is a situation that I have to deal with as I go through the process and the demanding hours of my administrative role, as well as being a mother of three boys. I am working 24/7, but I feel that I am not doing either of them very well. I have been going through this for years. Eventually, I will have to let go as I can't have it all.

The task of reconciling motherhood with the demands of academic life is a difficult one. Many of the participants fully accepted their roles as both professionals and homemakers, and accordingly moulded the borders between the two domains. In general, the participants' attitudes and their acceptance of the roles assigned to them were typical of the traditional views and expectations held by many Omanis with respect to women. Some of the participants described themselves as being prepared for such responsibilities and willing to sacrifice their career if they had to. Although many of the participants credited their family as being an important source of support, they also acknowledged that accommodating their family's needs

might require curtailing their professional aspirations. Participant 8 made the following observation about the living reality of working women: 'There is always the sense of expectation, especially if she is married with children. Therefore, the expectation is that her home and family is her priority and her profession comes next'. In managing the demands of work at the expense of the family, Participant 13 gave a further explanation about the choices women might need to make:

> From my point of view, women who reached the right qualification academically and professionally at this stage of their lives are already mothers. They might have tried to seek advanced posts, but they might have fallen in the circle of choice. Could they have the balance between both, the job responsibilities and their family obligations? It can be stressful at times.

Nevertheless, although most of the participants shared similar views, some indicated that the societal bias about a woman's role is directly linked to the way women are brought up:

> [W]e should go back to the roots of our families and the way we [as the new generation] bring up our kids. We shouldn't bring them up thinking that they are different from each other or less than each other because of gender. They should know that they are equal. I believe that the core of our problems starts in our own homes. We should make the change there first! (Participant 12)

5.3.3 Religion

The third major barrier to women's professional progression in academia, as identified in the literature review, was religion. In discussing the effect of religion on the professional development of the participants, however, it was surprising that all indicated that religion had no impact in shaping the overall development of their careers. Notable scholars have argued that religion is inextricably intertwined with human activities and that it has a strong effect on work-related events and life outcomes (Shah, 2015; Fox, 2003; Ondeck, 2002). This, however, was not found to be the norm amongst the current study's participants. According to Participant 7, '[r]eligion was never a factor that stopped us or hindered our progress'. Participant 11, who affirmed that '[w]e never faced any challenges when it came to religion', echoed this sentiment. In Oman this has never been emphasised.

Participant 3 agreed that religion does not disincentive female academics' advancement in the academic hierarchy. She elaborated further that, '[r]eligion is not a challenging factor at all, especially at the university. Our university is a multicultural community and the focus on religion is not emphasised at all'. She further observed that: '[w]e have great examples of women scholars in Islam and even warriors whom we always take as an example in every challenge we face as women'. Similarly, Participant 8 also commented on the prevailing assumption of the role religion plays in the professional development of women:

> [I]t depends on how people perceive religion because you will hear different interpretations of their understanding of religion. You might hear some say that women should not do certain tasks or activities because it violates religious norms. From my point of view, I don't think so because I know that one knows her [own] limits. I do understand that there are some religious limitations, but I don't think these are barriers that will stop women from progressing or becoming leaders and advancing in their career. A woman can keep her religious norms in mind while still progressing.

Some participants argued that a number of old concepts and traditions in Omani culture had undermined women's ability to lead effectively, which many people erroneously attribute to religion. When asked whether she viewed religion as a challenge, Participant 12 responded:

> Not at all! Omani women have reached all the posts. Religion was never a factor that stopped us or hampered our progress. It is all back to culture and what women are supposed to do and what they should not do. It is not a religious factor.

Other participants agreed: 'In our context, religion was not an obstacle'; 'ultimate decisions are made by the culture we live in, not our religion' (Participant 5)

As Participant 8 observed, however, there are certain religious beliefs that could be manipulated by some in order to justify their own injustice towards women. Even though this concept of men being superior to women was not something she had noticed at her place of work at the university, she admitted that:

> Many men in the Arab World [even here in Oman] interpret and utilise religion to serve their own schemata. Many of them [men] see themselves as the pioneers and reject the

thought of imparting authority to females, basing their authority and claimed strength on their elucidation of a verse in the Holy Quran:

"الرجال قوامون على النساء"

2

Men may utilise the literal meaning of this verse to their own advantage, knowing how much religion impacts Omanis and how individuals conduct their everyday collaborations by taking into account their Islamic convictions. In that sense, men generally tend to assume an executive role, anticipating that women will serve them both at home and at work. Some men are using religion to their advantage and to suppress women. As such, it could be argued that, technically, religion is a barrier, because of how it is being used by some individuals (this will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter).

5.3.4   Gender and Leadership

Another major barrier to the professional progression and leadership of women in Oman is gender itself. The majority of participants in this study expressed their firm belief that being female has affected their professional lives as leaders in one way or another:

> Unfortunately, we live in a masculine world. This is the general perspective nowadays in our community. Men still lead! Well, women can lead too, in a more efficient way than men can, but the masculine leading perspective is still there. It is haunting our lives and career progression. It is a fact that we can't ignore. (Participant 12)

> The general idea is that men should be the leaders. This is the assumption in the community that we live in. There are women who proved themselves and were successful and proved the opposite of this assumption, but again, they are the minority. I believe that tradition plays a role in putting many [women] off. (Participant 9)

Some referred to instances in which they felt that their gender was an issue that caused resistance from others, who were uncomfortable with their authority:

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[2] From the Holy Quran (4:034), translated as "Men are in charge of women" by Pickthal (1938), or "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women" by Mohsin (2013).

One of the most difficult issues is not dealing with rules and regulations, but dealing with people. Many could not accept the fact of me being their leader. I don't doubt that women in Oman have proved themselves in the leadership positions they have occupied, but I think that the support they are getting is not enough. Especially from the working team they have, mainly if they have more males, they will probably give more support to male leaders than females. (Participant 7)

Similarly, Participant 13, who worked as an executive officer but had to step down, recounted the conflict and negativity that she experienced in attempting to network with male colleagues:

My male colleagues did not believe in me. I faced the most problems with my former boss. He never believed in me and he always doubted my work. He continuously told people around me that I was not the right person for the job after being in this post for many years. I believed that I did my best and I performed my best. It was shocking to come to know that he actually took all the credit for the good work I did. I could not handle the pressure of my boss and the underestimation of my qualifications. He was always looking down on me. I didn't like it. I knew that after all these years of experience, I could not tolerate this kind of treatment from anyone!

She expressed that assuming her responsibilities as an executive officer made many of her other male colleagues uncomfortable with her new identity as a powerful senior administrator. She also summarised the end of her senior administrative job by saying:

I talked to my other superior boss, and he tried to give me an alternative to keep me at my post, but I could not put up with this person anymore and the men surrounding him. I do say it, and without a doubt, that my male boss affected the progress of my career very badly. It was not working anymore. I had to quit!

Although access into a male-dominated workplace has been granted to many female academics, the real challenge of changing institutional perspectives regarding women as leaders remains. Participant 10 recalled her own experience at her college, where subordinates could not adjust to having a female leader. She described the obstacles she faced in terms of the sacrifices she had to make and the hostile work environment that created constant roadblocks for her:

I was offered a big leading post at my college recently, but I had to reject it. One of the main reasons for that is my concern about the resistance that my male colleagues might put up to me [occupying a superior position]. Although previously a female leader occupied the same post, she was so well equipped academically and professionally that people could not object to the choice. I feared my colleagues' reaction towards the offered post. I anticipated that there would be resistance to completing the tasks that I would assign to them. I am sure it would not at all be a healthy environment to work in, just because I am female.

She elaborated further that some of the male and female academics she worked with seemed to believe that women should not occupy leadership positions, but rather be subordinate to men:

[M]any of my academic colleagues, both male and female, would avoid joining some of the committees that are formed by the college and led by my office just because of the gender issues. They would prefer to work in committees where the leaders are men… The community perception of women is a big challenge to me. There are some who look at me as a woman who has given up her femininity and all the values because I chose to be a leader.

Gender-based expectations about women are pervasive to such an extent, as Participant 3 stated, that even in this day and age men still tend to believe that 'a woman's place is the home and she can never lead or be a leader'. To illustrate the senselessness of this view, she referred to female domestic obligations that, in her experience, inherently require a substantial amount of knowledge and leadership skills:

Women are in charge and responsible for every [thing] at home, and they are even the ones who make the most crucial decisions when it comes to their kids. Yet, men still underestimate women's ability to lead.

She described it as a double standard but added that 'the community still believes that women are less qualified and cannot lead'. Thus, while women's work is undervalued in relation to that of men, women also face the threat of being challenged for their performance. She stated: '[a woman] will have to prove herself twice, as a leader and as a capable female in such a [leadership] post'. By extent, even though women may be present in leadership roles, the culture is so male-centric that a feminine way of leading is not held in esteem or even accepted.

Participant 1 went as far as to suggest that male administrators would be keen to preserve this male-centric workplace:

> Men are still not comfortable with the reality that women are involved in all aspects of their career and progress as leaders. I guess as long as we have men in the leading positions, those men will make sure that only men will get the other leading posts on the same level. They are the ones who make the decisions.

Participant 13 testified that gender oppression has become the norm in some colleges:

> Another thing that might have happened are people in powerful positions at the university, those who are in charge of the leading administrative position promotions, [who have influence over who gets promoted to such positions]. Our organising authority is not sure if female academics are capable of holding such posts.

Another gender-related tension that may be gleaned from the above excerpts is that female colleagues can sometimes reject female faculty who occupy leading administrative posts. In other words, the idea that women should not be leaders is so deeply ingrained in Omani society and culture that even some female faculty members espouse this belief, to the extent that they, too, oppress other women. In relating her challenges, Participant 1 recalled:

> I faced more gender problems with females than with males. Most of the resentment was from female faculty members who were older in age. I don't know whether it is because of their personality or because they got used to having men in leading posts.

Other participants, including Participant 3, echoed this sentiment: 'It is also interesting that I would hear many of my female colleagues complain when we have a female as a leader'. Participant 5 added:

> They [the people who are not in favour of women leaders] think that women cannot do as much as men can when it comes to work commitment and obligations. You might come across this kind of feeling that you are a woman and you will not be able to solve work challenges if you face one. (Participant 5)

One of the respondents, Participant 9, was of the view that people 'underestimated women's abilities' to lead and that the majority of top posts were reserved for men. She was convinced that:

> [i]f there was a leading post and there were two people who have the same qualifications and abilities, I am sure they will choose the man over the woman as they will always think of her other responsibilities [as a caregiver].

Many of the participants acknowledged the fact that men occupied the majority of senior level positions in their institutions. They believed that female faculty members were disadvantaged because of their small number in comparison to men in their departments:

> I was a deputy director for nine years. I guess what helped me at that time in my post was that there was another female in a similar post, but she did not continue. Sometimes I felt awkward being the only female in such a post, especially when it came to meetings and I was the only female in the place. I was not comfortable, but we always tried to look at it in a professional manner. However, I could see clearly that when it came to a position vacancy, the votes were always in favour of male faculty, as the majority are men. (Participant 7)

Itzin & Newman (1995) assert that, usually, gendered male power and control are profoundly embedded in the structures of a university, in committees, staffing patterns and informal lobbying groups. Some participants echoed this view: 'There is a deceptive concept of equality in our institutions, and I am sure if they had both genders with the same qualities and qualifications, I am sure the first choice would be a male employee' (Participant 13). This participant explained further that such male dominance is evidenced by the fact that, to date, the university has only had one female dean while men occupy most of the top positions. The opportunity for a woman to serve in a high position could sometimes be hindered by the under-representation of women in leading posts, which may mean that their voices and interests are not heard in the right places.

5.4 Impact of Institutional Policies and Mandates on Women's Access to Leadership Positions

In discussing the ways that would motivate women to move forward and be effective leaders, the participants in this study spoke about institutional obligations and government policies that would impact on the participants' professional development and effectiveness as leaders in the workplace.

5.4.1 Institutional Mandates

Many participants conceded that they had not received any support or encouragement from policies or resources at their institution, although the availability of such is supposed to be an important aspect of higher education leadership. They identified the lack of clear institutional mandates as an obstacle to their own advancement:

> Unfortunately, we don't have clear institutional mandates. We are all struggling. There is a big problem that we are facing at the university and we did not realise it until we had external international auditors who highlighted for us the problems that we are suffering from. (Participant 10)

> There aren't any clear policies and mandates in our university that show women's rights. [This uncertainty of what needs to be done] makes you feel that you are just floating and wandering around with no clear directions. (Participant 12)

The latter participant attributed her growth and successes in her leadership post to her own personal effort, which helped her to develop a record of accomplishments in getting her work done:

> I tried to know about my rights according to the university regulations and the law. I tried to educate myself. I started reading around, trying to figure things out. In normal cases, when a person gets a position such as mine, you think it should come with its job description, but I got nothing. I did what I was supposed to do on my own. I even tried to seek the help of the person who [had previously occupied] my current post in order to get the job description documents, but he had nothing.

Contrary to the research's expectations, a number of participants saw the absence of clear institutional mandates to be beneficial to women with the potential to affect their careers positively, arguing for the existence of more equality that way:

> In my opinion, not having any restrictions regarding females being in a leading position or approaching a leading position is in women's favour. This means that both genders are treated equally and we all have equal chances. This is regarded as clear, fair treatment. (Participant 8)

As expressed by Participant 6, 'Competition for the position is equal for both genders. The government does not differentiate between us when it comes to the post and applying for it'. Participant 3 also agreed that not having mandates that are tailored to women's needs is a positive point. She stated that 'people might see this as a good sign'. In their opinion, this is one form of equality, as they do not sense any form of discrimination between the genders. They argue that this absence makes all academics go through the same job selection process and are treated the same regardless of their gender, while none is favoured over the other.

5.4.2 Policies

Since 1970, the government of Oman has embarked upon educational reforms that have targeted equitable male and female participation at all levels of education. Education is seen not only as a relevant variable of an individual's life but, indeed, as a decisive factor for a positive future. The participants in this study were pleased that most females were able to achieve the required grade point average for admission to university and that the number of females admitted has risen over the years. In doing so, they recognised the increasing equality between students of the opposite genders pursuing their education at university level:

> Both genders are given equal chances in education and finishing their degrees. We are getting equal scholarships too. In terms of government, the chances are equal. (Participant 7)

Participant 5 reflected on her own experience as a student at the university:

> In terms of being a student at the university, I didn't feel any discrimination in any way among the students or by the university. At some point, I became the vice president of

the student committee at the university. I could have been the president, though the president was a boy. It was not a case of boy or girl at that point.

Increasingly, education for Omani women is considered a turning point that enhances their social mobility and status, both for themselves and their families:

Of course, having the right educational background will qualify us [as women] to get the positions over others. I considered myself blessed for having the educational opportunities that were given to us by the Omani government. (Participant 12)

Participant 3, conversely, considered high school grades a construct that affects the choices made by Omani girls regarding their future profession. Girls who win a place at the university often find themselves concentrated in the humanities and the social sciences and, according to her, these fields do not often lead to significant opportunities in the job market:

Although females are accepted in large numbers at the university, the attainment of the requisite high school grades is made challenging for them. Unfortunately, the regulations require female students to attain a higher percentage [i.e. a higher grade point average] than males in almost all the colleges at the university.

Regarding the presence of prejudice, one of the faculty administrators noted:

I have to be frank about this. Yes, we choose males over females when we are choosing our students. Both genders have equal rights to pursue their education at the university, but when it comes to our college, we try to create some kind of balance and I admit this, we choose males over females. (Participant 6)

In the interviews, some of the participants described their personal experiences of the top-down locus of overall campus power. Participant 5 provided an example from her own experience in which she was almost prevented from becoming a faculty member of the university:

I was one of the gender discrimination victims of the higher college authority. I was not chosen to work at the College of Education, although I was qualified for the job, but they took one of my male colleagues instead, as they felt that the place had enough females, so they just took him. However, until this day, I can't understand it; being a female supervisor is not a problem at all. However, I was asked later by the university

administration to come and teach at one of the centres at the university and that for sure redirected my future. I could have been in a different place now and I could even have finished my PhD by now.

Nevertheless, she did not feel that creating further legislation and regulations to advance women's equality would help: 'I don't think this has anything to do with our Omani government. Surely, our government gives women tremendous opportunities and support'. Participant 6, when discussing her own experience in her current post, echoed this idea of top-down power:

I do know that people in high authority [at the university] want us to focus only on one gender. Well, we cannot do that. It is recruitment. We do not discriminate in it. If they deserve to get the post they will get it. I know it was not written anywhere that we have to choose one gender over another, but as I said previously, there are people who have this belief in high posts and want us to do such a thing.

She elaborated on the hidden agenda she perceived some individuals in the university administration to have, saying that 'the university policy is clear, there is no discrimination, but there are some people who are planning at the "backstage" and have the full authority to make the changes'.

The majority of the participants believe that the problem lies in the implementation of the rules and the existing regulations, and applying the mechanisms to ensure their fulfilment:

I do believe that the problem is not in lacking the policies, but in implementing them by the stakeholders in the government. There should be an auditing team or an associate who should make sure that these policies are in action and implemented. (Participant 3)

The respondents unanimously expressed the belief that the government is *for* women, not *against* them, and that this is reflected in the equal rights guaranteed by the Ministry of Manpower's regulations and employment laws. All participants were appreciative of the fact that they were given the chance to be faculty members at their institution. They did express concerns, however, about the lack of true acceptance of the need to respect differences when it

came to applying policies equitably, which need to be backed by the necessary infrastructure that can facilitate the achievement of the accurate development of female academics:

> The academic environment is not always supportive of women, especially as they take for granted our personal responsibility and they don't take into account that we are mothers and wives too. They just forget about our other human needs. They even ask us to do the same responsibilities [as our male colleagues]. (Participant 10)

The participants recommended that educational institutions can become more understanding of female faculty by effectively educating themselves on women's potential and seeing how the needs of male and female staff can vary. This would lead to more prominent accomplishments in enrolment and create a better fit between the organisation and future candidates.

5.5   Gender Equality in Higher Education

The previous sections highlighted the factors that contribute to the under-representation of women in senior academic faculty and administrative positions. At the same time, the challenges and opportunities that women experience as faculty members and administrators were examined. Based on the issues raised and in line with the fourth research question of this study, the participants were asked to provide recommendations for prospective female faculty members on ways of developing themselves professionally and how to pursue senior leadership positions. Figure 5.3 summarises the core themes that emerged regarding ways to enhance gender equity in higher education.

Figure 5.6 Core Themes for Enhancing Gender Equality in Leadership Positions in Higher Education Institutions
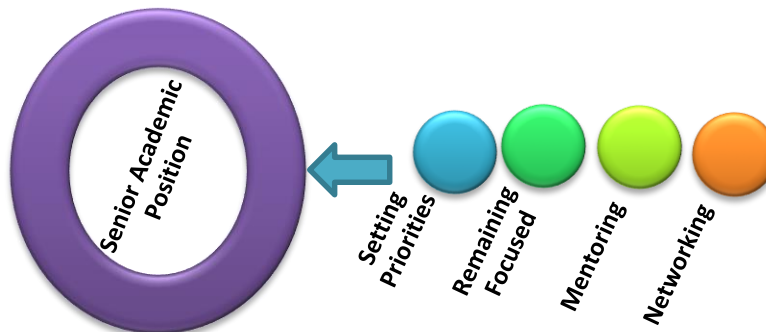
The majority of the participants stressed the importance of knowing what they wanted, setting priorities and remaining focused on their goals. For most, furthering their research was a priority:

> I think I have now polished my skills and I don't have the fear of moving forward in my career. I am thinking of developing myself further academically and [so I] focus on publishing articles and conducting research. As for the administrative post, I have accomplished a lot and I am happy to move even further. There is no end to my ambitions. (Participant 10)

Participant 6 shared a similar view about setting priorities:

> Women have to develop themselves and show that they are worthy to be thought of. They should work on their research profile and their academic publishing. Women have to be committed to their academic goals and develop themselves further. We have to "use it or lose it".

Some of the participants identified mentoring and networking as invaluable assets in academia. In this regard, Participant 5 suggested that female leaders should offer advice to new female academics and give them all the support they need:

The women who were able to reach leading positions should encourage other women around them to move forward, and they should set a good example for their female students and colleagues and encourage them. They have to tell them that they should believe in themselves and move forward.

She elaborated further by recommending that:

We should start by educating the coming generation and building their confidence. They should know that the challenges could be overcome if they believe in themselves and they should know that their challenges are not going to be more than the challenges their male colleagues will have.

