The Strategic Role of Human Resource Managers in Achieving Gender Equality in Employment in Saudi Arabia

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Saudi Arabia has begun a series of significant changes aimed at accelerating the modernisation of their economic and social systems, including those targeted at strengthening the roles of women within the economy and society. This study examines the role of human resource managers in achieving gender equality in employment in Saudi Arabia, relying on secondary research to obtain information. Institutional theory is applied to discover the factors which influence human resource management practises in Saudi Arabia, the varied rates of development in the pillars (cognitive-cultural, normative, and Regulatory). From the research, it was found that the rate of development at the cultural-cognitive and normative levels is slower than the rate of change at the regulatory level. This means that change is occurring at a fast pace in Saudi Arabia for the laws and regulations but not for the culture,which puts human resource managers in a difficult situation as they are forced to develop a strategy which accounts for all these factors. In addition, as there are no previous studies on the strategic role of human resource managers regarding gender equality in employment in Saudi Arabia, the model by Ulrich (1997) is selected. This model helps managers and policymakers understand and determine how and to what degree human resource managers are involved in achieving gender equality by measuring the four roles of the human resource managers that the model provide (Ulrich, 1997). Finally, we provided many suggestions, such as implementing Ulrich's model (1997) by using a survey to determine how and to what degree human resource managers practise the four roles of a human resources manager. Secondly, to achieve gender equality in employment, the human resource manager must adopt several practises to increase the number of women and attract them to the work environment in the organisation. To do so, the organisation

must provide more flexibility and support during pregnancy and provide them with training courses to manage their extreme workloads.

CIPD: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

HR: Human Resource

HRM: Human Resource Management

KSA: kingdom of Saudi Arabia

SHRM: Society for Human Resource Management

UAE: United Arab Emirates

Introduction

Worldwide, significant strides have been made in advancing gender equality in employment (Otobe, 2014). However, the continued disparity between males' and women's employment rates persists. (Badran, 2017). The Kingdom launched Vision 2030 to decrease dependence on petroleum, diversify the economy, and raise the rate of women's participation. Numerous changes have been implemented. For instance, the National Transformation Program, which focuses on women's empowerment (SPA, 2016, 2021), As a result of Vision 2030, the female labour force participation rate in KSA has increased (GASTAT, 2021). Despite these reform initiatives, however, KSA remains the lowest in the world for women's participation (Alfarran, 2016). This reinforces the assumption that other factors contribute significantly to the low participation (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Tlaiss (2015) believes that these cultural attitudes and societal expectations of what females can and cannot do limit their participation in the Saudi market. To address these issues, the position of HR manager in KSA is gradually evolving into a more strategic one and away from being primarily administrative. In this way, HR managers play an important role in translating national objectives into organisational goals through putting in new HR strategies and directing changes towards more women-friendly corporate cultures whilst respecting the country's cultural-cognitive and normative institution pillars (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). This finding is consistent with other recent studies conducted elsewhere in the Arab world, which assert that the role of HR managers in the area is progressively evolving strategically and focusing on organisational transformation (Mamman and Al Kulaiby, 2014).

Moreover, gender equality has become an important current topic, which is why this study explores the factors affecting it in KSA. Using institutional theory and discovering the strategic role of HR managers in this matter, the research aims to assist organisations in achieving gender equality in employment and understanding the factors that affect Saudi HRM practices. To do so, two main research questions are posed:

What factors affect HRM practises in KSA?

What is the strategic role of human resource managers in achieving gender equality in employment in KSA?

Objectives

Define 'gender equality'.

Explore the government's efforts towards gender equality in employment in KSA.

Explain the institutional theory and its link with HRM.

Explore the factors affecting HRM practises in KSA.

Explore the strategic role of HR managers in achieving gender equality in employment in KSA.

Suggest practises for HRM to increase the number of women in organisations.

Literature Review

The literature review provides a definition of gender equality and explores government efforts in this area regarding employment in KSA. It also discusses the relationship between institutional theory and HRM practises in order to answer the research questions.

Gender equality

Equality means that people should get the same treatment, regardless of their gender, colour, age, disabilities, ethnicity but based on their merit (Fredman, 2016). Additionally, gender inequality refers to women generally being seen as subordinate in a culture which grants males more significant prerogatives and options, notably in the workplace. Gender equality aims to strengthen the status of women (Alvesson and Billing, 2009).

