"I AM DIFFERENT FROM OTHER WOMEN IN THE WORLD" THE EXPERIENCES OF SAUDI WOMEN STUDYING ONLINE IN INTERNATIONAL MASTER PROGRAMMES

Anna Szilagyi, Laureate Online Education, Netherlands

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study that investigated seven female Saudi Arabian students of the University of Liverpool's online Masters programmes. Qualitative, first-person research methods and hermeneutic phenomenology were chosen for the analysis and interpretation of transcripts (Langeveld, 1983; van Manen, 1997; Creswell, 2007; Roth, 2012). The principles of cultural anthropology (Hall & du Gay, 1996; Hannerz, 1992; Lull, 2001; Coleman, 2010) were used to take a snapshot of the interviewees' particular world to provide an overview of the Saudi culture where the role of women is at the centre of academic, political, religious and social debate These findings reflect the participants' everyday lives, identities, values and beliefs, presented in a self-reflective, personal 'life-world' story of one single Saudi woman. The findings demonstrate that the primary motivators in choosing online international education to further studies are existing limitations of travelling to a university campus and customary gender-segregated education in Saudi Arabia. As a contrast, international online education offers the opportunity to gain up-to-date research-based knowledge in their chosen profession, learning critical thinking and problem solving skills and being given a chance to communicate with male and female students from different cultures.

Introduction

Education in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (hereafter referred to as KSA) is segregated in all levels. The education system is controlled by religious authorities that restrict women's access to education and limit their participation in certain professions. Therefore, women's choices are limited to certain professions or employment. They are not allowed to study engineering, journalism, pharmacy or architecture, as these professions are traditionally considered male activities (Cordesman, 2003). Women study mainly in the fields of health care, education, and public administration (AlMunajjed, 1997; Baki, 2004).

This article will present the particular 'life-world' of seven female, emancipated Saudi students who are eager to learn and actively participate to change the status-quo of women in the Saudi society by pursuing alternative higher education. Online learning lifts the restrictions on their physical mobility and alleviates their forced segregation in the Saudi society. The life of a

Saudi female student, studying in an online, Western European university, uncovers new dimensions in her experience with new paradigms to help find her own way to succeed.

Women and gender-based segregation in KSA

In the Arab world, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (hereafter referred to as KSA) is one of the most conservative Muslim countries, considered the keeper of the Islamic religion (Baki, 2004). Islamic studies are a core component of the educational curricula, in which male and female students learn their rights, obligations and duties (Denman & Hilal, 2011; Jamjoom, 2010). This religious education treats genders differently due to the different roles men and women assume in the Saudi society: boys are traditionally taught about male activities, girls about their role as mothers and housewives (Baki, 2004).

The traditional interpretation of the role of women in the Saudi society is based on the *Qur'an*, and the *Wahabi* interpretation of Islam, which is one of the most orthodox religious authorities within the Islamic religion. "The *Qur'an* gave women equal but not identical rights with men on personal, civil, social and political levels […] and warned that the mixing of sexes could lead to seduction and evil consequences that might follow". (Baki, 2004, p.2) In terms of clothing, the *Wahabi* interpretation calls for modest clothing for women including covering the face. The *Qur'an* also mentions modest clothing of women; although there is no indication about covering the face (Yamani, 1996; Almunajed, 1997, Baki, 2004).

Although today the Saudi educational system offers female education from primary to doctoral level, the restrictions in mobility create a significant obstacle for women to freely access higher education, since in order to attend a class on campus or go to a public (segregated) library, they need to employ a chauffeur or ask a close male family member to drive them to and from the institution (Baki, 2004).

Online Education in KSA

As the educational system experiences change, the position of the Saudi Ministry of Education is ambiguous in relation to international online programmes: it does not fully accept qualifications from purely online programmes due to concerns about the quality of the online programme (Hamdan, 2014). On the one hand, KSA promotes the development of online or blended learning methods and English teaching in order to sponsor the education of skilled Saudi citizens with English proficiency, on the other hand it also recognises the culturally invasive power of low cost mass media (internet, satellite television, social media) and that native English teachers in international programmes may pose cultural challenges for Saudi students due to their different ways of thinking and interacting (Moores-Abdool, Yahya & Unzueta, 2009; Onsman, 2011).