Other participants voiced similar views about the value of support offered by senior faculty members to junior female faculty members in their respective disciplines:

I think that we should offer more support to women and that will encourage them to go for a higher position or work to get there… I think that the support they are getting is not enough. More specifically, they need the support from the working team they have; especially if they have more males, they will probably give more support to male employees than to females. (Participant 7)

I think that if we are going to offer this kind of high position we should offer first the right training to cope with the challenges that they will face […] Besides familiarising them with the kind of duties they will handle, they should have the proper support. (Participant 11)

[W]e really need to know women who are interested in being in such [leadership] posts and encourage them to pursue their dreams. (Participant 6)

When Participant 5 was asked to identify the most significant way to increase the potential of female faculty leaders, she recommended giving the opportunity to lower-level employees, who would not typically have the chance, to interact with senior-level administrators from other higher education institutions on a more personal level. She felt that the transfer of knowledge would be extremely valuable:

Sharing experiences with other institutions that have women in high posts would be an excellent step. The unknown is difficult and scary for women. Women need to take decisions, and it's not like men, who just take individual decisions. For a woman, whatever decision she will take, it will affect her husband and children and she would definitely like to know how to deal with such constraints.

In some cases, the participants felt that the female faculty members were undervalued within the academic hierarchy:

I think the university's management should give women the chance to be in such posts and see how they will perform in such a place. I read many job advertisements at the university that said 'males only'. I think it's about time to have such advertisements for 'females only'. We need to raise people's awareness about women's abilities to lead and be effective as leading members of society.

A small minority of the participants provided an alternate perspective, arguing that female faculty members do not need any particular plan to advance further:

In my opinion, women don't need to be enhanced further. I don't think women should ask for more or demand more. I think we should wait. You never know, many things in the future might change. We shouldn't fight for it now. I feel the desire should come from the women themselves. (Participant 9)

I've got to be honest [and say] that women [themselves] also might have a great effect on their work progression. They might want to retire or just stay at home after years of work. They might want to continue. First, we really need to know women who are interested in being in such posts and then encourage them to pursue their dreams or even have plans for them. (Participant 1)

What is interesting in these views, however, is that despite being sceptical about having a plan for the advancement of women, both imply that women should follow their individual desires to advance, whether directly or indirectly. Given the educational, scholarly and professional achievements of many of the study's participants, they have attained a level of overall accomplishment that positions them as likely candidates for higher posts at their institution, such as the position of Vice Chancellor (VC). Yet, when asked about their career aspirations,

the participants revealed a variety of responses regarding their interest in pursuing this goal. In addition, they provided insights into the negative elements associated with such a position, as well as the toll it would take on their personal lives.

Many participants indicated that becoming a VC held no attraction for them. When asked whether she saw herself as a VC, Participant 1 stated: 'I don't think I would want to be VC one day because it is not part of my personality and I am not interested'. Participant 9 asserted that 'I don't want to be a VC. I am an ambitious person, but not that ambitious. It is not one of my dreams or aims. I like my job as a teacher, to tell you the truth'. Similarly, Participant 8 commented: 'I never had that as a goal. I am not that interested or keen to climb that leadership ladder. I always have my interest in research'. Participant 11 added:

> Well, for the time being, I am not keen on being in such a position [VC]. I might consider it in the future when I am more satisfied academically and I feel that I have accomplished all that I want in my research. I want to fight for my academic post first and then think of the administrative posts. My future aspiration is to really publish a number of articles and then apply for a promotion. If I met a very crucial milestone in my career, then I could relax and think of administration.

Despite the apparent lack of personal interest in the position, the participants made a clear distinction between their ability to do the job and whether they would like to do it or not. As Participant 8 clarified: 'I do believe that women can do it if they are given the chance. They have the abilities and the skills'. Likewise, Participant 5 stated:

> No, I am not interested in the VC post at all. However, I want to be clear about this: my lack of interest is not because I am a woman or I can't handle such a position or I can't lead, but because of my family commitments and my personal obligations.

In Participant 10's view, such a high position might conflict with her personal life and the welfare of her family. She explained this further by saying:

> Yes, I could be a VC and I know I would perform well in the role, but I don't want to go for such a post. I cannot handle the commitments that this job will force on me. There are obligations that come within this job description, which I cannot be

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committed to at this time. The attention that I will give to my family will be less than 20% of what they need and I cannot do that to my family.

Whether the women were uncertain about becoming a VC or were interested in the post but at a later point in time, they articulated various concerns that they thought inhibited them from proceeding to this next phase in their professional lives. Trying to balance family commitments along with the demanding duties of a VC would add more difficulties to an already challenging position. Participant 10 summarised the dilemma, which made most of the participants uninterested in advancing to the university presidency:

> I think it's the inner fear of losing what we have in our daily life with people around us. There isn't a formula that we can follow to create the balance between home and work. If the person cannot make this kind of balance, he/she will not be able to perform. There will be huge sacrifices that come along with the position. Women will have to accept that something will be lost from time to time on both sides. I am sure no one would want to experience any loss whatsoever.

Of all the participants in this study, only four expressed interest in becoming a VC at some point in their career. While discussing her interest in pursuing such a post, Participant 3 talked about how her gender and age might have a significant impact on the university presidency:

> I am 100% sure I could do it and perform well as a VC. I have the ability and am keen to get there one day, if it would ever be possible. [However], I know it will be difficult to get it. I don't think my male colleagues will accept me at this stage of my career as a leader, but it harms no one if I keep my faith and determination.

Participant 12, conversely, felt that nothing could stop her from reaching this goal:

> I am interested and I know I have the ability to manage such a post. I know it all depends on the personality and the way you administrate the position. If you have the leadership skills, you could go for it and you could perform well in it.

Participant 6 shared the same view about herself:

Yes, I could be a VC one day, why not?! Especially if I have the skills, the abilities and the knowledge, why not?! If women have the patience and could tolerate the challenges, they could get there one day.

Participant 4 echoed the same determination and confidence. She responded to the query by saying emphatically: 'Yes, I am sure I can. Why not? I know I could succeed in such a position if it was offered to me'.

All participants acknowledged that being in a leadership post is not an easy job and that it requires extensive training and experience, but this is something that can be remedied with guidance. Participant 11 stated: 'I definitely believe that people who are chosen for this administrative post need to get training and support', and the institution management needs to evaluate their leadership abilities, as well as identify and groom future leaders. In speaking about SQU's involvement in these efforts, Participant 5 said that over the past couple of years, female faculty members have been offered a number of leadership development programmes. Some of these initiatives included helping them discover their personal talents and skills:

They do hold, occasionally, some training workshops and programmes for women faculty, such as the Women Springboard[3]. They also had several sessions done for SQU staff; they have a few courses that highlight women's needs. These courses helped the participants to see their potential. Therefore, that has been very helpful.

Elsewhere, participants suggested that both men and women should undertake leadership training. In the words of Participant 3, what makes these training programmes effective is the involvement of faculty from across the institution:

I suggest that both genders need to be involved in certain management and leadership training and workshops. It is important for both because such programmes will show both that being a leader does not fall under gender, but the best should get it.

More participants shared this sentiment:

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[3] The Springboard Programme for professional women 'enables women to take more control over their own lives by helping participants identify the clear, practical and realistic steps that they want to take and develop the skills and confidence to take them', http://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/springboard/

I think there should be training programmes for both genders to show them how to pursue high leadership posts and accept each other in such posts. (Participant 2)

Leadership is not based on gender. Both men and women could do their best as leaders if they get the proper training and skill development. (Participant 13)

As observed above, each person has a unique situation and there are no straightforward solutions for the explored dilemma of advancing more female faculty members into leadership roles. Offering professional development training programmes and workshops on issues related to leadership and personal discovery, however, grants the institute with the potential to lead both men and women towards a better understanding of their own and each other's abilities, and help them to determine how to move forward in their careers without underestimating each other's strengths.

5.6   Summary

This chapter presented the data collected during the interviews in regard to the following issues as prescribed by the research questions of this thesis: (1) the factors that female Omani academics identify as significant for access to senior leadership positions; (2) the barriers that hinder female academics from performing as well as they would have liked or that inhibit their professional development; (3) the perceived impact of institutional policies and mandates on their effectiveness as leaders; and (4) the steps that could be taken in order to enhance gender equality in higher education and allow more women to pursue senior leadership roles.

The data collected in this study revealed distinct patterns in the participants' career progression and demonstrated the influence of various personal and professional factors in their advancement. The sample for this study consisted entirely of females in order to explore the unique role gender played in their educational and career development. When discussing the factors that affected their ability to pursue their goals and the challenges they faced in their professional lives, the participants drew on a range of experiences to pinpoint abilities and individuals that either facilitated their advancement or circumscribed their career aspirations. Furthermore, in considering ways of mentoring women interested in seeking leadership positions, the participants suggested strategies that higher education institutions and senior leaders could implement to develop potential candidates' personal, social and professional attributes.

The next chapter will review further the research findings provided in this chapter. An overall discussion and summary of the findings is presented for each of the four questions in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

6.1   Introduction

This chapter discusses the key findings from this research against the backdrop of pertinent international literature. The research highlights the impact of different factors that emerged from within both the professional and personal spheres, either facilitating or hindering the participating women academics' likelihood of progression into leadership positions.

Blustein et al. (2004) identify social constructivism as providing 'the most challenging springboard to questioning and re-conceptualising the space shared by work and relationships' (p. 427). Weick (1995) further explains that people are constituents of their surroundings and environments; thus, through their behaviour and actions they contribute to the creation of 'the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face' (p. 31). The key objective when taking a social constructivist perspective as a basis for the analysis of this study, is to portray individuals through relationships 'rooted in a cultural, socioeconomic, and socio-political context, as opposed to being a product of possession of the individuals' (Blustein et al., 2004, p. 427; Gergen, 1999, cited in Blustein et al., 2004; Burr, 1995). This approach will help the researcher to understand how the wider social context shapes the social interactions of individuals, as well as their relationships and career development (Fernando & Cohen, 2011). From this perspective, reality can be seen as enduring and dynamic, continually informed by individuals enacting their representations of it (Fernando & Cohen, 2011). This study was designed to investigate the experiences and views of female faculty members. In addition, it sought to highlight types of bias, opposition or roadblocks interfering with access to leadership positions and the management of roles. Specifically, the study is interested in how female academics sanction practices within their professions in light of their personal representations and, in turn, how they influence the academic context in which they find themselves.

In consideration of the above, this chapter sets out to contextualise and analyse the research findings against the emergent themes arising from the participants' interviews and the research questions. The selected themes indicate some cohesion in the shared experiences and perceptions of participating female faculty leaders. Discussion of the themes is organised around the following major areas of interest drawn from the relevant literature and the research questions: family; education; social/personal positioning; gendered practices; cultural and

belief systems; gender equality in higher education; institutional mandates and governmental policies assisting female scholars' participation in HE institutions.

6.2   Family: Support or Barrier?

Family is cited as a significant element influencing women's leadership development, or blocking their progress. As elsewhere, family, for Omanis, forms the core of society, playing a major role in the political, economic, social and religious spheres (Al-Riyami, 2010). The strongest theme to arise from the female leaders' narratives detailed how certain family relationships exert a huge influence on their professional lives and career trajectories. Family in the current research context was broadly classified into three separate units: parental family, nuclear family and extended family (see Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 Family in the Current Study Context
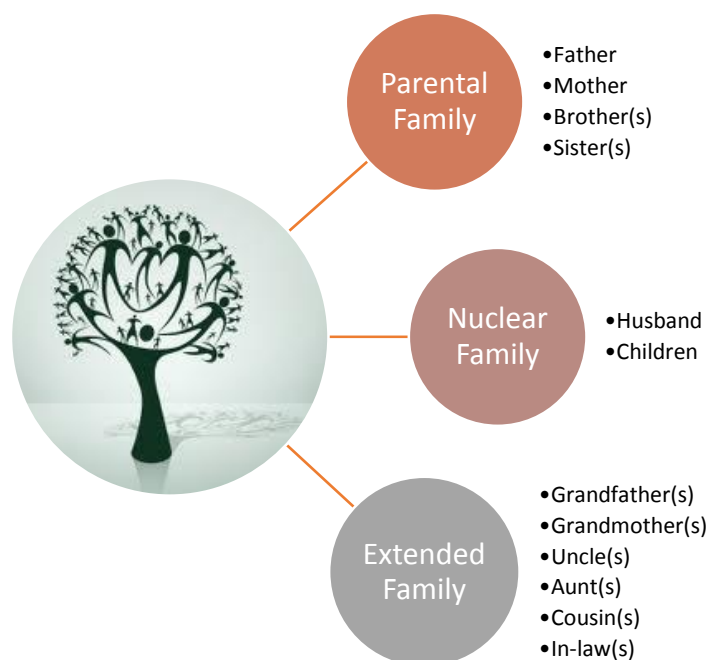
6.2.1   Parental Family

The parental family describes one's relationship with one's mother, father or siblings; the extent to which these individuals display confidence in the participant and offer a balanced support system for them, both personally and professionally, is crucial to their professional achievements (Al-Lamky, 2007). Several participants spoke at length regarding the influential roles their families played, observing their potential to influence their career selection, fault

avoidance, and continuous support for their educational and professional development. In many cases, childhood experiences and family values about education shaped the participants' self-concepts, their opinions about careers, their attitudes towards the traditional role of women in the family, and their perceptions about their ability to succeed within academia. Moreover, from the interviews it emerged that in their formative years, in all cases, either one or both of the participants' parents cultivated their sense of independence, assurance and self-confidence. Interestingly, several of the participants spoke about their male siblings who 'were huge supporters for us. They were there for us at all times' (Participant 12), and for having an important influence with regard to teaching them how to deal with and interact with males, while they also noted that they [male siblings] were supportive of their career progression. The attitude expressed here was echoes by several Arab scholars, reflecting the significance of these relationships to women in Arab cultures, because the expectation of freedom and opportunities to develop are not the norm (Al-Abri, 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007). Thus, family stability and upbringing promoted the development of the participants' strong personalities, and their determination to succeed and move forward in their careers.

The available literature on women in leadership in the Arab and Middle Eastern cultural contexts across various sectors (political, academic, business) reports that the majority of women's relationships and early experiences contributes significantly to their leadership successes and career progression in later life (Shah, 2015; Al-Shanfari, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010; Madsen, 2010, 2006; Al-Lamky, 2007; Sacheti, 2007). For example, Al-Lamky (2007) conducted phenomenological research investigating women in leading policy-making positions in Oman to understand the evolution of women's empowerment in the Omani political sphere. Al-Lamky believes that the positive developments the women in her study experienced could be ascribed to their initial social encounters, and included a heightened appreciation of the value of education, supportive parents and receiving equal treatment with their male siblings. Her participants indicated that they had been strongly encouraged by their family, 'particularly the father' (p. 49), to attain higher degrees and advance their careers. An underlying assumption of her study is that experiences during childhood and youth can have a profound lifelong impact (a fact confirmed by the present study). Indeed, many participants here attributed their ability to pursue further education to 'caring' fathers, who provided them with the necessary support and encouragement to progress. The participants maintained that their fathers had helped shape their personalities, attitudes and self-assurance, playing a crucial and influential role in making opportunities available to them, directly affecting their careers. The researcher, however,

observed that the participants were not particularly forthcoming regarding their mothers' role, either personally or professionally, referring to them only when asked directly. After this was pointed out, many stated the importance of their mothers, describing their assistance in helping them pursue their dreams, as well as acting as a source of inspiration.

Furthermore, one of the important findings of the present study suggests that participants from socially and economically advantaged families have better access to the personal development, higher education, skills and expertise development that are generally associated with leadership roles (Madsen, 2010). This is particularly important for women in Omani culture, because it improves their ability to express themselves and present their skills. Reinforcing women's special skills from childhood and providing them with occasions upon which to express themselves will definitely strengthen their personalities and help build their confidence. All the women who participated in this study had been given the opportunity to pursue higher education, arguably because they are from socially and economically privileged families. Their families were willing, and had the resources, to support their daughters' pursuit of higher education abroad and provided them with chances to excel throughout their lives. An important point raised in this study indicated that almost all women found their parental family extremely supportive, which implies that women unable to access senior positions may lack the support of their families.

The literature further affirms the positive effect of early socialisation and gender equality in one's parents' household on a woman's ability to lead. Madsen (2006) studied a group of female Asian academic leaders and demonstrated how their early upbringing influenced their personal and professional development. She shows that her participants 'loved learning, education and development' (p. 14) and were obedient as children. She further elaborates that their academic identities were influenced by continuous care and encouragement from their parents, teachers, religious leaders, neighbours and adult relatives. Her participants reinforced the significant role of such formative development in shaping their personal and professional lives, and this corresponds with the findings of the present research in relation to the participants' upbringing. Another early study, by Adusah-Karikari (2008), evaluated the impact of the social and cultural context on women in higher education in Ghana. She argues that being female in an organisational setting, especially in a developing society such as that of Ghana, often presents challenges for women attempting to achieve leadership status. She asserts, however, that full involvement in academia involves clear 'sociocultural practices,

belief systems, and the support of family members [to] impact girls' career paths' (p. 76). These findings relate to the sentiment expressed by the present study's participants, i.e. that they owe their professional development and career progression to the backing of their families, which 'builds the woman's confidence and forms her leadership characteristics' (Participant 13).

Previous research has demonstrated that Arab families can have a considerable impact on their daughters' educational goals and future opportunities (Al-Abri, 2010; Al-Bulushi, 2010; Madsen, 2010; Mujtaba et al., 2010). Mujtaba et al. (2010) state that Omanis tend to 'put a high level of importance on family decisions' (p. 177), as was corroborated by the present study's participants. For example, certain Omani families demonstrate great flexibility concerning their daughters' educational choices, while others make these decisions on behalf of their children, especially their daughters (Al-Abri, 2010). Based on the results of the path analysis for the participants, family attitudes and the educational opportunities offered have a significant positive relationship to women's future job performance as they progress into the later stages of their vocational lives. Many of the participants reported being afforded freedom to follow their dreams and encouragement to carve their own paths. Participant 10 attributed the growth and successes in her educational path to her father who 'believed in [her] educational choice and freedom'. These participants explained that, if their families had not supported their decision to pursue higher degrees and travel abroad, they would have never had leadership opportunities offered to them.

These findings contradict those of a key study about Omani families conducted by Sacheti (2007), which asserts that traditional Omani families tend to constrain their daughters' careers and regulate their academic choices. This situation is reinforced by the girls' dutiful obedience, arising from their sense of obligation and respect, which is highly valued in Oman. Sacheti (2007) also mentions that, traditionally, Omani families would encourage their daughters to study in fields such as education and medicine, since considerable importance is placed on the woman's traditional role as carer. Sacheti's article, however, was written almost ten years ago, and the present work suggests that, since then, Omani women have gained more support from their families and received greater encouragement to follow alternative educational and career paths. This difference might also relate to the personal skills and aptitudes of the relatively small and unique samples of women in each study. According to the present study, family support for women choosing to study in any field is growing. Throughout the course of the interviews, all participants stated that their families 'encouraged [them] all the way through'

(participant 11) and were supportive of them obtaining a higher educational degree in the field of their choice, despite many of their parents not having had a college education themselves. It is accepted, however, that more studies with large samples of respondents are needed to verify these findings.

6.2.2   Nuclear Family

The participants also referred to their nuclear families in the interviews, discussing the influence of their spouses and children. In this case, the consequences of family ties were twofold. Family was in some cases considered a significant supportive element, advancing women's progression and development. Those participants that fell into this group described their husbands as very cooperative, providing the necessary support to help them advance in their careers. By contrast, other participants reported that looking after children and responding to the demands of uncooperative husbands could be challenging.

The present study recognises that the marital status of the participants was a contributory factor to their professional advancement. This was mainly a consequence of the pivotal role that the participants' husbands played in influencing their careers. They maintained that finding the "right" husband had been vital to their career success. Many of the participants touched upon the dynamic role their husbands played in ensuring the existence of the requisite balance to manage work–family issues. In many instances, a married woman, irrespective of her level of education, desired that her husband should endorse her decision to pursue educational and career advancement. Participant 12 referred to herself as fortunate to have married a man who is a 'huge supporter and gave me all the space to flourish and succeed in my career'. Several also asserted that their husbands had nurtured their interest in research, and provided them even 'with funding to do research' (Participant 1), particularly those who worked in the same field. Similarly, in a previous study by Adusah-Karikari (2008), women in leadership roles in higher education acknowledged the enthusiastic role their spouses played in their career progression. Indeed, one of Adusah-Karikari's respondents commented that she would not have attained her executive level position had she not been married.