The fundamental cause for gender disparity, particularly in the workplace, is the separation of gender roles and labour division (Reskin, 2000). According to Reskin (2000), businesses are responsible for specific instances of gender inequality since companies fail to solve the issue, and some organisations encourage such behaviours and enable male employees to continue their discriminatory conduct. Dorius and Firebaugh have further argued that gender disparities

occur when men and women have unequal access to specific commodities such as politics, education, and economic benefits.

In addition, gender differences are not just seen at work but from a broader perspective which encompasses life expectancy, financial rewards, and political engagement (Dorius and Firebaugh, 2010). Dorius and Firebaugh's application of this term provides a larger perspective on gender imbalance and how it occurs in the workplace and other spheres of community. Jha and Nagar (2015) concur with Dorius and Firebaugh in asserting that gender inequality is not confined to the workplace but manifests in various other fields, whether culture, politics, economy, society, and legislation. They have stated that discrimination against any employee based on gender might be classified as gender inequality; however, gender inequality does not relate to a specific gender but may refer equally to any gender which is mistreated (Jha and Nagar, 2015).

Government efforts towards gender equality in employment

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has begun a Saudisation initiative for employment to boost the Saudi people's number in the labour market, particularly women. Numerous legislative and regulatory changes have been made to the labour market; in 2011, the Nitaqat programme was launched to localise private-sector employment and restrict some positions only for women (HKS, 2020). Moreover, in 2016, the kingdom launched Vision 2030, which seeks to lessen KSA reliance on oil, diversify the economy, create jobs for Saudis, empower Saudi women, and provide women with a significant role in economic involvement (SPA, 2016). As a result of these changes, KSA placed first amongst the 10 most reform-minded nations in 2020 in regard to closing the worldwide gender inequality gap (WEF, 2020).

Figures have shown that the labour participation rate for the whole male working-age population declined to 79.2% in the second quarter of 2021, down from 79.7% in the first quarter. The female working-age population's labour force participation rate increased to 33.8% in the second quarter of 2021, up from 33.6% in the first quarter of 2021 (GASTAT, 2021). Although legislative measures implemented since the beginning of 2010 have aimed to enhance female employment, and certain occupations have been reserved for women (HKS, 2015), female labour market participation remains low in KSA, which confirms the hypothesis that certain factors substantially contribute to this (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).
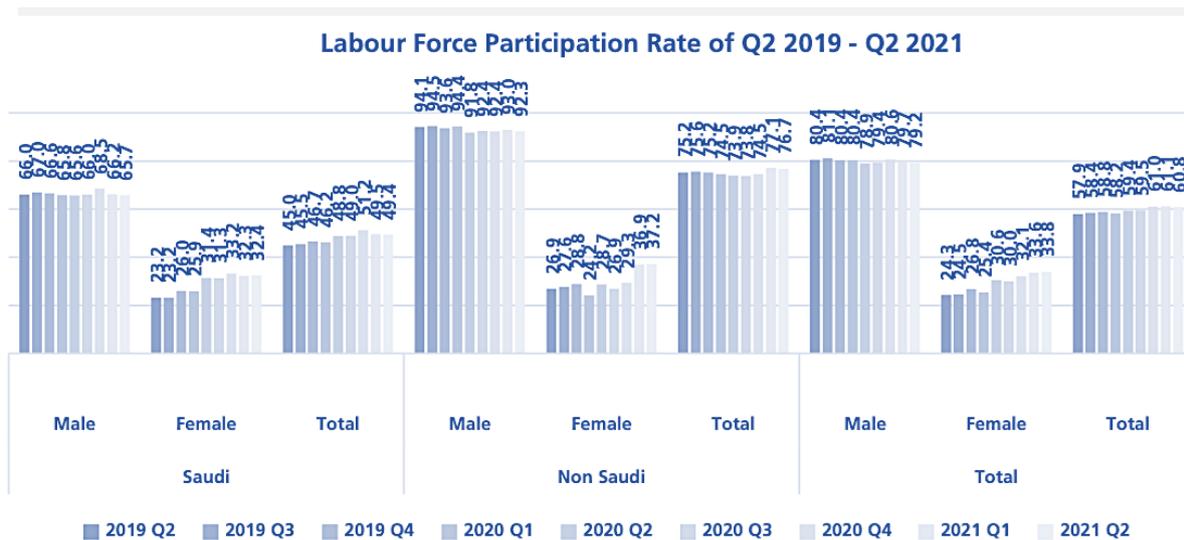
Figure 1: Estimated data from LFS-General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT,2021)

Institutional theory and human resource management

According to institutional theory, companies face societal pressure to adjust their practises, even those in strategic HRM, and to ensure that they are compatible with their organisational framework and circumstances (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In order to stay in business, companies which share an environment are driven to conform to the environment's institutional expectations, in which way organisations become isomorphic with one another. Moreover, businesses must change their administration structures appropriately based on the environment (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020). According to Scott (2014), companies are impacted by their national context's cultural-cognitive, regulatory, and normative pillars.