One of the challenges in implementing online or blended learning is that Saudi public universities are used to the traditional didactic, lecture-based, teacher-centred education. Their curricula are often out-dated or irrelevant to students' career paths. In addition, they continue to use memorization and passive learning practices (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010;

Hamdan, 2014). Hamdan's study (2014, p.312.) describes that in the Saudi school system, knowledge and truth are fixed concepts and "what is taught in school is unquestionable", which does not facilitate the development of critical thinking skills or the appreciation of diversity. As opposed to this, online learners in KSA have free access to educational resources, online libraries, online forums that facilitate intercultural communication between students from all over the world and with the other gender as well.

> *"This unprecedented openness to new educational resources and cultural perspectives is leading KSA's younger generations to become less traditional and strict in their views"* (Hamdan, 2014, p.310).

Methodology

The findings are part of a wider research project that focuses on the online learning experience of Saudi students and follows phenomenological principles (van Manen, 1997; Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Mason, 2012; Roth, 2012) in the research design. For this particular article, the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven Saudi female students were used to enable the investigation of their 'life-world' (Langeveld, 1967, 1983).

The interviewees were all enrolled in or graduated from the online master programmes of the University of Liverpool delivered by Laureate Online Education. The selected students were all Saudi citizens and had at least one year of learning experience in the online programme. A group of female students was selected, with a range of passing grades, to understand their views of learning online in a global environment. Participants were between 25 and 49 years of age; their religion is Islam. Most of them have had some educational experience in America or Western European countries; one has also experienced online education in a US university.

The interview structure focused on three main topics: cultural values at home, online learning experience (MA level) and face-to-face learning experience in the Saudi Arabian segregated higher educational system (BA level). The interview protocol covered a set of questions that invited students to reflect upon their culture and online learning challenges.

"Women don't drive here, so we use drivers or a male family member has to drive us" (Student 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)

> *"Women don't drive here, so we use drivers or a male family member has to drive us. Women here usually have three different ways to find someone to drive them. Either it is one of the male family members, like brother, husband, father or nephew who can drive or they have their private drivers with contract. Private drivers are usually from Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines." (Student 4)*

"The doors of the University are locked once you are in." (Student 4)

"When I studied on campus during my graduate studies, my dad used to drive me to the University. My first class started at 7am. He could not come to pick me up before 5 in the afternoon, due to his work commitments. I was not allowed to go out before the end of the academic day, even if I had no classes in between. The doors of the University are locked once you are in. At the beginning this was very strange for me, but then I got used to it." (Student 4)

"I am different than other women in the world" (Student 3)

"I am different than other women in the world. I'm getting knowledge, I join companies to work but still I am treated differently and I have fewer rights than other women. The Saudi culture is very strict and conservative; a religion-based culture. It is a man-dominant society. There are a lot of things that are not allowed for women.

I don't have the same opportunities and I am not allowed to be myself, because the culture is not supporting women. When making decisions, a woman has to check first how it is acceptable and permitted by the religion. It does not matter how educated, broad-minded and intelligent you are, as a female." (Student 3)

"It's a struggle to work as a woman" (Student 4)

"I couldn't manage male staff: they cannot tolerate having a woman as a supervisor. It's a struggle to prove myself because I have to show constantly that women can do as much as men do. Even if professionals accepted this fact and they worked with me as an equal, it's difficult for the parents. Sometimes they come and say: 'Can we talk to a man? Do you have a man here that we can talk with?' They don't want to feel that a woman gives them the information, and makes the decision for them. Usually they are the decision makers, without the help of a woman. It is difficult to deal with them, as sometimes we have very conservative and religious parents.

I learnt that no matter what my intentions are, the parents' opinion is more important. I have to be conservative as far as my appearance and behaviour." (Student 1)

"Now I am prepared that when I talk to a father, I have to ask a staff member to witness the conversation, change the way I sit, my posture, my body language, my tone of voice, even the way I think. It is so difficult… I am trying my best to behave differently, because I know this is the only way that I can provide good care to my patients and to their parents. I don't mind doing the

extra miles just to make them feel comfortable, safe and secured with me." *(Student 4)*

"I don't feel bad when I cover my hair" (Student 5)