The participants in this study described a shared partnership between couples, established to assist them in managing their personal and professional responsibilities. The findings relating

to this are also supported by literature discussing the role of the husband in managing any work-family conflict. Al-Abri (2010, p. 369) affirms in her study that:

> Women who marry men of a similar educational background enjoy greater flexibility and cooperation in changing women's status in the community. Their husbands tend to give them the support and encouragement they need to gain further education that would bring them a higher social status and an opportunity to participate in decision-making.

Overall, the findings of the present study confirm that 'the existence of educational balance and complexity between the couple plays a large role in establishing proper communication and understanding between them' (Al-Abri, 2010, p. 370), which suggests that educational compatibility in a spouse is advantageous to women's career progression.

The above, however, can be contrasted with the experiences of women who step down from their posts or who have not moved forward in their academic careers, because this did not align with their spouses' personal agendas. These examples clearly indicate that a supportive environment, created by immediate family and spouses, opens doors to educational and professional opportunities for women. Affirmative relationships can strengthen their autonomy and prominence in society in general, and in their professional lives. Many studies underline the challenge that many professional women in senior-level leadership positions face, in terms of work–family conflicts. The studies explain that the demanding nature of leadership roles can create an imbalance between work and family life (Muna and Mansour, 2007). Moreover, women struggling to balance work and family are disproportionately (under)represented in leadership positions (Lumby, 2015; Shah, 2015, 2012; Muna et al., 2007). Muna & Mansour (2007, p. 123) argue:

> The critical and more difficult task is the leader's ability to effectively balance the time and focus between one's career demands, family pleasures and obligations, and personal life – over a lifetime.

In the current leadership literature, this imbalance appears to stem from a combination of factors, including societal expectations (Eliophotou-Menon et al., 2015; Fuller, 2015; Lumby, 2015; Rarieya, 2015; Reed et al., 2015; Shah, 2015; Coleman, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010), gender stereotyping and discrimination (Eddy et al, 2015; Enid et al., 2013; Yavas et al., 2008; Shah,

1998), family–work balance (Robinson, 2015; Al-Bulushi, 2010; Eddy, 2009) and lack of a support network (Shah, 2012; Al-Shanfari, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010; Slan-Jerusalim and Chen, 2009; Al-Lamky, 2007). Family obligations towards husbands and children, however, are particularly significant for married women in Muslim societies. All but one of the study participants were married with children, and they revealed that, notwithstanding their academic interests, they were still expected to fulfil conventional commitments to their families, including meeting the demands of motherhood. In general, Middle Eastern societies are reluctant to abandon the conventional perspective that women are predominantly dedicated to their homes and children (Al-Abri, 2010; Al-Bulushi, 2010; Madsen, 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007). Regardless of the professions women choose, their obligations as mothers and wives are prioritised. These social obligations, in a traditional extremely patriarchal society such as Oman, combined with the demands of their work, deeply affect women's professional development slowing in some instances their career progression.

Eddy (2009) reveals that while women pursue their own career progression, they must also accommodate their children and their husbands' career needs. In some cases, their family obligations prevent them from following career plans, making attainment of upper-level positions difficult. Similar to the findings of the present study, Eddy (2009) attributes the lack of senior female academics in leadership positions to women's decisions to prioritise family over career (Eddy, 2009). Other participants were further restrained in their professional progression because of constraints on women's mobility and travel prospects, as many were unable to pursue PhD degrees abroad. This finding was echoed by Smith (2016, p. 85), who states that the '[p]owerful social discourses of motherhood continue to find expression in the restrictive parameters within which many women make their life and career decisions'. As with the female leaders in Eddy's (2009) study, many women in the present study often adopted different roles at work or refused opportunities to purse higher education degrees because of the potential impact of relocation on their families.

The experiences of many participants in this study underline how the institution of marriage continues to be utilised as an instrument of female repression by patriarchal Arab societies, specifically by individuals who cling to patriarchal traditions in present-day Oman and elsewhere in the Arab world (Al-Abri, 2010). Subsequently, stereotypes have been developed by both women and men, which claim that the former are 'naturally suited to the primary [yet "subordinate"] roles of mothers and wives' (Court, 1997, p. 34), whilst men are designed to be

providers and pioneers (Coleman, 2011). As indicated by Pounder & Coleman (2002, p. 125):

> [F]rom a female perspective, the downside of this process is that the view of women as nurturing may lead to a justification of women holding supportive roles, leaving men typically to play leadership roles.

It should be noted that women in academia fully recognise their dual roles as professionals and homemakers, continually negotiating their way around social expectations. This suggests that the patriarchal society in Oman expects women to adjust their lives to cope with their family roles, adding a degree of complexity to the pursuit of professional objectives. A study of women in academia conducted by Eliophotou-Menon et al. (2015) indicated similar barriers to those referenced in the present study. The authors reinforce three main factors contributing to the under-representation of women in academia in Cyprus. These factors were associated with 'prejudices and societal expectations [in balancing work and family duties] as well as personal choices made by the women themselves' (p. 20). Lewis (1997, p. 18) advises that '[s]tate support is, therefore, a necessary context for broad organizational change, providing a platform of rights from which workers can negotiate the conditions needed to balance work and family'.

Eddy et al 's(2015) recent study also supports these findings, highlighting that '[i]t is not necessarily the challenge of the work that prevents people from pursuing career opportunities; it is the anticipation that there will be challenges, albeit an assumption borne out by the reality of many women's lives' (p. 7). It is rather, as one participant expressed, 'the inner fear of losing what we have in our daily life with people around us' (Participant 10). The women interviewed articulated that they were unwilling to make sacrifices at the expense of their loved ones. Thus, many were trapped by such fears, which had negative implications for their career advancement, impeding their motivation to pursue leadership. An inability to strike an appropriate work–life balance resulted in a profound sense of guilt, especially with regard to one's children, as the mother's role within the family is considered pivotal.

In a recent study, Slan-Jerusalim & Chen (2009) point out that work–family conflict has a negative effect on women's personal and vocational lives. This finding adds credence to Yavas et al.'s (2008) argument that employees experiencing conflict between their work and family life become emotionally exhausted, and that inter-role conflict is a significant predictor of frontline employees' turnover intentions. This is borne out by Koneck (2006), who notes that 42% of her sample of successful professional women stated that the 'demands of an upper

management position would adversely affect their life–work balance' (p. 84). In the same vein, Enid et al. (2013, p. 31) assert that '[s]ocial roles and social stereotypes play a major role in inhibiting the progress of women', and can contribute to the glass ceiling that will be discussed later in this chapter.

In the context of the present study, one needs to give a thorough explanation of the responsibility associated with having children. On the one hand, having children is considered a blessing in Islam. According to Saad (2012, p. 198):

> The main purpose of marriage according to the Qur'an and practices of the pious
> prophets that were sent to mankind (Peace be upon them) was to reproduce and
> fill the earth so that they could worship the Lord in large numbers.

Most of the participants were themselves from large families and perceived of having children positively. The researcher established that they received support in raising their children from their parents or their extended family (as will be discussed in the next section). An interesting finding of the research was how the participants described their responsibilities as mothers. It appears that the prevailing notion was one of respect for the relationship between their professional role and that of spouse and parent; they were viewed as complementary rather than conflicting. Career success was viewed as a source of power and an opportunity to move forward and accomplish more to benefit the entire family. This was reflected in the participants' demonstration of how women in their position strive to be incredibly conscientious and dedicated in their work, while also meeting family responsibilities. Whilst acknowledging some strain in familial roles, they observed that additional work responsibilities were external to their duties as wives and mothers. As Participant 11 stated, 'whether I like it or not, I, as a woman, have to share my time between family matters and professional ones.' Many women in the study had developed, or were in the process of developing, coping strategies to achieve balance and ensure work did not impinge on home life. The participants also interpreted the challenges arising from the need to balance their time, careers and personal lives differently. From their responses, it emerged that some participants valued both roles equally, and strategised accordingly to integrate them conscientiously.

These findings broadly concur with those of some Omani scholars (Al-Shanfari, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007; Al-Lamki, 1999), who note that female Omani leaders imagine

themselves as women who have adopted 'the role which they have been born for and which has [been] framed by God and men' (Al-Abri, 2010, p. 326). Furthermore, they expect to obtain the highest level of education and to master their professions. An interesting finding that corresponds with the current study is that provided by Omair (2008), who reports that 'the driving forces for success for Arab women in management are education and the support of their husband and families', and that 'success for Arab women is not defined in terms of financial gains but rather satisfaction, happiness and growth' (p. 115). Certainly, several participants in the present study successfully maintained a work–family balance based on strategies designed to help them enjoy fulfilling professional and personal lives, but this was a small proportion of women academics.

The majority of the women leaders who participated in this study did not find the family-work balance challenging because of the specific support systems available to them, although many women in senior leadership positions have a different experience (Smith, 2015; Eddy, 2009; Metz, 2005). Contemporary research reveals that having a family is often perceived as a barrier to career development in Western societies. Indeed, a sense of guilt, compounded with social and financial impasses, is common among working mothers (Smith, 2016; Nguyen, 2012; Figes, 1994). Figes (1994) argues that:

> At work [the working mother] feels guilty about not being a good enough mother, and not spending time with her children; because she has children she also suffers guilt at not working hard enough in her job. In both quarters, working women feel compromised and inadequate. (p. 78)

Evidence suggests that many women in the Western context choose to stay single or postpone or never have children, because of the obligations associated with a commitment to career advancement (Smith, 2016; Simone, 1987). The reflections of women in leadership roles show that success as an academic is more readily achieved when one is not burdened with the social responsibilities of a mother and wife (Smith, 2015; Eddy, 2009; Metz, 2005), which are time-consuming, require commitment and restrict career progression. In contrast to Western feminist approaches, a number of the participants in the present study do not see their gender-specific functions as wives and mothers as constructs devised by an oppressive system. Interestingly, few argued that they had no fear or concerns about moving forward to pursue their dreams with

a careful attention to their obligations towards their families, whereas in previous studies, emotional fear was considered a stumbling block for women seeking upper-level positions.

Nevertheless, childbearing and the associated responsibilities were understood by several of the participants to have a primary bearing on women's work patterns. Although all participants in the present study professed that having children was desirable, they admitted that the responsibilities of motherhood are a chief barrier discouraging women's ascension to leadership roles, as well as being the reason why some abandon leadership posts. They spoke about the ways in which their personal and professional lives intertwined, and several related circumstances in which they had postponed further study, foregone excellent positions or put their careers on hold, because 'family and children are [their] priority' (Participant 9). Some, in extreme circumstances, step down from their senior roles, although 'this is rarely the case in Oman due to the absence of appropriate alternative job opportunities for females' (Al-Bulushi, 2010, p. 227).

The study, however, established that some participants, who had become concerned about where they were heading, fearing they would be unable to cope with very demanding roles, had rejected any further progression to leadership positions, as 'staying in the post would have been at the expense of [their] family' (Participant 11). Smith (2016) views motherhood 'as particularly influential in forming and influencing the career decisions of women with children and those who planned to have children' (p. 85). The conflict that arises is that women often lack the time and energy to excel as both mothers/wives and effective members of staff, and many feel compelled 'to excel in all areas of their lives' (Robinson, 2015, p. 57). Robinson investigates her participants' career paths and the reasons behind decisions made to abandon leadership positions. All her study participants were 'more than qualified' (p. 60), but could not navigate their dual roles to their satisfaction. Results reported by Nguyen (2012) also describe how women in the traditional Vietnamese society feel pressured by family responsibilities, as they are 'expected to take more family responsibilities than men' (p. 126) and this impedes their career progression. Even women who find ways to reduce family pressures are still burdened with domestic responsibilities, which acts against promotion 'especially to time-consuming, demanding positions' (p. 126).

In general, Middle Eastern societies are reluctant to abandon their conventional stance that women should predominantly be dedicated to the house and their children (Al-Abri, 2010; Al-

Bulushi, 2010; Madsen, 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007). Although female leaders typically receive help at home, from either paid employees or relatives (family members or spouses), in the Arab world, childcare remains their most critical obligation (Al-Lamki, 1999). In many instances in this study, several participants (not all) reported changing their positions because of fear of the impact of relocation on their families. These professional women held themselves back from opportunities (such as completing higher degrees or attendance at conferences or academic events) because of concerns over how their professional activities might influence their family lives. The participants' comments are echoed in the words of Shah & Shah (2012), who state that '[m]any participants [in their study] admitted of having at different times let go of headship if it meant any disruption of family set ups' (p. 36). Indeed, '[w]omen's family responsibilities can severely limit their careers in ways that do not generally affect men" (Greenhaus et al., 1999, p. 409).

6.2.3   Extended Family

The third reference to the relevance of family in the present study relates to the extended family, which may be considered a third dimension. This includes grandfathers, grandmothers, in-laws, uncles, aunts, cousins, and in the case of a community, the whole tribe. According to Madsen (2010), 'the family is very closely knit within the Arab culture, so many of these influential [individuals] were relatives, such as grandmothers, aunts and cousins' (p. 88). Extended relationships in Eastern cultures serve to control the participants, constraining their mobility and professional advancement. The majority of Arab families place a lot of weight on the values and rules espoused by extended families. Generally, members of the Arab culture base their values strongly on 'tribalism where individuals have strong feelings of loyalty to their tribes' (Al-Subhi, 2016, p. 17).

For Arabs, as stated by Madsen (2010), 'the family lies at the core of society, playing a major role in political, economic, social, and religious spheres' (p. 117), and in some extreme instances, family could, as Shah (1998, p. 342) states, 'serve to impose stereotyping and sex-segregation leading to exclusion of women from the public' or devalue a woman's contribution to society. In the Omani context, historical reviews of such treatment demonstrate how the extended family (in the context of this study, the tribe) before 1970 dictated how women should behave in terms of obeying rules (Al-Azri, 2013). Typically, women are expected to be

obedient and passive, which reflects adversely on how many women view themselves and their potential to contribute to society.

In the case of the participants in this research, the majority of the roles pre-assigned to them in their daily lives are based on their family's standards and the opportunities afforded them to 'carve out their own place of power and influence' (Madsen, 2010, p. 118). This was also reflected in the participants' personal experiences, as they had in many cases deliberately refused to accept the social roles and practices imposed on them by their extended families, intended to limit them to domestic roles. This was not only a personal decision, but was fully reinforced by their male family figures (fathers and male siblings), who supported their eagerness to move forward in their education and establish successful careers. Participant 12 shared her personal experience of how her father 'continuously fought with his family [uncles and cousins, who did not believe in girls' education] for [her] rights', to enable her to advance her studies by completing her postgraduate degree abroad.

In many circumstances, however, researchers have reported that extended family influence and socio-political status can be one of the greatest facilitators enhancing opportunities for women in Arab culture (Al-Abri, 2010; Madsen, 2010; McElwee & Al-Riyami, 2003) and their contribution to society. Family links in the local context could contribute significantly in the empowerment of individuals and is the greatest 'support in accessing top positions' in the Arab communities (Abalkhail, 2017, p.178). There is considerable evidence demonstrating the positive influence of the extended family (in-laws) on the participants' contributions to their work. As evident in literature and supported by this study participants, women are expected to heavily depend on their families 'for economic and social support because the identity of a women is directly linked to her family' (Abalkhail, 2017, p.178).

From the above discussion, the participants seems depicted their families as a source of strength and empowerment. In Arab societies, family and tribal identity (as highlighted in previously) remain a very powerful force in individuals' lives (Al-Abri, 2010; Al-Bulushi, 2010; Al-Shanfari, 2011; Al-Lamky, 2007; Riphenburg, 1998b). It is interesting to observe how the study participants viewed the role played by family on various occasions and in different stages of their lives. Throughout their narratives, they stressed both the positive and negative influence of family, highlighting the rapid changes taking place in Oman. At first, in the participants' early years, family proved an important source of positive reinforcement and self-affirmation

in the form of support, opportunities and a strong drive to work in academic and professional fields. Conversely, some participants narrated stories of conflict with their extended family's values and the roles that it was assumed women should follow, claiming that traditional views served as impediments to their professional performance.

6.3   Educational Experiences

For many women in Oman, 'education means more control over their lives' (Al-Shanfari, 2011). In reference to education as a crucial factor in women leaders' lives, all participants perceived that their educational background, and especially their overseas studies, had played a significant role in establishing a framework to advance their careers and prepare them for their leadership roles. It was apparent that all participants believed that receiving international postgraduate degrees in their respective fields had provided them with opportunities and opened doors for them to access leadership roles in Oman. Many participants described how 'having the right educational background qualified [them] to get the positions over others' (Participant 12).

Omani women understand the importance of seeking higher degrees 'to improve the quality of their economic, social and cultural life standards' (Al-Abri, 2010, p. 322). Al-Abri (2010) demonstrates that the 'education of women has triggered changes in the configuration of women's life cycles' (p. 396). Women acknowledge that hard work and educational accomplishment are ultimately rewarded by financial security for themselves and their families, and the opportunity to advance to leadership positions (Al-Abri, 2010). In this study, the participants observed that higher education was not just a means towards financial reward but, perhaps more importantly, a way to establish a meaningful place for them within society, as '[i]t opened […] many doors' (Participant 13). They further recommended that female faculty members should prioritize the pursuit of postgraduate degrees. This finding, therefore, is consistent with earlier studies (Al-Subhi, 2016) that have highlighted the importance of attaining further degrees. Al-Subhi (2016, p.14) confirms that 'education is the most powerful tool to achieve socioeconomic and political changes' (p. 14) for Omani women. Muñoz's (2010) participants also expressed similar views concerning the importance of attaining a doctoral degree to advance one's leadership prospects. Some of the participants in the present study claimed that having higher academic qualifications 'qualified [them] to get the positions

over others' (Participant 12), even when they did not have an appropriate academic profile (e.g. publications, research contributions) or sufficient professional experience.

Other context-specific factors that the findings of this study implied significantly affected female Omani academic leaders' professional progression, and that helped them succeed in attaining senior-level leadership positions in higher education, include being high achievers, being SQU alumni and having been pioneers at the University (the Renaissance generation). It was evident from the findings that having been a pioneer at the University had brought rewards for the participants in that all these individuals were highly valued both at work and among their communities; as stated by Participant 11, 'it was a great honour to work there'. To the majority of the participants, '[i]t was a significant turning point in [their lives]' (Participant 2). They are viewed as extremely hard-working individuals, a quality greatly in demand in a leader. This suggests that women's opportunities to access leadership roles could increase based on their academic achievements. In this sense, the participants recognise the significance of pursuing knowledge, observing that this may have played a key role in the sense of empowerment they experience in their personal lives, and which eventually proved a great incentive to fulfil their professional objectives. The finding is consistent with that of Al-Rahbi (2004), who confirms that for Omanis higher education degrees are 'a necessity, rather than an option' if they are eager to move forward in their career. These findings, therefore, suggest that young Omani women should be encouraged to move forward in their educational degrees. Beyond this, the findings also suggest that the higher the educational degree, the better the chances for women to pursue significant leadership roles in different governmental sectors and at higher education institutions in Oman.

6.4   Individual Strategies

In order to comprehend the roles and goals of female Omani faculty members, it is useful to know about their abilities and conduct as women in leadership roles in the Omani setting. The participants' data revealed various vital competencies and leadership styles, which they observed as having enabled them in succeeding in their leadership roles. They emphasised that besides personal dynamics, factors associated with their jobs such as good skills and leadership style helped them to access leadership positions within their institutions. Leadership skills were emphasised by the participants when discussing their progression to leadership positions.

A common finding was that people's skills and social aptitudes, such as the capacity to build rapport, work effectively with others and build positive relationships, were essential in empowering the participants to lead competently. This finding is consistent with that of Hough (2010), who states that leadership skills focus on 'knowledge and abilities rather than on the personal characteristics of the leader' (p. 15). Northouse (2007, cited in Hough, 2010) further explains that 's*kills* are what leaders *can accomplish,* whereas *traits* are who leaders *are,* such as those characteristics that leaders are born with' (p. 40, original emphasis). The participants in the present study echoed these views, stating that they had the capabilities and the skills to lead, both of which were perceived as instrumental when developing and improving their place of work. As some participants noted, their social and communication skills (Participants 10 and 13) had assisted them to 'orchestrate each individual's potential in the organization' (Callan, 2001, p. 27) in order to attain institutional goals, affirming their aptitude to lead efficiently. It was evident that many of the participants endorsed the evidence reported by Day (2001), who found that in a school context 'the most important aspect of leadership for all the principals was working successfully with people' (p. 45). Likewise, in the present study, one of the attributes of an effective leader is the competence to build rapport with members of staff.