The cultural-cognitive column for social organisations displays the usual typical systems and mental formations considered normal amongst people within a specific country (Scott, 2014). Additionally, the cognitive component relates to the inferential patterns and frames which impact and decide how actors classify or perceive their surroundings (Haak-Saheem et al., 2017). Cultural-cognitive institutional forces are crucial for comprehending HRM practises and the influence of context-specific elements such as values, faith, and culture on these activities (Haak-Saheem et al., 2017).

Scott (2014) has defined the regulatory pillar as 'current rules and regulative that support some behaviours while prohibiting others'. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), column functions as a coercive pressure tool which ensures compliance with societal expectations and behavioural norms. In the context of HRM, the regulatory column, or the pressure tool, refers to the impact of the rules, employment regulations, and other social associates, namely work councils and organisations (Farndale and Paauwe, 2007).

The final column is the normative component of every nation's institutional profile, which comprises socially accepted values, assumptions, views, and binding expectations which define acceptable conduct (Scott, 2014). They represent and encourage proper behaviour amongst society members and are therefore seen as the evaluative and compulsory parts of social life (Haak-Saheem et al., 2017). The regulatory procedures largely show the influence of employer groups and HR expert organisations (Farndale and Paauwe, 2007).

Institutional theory has been adapted and used in a wide variety of HRM studies because it provides a toolset for analysing how organisations and people deal with these institutional pillars (Lewis et al., 2019). It has contributed significantly to the field of HRM studies and has aided researchers in determining that organisations' HR strategies are influenced not only by market considerations but also by the sociological perspective, which is critical for understanding and determining which practises are embraced (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020). For instance, Chowdhury and Mahmood (2012) have concluded that the regulations and laws in Bangladesh have an effect on the HRM practises of multinational companies (MNCs) and that the various HRM techniques are vulnerable to institutional constraints (Chowdhury and Mahmood, 2012). Conversely, Pasamar and Valle (2015) found that the regulatory column did not promote enterprises in Spain to be attentive to work-life concerns (Pasamar and Valle, 2015).

Additionally, institutional theory has assisted HRM academics in recognising that despite international frameworks which enable the diffusion of HRM practises, cross-cultural disparities in these practises remain amongst nations (Lewis et al., 2019). Towards that end, Vaiman and Brewster (2015) have emphasised the role of institutional factors in explaining a large portion of this variation (Vaiman and Brewster, 2015).

Having considered HRM some country, this study considers:

Question 1: **What factors affect human resource management practises in KSA?**

This research applies institutional theory to examine how cognitive-cultural, regulatory, and normative factors affect women's employment and HR practises in achieving gender equality in employment.

Cultural-cognitive pillar

Institutions are built on cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulatory pillars which employ standards and regulations to direct social conduct (Scott, 2014). The cultural-cognitive pillar is concerned with how institutions understand local culture and traditions as well as the function of social structures in fostering socially acceptable conduct (Hofstede, 2001).

Nakdimen (1984) has stressed that stereotypes are a sort of direct discrimination between women and men which results in indirect discrimination due to gender's traditional function in society. Gender stereotypes are generalisations about group characteristics applied to group members, such as women, due to their membership in that group. They are generalisations about men and women's characteristics which affect women's career paths and advancement (Heilman, 2012). Moreover, Elson (1999) has stated that implied attitudes are discrimination based on gender, which contributes to the employment disparity between men and women, affecting the labour market's institutional development.

Generally, women face the following challenges across multiple industries:'the prominence of gender stereotypes; workplace discrimination; poor chances for improvement, and career progression; extreme workload due to a decline in family and work balance; as well as gender-based difficulties associated with pregnancy'(Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Additionally, Alomiri (2016) has asserted that in such an atmosphere, the absence of specified competence-based criteria and procedures for selecting people for leadership roles fosters workplace disorder. Selections are regularly made on the basis of who knows whom, and hiring decisions are frequently made to secure the services of obedient juniors rather than in the organisation's best interests. Glowork (2017) has supported this notion, claiming that family connections appear to be critical in recruiting and selection procedures, frequently outweighing qualifications.