"I feel very good and proud of being a Muslim woman, wearing hijab, because I feel protected and I know I gain benefits for my next life. If you see a man without hair, you can accept his face and you don't care about the hair. But if you asked a man, what is the first thing he looks at a woman, he would say: 'if the woman doesn't have hair, I don't look at her'. Our God asks us to cover our hair...in order to protect us." *(Student 5)*

"We believe that covering the hair will not make us very appealing to men and that we have a very conservative religion that we protect. We always cover the hair and wear conservative clothing, no arm can be shown, no legs can be shown, so it becomes less appealing to men." *(Student 1)*

"This is our belief about cover and this is how you protect yourself and you protect also men, from not seeing you actually." *(Student 1 and Student 5)*

"I could not communicate with male students face-to-face, but I could use network communication" (Student 5)

"During my bachelor studies in Saudi Arabia male students were separated in other classes. I could not communicate with them face-to-face, but I could use network communication. I used to communicate with them during my studies. This way of communication is not so different than communicating with men in the online master programme: you don't see them, but you can see them interact by exchanging messages and words." *(Student 5)*

"I treated the online classroom, as if there was no actual communication with men, there were only responses on the subject. I read their answers for the discussion question and I wrote a response, but usually there were no emails, there was no further connection." *(Student 7)*

"There were situations when there was disagreement in the online class, but it wasn't difficult for me to deal with it. I just posted my opinion and discussed it with them back and forth. Whenever I discussed it, of course, we never talked outside the class because we're not at that level of relation." *(Student 5)*

"I didn't feel connected with online students" (Student 4)

"I didn't have close relationship with my classmates. I only imagined them. I didn't see them in real life." *(Student 5)*

"The time I spent online was enough for my own learning, but did not increase my relationship with my classmates." (Student 1)

"Even if we had the opportunity to exchange emails or occasionally called each other, still the face-to-face relation was not there, and I always felt there was something missing. I read their posts and got the idea but their expressions and feelings were missing." (Student 4)

"In the online class you were given materials and all depended on you. In contrast, in the face-to-face university I was more dependent on the instructor and not on myself, because I could ask him on the spot." (Student 3)

I wanted to change the way I was educated: I wanted to open my mind to other cultures, experience research-based learning and increase my knowledge" (Student 1, 2, 3, 4)

"In Saudi Arabia professors have formal relationship with students and sometimes I avoided them because I didn't like their way of teaching." (Student 5)

"Students were not dependent on themselves, everything was ready for them. I remember that when I had a Biology class during my BA studies, the professor came with notes that were ready for us, we read them, completed the assignment, passed the exam and that was it. There was nothing about teaching students how to use their brains, search in the library for extra books and articles. This is exactly what is happening in other Universities outside Saudi Arabia. I am used to the American style of education and the Arabic education wouldn't be satisfactory for me. This is why I wanted to change the way I was educated." (Student 1, 2, 4)

"I chose the online master programme of the University of Liverpool because I wanted to open my mind to other cultures, experience research-based learning and increase my knowledge." (Student 1, 2, 3, 4)

"Online learning gave me the opportunity to meet people from different cultures, with different believes and knowledge." (Student 3)

In the online class we were free to speak" (Student 4)

"I had experience with other online courses at an American online university. At the time there were lots of political issues between the Middle East and the States after 9/11 and I felt discriminated in the class. I was the only student from the Middle East and the professors were really against me. They were irrational and very critical about my postings, so I had to quit. My experience with the University of Liverpool is totally different. I really liked studying here

and I've recommended the University for many people. There was respect towards students and between students. No one commented on anything that might hurt or make others uncomfortable in the class. In my culture, usually we don't discuss things openly, but in the online classes we were free to speak. No one joked about whatever I posted or said." (Student 4)

"I didn't feel I was judged by my background or my religion. It was very easy and comfortable to express my thoughts on religion, education and my cultural background. It was a respectful environment." (Student 1)

"That is something really good about Liverpool." (Student 4)

Discussion

The constructed "story" of a Saudi woman provides a snapshot of the transforming reality of female Saudi students. It portrays the everyday difficulties of travelling back and forth to the campus of the university or to a public library due to customary limitations on women's mobility. It also demonstrates how Saudi women view gender segregation, the essence of modest clothing or covering their hair, and also sheds light on culturally acceptable ways of communicating with the other gender. The struggle how women learn to communicate with men in order to be accepted and appreciated in their own cultural milieu is evident from their recounts. In the world of Saudi women, restrictions are completely acceptable and justified, as they were created to protect them. Yet, the interviewees are evidently ambitious Saudi women, who are aware of how differently other women are treated in other parts of the world. They have similar career aspirations and dreams of self-fulfilment, which motivate them to look for different ways of learning.