During the course of the interviews, the researcher observed that the participants indicated that the capacity to persuade people, listen to their points of view and associate with them was critical to their success as leaders. In addition, the ability to foster positive relationships with staff members was consistently referred to as an important leadership skill. The participants emphasised a willingness to hear out their staff and continuously encourage them, rather than to satisfy an egotistic need for popularity. These views confirm the findings in the literature regarding the significance of interpersonal skills for leaders (Kern, 2015; Kelly 2011; Callan, 2001; Day, 2001), in order to promote constructive, pleasant and effective relationships with co-workers.

The findings also support the respective views of Kern (2015) and Eagly et al. (2007) suggesting that good communication skills, collaboration and motivation are not only critical leadership qualities but also essential to success. The study's research findings specifically acknowledged that social and professional relationships seem to have been very helpful in assisting participants to manage groups in what are still male-dominated institutions. In many cases, active use of networking opportunities emerged as critical for obtaining and maintaining senior leadership positions. More specifically, the research participants claimed that teamwork

and responsive engagement with other people in the workplace, is 'important to achieve stability and harmony in the workplace' (Participant 5). They admitted that if the team was not supportive and if its members were unsuccessful in working together, then failure could result (Participant 3). The research also revealed that the transfer of authority from leader to other individuals within the team, and the opportunity to make autonomous decisions on behalf of the staff was felt to be empowering and to contribute to 'effective leadership at all levels [as] it is based on trust' (Bynum, 2015, p. 66).

By contrast, in Western countries, evidence suggests the significance of fostering a high level of trust among members of teams (regardless of their gender), which results in people being 'trusted to work as autonomous, accountable professionals' (Day, 2001, p. 54). The research participants involved in this study, however, did not mention such aspects of interpersonal relations, possibly due to the cultural differences between Arab Middle Eastern countries and Western countries. Bohnet et al. (2010a, p. 4) explain that '[r]eference points for trustworthiness differ between the Arab Middle East and the West'. Accordingly, '[i]n the West, by contrast [to the tribal societies of the Middle East], there are many trust interactions among strangers, with formal institutions, such as contract law, making trust possible' (Bohnet et al., 2010a, p. 5). Bohnet et al. (2010a) further argue that it is difficult to win the trust of Gulf citizens, in contrast with people in the West who usually trust other people when they encounter them within an institutionalised framework. People in the Middle East 'do not trust unless loyalty or trustworthiness is virtually guaranteed' (p. 11). In this study, the participants did not trust the system either, reserving trust for personal and family relationships rather than professional ones.

These findings reflect what the aforementioned literature describes as the principal dimensions of the transformational approach to leadership. As Callan (2001) finds, strong interpersonal and communication skills, and a focus on team building and teamwork are essential prerequisites for effective transformational leaders. To date, many studies have been conducted in various contexts worldwide at different levels within the education field, e.g. in schools, colleges and universities, associating women with transformational leadership styles (Amin et al., 2013; Percupchick, 2011; Koneck, 2006; Eagly et al., 2007). The transformational leadership style is associated with a leaders' effectiveness, and its main focus is on 'character traits such as support and consideration' (Kern, 2015, p. 34). Koneck (2006) claims that '[r]esearch appears to favour the stance that women tend to be transformational leaders' (p. 3).

There also appears to be a gendered assumption that 'women often favored a more transformational leadership style' (Kern, 2015, p. iii). Yaseen's (2010) study demonstrates that culture imposes stronger transformational characteristics on women in the UAE in contrast to the more transactional characteristics in men. The data collected for this study also affirms the assumption that female leaders practice a transformational leadership style more widely than they do other styles, as they are frequently 'more participative, transformational and people oriented' (Liu et al., 2015, p. 3).

Nevertheless, we cannot assume that leadership styles are innately linked to certain characteristics possessed by either men or women. Thus, caution is essential when making claims about women and men's leadership styles, to avoid simply reinforcing stereotypes that reify women as people-centred and men as tough. Certainly, the participants in this study portrayed themselves as having traits that reflect cultural norms (and which can be referred to as transformational), but this does not mean that they cannot adopt other styles or shift between styles as needed. There are certain gender norms and behavioural expectations embedded in the social and work contexts associated with both men and women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In the context of the present research, equating one gender with a particular style 'can lead to an essentialising of gender, as if men and women "naturally" have different styles of leadership and professional performance' (Read & Kehm, 2016, p. 816). For example, Read & Kehm (2016) argue that leadership styles and practices are always constrained by 'culturally dominated discourses of what is appropriate and acceptable', and not by individuals.

According to some participants, the leadership styles they adopted had greatly influenced their decision to advance up the leadership ladder both 'successfully and effectively' (Participant 2). Some researchers, however, have indicated that the friendly, approachable style some leaders adopt is not without complications or difficulties (Kellerman & Rhode, 2014). Their opinions seem to point out the "negative" outcome, as for some organisational stakeholders the approach 'can seem weak and indecisive' (Kellerman & Rhode, 2014, p. 29). In reality, in traditional Arab culture it is not usual for women to act in an inviting and receptive manner when interacting with male colleagues. There are additionally, socio-cultural boundaries that both genders must respect and never cross when interacting with each other; indeed, the majority of the participants 'come from very conservative famil[ies], where women are not allowed to mingle with and be exposed to men' (Participant 10).

Amin et al. (2013) observe that '[t]he qualities of a leader may determine a specific style for the leader, which may create a positive picture of the leader among subordinates' (p. 98). This already has been hinted here by the interviewees' personal experiences of the way they dealt with people around them at work. Overall, many participants explicitly described a comprehensive range of crucial aptitudes and leadership styles, which they perceived to have enabled them to grow into effective leaders within the university. Drawing from their words, there was a relatively high level of agreement, confirming the persisting stereotypical perceptions that leadership style was a core competency when seeking access to higher education leadership positions. Although the styles varied among the participants, depending on the specific nature of their work, there is relatively strong evidence that certain common elements, such as interpersonal and analytic skills are manifested in their experiences at work, testifying to their ability to think, analyse, plan and devise solutions to problems in conjunction with successful leaders.

6.5   Gendered Practices

The issue of gender, and the behaviour anticipated from both men and women, is a focal theme informing debate on leadership opportunities for women in higher education (Shah, 2016; Lumby, 2015; Reed et al., 2015; Shah, 2015). Men and women are generally attributed with certain exclusive characteristics and qualities (Fuller, 2015; Lumby, 2015), which are further associated with conventional expectations and obligations (Fuller, 2015). Moreover, it is important to note that Muslim countries are 'highly diverse' communities (Shah, 2016, p. 67), and that 'there are variations in how gender is constructed and experienced in different Muslim societies' (ibid., p. 68).

In Schreiber et al.'s (2003) study, the authors note that in Oman the increase 'of women […] in the workforce was not paralleled by a corresponding increase in their representation at upper management or executive levels' (1993, p. 52), and this remains true. Despite gender equality statistics in Oman revealing some improvement because of newly empowering legislation, the disparity between the number of men and women holding senior management positions continues, especially in higher education institutions (SQU Annual Statistic Report, 2014). The findings reported herein reveal that the participants have taken an important positive step in attaining leadership positions; however, the data analysis suggests that equality cannot be claimed due to the scarcity of women in senior leadership roles at SQU. Irrespective of the

career pathways of the 13 participants, they all shared significant characteristics that emerged only once they obtained their positions, specifically, the influence of gender on the participants' lives, which has become more influential since their earliest socialisation into their current leadership roles.

From the interviews, the participants provided evidence of how strongly women's lives and careers were shaped by gender regimes: from their early childhood through male family figures, to their own familial roles and duties and the vital role of their spouses, and their roles as women with careers in a male world. As a member of Omani society, the researcher anticipated that gendering would play a major role in the participants' lives, informing both their successes and failures. Despite considerable progress, in terms of Omani women's status in both society and the professional domain (as explained in the previous chapter), traditional patriarchal views portray women as family providers and men as leaders, and that the role of the family caregiver and domestic obligations continue to affect the choices associated with progression into leadership posts. Some of the participants were fortunate enough to break the constraints of the traditional roles assigned to women and reach leadership posts. Nevertheless, the majority confirmed the long-established stereotype regarding men being better leaders than women.

Notably, gender issues were explicitly discussed during the interviews. The participants were encouraged to share their experiences of gender, as manifested in interactions with their family and relatives, colleagues and their bosses at different stages of their careers. The majority of the participants stated at the beginning of the interviews that they had not observed any negative gendered attitude from their male family members (fathers, male siblings and spouses). In most cases, these women were offered positive support and encouragement by men to move forward and to apply for more posts with greater seniority, as previously mentioned. The participants' perceptions of their male colleagues, however, were contradictory. Although some participants highlighted a supportive attitude from their male colleagues towards their work, the vast majority of narratives clearly suggested some negativity and aggression from a number of male co-workers.

In contrast to the majority, two of the participants reported that they had never worried about gender incongruity at work. They both mentioned the positive attitude of their male colleagues, particularly those who played a crucial role in compelling women to advance their careers. In

these cases, the participants had not been especially oriented towards seeking leadership, yet they had been supported in pursuing seniority by their male colleagues. In fact, one participant had been formally requested to adopt a leadership role, despite the availability of male candidates in the same department. Thus, the suggestion of gender discrimination in the workplace was rejected in such cases. One explanation for this could be that the leadership skills and managerial styles of these women were primary concerns motivating employers to promote them. A further possibility might be that such promotions resulted from the Omani government's policy to reinforce women's status in the country (see Chapter 2). Interestingly, those who groomed these participants to enter leadership positions were mainly senior males. These two women's personal experiences, however, do not echo the views of many female Omani faculty leaders at SQU.

From the perspective of the majority of the study participants, it appears that women are discriminated against at an organizational level, and that this discrimination can take several forms limiting the professional evaluation of women. Shah (2016) asserts that 'gender has remained a powerful factor in defining women's role and status in all spheres of activity across societies and cultures' (p. 68). This data confirms the author's original expectations i.e. that in spite of the fact that numerous female academics have been permitted entry into a male-dominated working environment, institutional practices do not treat female faculty leaders equally. Indeed, the participants were acutely aware of the notion that certain jobs were classified by gender suitability as 'we live in a masculine world' (Participant 12), where leadership posts are 'reserved for men, culture-wise' (Participant 10).

Women faculty members in the studied institution seem to be heavily constrained by cultural expectations and identity constructs. Even hiring and promotion procedures were evidently gender discriminatory, as certain positions were advertised as only for men. Indeed, many of the job advertisements announced on the university website, and by the Public Relations & Information Department, reveal job descriptions for leadership roles tailored to fit male candidates, especially with regard to working hours. The participants voiced concern that this could create an imbalance, resulting in fewer qualified female leaders at the executive level because of policies instituted by the university and preconceived notions about female faculty members, which do not favour women receiving leadership positions (Participant 6). To address this flaw, Al-Bulushi (2010) suggests that "the provision of women's rights needs to be engineered by women, which will allow the development of more and better support for new evolving female roles' (p. 257). This suggestion was confirmed by Participant 12 who

believed that 'we should change this mindset […] Women should no longer fall behind or be restricted to certain jobs', which will nevertheless not happen without having women in positions of power.

In the current study context, leadership continued to be viewed as a masculine domain, impeding women's ascendancy up the work ladder (Sperandio, 2010, cited in Hough, 2010). Fitzgerald et al. (2010, cited in Morley, 2014) believes that the focus on efficiency, competitiveness, grading, technique and the 'inalienable logic of the market' solidifies the perception that senior higher education leadership is a masculine purview (p. 8). Elsewhere, Shah (2015) reports that leadership in Pakistan has been a male privilege, observing that 'gender inequities are deeply embedded in organizational and social structures' (p. 169). In Mombasa, and other parts of Kenya, Rarieya (2015) found that leadership was perceived as demanding, aggressive, authoritarian and more fitting for males.

The participants' responses reflected gender and leadership stereotypes, which overwhelmingly reflected a culture saturated in male tradition, male dominance and male-centred thinking. Some participants further alluded to occasions upon which they felt gender was an issue, citing resistance from individuals uncomfortable with their power and those who appeared to believe women should be followers, not leaders. These individuals expected women to observe traditional roles and gendered stereotypes that had been upheld for years, and which considered men to be natural "leaders". This attitude seems to be embedded in general assumptions regarding what women can and cannot do, affirming Eagly et al.'s (1992) suggestion of 'a tendency for women in leadership to be evaluated negatively' (p. 5) based on their leadership style, sex distribution in leadership roles, the sex of subordinates and the organisational context (Eagly et al., 1992). This results from the different roles the two genders uphold, and the expectations of members of society (Eagly et al., 2000; Eagly, 1987). One of the concepts that Eagly's (1987) social role theory discusses is the different status of men and women in the public arena arising from their social roles. The theory proposed that men have a tendency to lead either at their workplace or in their families.

Another interesting gender stereotype emerged from the participants' descriptions of their experiences with female colleagues. The interviews revealed that many participants encounter difficulties in dealing with other women, commenting that their female colleagues did not want them to flourish as leaders, and characterising their relationships with some of them as non-cooperative. Similar to findings reported by Eagly et al. (1992), the female academics in this

study, who were given authority over men, had a more negative reaction from women than men. The participants explained that some of their female colleagues could be just as divisive and uncooperative as their male colleagues. The researcher had not predicted this finding, especially in the patriarchal context of Omani society, which identifies cultural and traditional values as informing how Omanis think and act. It was anticipated that women would prefer to be overseen by female leaders. The upholding of the existing stereotype among female faculty members that women's leadership style is not compelling (Eagly et al., 1992), however, was a challenge for the study participants, especially those in senior administration positions.

This unexpected result is 'more interesting and provocative, perhaps for themselves as perceivers or for subordinates' (Eagly et al., 1992, p. 20). The consequences of such 'persisting perceptions' in a small professional community, such as SQU, where there are few women in high leadership roles could 'trigger discrimination against women and pose barriers to their advancements' (Kyriacou-Savva, 2013, p. 140). This type of resentment does not foster the creation of strong women's networks. Drury (2010), who interviewed female chief information officers from public higher education institutions in the US to investigate their lived experiences and perceptions regarding barriers encountered by female leaders, highlights several obstacles faced by participants engaged in senior level positions. The most significant were stereotypes and biased attitudes, and comments concerning their competency as women voiced by their colleagues.

Faced with obstructive behaviour from fellow female and male colleagues, many of the female faculty members involved in the study were frequently demoralised and avoided putting themselves forward for higher leadership posts. A dominant assumption, which the researcher observed from the interviews, was that women cannot and should not be leaders as 'golden opportunities, community-wise, are more available to men than women' (Participant 12). Such assumptions persist, despite confirmation from the study data that the leadership style of female faculty members enhanced women's status and influence over other faculty members. Nevertheless, many participants also highlighted the role of evaluation as typically more favourable for men involved in leadership roles. Many people 'underestimate women's abilities' to lead (Participant 9) and the assumption appears to be that men would perform better in leadership roles.

These women's stories demonstrate two key issues acutely. First, the interviewees were aware of the effect of family traditions and associated cultural norms, and spoke about patriarchal structures and gender stereotypes as deeply rooted in Omani society (Al-Abri, 2010; Al-Bulushi, 2010). Second, female leaders claimed that their relationships with some of their male colleagues were superficial, since, although the latter openly acknowledged their leadership status, in reality they resisted following them challenging their abilities. Accordingly, many participants concluded that prevailing views regarding women's abilities discouraged them from applying for leadership posts or seeking leadership. These findings resonate with the outcomes of Moorosi's (2015) research, conducted in the South African context, which suggest that men dominate leadership roles in academia, because of the assumption, which is 'deeply rooted in the traditional division of labour, embedded within the singular construction of masculinity' (Moorosi, 2015, p. 25), that women cannot succeed in leadership roles (Moorosi, 2015).

The perceptions and practices outlined above demotivated women and negatively influenced their participation in organisational leadership. Many of the participants declared that even their female colleagues underestimated their capacity to carry out leadership roles efficiently. Therefore, with regard to peer influence in the workplace, the findings from the study showed a significant impact on the legitimacy of female leaders' power and authority associated with their leadership role. Unfortunately, the gendered role society forces upon women in Oman (that women should be in charge of their household), not only creates conflict for the women when balancing the two, but also leaves them less equipped for future career advancement, reducing their access to leadership roles. Kagoda (2015, p. 75) also argues that the 'traditional gender-based division of labour ties women down with domestic work and reproductive work', making it extremely difficult for them to access leadership positions. These findings indicate a need for a greater understanding of gender role stereotyping in the higher education environment, and its consequences on women's access to leadership roles. There is a vibrant absence of a clear understanding of the need for balance between family and working life. Such information can be beneficial to higher education institutions, enabling the creation of a healthier working environment in which both genders can pursue their careers equitably.

6.5.1   Women Academics and the Glass Ceiling

Another issue that emerged is the so-called glass ceiling (Enid et al., 2013; Al-Abri, 2010), irrespective of whether specific participants acknowledge it as present in their context or not.

It is noteworthy that, although the numerical data categorically establishes the under-representation of women within higher education institutions, the views expressed by the participants provided a contradictory picture. The majority of the participants had not recognised the gender inequality at higher education institutions or the disproportionate representation of women in leadership roles at SQU. They were surprised when presented with the statistics and the data collected between 1986 and 2013 reflecting a gender disparity among the faculty across the institution's colleges and departments. This could have been because the researcher was a formerly professional colleague, and discussing gender discrimination within the workplace could be considered a sensitive issue. The participants expressed their personal satisfaction regarding the status of women in SQU, and many spoke about the opportunities afforded to them. Furthermore, they were reluctant to depict circumstances with negative effects on them, preferring to convey their enthusiasm about different aspects of their entry into leadership roles. In fact, the majority of the participants did not sense the presence of a glass ceiling as hindering their career prospects, or any deliberate exclusions in the workplace, but they did state that they felt constrained by their gender. This is consistent with a study by Koneck (2006), which concludes that a considerable percentage of women in leading managerial roles did not consider the glass ceiling a barrier to career advancement.

It was anticipated that the study participants would recognise and discuss the presence of a glass ceiling, but none alluded to this phenomenon (Al-Shanfari, 2011; Al-Lamky, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002). In examining the responses of participants, there was a clear consensus among several of them, that they did not perceive the glass ceiling because the Omani government offers leading posts to women. Omani women today occupy positions in the upper professional echelons, including ministerial and ambassadorial posts. Many of these leading women once worked as academics in higher education institutions. The government allows women access to leadership roles in the public sector, if they possess a doctoral degree and have experience of working in higher education institutions (Al-Lamky, 2007). The literature review further suggested that 'individuals who lead institutions of higher education in the 21st century hold one of the most important roles in shaping the future of societies' (Teague & Bobby, 2014, p. 59). This, however, was not the case with senior academic females at SQU, as they appear to have had few opportunities to advance up the administrative and academic ladder within the university.

These findings seem to resonate with those of Hough (2010), who suggests that the explanations behind women's inability to break through the glass ceiling or even recognise its presence can be identified within cultural and societal factors, family issues and gender discrimination (Mason, 2009 cited in Hough, 2010). The discrimination and gender stereotyping documented in Hough's study were common complaints expressed by female directors, which prompted a consensus that the prospects for leaders were overwhelmed by male-centric attributes (Hough, 2010). Indeed, many of the participants who responded to the present study also confirmed the existence of cultural and societal barriers. Furthermore, some studies, which correspond with the findings of the present study, have concluded that it is not a matter of choice that women remained in middle management positions, but because of unspoken barriers surrounding their personal and professional lives. Nevertheless, these women found ways to fulfil their career aspirations in spite of those barriers.

6.6   Cultural and Belief Systems

6.6.1   Culture

The research participants originated from different regions of Oman, and this diversity provided richness to the analysis, due to their varying experiences and perceptions of gender equity. From a research perspective, it was interesting to examine the degree to which regional culture influenced women's personal and professional experiences. In the present study, a number of negative outcomes have been associated with culture, at the personal and organisational level. The participants highlighted the socio-cultural expectations of women as an overarching factor informing members of Omani society. As stated by participant 12, 'our lives are influenced by our traditions to a great extent'. They admitted with disappointment that their freedom to access and function in leadership roles was constrained by the socio-cultural expectations that 'a women's place is in the home' (Participant 11). They also stated that their extended community regularly endeavoured to guide them towards attainment of roles that would be seen as socially fitting for members of their gender. These findings resonate with research by Shah & Shah (2012) and Omair (2011, 2008). Shah & Shah (2012) stated that 'women's participation in the public [sphere] and their access to senior leadership positions is defined by cultural and belief systems in a society' (p. 33). Omair (2011) further demonstrates that the 'progress of Arab women is complicated by the fact that the woman is subject to a number of coded and unwritten social mores in a patriarchal, male-dominated society' (p. 19).