Women's are not considered breadwinners in traditional family arrangements because their primary responsibility is childcare and household work. Throughout the years, every attempt to alter this status quo has met with widespread resistance and suspicion (AlMunajjed, 2010). However, the need for secure earnings in a globalised society and the advancement of women's education have prompted many women to want to work. Nonetheless, in terms of women's labour market involvement in KSA, a significant gender discrepancy still exists (AlMunajjed, 2010).

Jamjoom and Kelly (2013) have claimed that gender segregation in all spheres of society, particularly schools, has produced circumstances in which women have been isolated and protected from public participation. This has put them at a significant disadvantage, having hampered their development of communication and soft skills in the job market (AlMunajjed, 2010). As a consequence, there continue to be gender disparities in employment and unequal job opportunities.

Arab communities, in particular, have traditionally been characterised as macho, with well-defined, stringent gender norms (Hofstede, 2001). According to Badran (2017), the Arab region's cultures and traditions significantly influence women's career selection choices; such a hierarchical, conservative society continues to impose pressure on women's employment opportunities and professional improvement, as well as on HR policies (Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014; Hamdan, 2005).

Regulatory pillar

The regulatory pillar comprises the laws and rules that promote some behaviors while rejecting others, which act as oversight mechanisms (Scott, 2014). KSA have launched numerous measures targeted at promoting girls' education and women's labour force participation (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020). For instance, the country has made significant investments in the education of its inhabitants. As a result, KSA has made significant progress in eliminating gender disparities at all educational levels, with women accounting for more than half of the kingdom's university graduates (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). The higher level of educational attainment has paved the path for women's labour force participation rates to grow to 33.8% in the second quarter of 2021 (GASTAT,2021).

KSA implemented several more adjustments in 2017 which benefitted women's employment, as well as HR practises. For instance, a new regulation allowing Saudi women to seek work without the permission of a male guardian (MLSD, 2018) has meant that HR departments no longer need to obtain the consent of a male guardian before employing women. In addition, Article 159 of the labour code specifies that if a firm has fifty or even more women workers, and they have together ten or even more kids under the age of six, the organisation must offer a nursery school with enough staff to take care of the kids. Furthermore, the Ministry of Labour began a new round of steps to combat gender discrimination, including an order prohibiting salary disparities between men and women for work of equivalent value (MLSD, 2018). By promoting gender-equity policies and gender-friendly HR practises and environments, these legal developments have enabled HR managers to implement changes to organisational structures and cultures (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020).

Although the presence of women in the labour market has increased dramatically in recent years, obstacles still exist for Saudi women who want to work in fields other than conventional ones, such as engineering (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Hewlett et al. (2008), for example, have argued that women leave the engineering field because they feel alone and ostracised in a harsh and masculine work environment. Thus, women continue to be underrepresented in terms of labour force participation (Gorney, 2016), mainly owing to structural difficulties within organisations (Thompson, 2015). Three major fundamental obstacles have been identified:

- A lack of female participation in strategy design

- Centralisation of decision-making

- A lack of power

These barriers are classified as organisational and can also be categorised as cultural, and social (Hodges, 2017). Moreover, the long-standing impediment is that cultural norms such as specified gender roles, gender-based vocations, and limits on men's and women's relationships affect laws and regulations within organisations (Glowork, 2017).

Normative pillar

The normative pillar is mainly built on the mandatory features of any form of professional, organisational, or social relationships. Through the normative pillar, organisations can steer conduct by creating norms and specifying expected actions in diverse social circumstances (Scott, 2014). The normative force is formed of values (what are regarded as proper) and norms (how things must be done in line with the values), allowing organisations to construct basic rules to which all employees should conform (Scott, 2014). Consequently, institutions may exercise influence by reference to a social commitment (March and Olsen, 1989). Whereas some civilisations have laws and traditions which support and promote women leaders, other societies oppose this by making it complex, if not illegal (Abadi et al., 2020).