Online education provides a way to lift cultural limitations. Female students enjoy that they are free to talk and communicate with male students within the classroom, although most of them would not initiate further discussion with them outside of the class. This alternative was commonly accepted by the participants. They felt that online learning not only gives them a chance to increase their knowledge about different cultures, but also helps them to use different methods of learning in order to develop critical thinking skills and adapt new problem solving methods. This is significantly different from using passive learning or memorization techniques practiced in the local universities within the constraints of segregated education. Hamdan (2014) and Moores-Abdool et al. (2009) and Al-Fahad (2010) also confirm that Saudi female students appreciate international online or blended education because of these features.

Conclusion

The internationalization of education is a widespread and irreversible process generated by globalization. (Al-Fahad, 2010, Hamdan, 2014) It has lead to the emergence of young female, professionals within KSA who are hungry for social recognition in their cultural milieu, and are willing to take an active role in the socio-cultural and political changes, protesting against the restrictions imposed on them within their own country. The surrounding Muslim society insists on the practice of gender segregation; women's appearance in the male sphere is deemed provocative and offensive and women are restricted to "spend most of their lives in veil and in the four walls of their house". (Syed, 2010, p.151) There are still relatively few studies conducted on the effects of international online education that enters 'their house' and at the same time, opens up virtually the whole world at least for the duration of their studies. The present paper highlights that more research is needed in this area and also suggests that policy makers in KSA should take action in order to create more clarity in what is considered a role model for today's women in KSA. The serious potential of highly educated women, who are just as skilled as their male colleagues, should also be recognized in the Saudi labour market

The findings of this paper demonstrated the awareness of female Saudi students of their ambiguous role as women in the Saudi society: on the one hand they are trying to fulfil the cultural expectations of the conservative Saudi society, whereas on the other hand, they are eager to take an active role in their education and career choices. This paper demonstrated culture and country specific motivational factors, leading them to look for alternative learning methods and it also shed light on the limitations that determine their everyday lives and learning experiences. These women choose online learning in international programmes because it eliminates cultural and physical boundaries, opens a new horizon, allows free communication between male and female students from different cultures and also provides a way to gain up-to-date knowledge in specific professions.

The ambitious goal of the KSA to elevate the international status quo of its higher education continuously opens up the debate on gender-based segregation, which still remains unresolved and contested (Prokop, 2003; Baki, 2004; Osman, 2011). In the course of their emancipation, the female Saudi society has to compete with foreigners in the labour market, having up-to-date knowledge and excellent English language skills, and also, with the Saudi male population. They have to face conservative political forces that insist on the idea of gender segregation in order to secure employment opportunities for the members of the male society (Doumato, 1992; Prokop, 2003). Therefore, the question remains: how are these ambitious and skilled female students going to find suitable jobs (given their degrees) in the male-dominant Saudi society, where the same limitations that forced them to choose online learning in international programmes as opposed to in-country face-to-face education still exist and determine the everyday life of a working woman? Will they ever be treated just like their male colleagues, i.e. as equals? This study does not aim to answer this rhetorical question, as the educational, religious and socio-political debates around the role of women in

the Saudi society are yet to crystallize. It does, however, intend to raise awareness regarding the ambiguous situation of educated Saudi women: as students they learn the way *"other women"* (Student 4) learn in Western societies, but their life is connected to a socio-cultural milieu that resists giving them equal human rights.

Reference

1. Alebaikan, R. and Troudi, S. (2010). Blended Learning in Saudi Universities: Challenges and Perspectives. In *ALT-J, Research in Learning Technology, 18(1),* (pp. 49-59).

2. Al-Fahad, F. (2010). The learners' satisfaction toward online e-learning implemented in the College of Applied Studies and Community Service, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia: Can E-learning Replace the Conventional System of Education? In *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE, 11(2),* (pp. 61-72).