Similarly, Omair (2008) claims that something all studies to date 'agree upon is the influence of Arab cultural and societal norms on women's career advancement' (p. 119). Nowadays, the constraints placed on women accessing the labour force are not inexorably identified with economic cost (particularly in Oman), but instead arise from the desires, attitudes and predispositions of communities and families (Al-Abri, 2010). It is social norms, as well as cultural beliefs (often presented as *religious* beliefs), which limit women's advancement in the Islamic world in general (Shah et al., 2012), and the Arab world in particular (Al Doubi, 2014; Omair, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007). For instance, Omair (2008, p. 119) asserts that 'Arab societies are still regarded as highly patriarchal with clear gendered-roles differences'.

Despite the previously explained significant advancements in the country's socio-cultural structure since the 1970s, the participants' attitudes recall Al-Bulushi's (2010, p. 253) assertion that 'this is thus not simply related to an upbringing that stresses [Omani] women's primary domesticity, but rather to a desire to avoid a cultural paradox in which the woman finds herself trapped'. This finding is echoed by Al-Shanfari (2011), who shows that social pressure and gender role expectations greatly affect Omani women's educational choices. This is consistent with the findings reported here, regarding faculty members' educational and career trajectories. In conjunction with many female educators in higher education, participants in this study have found themselves unable to advance to higher leadership posts due to the cultural norms of Omani society being detrimental to their vocational advancement. In many countries worldwide the situation is similar. As stated by Lyman et al. (2012):

> Cultural expectations reinforce the belief that women with a career are still responsible for domestic duties and bringing up children. Balancing these expectations can be challenging to sustain. (p. 29)

Shah & Shah (2012) studied a group of female Heads of Colleges in Pakistan, and focused on why and how women made decisions balancing familial roles and professional development. Findings illustrate that women are affected by traditional values and cultural expectations, defined in relation to the belief systems in what is a 'Muslim feudal patriarchal society' (p. 34). The study aimed at understanding the desultory flow in that societal context, showing how complex factors interrelate to establish what is culturally acceptable (ibid., p. 33), an aim that corresponds with those of the present study. Herein, the conflicts mentioned arose from traditional values and the cultural norms attached to expectations about a woman's role in a

Muslim society. Since Shah & Shah's (2012) study seeks to understand the "implications" and conflicts women face in their role as college heads in Pakistan, this offers insights into the present research findings. It was found that many participants were equally concerned that family traditions and social customs often thwarted their goals rather than encouraged them. Similar to the participants in Shah's (2012) study, the majority of the participants in the present study (originating from the Omani hinterland) felt that male domination eclipsed and downgraded women's commitment. They identified social and traditional values as crucial factors affecting how they think and behave as pioneers.

6.6.2   The Concept of *Sharf*

Another important finding from this study concerns the effect of the concept of *Sharf* (honour) on women's professional lives. It is, as stated by Shah (2009), 'a notion defined through actions and activities' that emerged from socio-cultural discourses 'to centralise power to maintain control' (p. 366). On the subject of female educational leadership in a Muslim context, Shah (2016) uses the term *Izzat* (honour) to portray the significant role played by honour in deciding the roles and practices engaged in by female leaders in Pakistan. The concept of *Sharf* discussed in the present study shares some similarities with the concept of *Izzat* discussed in Shah's (2009) work. Shah (2016) uses the notion of *Izzat* to illustrate how women in Pakistan, based on social norms, accept male (head of the family) domination in all aspects of their lives: personal, financial and professional. The female leaders in the present study raise this expected notion as a concern. Some of the participants, especially those from Oman's rural regions, had navigated similar social pressures arising from expectations that 'women should be less exposed and voiceless' (Participant 10). Some were highly critical of the social structures defined by tribal membership, and dominated by men, claiming that these limited their career progression and their opportunities to develop skills. Participant 7 perceived that 'we always wonder whether our action or task will be accepted by people in our community'. The findings further highlighted the 'powerful concept' (Shah, 2016, p. 92) of family honour and dignity referred to in Arabic as *Sharf*, or as *Izzat* in Shah's (2016, 2012, 2009) work.

Moreover, several participants in the present study additionally described ignorance among the community regarding women's rights and uncritical acceptance of men's rights over women, which had affected them personally, and other women they have known, throughout

their lives. For example, many people suggest men have the right to dominate women in their everyday lives and at work. As one participant commented in the present study, women are 'controlled by many restrictions, such as the belief that men should lead' (Participant 10). Research findings by Al-Shanfari (2011) corroborate this assertion, with Al-Shanfari characterising women in the rural regions of Oman as 'vulnerable and major life decisions are still mainly in the hands of the family's males' (p. 124). For some participants, as well as other female family members, joining the labour force has been a challenge to traditional gender roles within and outside households. Nevertheless, many are always conscious of family honour, *Sharf*, when communicating with their male peers in their workplace. A small number of participants elaborated further, explaining that the cultural norm of *Sharf* limits the scale of their involvement and exposure within the academic world, and several feel restricted by this concept. The majority of the participants, however, highlighted that although the concept has restricted their networking and mobility, they have successfully planned ahead in pursuit of their personal and professional goals. They were able to navigate and strike a balance between work obligations and the traditions and customs they uphold, by making 'peace with everyone' (Participant 10).

The findings highlight how women have empowered themselves through steps such as looking for educational opportunities abroad, educating themselves regarding their jobs, and focusing on finding positive support whether from their families or at work. The findings of the present study, in relation to the barriers and challenges female Omani academics in leadership roles encounter, can be compared with results obtained from previous studies of female leaders in higher educational settings, which are being carried out in different cultural contexts worldwide. These indicate that there is a relationship between cultural norms and women in leadership posts in the Islamic world and in other societies also; however, the nature and degree of this relationship varies relative to specific leadership style(s) and the particular context (Shah, 2012).

An interesting finding in the Omani context is that many women living in the capital, Muscat, have long been involved in leadership roles in all sectors, because of the economic growth (the rise in oil income), which opened many doors for both genders. Away from the capital, however, and especially in the interior and southern parts of the country, women according to several participants (Participants 3, 7 and 11) are still restricted to taking gender-specific jobs (such as teaching and nursing), and excluded from leadership roles by customs and family

traditions. Bucklin (2014) has noted that women tend 'to choose professions that align with their perceived natural qualities of being nurturing and being concerned with relationships' (p. 170). According to a recent report by the Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, many Omani women in cities outside the capital, 'once married, […] may be prevented from working at all' (2010, p. 11); as stated by Participant 9, 'it's part of our tradition and customs [in the interior] that a woman's place is in the home'. Kemp & Madsen (2014) also confirm that 'the ability of women to participate in the employment market depend[ing] on where they live' is unique to Oman (p. 793). This research further points to the influence of family customs and traditional beliefs on the education and future of women in Oman, especially in inner areas of the country, as linked to the regional customs that predominate (in tribal areas) (Omair, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010). In this context, the models and theories pertaining to Western countries may not hold.

6.6.3   Religion

The findings revealed that, contrary to expectations and assertions in previous studies (Shah, 2015, 2010, 2009; Al-Doubi, 2014; Constantine et al., 2006; Fox, 2003; Ondeck, 2002), the participants did not believe that religion was an oppressive or even a significant factor preventing them from attaining leadership roles at higher education institutions. Most participants felt that the status of women's leadership largely 'falls under tradition' (Participant 9), rather than religion. In order to explain their views, the participants narrated verses from the Holy Quran and referred to the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) acknowledgement of women's right to seek knowledge and education in the same way as men, emphasising that 'the seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim' (The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) – Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 74, cited in Al-Geyoushi, 1970).

Several scholars have claimed that religion plays a key role in determining the place and status of women in the Muslim/Arab world (Shah, 2015; Al-Doubi, 2014; Constantine et al., 2006; Shah, 2009; Fox, 2003; Ondeck, 2002), and further, that it has the potential to influence women's work trajectories and life outcomes (Fox, 2003; Ondeck, 2002). For example, Shah (2015) found that all her participants 'recognized constraints placed by religious and cultural practices' (p. 169), which limit their exercise of power as leaders.

The findings of this study suggest that religion was reflected in the context of all Omanis' daily activities and lives, but that it did not appear to prevent Omani women's career progression within academia. This view appears to resonate with Mujtaba et al.'s (2010) findings:

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While Oman is an Islamic country, women do work in various industries and at times hold professional and management positions and this is perhaps why the country of Oman has a higher leniency toward a feminine culture, which is focused on caring relationships. (p. 186)

Undoubtedly, Omani females' lives are driven by a raft of complex factors stemming from cultural norms and social realities, which delineate boundaries and set restrictions on women's progression towards leadership roles. In this context, no evidence suggested that religion might have curbed opportunities for female faculty members. Here, it is important to note that some inconsistency may arise from the fact that the Omani population comprises people of different languages and ethnicities: 'Omani society is not only multi-ethnic, it is also multi-religious' (Al-Saadi, 2008, p. 12). In other words, in a multi-cultural society such as Oman, which seeks to accommodate people from different ethnic groups and religions, the goal is not to reinforce Islamic beliefs and philosophies, but rather to accept the diversity of the community in all forms.

In support of the aforementioned point, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, ruler of Oman, stated in a personal interview:

Islam provides for *ijtihad*, for everything being reviewed and interpreted in the time and context of the moment. Those who argue differently are using Islam for their own political reasons. There should be no discrimination against working women. The problem now is that more and more women want jobs. So men are feeling the heat. They're competing with us! I say, why not? We have senior women in government. I hope we'll have some more senior women in government soon. We're making progress, but quietly. Slowly. (Quoted in Miller, 1997, p. 1)

This view supports the idea proposed by one of the participants (8) to explain how some people define religion according to their own individual interests and personal agendas. Participant 8 stated that some men refer to the expectation that women should be followers when interacting with females in the workplace, based on an interpretation of Holy Verses from the Quran:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means. (The Quran 4:034)

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Some religious teachers explain the above verse, as stated by Al-Hamid, (1978, p. 49 cited in El Saadawi, 1982, p. 201) as follows: 'men are in a position of responsibility with regard to women because of the qualities and specific characteristics which *Allah* [God] has given them and through which he has differentiated them from women'. Islamic scripture, however, akin to most religious content and teachings, contains ambiguities that might result in diverse interpretations and judgements (Roded, 1999, cited in Omair, 2011). Consequently, the perception (of men as superior) is used to prioritise men, in order to preserve their power and authority over the women in their lives, whether work colleagues or family members (Participant 8). The findings of this study suggest that women are expected to hold subordinate positions; hence, a conflict emerges when men are called upon to accept and work under women in senior roles (Adusah-Karikari, 2008). As stated by Shah (2009), '[i]n a patriarchal tradition, men find it hard to accept women in positions of authority even in a professional context' (p. 14).

The study found that some female faculty members uphold the same interpretation of the above Holy verses, as patriarchal traditions permeate Omani society and culture, especially in rural regions where women are expected to be wives, mothers and caregivers (Al-Abri, 2010). A few participants in this study suggested that their professional aspirations were affected by these beliefs, and that in some way tradition 'is haunting our lives and career progression', as stated by Participant 12. A similar view was expressed by Shah & Shah (2012), who allege that religious interpretations 'have been male dominated' (p. 35). They also contend that 'female de-powering by the male-dominated socio-eco-political discourses and traditions acquired social validation through given interpretations of religious texts' (Shah & Shah, 2012, p. 36), consequently affecting women's performance in the public sphere. Many study participants appeared to accept these norms, aligning with these assertions.

In the context of the present study, it is essential to distinguish between religious beliefs and socio-cultural norms, because each represents a distinct yet important dimension in the participants' lives. The study findings highlight the role of cultural/traditional norms in determining the participants' career choices and 'guide most of [their] acts' as stated by Participant 7. It is interesting that culture, more often than religion, seemed to be a dominant factor in the personal and career progression of many of the participants in the present study. It is important to note, however, that a small number of the participants indicated that neither culture nor religion affected their career paths. Despite the increasing number of studies focusing on cultural and religious issues and their effect on the lives of Muslim women,

insufficient information is available regarding how these factors (culture and religion) relate directly to the vocational and academic domains. Therefore, the present study highlights a knowledge gap in the existing literature, pertaining to the effect of religion in educational leadership and practice in the higher education system in the Arab Gulf region in general, and Oman in particular.

6.7   Gender Equality and Higher Education in Oman

Organisational policies and practices are regarded as significant elements empowering women. Recent years have witnessed a growth in national policies in Oman, supporting 'improvement in the levels of women's participation in the labour market' (Ministry of Development, 1996, p. 191). Nevertheless, their implementation in the higher education sector has been limited. The data points to institutional deterrents, as contributing to the unbalanced representation of women in higher leadership posts at SQU since 1986, as detailed in Chapter Two. Due to the absence of 'clear institutional mandates' and organisational measures, as noted by Participant 10, women receive fewer opportunities for growth and success. According to Powell (1988, p. 98), 'the decisions made by individuals and organizations cumulatively affect the representation of the sexes in managerial positions'.

Studies indicate that, in statistical terms, there are fewer female academic deans and heads of departments than males in higher education institutions worldwide (Madsen & Longman, 2014; Rabas, 2013; Dominici et al., 2009). Based on statistical data collected from the Ministry of Higher Education, this finding resonates with the present study, which confirms that female faculty members lag behind their male colleagues in taking up leadership positions at SQU (see Table 3.3). Although women have successfully entered the workforce and proven their professional qualities and potential, men are still favoured when assigning leadership roles (Nguyen, 2012). Additionally, the lack of visibility of women in the top stratum of the university (see Figure 3.4) means that women have minimal input in overall decision-making about the administration and policy issues governing their institution. Moreover, women are less likely to become vice chancellors, deputy vice chancellors or deans, than their male peers at SQU, as 'a result of the lack of women's voices at the highest levels of leadership – administrative, faculty, and board leadership' (Madsen & Longman, 2014, p. x). As Scanlon (1997) states, the situation for women involves 'less representation, less power, less prestige' (p. 40). Participant 13 advocated that women 'should have equal and fair chances as men do'.

A significant element to surface during the interviews was the importance of institutional support, which was regarded as empowering women to adopt leadership roles. Johnsrud & Des Jarlais (1994) listed barriers that female faculty members encounter when taking on leadership posts in a university setting. Some resonate with the current study, including structural discrimination (i.e. leave policy, job disruption), workload imbalance (i.e. number of working hours) and occupational pressures. The authors claim that women often encounter a more antagonistic work atmosphere than men do and, thus, witness auxiliary and individual discrimination at work (Johnsrud & Des Jarlais, 1994). Moreover, Rabas (2013) claims that female academics are frequently obstructed when seeking advancement, which leads to a cycle 'in which women tend to be reluctant to apply for senior positions' (p. 28). Many of the participants in the current study conceded that at the institutional level they received no backing or support from their colleges and departments, even though access to support should be mandatory for those engaged in higher education administration.

An additional interesting finding to emerge during conversations with the research participants was a lack of awareness among female academics of their status (as women representatives) within the organisational hierarchy. Although many cited gender conflicts that posed a challenge to their leadership positions, they had never considered women's access to higher posts to be a problem at SQU. Many stated that they believed lack of further advancement related to personal factors, concerning themselves as individuals, and not as an institutional phenomenon that was of relevance to others as well. This could be attributed to the way women in Omani culture are encouraged to perceive themselves. As mentioned in an earlier study by Al-Lamky (2007), many women are unaware of their legal rights and unquestionably accept the socio-political pressures and marginalisation imposed on them. There is a silent acceptance of their situations; indeed, some of the participants at the start of the interviews even suggested that organisational rules and policies addressing women's rights were neither essential nor required because women enjoyed equality. After talking about these issues and sharing their experiences, however, many reconsidered, based on their deeper insight and critical understanding.

Highlighting the issue of the under-representation of women in leadership positions provided an opportunity for more critical engagement with the challenges posed, offering a clearer understanding of the relevant issues and barriers. The responses of the participants expose the challenges the female faculty members face, attributing them to the absence of clear organisational policies formulating roles and practices focusing on women's needs. The

experiences shared by these women confirm what many other female academics acknowledge widely in international literature, and emphasise the need to address issues related to institutional support, and highlight the absence of a support structure that could encourage more women to apply for and assume leadership roles.

A further area of significant conflict for female leaders in higher education, which arose during the interviews, related to the lack of clear policies, formal systems and management plans aimed at preparing, implementing and monitoring career strategies for women (Rabas, 2013). As the interviews progressed and more facts were revealed about the status of female academics at SQU, the participants acknowledged the absence of a clear mechanism for establishing a process of appointments to senior administrative jobs. The present study suggests that for some participants, SQU does not provide sufficient levels of ongoing support and credit for their achievements at work. Furthermore, despite some gains, there is a lack of equality in terms of job opportunities and equal access for both women and men. The participants expressed dissatisfaction with the university system of appointments and expressly demanded change. Participant 9 recommended that some jobs should be advertised by the university as for 'females only, as we do have jobs for men only' (the researcher has found examples of job advertisements and several emails circulated by the Human Resources Department at SQU stating posts were for 'males only'). Participant 9 expressly stated that women were undervalued within the academic hierarchy, and that they should be given opportunities to demonstrate their abilities to 'lead and be effective as leading members of society' (Participant 9). This is in line with Percupchick (2011, p. 84), who confirms that 'women should receive the same assessment and selection process as their male counterparts' to ensure their progression in the workplace.

Similar arguments are made by Al-Lamki (1999) who observes that one of the barriers Omani female managers face to ensuring the recruitment of women to management positions is the absence of policies and legislation to support the active recruitment of women. Statistics reveal that female faculty members are less likely than their male peers to receive job offers at SQU, as people in the upper echelons of the hierarchy 'who [we]re planning at the "backstage" prefer 'to focus only on one gender' (Participant 6). Some of the participants suggested that there should be an organisational plan mandated for higher education institutions to guarantee gender equality in leadership roles. These recommendations resonate with research by Belwal & Belwal (2014), who suggest that employers should display a copy of the guidelines and rules concerning women, and implement "Family-Friendly Policies" in the workplace. This would

thereby expand the 'sense of entitlement' (Lewis, 1997, p. 15) for equality among the workforce.

Some researchers, including Drury (2010), have argued that 'the movement of people into different administrative positions within colleges and universities reflects organizational decision-making patterns related to not only meeting staffing needs, but also affirmative action and equal employment opportunity goals' (p. 70). Several participants, however, have since introduced concerns regarding the practical implementation of equality rules within their organisation. Monroe et al. (2008) also claim that discrimination against female academics within universities arises from within the organisations themselves. In interviews, the participants in this study suggested that their organisation's commitment to them was insignificant and largely motivated by legal expectations, rather than genuine concerns about improving their status. A plausible explanation for certain practices might be, as stated by Al-Shanfari (2011), that the traditional perception of the man 'as the breadwinner influences Omani higher education policies and leads to the legitimization of gender discrimination in this domain' (p. 134). The participants urged leading authorities at SQU to expand the number of female faculty members in leadership roles actively throughout the institution. The available literature suggests that organisational structures, norms and values disadvantage women in their career advancement (Nguyen, 2012; Al-Shanfari, 2011). In this context, the findings confirm once again, as stated above, the fundamental influence of cultural norms and social realities on female faculty members' progress to leadership positions.

Although the present study confirmed that the Omani government supports women's participation in all fields, and that it has contributed to enhancing Omani females' social mobility and status, in practice many challenges remain. Female Omani faculty members at SQU appear to receive all the necessary government support at policy level to prepare themselves for their leadership roles. It is within the purview of senior university leaders, however, to implement a focused and well-structured plan to develop and acknowledge a potential candidate's personal, social and professional attributes; this is where barriers emerge. In Al-Balushi's words (2012, p. 5), '[t]here is the need for a proper policy to ensure the recruitment of suitable leaders to run these establishments in order to respond to the dynamic changes within the society'. Dencker (2008) also emphasises that organisational personnel practices ultimately determine the opportunities for the promotion of women into leadership roles. Female faculty members need to be encouraged to participate in an organisation's upper echelons to comprehend 'how they will perform in such a place' (Participant 4). Participant 4

elucidated the crucial need 'to raise people's awareness about women's abilities to lead and be effective as leading members of society'. Lahtinen & Wilson (1994) push this issue further, by stating that '[l]egislation cannot by itself change the embedded power structure of organizations in which women are in a subordinate position. What we really need is a fundamental change in attitude towards women and employment'. The findings from this research suggest that female faculty members at SQU are being deprived of their right to lead, resulting in a gender imbalance and female leaders being in the minority. It is clear that policies for the recruitment, retention and promotion of women in higher education institutions need to be revisited.