As Afiouni et al. (2013) have indicated, HRM practises in KSA are strongly influenced by cultural, religious, and regulatory standards. Despite rising education levels and experience amongst Saudi HR practitioners, there is still a general lack of such professionals. Moreover, in spite of recent legal developments in KSA, gender stereotypes still control all aspects of women's careers, and there is little effort from HRM to decrease such discrimination (Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Hamdan, 2005). As a result, women continuously face restrictive organisational structures and hostile work environments fuelled by attitudes which cast doubt on their appropriateness for work (Al-Rasheed and Azzam, 2012).

The little consideration given by HR managers to gender prejudice is exacerbated because the absence of regulatory and professional institutions which support gender equality policies with well-defined implementation plans. This is illustrated by the limited adoption of measures promoting women's involvement, such as stated equality rules or policies protecting women from workplace discrimination (Afiouni and Karam, 2014). Regardless of the existence of worldwide professional groups and organisations which define standards for the field of HRM, including SHRM and CIPD, those organisations have not attempted to compel their members to promote gender equality in HR practises (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020). Therefore, regardless of the rise of professional and personal networking and the establishment of several non-profit organisations praising the business case for recruiting females in middle and upper positions management positions, HR experts continue to permit discriminatory HR practises (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020).

Nonetheless, this study asserts that, despite the prominence of gender discrimination at the cultural-cognitive pillar level and a lack of normative organisational level, important legislative advancements will likely persist in conjunction with Vision 2030 to increasing female's economic involvement and social status (SPA, 2016;Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020). Therefore, it is critical to analyse if and how HR managers in private organisations are implementing these changes or whether they will alter contemporary HR practises (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020), as reflected in the second research question:

Question 2: **What is the strategic role of human resource managers in achieving gender equality in employment in KSA?**

Throughout the research, no study was found which addressed gender equality in employment in KSA and the strategic role of HRM in gender equality. Apart from the growth in the number of studies examining numerous topics related to HRM in the Arab world, an understanding of how it functions inside Saudi firms remains weak. For instance, although 50% of the International Journal of HRM's articles current new edition on HRM in the Middle East (Afiouni et al., 2013) have investigated related challenges in the UAE, there were no studies on KSA. HRM-related research published in and reflecting on women's difficulties in KSA are usually theoretical in character and deal with different secluded topics (with only a few examples, as Al-Asfour et al., 2017). For instance, a conceptual article underlined the importance of national culture on the HRM function (Wood and Mellahi, 2001).

Another study showed that a Japanese company's HRM practises (JapanCo's) have been primarily modified to accommodate the host nation (KSA). State employment restrictions compelled the corporation to adapt to host nation organisations (Butler, 2006; Lowndes and Roberts, 2013). According to Mellahi's (2007) study, the Saudi legislative framework influences the private sector's HRM practises; this does not, however, relate to the technical part of the tasks. The business was able to transfer the majority of its technology and operational procedures to the Saudi affiliate without making significant adjustments. It maintained its high-quality standards by investing in the training and education of new Saudi graduates, both men and women (Mellahi, 2007).

In addition, Aldossari and Robertson (2016) have analysed how repatriates view the psychological contract to be ruptured as a result of the role that wasta (nepotism or networking) has in moulding official and informal HR practises before and after assignment (Aldossari and Robertson, 2016). Conversely, research examining women's difficulties are generally descriptive in nature, referring to women working within the contract of workforce nationalisation (Al-Asfour and Khan, 2014; Al-Dosary and Rahman, 2005).

Research Methodology

Secondary or desk-based research is a summarisation and collation of existing research instead of primary research to collect data (Goundar, 2012). To execute the secondary research, journal papers and books were compiled using the University of Liverpool's discovery search engine and Google Scholar.

Advantages and disadvantages of secondary research

Using the secondary data collection method was beneficial for the subject of the study for several reasons. First, it was very economical as this method allowed for easy access to many

studies which have already been published on gender inequality in employment. In addition, there was a breadth of secondary data available on gender equality and the factors affecting equal employment opportunities, a good amount of quantitative data to verify the information, and insightful and in-depth qualitative data as a means to further clarify the analyses and conclusions. Cowton (1998) has indicated that the researcher could use various types of quantitative and qualitative data, such as information from government agencies, which provides a wide range of usable data for the researcher.

However, secondary data collection has several limitations. First, the lack of data specificity for the study's objective has proven problematic. For example, the absence of studies on equal employment opportunities inside the Middle East or North Africa reduced the generalisability of the results. Moreover, no previous research has precisely examined the question regarding the strategic role of HR managers in gender equality in employment. Answering this question requires a great deal of analysis and synthesis and various combinations of research and link research. Thus, primary data could generate more accurate analyses and conclusions.