3. AlMunajjed, M. (1997). *Women in Saudi Arabia Today.* London: Macmillan.

4. Alquraini, T. (2010). Special Education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges, Perspectives, Future Possibilities. In *International Journal of Special Education, 25(3),* (pp. 139-147).

5. Alwadie, A. (2013). Online Continuing Medical Education in Saudi Arabia. In *Performance Improvement,* (pp. 24-28).

6. Anderson, T. (2008). *Theory and Practice of Online Learning* (2nd ed.). Canada: Marquis Book Printing.

7. Baki, R. (2004). Gender-segregated education in Saudi Arabia: Its impact on social norms and the Saudi Labor market. In *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 12(28).*

8. Coleman, W.D. (2010). *Cultural Autonomy. Frictions and Connections.* Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press.

9. Cordesman, A.H. (2003). *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century.* Connecticut: Praeger.

10. Creswell, J. (2007). Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design. Choosing Among Five Approaches. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage.

11. Crotty, M. (1998). The foundation of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process. Sidney, New South Wales, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

12. Denman, B.D. and Hilal, K.T. (2011). From barriers to bridges: An investigation on Saudi student mobility (2006-2009). In *International Review of Education, 57,* (pp. 299-318).

13. Doumato, E. (1992). Gender, monarchy and national identity in Saudi Arabia. In *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 19(1),* (pp. 31-47).

14. Glasze, G. and Alkhayyal, A. (2002). Gated housing estates in the Arab world: Case studies in Lebanon and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. In *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design, 29,* (pp. 321-336).

15. Hall, S. and du Gay, P. (eds.) (1996). *Questions of Cultural Identity.* London, Thousands Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.

16. Hamdan, A. (2005). Women and Education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Achievements. In *International Education Journal, 6(1),* (pp. 42-64).

17. Hamdan, A. (2014). The Reciprocal and Correlative Relationship between Learning Culture and Online Education: A Case from Saudi Arabia. In *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 15(1),* (pp. 310-336).

18. Hannerz, U. (1992). Cultural complexity: Studies in the social organization of meaning. New York: Columbia University Press.

19. Hycner, R. (1985). Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data. In *Human Studies, 8,* (pp. 279-303).

20. Jamjoom, M. (2010). Female Islamic Studies teachers in Saudi Arabia: A phenomenological study. In *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26,* (pp. 547-558).

21. Langeveld, M.J. (1967). The Stillness of the Secret Place. In M.J. Langeveld & Langeveld-Bakker, T.J. (eds.), *Scholen maken mensen: de bijdrage der school tot de vorming van het kind.* Purmerend.

22. Langeveld, M. (1983). The Secret Place in the Life of the Child. In *Phenomenology + Pedagogy, 1(2),* (pp. 181-191).

23. Lull, J. (2001). *Culture in the communication age.* London: Routledge.

24. Mackey, S. (2002). *The Saudies: Inside the Desert Kingdom.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

25. Mason, J. (2012). *Qualitative Researching* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

26. Moores-Abdool, W.; Yahya, N. and Unzueta, C.H. (2009). *Learning Preferences of Saudi University Students with Native English Speaking Teachers.* Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Association of Language Teachers (KSAALT), (pp. 2-18). Al-Khobar.

27. Nakshabandi, A. (1993). Videoconferencing: King Saud University (Saudi Arabia). In *International Journal of Instructional Media, 20(2),* (pp. 127-136).

28. Nel, B. (1973). The phenomenological approach to pedagogy. In *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 3(2),* (pp. 201-215).

29. Onsman, A. (2011). It is better to light a candle than to ban the darkness: government led academic development in Saudi Arabian universities. In *Higher Education, 62,* (pp. 519-532).

30. Prokop, M. (2003). Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education. In International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 79(1),(pp. 77-89).

31. Roth, W.M. (2012). *First-Person Methods: Toward an Empirical Phenomenology of Experience.* Rotterdam, Boston, Taipei: Sense Publisher. BIBLIOGRAPHY \l 1033

32. Syed, J. (2010). A historical perspective on Islamic modesty and its implications for female employment. In *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An international Journal, 2(29),* (pp. 150-166).

33. van Manen, M. (1997). Researching lived experience: human science for an action. London: The Althouse Press.

34. Yamani, M. (1996). Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives. Ithaca Press.