Hussain & Albarwani (2015) interestingly observe that SQU's 'strategic decisions are made at this level of university leadership [the Vice Chancellor and his four senior management team members]', where women had no representative in them for years (p. 153). Women's absence from the highest levels of leadership, as articulated earlier in this chapter, means that fundamental strategic decisions made at the university often ignore women and women issues. The literature concerning women's experiences at higher education institutes portrays a culture dominated by masculine customs and stereotyped notions of leadership (Shah, 2009), which in one way or another limit women's contribution in this domain. Nevertheless, the findings from the interviews revealed a sense of satisfaction amongst women in their accomplishments, and for occupying a distinguished place within the university hierarchy. They recognised that hard work is required of them, but that it is exceptionally rewarding. They claimed to have been forewarned that there would be sacrifices required, and that, as women, they would be expected (based on cultural norms and social expectations) to be positive role models.

The data revealed that despite the setbacks some of the women had encountered while navigating the higher education system, the majority have excelled in their academic careers, because of their personal aptitudes and fortitude. The findings demonstrated how these women confidently adjusted to the challenges and barriers that confronted them. This reinforces an earlier study by Gray (1994), which suggests several requirements in order to engage fully with the academic world: 'to accept the rules and procedures; to resist these or to engage in constant personal and professional negotiation, making some compromises along the way' (p. 57). This statement resonates with the assertions made by participants in this study. Some women had chosen to accept and respond to the system as it was, but others had fought their way up the career ladder. Considering the experiences women have had, they were able to suggest several

pointers when asked what advice they would give to others who might choose to follow their example. These are discussed below.

6.8   Promoting a Women-Friendly Environment in Higher Education

In advancing their careers and overcoming barriers, the research participants offered different suggestions to facilitate women's access to leadership roles. The elements they considered as important in enhancing their capability to lead included: setting priorities, remaining focused, mentoring and networking. Although the participants believed in prioritising work needs and that a leader's personal development is 'ongoing' (McDermott et al., 2011, p. 358), they further admitted that a leader's development is only one aspect of leadership (McCauley & van Velsor, 1998, cited in McDermott et al., 2011). How personal development is accomplished also varies according to an individual's personal style, and the pressures of the cultural and authoritative context (McDermott et al., 2011). McElwee & Al-Riyami (2003) argue that Omani women are a disadvantaged group, due to the lack of networks and fora in Oman for women to come together and share their experiences. They highlight how establishing such networks is crucial and how it could encourage Omani women and other women in the region.

From the participants' perspective, leadership development programmes, supported by teamwork, networking and mentoring can positively affect an individual leader's development and performance. Growing evidence from the literature asserts the importance of taking advantage of job opportunities and training when advancing into leadership positions (Eddy et al., 2015; Sandberg, 2013; Al-Abri, 2010). McDermott et al. (2011) argue that greater attention should be directed towards how individual leaders can be effectively supported to address the personal and organisational challenges they encounter in the workplace. For example, Eddy et al. (2015, p. 11) assert that 'individual women can increase their agency and build their own leadership strengths by taking advantage of development opportunities'. They also argue, however, that focusing on an individual's own personal advancement would not resolve the frustration or obstacles women face, and emphasise the relevance of how far institutions manipulate 'opportunities to take advantage of the strengths of all its workforce' (Eddy et al., 2015, p. 11).

The powers of modernisation, improvement and nationalisation in Oman have consolidated the promotion of talented Omanis capable of, and willing to, work in a wide range of jobs at all

economic levels. Al-Riyamy (2010), however, argues that increased attention should be directed towards women's education and training opportunities, as these 'can be further enhanced with more qualitative influence on decision-making' (Al-Riyamy, 2010, p. 21). Al-Lamki (1999) additionally observes:

> There is an unspoken "silent" policy of discrimination against women [in Oman] at work, the presence of a "glass ceiling" preventing women's accessibility to top positions in management, the absence of a professional women's network, the lack of professional management training programs for women, and the lack of affirmative action to promote and ensure women's presentation in the labour force as well as in management positions. (p. 4)

This is reflected in the widespread recommendations for continuous investment in leadership development programmes and training found in the academic literature (Eddy et al., 2015; Al-Shanfari, 2011; McDermott et al., 2011; Eagly et al., 2000). Kotter (1990) suggests to leaders to expose themselves to a diverse range of development opportunities, to enhance, refine and cultivate their leadership competencies. The common objective underpinning any such intervention is the creation of methods and practices to assist women in academia to challenge the notion that leadership roles are exclusively for men, and that they, as women, are unable to meet their demands. According to the women in this study, it is possible to develop leaders (McDermott et al., 2011), and this is the message they want to convey to newcomers.

At the organisational level, the findings suggest that the higher education institutions should offer appropriate training and development programmes, in order to reduce any uncertainty and anxiety among female faculty members when accessing management posts. The majority of the participants argued that such training would benefit them, and also contribute to the development of future candidates' leadership approaches and aspirations. The research data also suggested that both genders having the proper training would 'show both that being a leader does not fall under gender, but the best should get it' (Participant 3). Following a recent report presenting both the postgraduate and research achievements at SQU during 2013, there has been a noticeable proliferation of postgraduate programmes, particularly doctoral programmes, through state-of-the-art facilities, scholarships and bench fees. All the training offered, however, focuses on academic programmes ignoring the value of enhancing the faculty's administrative and leadership skills. Such opportunities are vital. As Teague & Bobby

(2014) claim, 'leadership development programs dedicated to the advancement of women are more essential than ever to meet the complex challenges facing today's higher education leaders' (p. 74).

The current challenge, in view of the above, is to find appropriate leadership development programmes to both enhance opportunities for leadership development and empower women wishing to take on leadership roles. To this effect, Madsen (2011) posits:

> Leadership development programs and other interventions for women on university and college campuses continue to fulfil a critical function through teaching women how to prepare for, attain, and maintain positions of influence within their institutions. (p. 135)

The participants interviewed for this study acknowledged that leadership development programmes assist women by developing their personal traits and confidence to seek leadership posts. Al-Balushi (2012) observes that '[o]ne of the major challenges facing the decision makers in higher education in Oman is the effectiveness of the leadership of colleges and universities' (p. 5). Interestingly, the majority of the research participants had no leadership training before obtaining their posts, and admitted that they initially struggled to pursue what were in many cases unforeseen career paths. Participant 12 ascribed her own development and achievements to her personal efforts, stating: 'I tried to educate myself'; her self-developed skills earned her a reputation for efficiency. Undeniably, access to proper training and development programmes can help women 'cope with the challenges that they will face […] besides familiarizing them with the kind of duties they will handle' (Participant 11). Access to such leadership development programmes would be invaluable for 'creating effective leadership development opportunities for women' and would help them advance in their administrative and academic careers (Calizo, 2011, p. 3).

Another issue raised by the participants is the culturally prescribed assumption that men are better leaders than women, which is still rooted in the minds of men in traditional societies such as Oman. As discussed in the previous sub-section, gender-based expectations about women pervade the male-oriented belief that women 'can never lead or be a leader' (Participant 3). Coleman (2002) and Ducklin & Ozga (2007) mention the troubling behaviour and resentment that women leaders reported facing from male colleagues in the United Kingdom. The need to address the factors leading to such attitudes was stressed in both studies. In the present study, gender stereotyping has led a couple of female faculty members to step down

from or refuse senior positions. One of the participants in this study did mention an incident in which she had to step down from her post at one stage of her career. She explained how she had reached a point where she was completely immobilised in a place where she had to prove her worth as a leader 'in a role which continued to be sanctioned by the culture of the organization and by society as more appropriately filled by males' (Slick & Gupton, 1993, p. 75). The participants affirmed the suggestion that leadership development programmes would help to eradicate stereotyping and perhaps prepare women to deal with difficult situations more confidently, as well as educating men and women to 'accept each other in such posts' (Participant 2). They advised women with leadership aspirations to build their confidence and seek out authoritative roles, avoiding the tendency to doubt their own ability to lead.

The participants also emphasised the value of mentoring as an essential element in personal development and a contributor to female faculty members' effectiveness as leaders. Bynum (2015) identifies the inspirational effects of both formal and informal mentoring on women's advancement to leadership positions. Many organisations have realised the importance of mentoring over time, as the practice helps 'to attract, develop, and retain [good] employees' (Kovnatska, 2014, p. 69 cited in Bynum, 2015). Lahtinen & Wilson (1994) contend that mentoring is 'key for women to advance in their career' (p. 20). They argue how, 'through mentoring, women would have better access to power networks and could receive more promotions' (p. 20). Diehl (2014), citing Sandberg (2013) and The White House Project (2009), states that '[w]hen women in top-level leadership positions serve as role models, mentors and sponsors to young women, they can influence and inspire women of this generation and generations to come' (p. 137). Research participants here also stressed the importance of mentoring as 'an excellent step' (Participant 5). Although they had received no formal mentoring themselves, they acknowledged the importance of having a mentor sharing a similar background, with whom to exchange knowledge and information about positive and useful experiences. As a result of this absence, for some participants, it had been male colleagues (their male bosses) who had supported and encouraged them to map their routes up the hierarchy. Lahtinen & Wilson (1994) propose a similar argument when explaining that the lack of women in leadership posts resulted from a lack of access to information about organisational hierarchy. They argued that 'having a mentor significantly affects individuals' perception of power in organizations' and, therefore, it will eventually reflect positively on women and 'speed up their careers' (p. 20). There seems to be a general consensus regarding the role of

mentoring and its capacity to boost the confidence of women, enabling them to advance their careers.

The contribution of a variety of stakeholders in enhancing leadership activities, identifying potential leaders and involving them in leadership-development programmes, was another important factor emphasised by the research participants in the interviews (Eddy et al, 2015). The powerful stakeholders and leaders in higher education have the responsibility to introduce and implement changes to their institutions' policies. McDermott et al. (2011) argue that 'leadership development requires a tailored and individual-focused approach to meet the needs of the individual leader and the organizational context in which s/he is embedded as opposed to a generic "one size fits all" development model'.

6.8.1   To Lead or not to Lead?

A fascinating aspect of the question of whether or not to lead, is that regardless of being distrustful of arrangements for the advancement of female faculty members, all participants suggested that female faculty members ought to observe their individual needs if they are to progress. Achieving these needs may be either straightforward (i.e. actively seeking out leadership positions) or by implication (showing a willingness to take on a leadership role). Female leaders need to be mobilised to promote themselves and develop their ability to excel in leadership positions.

Many participants had exceptional educational and professional backgrounds, and could rightfully aspire to higher posts at SQU, such as that of Vice Chancellor. A large majority, however, did not show any interest in occupying positions at the highest level. In many cases, they had not even enthusiastically pursued their current leadership roles, but had taken them on by default. As the data collected for this study suggests, women in academia do not necessarily seek out leadership roles or perceive them as potentially fulfilling, but rather accept them from a sense of obligation. As Sandberg (2013, cited in Eddy et al, 2015) argues, women frequently are ill-prepared for such opportunities, although men with less experience tend to have fewer doubts about seeking out leadership positions, even when they do not meet the prerequisites. A possible explanation for this might be, as stated by Kyriacou-Savva (2013, p. 180), that gendered stereotypes 'are so deeply rooted in the minds of women that [they] make

them feel weak and prevent them from confronting and reacting against the lingering status quo of male domination'.

The Wall Street Journal (2011, cited in Madsen, 2012) analysed the position of women in the economy, positing that women, unlike men, 'show less interest in climbing the career ladder as their families grow' (p. 20). Additionally, women more often express a greater desire than men to 'maintain what they consider a healthy balance between work and life outside the job' ("What Women Want", 2011, p. R3). The present study also revealed that women were disinterested in moving into higher professional levels, but that this stance emanated from perceived family obligations rather than from lack of ambition. In fact, many participants attributed the under-representation of women in higher ranks or departmental headship positions to personal choice, 'as home and family is priority' (Participant 8) and sacrificing their careers is a must when forced to decide between the two (Eddy & Ward, 2015; Eliophotou-Menon, 2015; Shah, 2015; Madsen, 2012; Nguyen, 2012). Smith (2016, p. 85) states that to understand 'the continued under-representation of women in the most senior posts in education there is a need to take into consideration how women's private and domestic worlds intersect with their public and professional lives'.

The literature and findings of the present study highlight how women's desire for advancement is sparse and often contradictory (Lewis, 2012). Just four of the participants showed an interest in advancing up the career ladder to become VCs, if the post was offered to them, as they had full confidence in their leaders' capabilities. The study also found that such decisions were conscious, resulting from internal factors created by the individuals themselves (Eliophotou-Menon, 2015), and generated by external factors associated with their societies' organisational practices (discrimination and stereotyping) (Drury, 2010). As stated, some participants chose to give up leadership roles in favour of their family responsibilities in response to society's prescription that 'family obligations come first' (Participants 9). Many have the appropriate skills and qualifications, as well as ambition, but are concerned that a leadership role will distract them from their personal and social commitments.

6.9   Summary

This chapter has analysed the results obtained pertaining to female leadership, and the barriers and inequalities affecting the representation of women in senior administrative posts at an Omani higher education institution. At SQU, evidence of inequality is evident at all levels. The

perceptions of female Omani faculty members at SQU have been evaluated, as have critical factors facilitating their ability to advance and lead effectively, and the barriers to their advancement. This chapter offered answers to the questions raised elsewhere in the research. It is noteworthy that the analysis and evidence provided in the literature was unable to clarify all the findings. This, however, was later rectified by drawing on relevant work by Omani scholars. This chapter also suggested new ideas to support female Omani faculty members' development and to promote gender equality in SQU, as raised by the participants themselves. The next and final chapter will draw together the findings from the study, introducing some of the key implications relating to women's participation in management and educational leadership in the Omani context, as well as outlining further research options.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

7.1   Overview of the Study

Studies of female leaders in higher education aspiring to traditionally male-dominated positions in the Arab region in general and in the AGCC in particular are still lacking. Despite the complexities and challenges female Omani academics face, there is currently no published literature regarding the lived experiences of emerging and current female Omani faculty at Sultan Qaboos University. Moreover, the quantitative and descriptive research available in Oman tends to provide an 'overall picture or statistical analysis without really providing any kind of voice to women' (Omair, 2008, p. 119). This research addresses a serious gap in the literature and seeks to gain insight into experiences that may be unique to Omani females. It has attempted to map the current situation with respect to the presence of women in academia in Oman, the factors that enabled them to reach their current positions, and the various challenges they face in accessing and practising educational leadership.

While some progress in women's advancement to senior leadership roles has been achieved in higher education institutions in Oman, certain gendered trends remain troubling. Over the years 1986–2013, female academics have been significantly under-represented in middle and upper management positions (7%), and over-represented in low-level positions (95%) (SQU Annual Statistic Book, 2014). Women are a minority in terms of statistical visibility at the university, both as administrators and faculty. During this decade, only one woman had served as Dean, and only three as assistant deans at the university (SQU Annual Statistic Book, 2014). Indeed, female faculty at Sultan Qaboos University continue to be nominally represented in upper management positions. Such trends raise concerns about whether higher education institutions are being as supportive as they could be in elevating female academics to senior leadership roles.

A variety of studies on women in higher education in developed and developing countries were used to interpret the data and debate the under-representation of women in senior leadership roles. Many researchers, however, have argued that Arab women leadership experiences vary significantly from those in the West and other neighbouring countries (Omair, 2011; Madsen, 2010; Omair, 2008). The Gulf Arab societies in general and Omani society in particular have experienced significant changes in the last couple of decades. It has been argued that these

changes were reflected by crucial changes in Arab women's lives (Omair, 2011). It was consequently imperative to perceive how these women construct their professional identities and career growth.

Therefore, in light of the above, this exploratory study draws on 13 female Omani academics' narratives of their career progression, taking into consideration the historical, economic and socio-cultural context of Oman. There was a crucial need to highlight the importance of the individuals' voices on issues that affected them and specifically their lived experiences. The research questions generated rich data that addressed the barriers and enablers that contributed to female Omani academic career progression. Furthermore, coping strategies suggested by the participants could lead to positive change in higher education institutions to empower female leaders.

The study was guided by the following four research questions:

RQ1. What factors do female Omani academics identify as significant for their access to senior leadership positions?

RQ2. What do female Omani academics perceive as barriers to their career progression?

RQ3. According to female Omani academics, which institutional mandates and governmental policies have facilitated women's access to academic leadership positions in Omani higher education?

RQ4. How can female access to leadership and gender equity be enhanced in higher education in Oman?

The major findings of the four research questions covered themes that are related to socio-cultural practices, motherhood, religious interpretation, personal attributes, gender and leadership concepts in the work place, and lack of institutional policies to protect women's rights. All were analysed as potentially both obstructing and empowering influences. This chapter presents a summary of the main research findings, highlighting the study's contribution to the field of higher education and its limitations. Finally, it suggests implications for policy and practice, as well as offering recommendations for future research.

7.2   Main Research Outcomes

Since women's progression to senior leadership and administrative roles served as a key theme for this study, the focus was on the stories of these female Omani leaders regarding their experiences in accessing leadership positions in higher education and practising leadership. The broad goal of this study was to investigate and offer an understanding of the experiences of these female faculty members by eliciting their own voices. The voices of these women, as expressed in the interviews, underscored several themes in understanding their professional experiences. The present study presents both the facts of the current demographic realities of the participants and their thinking about how improvements can be accomplished. The participants talked about their social roles and the gender stereotypes they were expected to uphold, which influenced their access to leadership positions in higher education and their performance therein. Despite dissimilarities in academic disciplines, past employment opportunities and the years of experience in a position, the women's responses revealed shared experiences in their encounters in academic leadership. For instance, they shared similar family backgrounds with supporting families, namely a father or a spouse who was exceptionally supportive of their ability to move forward and progress professionally, and a drive to develop their leadership skills. The findings are briefly reviewed in what follows.

7.2.1   Factors Supporting Female Academics' Access to Senior Leadership Positions

The first research question (RQ1) aimed at investigating the factors that were crucial to the participants' access to leadership roles in higher education institutions. The participants shed light on their personal, individual process as leaders and their experiences and characteristics underpinning their leadership development, as well as the enabling factors that helped them to move up the academic ladder. Irrespective of their career pathways, they all revealed that there are several significant factors that are used in the leadership selection process, including educational background, skills, leadership styles and professional networks, which enhanced their status and influence over other faculty members (see Chapter 6). A noteworthy perspective shared by the participants was their leadership styles. In this, they shared their conviction on how they lead, which specifically reflected the principles of transformational leadership. Furthermore, these women prescribed attributes, skills and socio-cultural practices

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that supported their movement up the career ladder. As mentioned in the previous chapter, however, one cannot assume that they cannot adopt other styles or shift between styles as needed. Higher education institutions have been criticised in the scholarly literature for neglecting to invest in leadership aptitude (Al-Abri, 2010). This information could be utilised by policy makers and organisations to construct better job descriptions that match both genders and adopt institutional training and educational strategies that would enable future female academics to develop their leadership skills within their institution in Oman.

The main themes that arose from RQ1 were linked to the influence of upbringing and parental support on the participants' aspirations for high achievement and career progression. The findings of this study appear to resonate with previous research, suggesting that the upbringing of these women and the positive experiences they had with their family members (parental, nuclear and extended families) shaped their educational path and influenced their personal and future development (McDermott et al., 2011; Shah, 2008; Al-Lamky, 2007; Fels, 2004; Rhode, 2003). Drawing from the women's narratives, it appears that the role of the participants' families (especially male members) was pivotal in raising their confidence and providing support at different stages of their lives, starting from their education and leading to their career choices. It is important to take into account that family may not be a barrier (as stated by past research), particularly when it comes to collective societies, where the concept of family (including extended families) is strong and where domestic responsibilities and looking after the children are shared among all. The findings, therefore, are consistent with the literature reviewed in confirming that women who belong to family-oriented cultures are more likely to get support from their parental and extended family in their economic and career advancement (Omair, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007). An interesting conclusion that can be drawn from this, is that the way these women were raised and the stability provided by their family were catalytic for their strong characters and fortitude to succeed in their institutions and move forward in their careers.

In many cases as in the present study, the participants' husbands were also the driving force behind their successful progress. They valued their career accomplishments and were willing by all means to make the necessary adjustments as needed. This is contrary to the majority of existing Western literature, which suggests that having a family with children is a barrier to women's career progression. In many cases, women prefer to stay single if they decide to move forward to leadership roles (Smith, 2015; Eddy, 2009; Metz, 2005). This research study,

however, challenges this assumption, unveiling that women's families (parental, nuclear and extended) in family-oriented cultures, play a crucial role in constructing their personal identity, providing practical support, helping with child care and encouraging them to move forward in their career in a patriarchal working environment.