Discussion

In the discussion, we will analyse the previously mentioned factors and their impacts on HRM practises in KSA. Then we will explore the Ulrich (1997) model, and its four roles for HRM, which can help the organisation determine how and to what degree HR managers are participating in the four roles in achieving gender equality in employment

Question 1: What factors affect HRM practises in KSA?

HRM practises should consider the unique circumstances of working women in KSA. When organisations plan to include Saudi women in the labour market, it is essential to consider the Saudi Arabian contextual variables, including culture, regulatory factors, and tradition (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020). These factors are pertinent when developing any strategic plan for the organisation and appropriate strategies for Saudi women to achieve gender equality in employment (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020).

This study indicates that the Saudi social elements enhance conventional gender ideology, in which women, even those with full-time employment, remain mainly accountable for their families and are supposed to foremost be committed to their responsibilities as mothers and wives (Al-Rasheed and Azzam, 2012). HR managers are also hesitant to employee women due to institutional constraints inside firms which cast doubt on women's eligibility for work (Alharbi, 2021; AlMunajjed, 2010). This is confirmed by previous studies on the conventional division of labour in KSA, where males are thought to hold the management positions and they are the ones who make decisions in general (Hamdan, 2005).

Moreover, this research promotes awareness and develops valuable information about Saudi female employees and the effect of three institutional pillars on women's careers. HR resource

managers in KSA are consequently under considerable pressure to uphold these pillars and also embrace innovative HR techniques to meet the country's purpose of increasing women's presence in the workforce (SPA, 2016; Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020). Nevertheless, implementing these principles continues to be a significant issue, with regulatory constraints pushing one way and cultural-cognitive and normative influences pointing in the other direction (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020).

From the research, it was found that the rate of development at the cultural-cognitive and normative levels is slower than the rate of change at the regulatory level. This means that change is occurring at a fast pace in KSA, with a clear gap between policymakers, top managers, and HR managers (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020). Whilst HR managers strive to modernise their operations in response to the rapidly changeable regulatory environment and to raise women's labour force participation, their capacity to implement significant reforms is hampered by national cultural-cognitive processes and the lack of supporting normative institutional factors (Budhwar et al., 2019).

Question 2: **What is the strategic role of human resource managers in achieving gender equality in employment in KSA?**

Research on the function of HR managers in organisations in KSA is scarce. The gap is exacerbated further when attempting to comprehend the role of HR managers in supporting the national objective of improving women's careers and eliminating gender inequality. Even as HR managers/management departments continue growing in prominence as key associates in implementing operations and businesses, raising organisational competitiveness, and improving profitability (Lepak and Shaw, 2008), the understanding of what they practise in KSA is scant, if it exists at all.

To address this issue, this study suggests using Ulrich's (1997) HRM four roles model to determine how and to what degree HR managers are participating in HRM in KSA, especially in the area of gender equality. Through this paradigm, HR managers are required to reorganise their delivery of conventional services or duties, including recruiting and selection, in ways which improve strategy implementation, efficiency, employee participation, and capacity for change (Ulrich, 1997).

To drive value creation and address rapidly shifting business issues, HR managers must embody four main tasks, which are classified as: strategic focus compared with operational focus as well as processes compared with people. Moreover, the expert and the advocate are operational-focused positions, whereas the champion and the partner are strategic-focused positions. In these four positions, the partner and the expert are concerned with people, whereas the champion and the advocate are concerned with procedures. The four HR roles are shown in the following diagram (Ulrich, 1997).

Figure 4: HRM four roles model (Ulrich, 1997 as citied in Mei and Subramaniam, 2014)

Definition and Factors Affecting HR Roles

The role of strategic partner

According to Mei and Subramaniam (2014), the strategic partner job includes tasks that aid in the implementation of a business strategy. Lemmergaard (2009) describes this function as focusing on the methods and processes that will accomplish the desired objectives. This function is assessed based on how well the HR professional collaborates with top and line management to implement overall company objectives to accomplish organisational goals (Ulrich & Eichinger, 1998).

The role of Change Champion

This job is focused on people, and as Mei and Subramaniam (2014) points out, HR is particularly positioned to perform this function because of its involvement with people and culture. This facilitator function acts as a catalyst for change in other sectors and across the organisation. HR professionals serve as "change champions" when they assist in implementing change by identifying important change procedures and fostering commitment to those processes to guarantee that change happens as planned.