7.2.2 Barriers Inhibiting Female Academics' Progression Towards Leadership Roles

The second research question (RQ2) aimed at providing insights into female Omani academic leaders' experiences of barriers and challenges in higher education institutions during their advance towards and access to leadership positions. Based on the study findings, the barriers that the participants encountered in their career could be divided into two types. The first identified with gender-stereotypical barriers, which in one way or another prevent women from moving forward in their careers. The other type comprises their family obligations, which affect their work.

What surprised the researcher was an interesting shift that happened during the interviews. The views expressed by the participants at the beginning provided a contradictory picture of the role gender played in their academic experiences. The majority denied at first the existence of discrimination and attitudinal prejudices at their workplace. The gender disparity, however, was reflected in the data provided by the researcher, and this opened the door for more stories from the participants. Some shared interesting facts about the challenges and obstacles women encountered in higher education institutions. The study findings highlighted several internal and external barriers that influenced women's advancement to leadership posts. Many participants cited cultural backgrounds, as well as social norms among the major causes of gender inequality and the disproportionate representation of women in leadership roles.

The evidence from this study and from other studies (such as Shah, 2015, 2011; Al-Shanfari, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010; Yaseen, 2010; Ameen, 2001) seems to suggest that socio-cultural norms and family traditions are significant drivers and restraints to female academics' progression within their workplaces, and have a substantial influence on their career progression. The literature review revealed that in the Arab world in general and in the Middle Eastern countries in particular, social and cultural forces may deter women from applying for highly visible senior leading positions. The study exposed how these women were trapped by personal obligations that were shaped by the socio-cultural and traditional norms of the society in which they lived, although they had been able to overcome many of the external factors highlighted

in the previous chapters. The study thereby concludes that Higher Education institutions should address these barriers and be committed to supporting family-friendly lifestyles. Therefore, there should be planned policies to ease the burden of balancing work and family commitments to expand female faculty's leadership opportunities.

The participants observed an additional barrier in them being devalued by their female colleagues, which often hindered their ability to assume leadership roles. The researcher did not anticipate this finding prior to the study. The study unveiled the participants' personal dissatisfaction and frustration at how they were perceived negatively by their female colleagues. This frustration was visible in their preference to work with male colleagues, which further offers insight in the resentment the participants faced from their female colleagues. What is impressive is how these women viewed each other and how they underestimated the quality and strength their female colleagues had, but these women just mirrored the reality of the community they live in. This was further confirmed by the participants' life stories, when they themselves forgot to highlight the crucial role their mothers played in their lives. This fact unfortunately shows how women themselves undervalue the other women in their lives (mothers), at a time when in one way or another the latter were the backbone of their entire life and the source of their empowerment. The responses gathered from the participants pointed out that the changes should come from women themselves. In order for women to pursue their professional ambitions, they have to believe in themselves and in the abilities of other women around them. Such perceptions and practices demotivate all women and negatively influence their confidence in the long run, while they also determine in some way practices at their workplace. This is, therefore, an indication of the extent to which the notion that males are better suited for leadership is taken for granted.

While the participants were generally satisfied with their professional success, they did reveal the struggles they had endured due to the demands academia placed on their domestic work and childcare commitments, which added a degree of complexity to the pursuit of their professional goals. In general, the findings suggest that some women experienced a continuous sense of guilt. These feelings were the result of the cultural perceptions of women's roles in their society, whereby being the daughter, the wife and the mother were her prime responsibilities. In many circumstances in this study, the women participants had to defer their own work aspirations in order to fulfil the role of carer, a finding that supports other studies linking the absence of senior female faculty members to women's personal choice to prioritise

family over career (Smith, 2016; Shah, 2015; Adusah-Karikari, 2008). Therefore, despite some gains made by women in this cohort, they highlighted points in their lives when they had turned down opportunities, postponed advancing their career or even put their career on hold because of these challenges. The examples of different levels of perseverance clearly demonstrated that these women's inner strength and their willingness and determination to succeed helped them reach their goals. Having said that, some of the participants expressed how fortunate they had been to benefit from a supportive system that equipped them with the right strategies for enduring such dual roles.

One unexpected finding in the present study pertains to the impact of religion on female faculty members' job performance and progression. Contrary to previous studies (Shah, 2015, 2010, 2009; Al-Doubi, 2014; Constantine et al., 2006; Fox, 2003; Ondeck, 2002), religion was not found to be a significant force in determining female faculty members' organisational roles and career advancements. It is interesting that culture, more often than religion, seemed to be a dominant factor in the personal and career progression of many of the participants in the present study. One plausible explanation for this unexpected finding may be based on the political, economic and administrative structure of Oman. As Mujtaba et al. (2010) report, 'the Omani culture is considered to be diverse and heterogeneous' (p. 176). All participants refuted the suggestion that religion is an element that could influence their future work events or their life outcomes.

Although all participants acknowledged that religion forms the core of their lives, they rejected the idea that Islam is the main cause of discrimination against female academics or their under-representation in leadership roles in Oman. This, as mentioned previously, distinguishes this study from previous literature. All participants confirmed that there is no association whatsoever between religion and their access to administrative positions in their institution. Generally, women in Oman, as stated in previous chapters, have participated in mixed-sex settings and institutions. Accordingly, the government provides women with a context to exercise leadership in private and public spheres. This, however, does not apply to female faculty who are willing to take key power positions in higher education institutions. According to the participants, the constraints they face are not constructed by religious norms and practices, but by other social-cultural forces linked to the country's context. It should be noted that (in particular in rural areas) the issue of equality is viewed by the average Omani citizen largely from the perspective of cultural norms rather than religious practices or the laws of the

state. The study, therefore, suggests that in order to make significant progress and accountable development, there should be awareness among decision-makers, administrators and academics of the significance of differing qualities and equality (Kellerman & Rhode, 2014). Therefore, as proposed by Kellerman & Rhode (2014), decision-makers in higher education institutions 'must act affirmatively and proactively to promote gender equality in practice as well as principle' (p. 34).

The findings also reveal that while female Omani academics negotiate their path in the existing organisational mind-set, the barriers, cultural values and social norms with respect to female participation in higher education are undergoing a rapid change.

7.2.3   Gender Equity Enhancement in Higher Education

The third research question (RQ3) sought to record the participants' personal perspectives regarding institutional mandates and government policies that have helped women to participate more in academic leadership positions in Omani higher education institutions. The study highlighted gender inequality and patriarchy in academic settings, although this was denied by the majority of the participants at the beginning of the interviews. While it is possible that the participants may have been oblivious to any types of discrimination to which they were subjected, their own encounters may not mirror the grievous examples that are highlighted by some researchers (Robinson, 2015; Sui Chu Ho, 2015; Morrison, 2012; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Lahtinen & Wilson, 1994). The data revealed that there was very little done to increase the involvement of female faculty members in higher education administration or even retain the leadership candidates available at the institution. Although the number of female faculty members and administrators with high academic qualifications has increased in higher education, the study reveals that institutions still do not fully exploit this potential. Therefore, the study suggests that having women actively involved in the top stratum of academia would give them and other female faculty more opportunities. It is evident that women will have more input into decision-making, administration or any other policy issues at their organisation, which would eventually increase female participation at all levels.

Drawing from the participants' narratives, it appears that they do not attribute their career advancement to SQU's policies in their colleges and departments. From the outcome of our investigation, it is possible to conclude that there is a clear absence of policies, formal frameworks and administration plans that could prepare women to claim leadership positions

within the organisation. This state of affairs will eventually obstruct many female Omani academics from attaining top leadership positions at their institution. This is in line with Johnsrud & Des Jarlais (1994), who affirm that there are many barriers that women encounter, such as lack of policies, workload balance and other work-related pressures, in their leadership roles in higher education institutions. In many instances in the interviews, the participants shared their concern about the whole process of staff development. The study results indicated clearly that 'commitment from the top is critical' (Kellerman & Rhode, 2014, p. 32). The lack of such development plans and programs would affect the process of career advancement. Decision-makers need to address such gaps in higher education institutions in Oman formally, in order to help female faculty members interested in moving up (Kellerman & Rhode, 2014, p. 32). Higher education institutions ought also to examine the institutional gender boundaries obstructing the professional success of female Omani academics and figure out fitting arrangements to urge females in the institutions to advance further.

7.2.4   Steps to Enhance Gender Equality in Higher Education

The fourth research question (RQ4) has provided suggestions that may inspire future female leaders, by eliciting advice from the participants on critical administrative skills, and advice for emerging and current female faculty who are thinking of pursuing leadership positions in higher education. The participants claimed that many female academics do not receive adequate training and mentoring to enhance their ability to lead. To address ways of fostering female faculty interest in leadership roles, the participants suggested different supporting program plans at different levels that higher education institutions and decision-makers could implement. The absence of leadership development programmes that could help the participants to improve, enhance and promote their leadership competencies, thus directly correlates to the disproportionate representation of women in higher education leadership positions. This finding is consistent with those of Eddy et al. (2015), Sandberg (2013), McDermott et al. (2011) and Al-Abri (2010), who conclude that in order to attract effective leaders, organisations should establish well-developed plans and formal training programmes for leadership in order to develop individuals' personal skills and equip them to face potential challenges. As established earlier, the institution under study did not offer suitable support or affirmation for female faculty. Furthermore, the study concluded that in spite of some achievements made by the study cohort, the majority had not been endorsed to the levels that one may have anticipated, taking into account their apparent potential since the opening of

SQU in 1986. As a result, the present study findings propose strategies to implement female-specific training programmes and mentorship campaigns at higher education institutions.

A significant key finding perceived by the participants at their institution was work-family conflict, since they all agreed on its significant effect on individuals and their organisations. As the literature review revealed (Smith, 2016; Coleman, 2011; Cosimini, 2011; Slan-Jersulim & Chen, 2009), there is an ongoing conflict to maintain balance between work and family roles. Similar to the results reported by Smith (2016), the study results demonstrated that such work-family conflict 'had impeded [female leaders'] career progression' (Smith, 2016, p. 91). The demands that come with leadership along with the potentially long working hours frequently conflict with family responsibilities, such as childcare, elderly care and looking after homes. Women have to "juggle" between their family life and their professional life. In order, therefore, to support female faculty against the challenges they face, there is a need for an urgent transformation of the institution's agenda. Additionally, it was identified that the university was not designed 'to correspond to timetables of motherhood' (Morley, 2014, p. 122). This emphasises the need to have institutional policies and facilities to pave the way for female faculty members, who are also mothers, and ease the pressures they encounter while helping them overcome the "unseen barriers" to leadership (Ibarra, Ely & Kolb, 2013). For example, higher education institutions should provide childcare facilities, such as nurseries and offer less demanding and more flexible working hours.

Another key finding in this study is the participants' claim that women themselves make a conscious decision about how to pursue their career. The study participants fell into two groups when discussing their personal interest in attaining a senior management position in SQU. The results show that female Omani academics are fully aware of the opportunities provided by their government in taking leadership roles in their organisations and, according to one group, it is a personal choice not to move up the career ladder. They were clearly not interested in striving for top positions at their institution. The clear message from those participants was that they could obtain the highest leading post at the university, as long as it was a good match for their professional goals and personal needs. The first group, however, revealed a reluctance to carry out the demands of a presidency and the strains this job might bring along at this point in their lives. The study demonstrated a notable lack of strong desire to even seek top positions. As the results indicated, these women may have the appropriate abilities and ambition to match,

yet they do not strive for these senior leadership roles on the grounds that it would affect their personal and social lives.

It could be argued that these women's decision not to lead or even to step down from their current leadership roles was not because of their personal commitment to their families, but of social considerations and society's expectations. Echoing previous research, the participants did not regard the Vice Chancellor position as among their future plans or personal goals (Scanlon, 1997; Johnsrud & Des Jarlais, 1994). An interesting conclusion that can be drawn from this is that many issues that are identified as barriers may actually not be, but instead might be the result of conscious personal choices made by the individuals. The explanation for this lies in socio-cultural expectations embedded in assumptions regarding female roles and responsibilities. Men, as discussed in the previous chapter, are comfortable elevating themselves to more advanced posts, whereas women do not seem to see this as crucial or necessary. This coincides with the existing literature, which suggests that women are being influenced by 'a number of coded and unwritten social mores [customs and traditional values] in a patriarchal, male dominant society' (McElwee & Al-Riyami 2003, p. 339), where males are seen as superior whether they like it or not.

With respect to policy-making, one way forward can be that institutions focus on those women who are interested in leadership roles and ensure they receive the training, support and motivation they need to fulfil their responsibilities or to advance. They would then be role models for less aspiring women. Furthermore, having more women in leadership roles may encourage and motivate others. Women need to be more supported and encouraged in order to move forward and take advantage of the opportunities given to them by their government.

7.3   Limitations to the Study

As is the case with any research, this study has its limitations. First and foremost, this study is limited to the data collected due to the non-random sample and site-specific responses. The extent to which the results will be transferable to other alternative higher education institutions cannot be determined. This study is designed to be specific in focus, time and place and, therefore, the purposeful sampling method was applied to the participants. One major problem the researcher faced was how to access potential and suitable participants. As mentioned previously, women are still under-represented in leadership positions at SQU and it was difficult to select from a relatively limited population. This explains why the sample of female

leaders selected for this study included emerging and current female faculty in different ranks and levels of leadership roles, as well as female faculty who had stepped down recently from their leading positions.

It may be argued that the results of the study would be applicable only to the participants themselves, and not to all senior female Omani academic administrators at any HE institution. It may be valid, however, to make generalisations for proximally similar senior academic administrative positions and institutions in Oman. According to Denzin & Lincoln (2000), 'the consumer shall decide if the context, setting and respondents are similar enough to allow for transferability' (p. 54). This could be assessed through a rich description of the interview data (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The goal of this research, however, is, as Kelly (2011, p. 53) puts it, 'to explore the experiences of these particular women rather than to draw conclusions regarding the overall population of females'. Hence, this study consciously intended to provide insights for female Omani academics, who sought administrative posts at SQU, about potential challenges in their career progression and suggestions for overcoming those obstacles. In this respect, the study findings are valuable for stimulating further research that could offer additional perspectives on women's career progression in academia in the region.

Another limitation of this study is the potential for researcher bias, which occurs when the researcher has personal biases and *a priori* assumptions, which may affect data collection, analysis and interpretation (Onwuegbuzie, 2002). The researcher has worked in higher education for more than twenty years, was a former Head of a Unit at SQU and, as such, had a working relationship with the majority of the academic faculty who were invited to take part in the study. Therefore, this past acquaintance with the study participants may have affected their responses. For example, the participants may have neglected to elaborate sufficiently on a certain issue because they thought that the interviewer was familiar with it, or they may have been unwilling to share information that they considered risky or too private with a former colleague in the same system. Many of the relevant aspects may be culturally sensitive, especially regarding the obstacles they faced due to their gender (even though the respondents were assured of anonymity). In order to reduce researcher bias and increase the validity of the study, care was taken to employ a number of strategies recommended by social scientists (e.g. Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Hertz, 1997), as explained in detail in the Methodology Chapter. Corbin & Strauss (2008) state that '[s]ometimes a researcher has to use common sense and not get caught up worrying about what is the right or the wrong way' (p. 327). The most crucial

aspect is 'remaining open', understanding our own views as researchers (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and empowering our participants in order to share their experiences and hear their own voices in the stories they share (Creswell, 2013).

7.4   Research Study Contributions

This study makes a valuable contribution to research and knowledge on women's participation in management and educational leadership in the Omani context, especially since no previous research has focused on the disproportionate representation of women in leadership roles at higher education institutions in Oman (Al-Shanfri, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010). In the absence of such research in the Omani context, the study addresses a serious literature gap by sharing insights of female leaders on aspects that boost or hamper female academic leadership and initiatives. The study also provides the policy-makers in higher education institutions in Oman with substantial data regarding how they can support emerging and current female faculty members in their institutions. Moreover, this research adds to the limited information available on women in higher education leadership roles in an area that has not been investigated until now and in an institution that has not been previously researched. On another level, the secondary data collected to support the study's statistics adds vital information to the literature, providing a wider overview of higher education in Oman. Furthermore, this data is supported by statistical analysis and may be of interest to scholars of the Middle-East, with particular emphasis on women in higher education institutions who aim to access leadership positions or who are in such positions already. Besides this, the data could be beneficial to policy-makers and higher education management in improving the status of women's progression to leadership roles.

The study took a social constructivist approach to examine how the participants challenged different internal and external barriers to move forward in their career. Overall, the findings of the current study support previous research findings and contributes to the theoretical debates around gender and leadership by exploring other theoretical angles for discussing women's access to and experiences of higher education leadership. It confirmed the point that family support systems were a major contributor to female members' professional evolution. It, therefore, challenges Western feminist theory that suggests that family and having children is a barrier to women's advancement to leadership positions, due to the demands that come with leadership roles, which may conflict with family responsibilities. In Western societies, the

nuclear family is now the norm so that, whereas in the past women relied on the support of their extended family, now it is down to the individual to cope with all responsibilities. In Oman, where the notion of the extended family continues strong, women are enabled to pursue careers in ways Western women are not. The present provides, thus, an alternate perspective, whereby women with families may have more opportunities for accessing leadership when they have family support within the socio-cultural system. The women in leadership posts within the Arab world in general and in the Middle East in particular often enjoy extended family network support (familial support and spousal support). Therefore, the study affirms that family can be an enabling factor.

Previous studies on women in leadership assumed that women who are single could move up the career ladder more easily than women with families could (Smith, 2015; Eddy, 2009). To the contrary, in collective societies where the concept of marriage is very strong, being married affects women's social status positively, and their chances of accessing leadership are much higher (Al-Abri, 2010). The shared view running through the interviews suggests that to be married, for a woman at the workplace, is advantageous. In many Islamic countries, being married gives women privilege over others, which can be an enabler in progressing to leadership roles. There is a sense of respect (for being a wife and a mother) and cultural prestige that is connected with marital status. In the view of those interviewed, the general understanding of the gender role of a wife/mother is 'modulated, reflecting intersections of gender, religion and culture' (Lumby, 2015, p. 35). In Muslim societies, women have to function within moral codes, particularly if they are in visible roles or positions. Existing religious and cultural moral codes in many ways have a huge impact on individuals, rendering them more qualified for visible leadership positions.

This view, however, might disadvantage those who are single. It might have an adverse effect on women's social status at the workplace, as it violates the concept of the family's *Sharf* (honour). Unfortunately, single women might be completely immobilised in a place where they have to prove themselves as suitable leaders. They cannot travel alone or stay late for meetings just because they are single. Women in many parts of the Islamic world (such as in the AGCC) are very much affected by the cultural concept of *Sharf*, which is associated with certain moral values that cannot be violated or ignored, especially in their interaction with men who are not members of their families (Samier, 2015). The present investigation has demonstrated the significant role played by tribes and tribal norms in shaping the identity of a number of the

participants and how they affect their personal beliefs, past experiences and present decisions. The existing theories regarding women accessing leadership roles, especially in the Arab world, need to acknowledge these complexities. In Western societies, such tribal moral values may not affect women's access to leadership roles or hinder their progression and, therefore, we need to recognise the limitations of Western theoretical constructs when applied to other societies, such as Oman.

In respect to the methodological contribution of this study, the researcher used multiple interview techniques (face-to-face and online synchronous), which represent a departure from the common traditional interview methods. The participants interviews (whether face-to face or online) generated rich data that shed light on their first-hand experience of the challenges they encountered, the cultural constraints they negotiated, the support systems they availed, and their personal views on the investigated phenomenon. In recent years, there have been theoretical debates among researchers on the assumption that 'online interviews can produce data as reliable and in-depth as produced during face-to-face encounters' (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014, p. 604). The primary data generated through these women's narrations offered deep insights into the complex phenomenon of gender and leadership in an Arab society which was reflected by crucial changes in Arab women's lives. The study, therefore, contributed towards the debates surrounding the efficiency of online interviewing which showed its effectiveness as a valuable research method technique to access global research participants.

7.5   Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for future research on the professional development of female faculty members. It is hoped that the data presented will prove useful to the academic faculty, researchers, and stakeholders alike. The inductive methodological approach used to investigate the lived experience of female faculty members revealed an array of factors responsible for these women's professional growth and highlighted a number of obstacles that hindered their progress. Middle Eastern literature has, to date, focussed on women's status and under representation in the business leadership and political spheres (Al-Abri, 2010; Al-Yousef 2009; Al-Lamky, 2007). However, previous researchers have not investigated the experiences of women in leadership posts in higher education institutions within the Gulf region in general and in the Omani context in particular. This study, therefore, develops a new substantial data set regarding significant factors that facilitate or hamper the

progress of emerging and current Arab female faculty. Ultimately, this information will hopefully prompt rapid change in the social and institutional attitude towards female faculty members throughout the Gulf region context (the data is relevant due to the similarities across the region in terms of social, cultural and economic backgrounds).

The current study also generates useful information for stakeholders and policymakers that can assist them in redefining policies to facilitate equal treatment of both genders at the institutional level. Issues regarding cultural norms (as an overarching factor) are emerging as obstacles to women's advancement, and so need to be looked at closely. As Hoeritz (2013) suggests, institutions should explore 'the relationship between culture and women's advancement and identify cultural conditions that promote or inhibit women as leaders' (p. 218). Higher education institutions should also strive to investigate the institutional barriers hampering the career advancement of female faculty, and formulate appropriate plans to effectively promote and encourage females in academia to seek advancement. Policymakers need to address and minimise the barriers that women encounter, especially by assisting them in navigating their family obligations. The institutions should strive to create an environment and adopt policies to reduce the pressures female faculty members experience when seeking a balance between work, life, and family commitments.

The fundamental statute of Oman declares equal rights and opportunities for all Omani citizens, and prohibits discrimination against men and women in terms of social rights, commitments, or employment in public office. With respect to SQU, there is a need to take such mandates seriously, and implement appropriate hiring and promotion policies accordingly. The university should also establish a transparent and efficient mechanism to emphasise equal recruitment across the gender divide. Harrow (1993, p. 146) noted: "leadership, when dominated by one segment of society, suffers from a narrow perspective, a lack of richness of ideas and ideals". Therefore, there should be effective policies implemented to assure the representation of women on the university council board and within the most senior ranks of the university.

7.6   Recommendations for Future Research

The majority of previous studies on leadership in the Arab world have concentrated mainly on male leaders in the political and business spheres (Al-Shanfari, 2011; Al-Abri, 2010; Yaseen 2010; Al-Lamky, 2007; Ameen, 2001). The present study focused on women leaders in one

Gulf country, but it would be interesting for a similar study to take place on a larger scale that includes other Arab neighbouring countries within the AGCC, broadening the participant base to all women working in the field of higher education. It is anticipated that such a study within the Arab region would generate more facts related to the disproportionate representation of women in higher education leadership positions in the region. The recommended comparison between the experiences of female leaders in various social and cultural contexts could provide insights and clarifications, especially for populations that were not addressed within this study, which could improve professional opportunities for females.

Another area worthy of further research is a detailed comparative study of both genders in higher education institutions in Oman. It will be interesting to replicate the present study to include a larger number of male and female faculty members who are currently in leadership roles across all higher education institutions in Oman, including private institutions, in order to gain a deeper and richer insight into how men and women experience each other's involvement in the current working environment. Studies that bring forth the experiences of both men and women would be especially fruitful. Indeed, it would be insightful to ascertain how both genders view gender issues in the workplace and whether such perceptions differ or complement each other. Besides, it would be informative to explore male leaders' viewpoints on the topic, in order to establish whether they offer any additional barriers that prevent women from professional progression. This could be an intriguing extension to this investigation.

Finally, further research may be needed to understand more fully the challenges faced by women at SQU by hearing the other (male) side of the story. Concurrently, some interesting findings in this study underscore the need for further investigation in order to understand higher education in Oman from a different perspective. The study proposes a mixed methods approach. Therefore, another recommendation in order to address and understand better the gender stereotypes embedded at the institution, would be to invite Omani male faculty members to share their perspectives when interacting with their female colleagues. Using online questionnaires that could be filled out and returned anonymously could expand the available body of knowledge on the topic. Evidently, this will enable the researcher to acquire more data from a larger group and, therefore, generalise the findings, alongside investigating the reasons of specific variance in gender. The participants could be given the choice to become involved at a later stage in one-to-one interviews to discuss the challenges faced by higher education institutions in Oman and their impact on both genders.

To conclude, this research provides rich data and compelling knowledge based on first-hand experiences that could serve as tools for decision-makers to plan a better future in a country where women comprise about 50% of the population but have very low participation in senior positions. The issues investigated have not covered all aspects related to women in leadership in higher education, but it is nevertheless hoped that this study will open up opportunities for further intensive research that would help female faculty members overcome the restraints that hinder their professional development.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

The Ethical Approval Letter for conducting the study

University of Leicester

To: **ANFAL AL WAHAIBI**

Subject: Ethical Application Ref: **aaw19-d62c**

        (Please quote this ref on all correspondence)

25/09/2014 16:45:13

School of Education

Project Title: **Challenges facing Senior Female Leaders in Tertiary Education in Oman and their Coping Strategies**

Thank you for submitting your application which has been considered.

This study has been given ethical approval, subject to any conditions quoted in the attached notes.

Any significant departure from the programme of research as outlined in the application for research ethics approval (such as changes in methodological approach, large delays in commencement of research, additional forms of data collection or major expansions in sample size) must be reported to your Departmental Research Ethics Officer.

Approval is given on the understanding that the University Research Ethics Code of Practice and other research ethics guidelines and protocols will be compiled with

- http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/committees/research-ethics/code-of-practice

- http://www.le.ac.uk/safety/

Appendix 2

Letter of Consents

Academic Females in leadership post in a Higher Education Institute

Dear Colleague:

I take this opportunity to first introduce myself. I am **Anfal Al-Wahaibi**, a doctoral student at the University of Leicester. My research focuses on the challenges senior Higher Education female academic leaders encounter in their workplace, and how they overcome them. Main tool of data collection will be interviewing. In preparing for this research, I have identified you as being among the group of women who fall into this sample. As a result, I am writing to request you to participate in this study and will appreciate your consent to be the interviewee for this study.

The purpose of my interview is to investigate the perceptions of academic female leaders in Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), in Oman, where a high percentage of senior academic and administrative posts are male dominated. The interview solicits information from female academic administrators regarding their experiences of and perceptions about their ascent to senior leadership positions. Your responses will contribute to our understanding of the current situation of female leaders at SQU.

It is estimated that the interview will take approximately 45 minutes to complete and will be recorded on audio-tape. Participation in this research is voluntary and involves no anticipated risks to you. All participants' anonymity will be ensured by using code names and every step will be taken to anonymise their institutional affiliation within my dissertation. Neither the researcher nor the university has a conflict of interest with the results. The data and the notes collected from the interviews will be kept on a password-protected personal computer. All audio-tapes and the printed materials (e.g., transcripts, notes and other handwritten materials) will be stored in a secure place and will be destroyed in three years.

I would like to thank you in advance for responding to this letter of request. Your involvement will be highly valuable for the success of this project.

If you have any further questions regarding your participation, the results, or this study in general, please feel free to contact me, or alternatively contact my supervisor at the University of Leicester.

Respectfully yours,

Anfal Al-Wahaibi

aaw19@le.ac.uk

Supervisor Details:

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I have read this informed letter and voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

Please write your name _____

Signature of approval _____

Appendix 3

Pilot Study Interview Protocol

<u>Interview Protocol</u>

Introduction: Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this interview, which will take approximately 60 minutes.

I will provide the dissertation topic and explain to the participants the confidential nature of their responses and the voluntary nature of their participation.

<u>Biographical Background</u>

1. What made you decide to pursue an academic career?
2. What obstacles/enablers did you encounter in pursuance of your educational goals?
3. How did you experience gender at these different points in your life:
   a. Education
   b. Pursuing an administrative career.
   c. Seeking an advanced administrative positions |

<u>Professional Life</u>

4. Describe your career progression. Can you tell me what your career has been like at the university?
5. How did you experience gender during your leadership career? Any examples?
6. Do you think that the academic environment is supportive/un-supportive of female leaders? Any examples?
7. What challenges have you faced in your career progression?

   Probes

8. What factors helped you achieve your current position?
   Probes

Institutional Policies

9. How does gender integration fit in with your university's strategic plan?
10. What are the provisions for initiating and supporting women's participation in decision-making and leadership training (if there are any)?

<u>Future Options</u>

11. What are your plans?
12. Do you feel you could be a Vice Chancellor or a Deputy Vice Chancellor? Do you feel you would succeed in obtaining such position if you tried?
13. Are you interested in such positions? Why /why not?
14. Why do you think women do not pursue such positions?
15. How can women's development and gender equity issues be enhanced in higher education in Oman?
16. Is there anything else that you would like to add to inform this research?

Thank you very much for participating in this interview. I will send you a full transcript of our discussion of your review and any corrections that may be required. Please be assured that I will make every effort to maintain confidentiality.

Appendix 4

Interview Protocol of My Study

[Interview Protocol of My Study/AW]

November 3, 2014

Challenges that Senior Female Leaders in Higher Education
Encounter in Tertiary Education in Oman and their Coping
Strategies

Time of interview:

Place:

Interviewee:

Biographical Background

1. Institution/college/center:
2. Position: |
3. No. of years in service:
4. Educational Qualification:
5. Tell me about yourself.

6. Can you tell about your experience growing up as a woman?

7. What made you decide to pursue an academic career?

8. What obstacles/enablers did you encounter in pursuance of your educational goals?

9. How did you experience gender at these different points in your life:
   a. Education
   b. Pursuing an administrative career.
   c. Seeking an advanced administrative positions

Professional Life

10. Describe your career progression. Can you tell me what your career has been like at the university?

11. How did you experience gender during your leadership career? Any examples?

12. Do you think that the academic environment is supportive/un-supportive of female leaders? If so, how?

13. What challenges have you faced in your career progression?

14. What factors helped you achieve your current position?

Institutional Policies

15. How does gender integration fit in with your university's strategic plan?

16. What are the provisions for initiating and supporting women's participation in decision-making and leadership training (if there are any)?
    (What support system does the university have in advancing gender issues?)

Future Options

17. What are your future plans?
18. Do you feel you could be a Vice Chancellor or a Deputy Vice Chancellor? Do you feel you would succeed in obtaining such position if you tried?
19. Are you interested in such positions? Why /why not?
20. Why do you think women do not pursue such positions?
21. How can women's development and gender equity issues be enhanced in higher education in Oman?
22. Is there anything else that you would like to add to inform this research?

Appendix 5

Interview Plan

Research Questions with Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview General Question	Probe
1. What factors do female Omani academics identify as significant for their access to senior leadership positions?	3. Studies show that growing up as a female in the Arab world is challenging. What are your thoughts and experiences growing up as a woman? 4. What made you decide to pursue an academic career? 5. What obstacles/enablers did you encounter in pursuance of your educational goals? 6. Why do you think women do not pursue leading positions? 7. What factors helped you achieve your current position? 8. What is your opinion regarding **leadership styles** and their role in women's advancement? 9. How do you think policies of the Omani government affect women's advancement?	1. Skills 2. Leadership style 3. Personal factors 4. Policies of the Omani government
2. What obstacles and challenges have female Omani academics faced in their career progression?	10. Studies have shown that women and men have historically been channeled into different occupations. Describe your career progression. Can you tell me what your career has been like at the university? 11. How did you experience gender during your leadership career? Any examples? 12. Do you think that the academic environment is supportive/un-supportive of female leaders? Any examples? 13. Historically, women who are married and/or have children have experienced barriers to advancement. Do you believe a woman's parental status is still a barrier to advancement?	5. Religion 6. Tradition/culture 7. Family 8. Marriage 9. Perception of women leaders

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3. What institutional mandates and policies of the Omani government have facilitated women's access to academic leadership positions in higher education?	14. Citizen participation in government is more prevalent than ever. Do you think that the academic environment as part of the government is supportive/un-supportive of female leaders? If so, how? 15. How does gender integration fit in with your university's strategic plan? 16. What are the provisions for initiating and supporting women's participation in decision-making and leadership training (if there are any)?	
4. How can female access to leadership and gender equity be enhanced in higher education in Oman?	17. With more women than ever enrolled and graduated from HE institutes, do you believe that will increase career advancement opportunities for women? 18. Do you feel you could be a Vice Chancellor or a Deputy Vice Chancellor? Do you feel you would succeed in obtaining such a position if you tried? 19. Are you interested in such positions? Why /why not? 20. Why do you think women don't pursue such positions? 21. How can women's development and gender equity issues be enhanced in higher education in Oman?	

Appendix 6

Consent Form to Audio Taping / Video Skyping and Transcription

The study involves the audiotaping of the interviews. Neither the name nor other identifying information about the participant will be associated with the tape(s) or with the transcript. Only the researcher will listen to the tapes. The researcher will transcribe the tapes. Interview transcripts may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written documents that result from the study; however, neither the name or any other identifying information (such as voice or picture) of the participant will be used in such presentations or documents. Further, all audiotapes and the printed materials (e.g., transcripts, notes and other handwritten materials) will be stored in a secure place and will be destroyed in three years.

Please check one of each of these pairs of options and email it back to aaw19@le.ac.uk

Taping the Interview

- o   I consent to having my interview taped
- o   I do not consent to having my interview taped

Transcription of Interview/

- o   I consent to having my taped interview transcribed into written form
- o   I do not consent to having my taped interview transcribed into written form

Use of Transcriptions

- o   I consent to the use of the written transcription of my interview in presentations and written documents resulting from the study, provided that neither my name nor other identifying information will be associated with the transcript
- o   I do not consent to the use of the written transcription of my interview in presentations or written documents resulting from the study.

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Appendix 7

NVivo Results (Word Frequency Queries)

The list of the most frequent words or concepts from the interviews

Appendix 8

Examples of the Thematic Analysis Codes in NVivo Program 10 (The **five** main nodes of the pilot study)
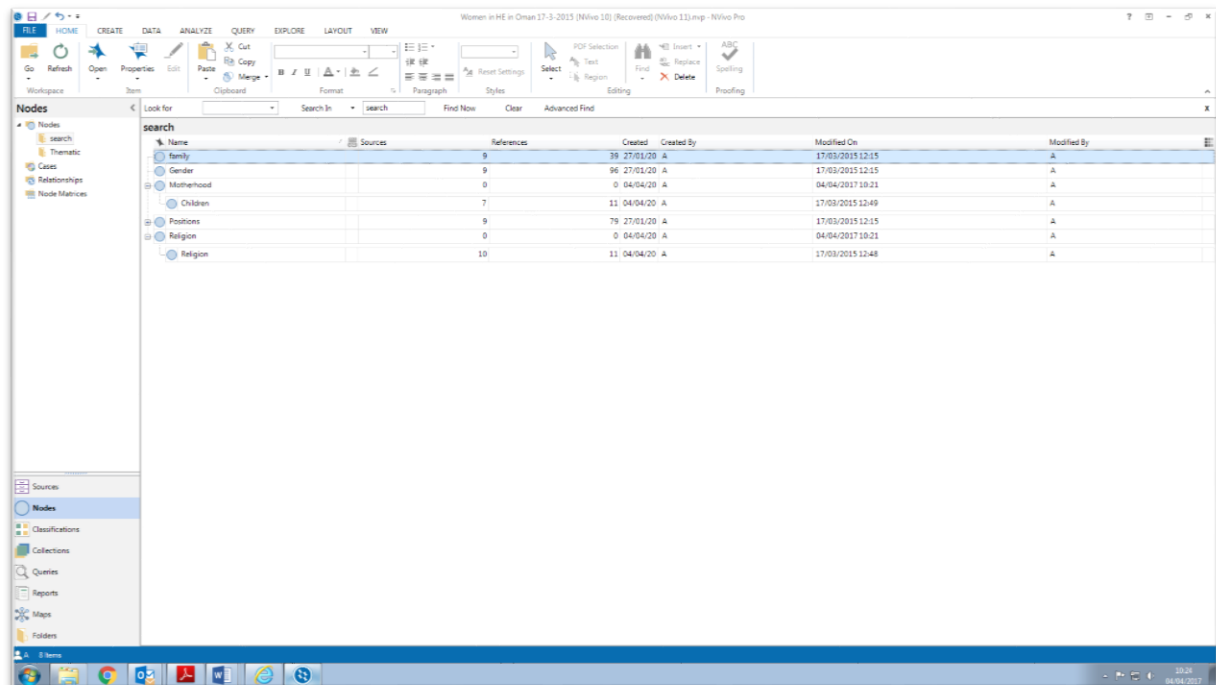
Appendix 9

Examples of the Thematic Analysis Codes in NVivo Program 10 (The main nodes of the study)

Appendix 10

Research Question Analysis of Emergent Themes and Categories

No.	Name	Position	Years of Experience	Qualification MA/PhD.	Effect of gender			Challenges in career progression					Factors to achieve position				
					Education	Admin	Adv.	Religion	Tradition	Family	Marriage	Perception	Skill	Style	Mandates	Policy	Education
1.	■	EO	10+	MA	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	√	√	-	√	√
2.	■	EO	6+	MA	×	×	√	×	×	-	√	√	√	√	-	-	√
3.	■	HoD	10+	PhD	√	×	√	×	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
4.	■	HoD	6+	PhD	√	×	×	×	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	-	√
5.	■	EO	10+	MA	×	√	√	×	√	√	√	√	√	√	-	-	√
6.	■	HoD	6+	PhD	√	√	-	×	×	×	×	×	√	√	-	-	
7.	■	Director	10+	MA	√	√	√	×	√	√	-	√	√	√	-	√	√
8.	■	HoD	6+	MA	×	√	×	√	√	√	√	√	√	-	√	-	√
9.	■	EO	10+	MA	×	√	√	×	√	√	√	√	√	√	-	-	√
10.	■	Assit. Dean	6+	PhD	√	√	√	×	×	×	×	√	√	√	Don't have	-	√
11.	■	Assit. Dean	6+	PhD	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	√	-	-	-	-

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12.	▮	HoD	10+	PhD	√	√	√	×	√	×	×	√	√	√	Don't have	√	√
13.	▮	EO	10+	MA	√	√	√	×	√	√	×	√	√	√	Don't have	-	√
14.																	

*YES = √   NO= ×   HoU= Head of Unit   HoD= Head of Department   Assist. Dean=Assistant Dean   EO= Executive Officer

Appendix 11

An Example of the Thematic Analysis Code in NVivo Program 10 (Producing a thematic 'map' of the analysis)
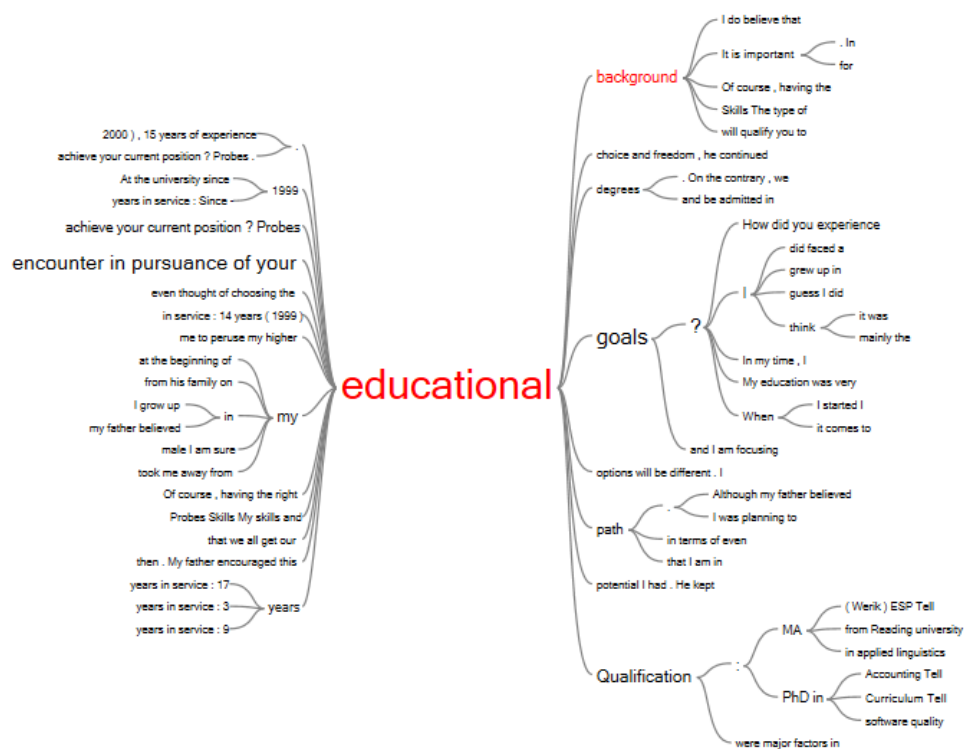
Appendix 12

Examples of Training and Development Programmes Offered at SQU