The role of the administrative expert

This position is responsible for maintaining conventional HR procedures (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). This position demands the development and implementation of efficient HR operations,

including staffing, training, appraisal, pay, and benefits. Regular tracking, monitoring, and enhancement of these procedures bolster the HR function's legitimacy.

The role of an employee advocate

This function demands the HR professional to understand and address workers' problems via various communication methods, such as surveys for the employee, group meetings, and sharing information with them (Mei and Subramaniam, 2014).

The four roles model were selected by Singh et al. (2012) for various reasons: The model is based on empirical research, which aims to discover whether HR professionals perform their roles. It has been broadly used by many researchers, even some in Arab countries. It precisely determines the details required to conduct each role, thus allowing space for empirical investigations (Singh et al., 2012). Finally, according to Tlaiss and Al Waqfi (2020), the model is suitable for examining changes in HRM practises after Vision 2030 because it recognises the presence of natural changes in HR activities.

Conclusions

The 2030 Vision of KSA was launched in part to diversify the country's economy and create job opportunities for Saudis, as well as to empower women, give them an essential role in economic participation, and create job opportunities for them. After these critical decisions, the rate of female participation in the workforce in KSA has increased. Despite this improvement, there is still a significant disparity between men and women in their participation in the labour force. This led to the theory that there are variables which have a vital impact on the rate of women's participation in the workforce. Several studies have indicated that culture plays a major role in the low percentage of women's involvement in the workforce. In Saudi society, women are not considered the breadwinners of the traditional family because their primary responsibility is childcare and domestic work. Every attempt to change this situation has been met with widespread resistance and skepticism. However, there are many changes and laws issued to increase the percentage of Saudi women's participation, and they are happening at a rapid pace in KSA. To increase our understanding of the influencing factors, we used the institutional theory, and we link it to HRM, which we found that the rate of development at the cultural, cognitive, and normative levels is slower than the rate of change at the organisational level. The rapid development in the organisational level has caused the role of HR managers in KSA to evolve into a more strategic position and away from a primarily managerial one. Hence, HR managers play an essential role in translating national goals into organisational objectives by adopting new HR strategies and directing changes towards more women-friendly corporate cultures. However, an obstacle for HR managers is the rapid change of systems by the government and the slow evolution of the cultural level of knowledge and standards. This puts them in a difficult situation as they are forced to develop a strategy which accounts for all these factors.

Moreover, we did not find previous research on the strategic role of HR managers in achieving gender equality in employment in KSA. Most of the research that we found on the challenges facing Saudi women is often theoretical and not applied in practice.

Due to the absence of any previous studies, we found a model that can help organisations and manger in understanding the strategic role of HR managers due to its application in Arab countries and the convergence of cultures. Ulrich (1997) model consists of four roles: strategic partner, change champion, administrative, and employee advocate expert. Each role has its own approach. This model can help organisations determine how and to what degree HR managers participate in achieving gender equality in employment by designing a questionnaire to measure these four roles of their HR managers.This model is the most appropriate model to apply in KSA to examine the changes in HRM practises after Vision 2030 because it recognises the existence of natural changes in HR activities.

Overall, when developing a strategy for organisations, HR managers must consider the current external environment and the changes occurring within it, as well as the status of the organisation's internal environment and an understanding of its practises of HRM. This also includes knowledge of the current level of skills and experience available in the labour market in order to develop a strategy to improve and refine the skill levels of Saudi women to make them an effective component of the organisation.

Recommendations and Implementation Plan

The findings of the study show a gap in the workforce between women and men and a need to develop customised policies which address Saudi women's work environments so that they can participate more efficiently in national development (Kemp and Madsen, 2014). Saudi HR managers should take a more proactive role as agents of change for promoting equality throughout their firms by upgrading policies and processes to guarantee that women have equal opportunities as men (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

The first suggestion doing a survey where the Mei and Subramaniam (2014) study indicated that the survey is the best way to identify the role of HR managers by measuring the roles specified in the Ulrich (1997) model. Moreover, to determine how and to what degree HR managers are participating in the four HR roles in KSA. Secondly, to achieve gender equality, the HR manager must adopt several practises to raise the rate of women and attract them to the work environment in the organisation. To do so, the organisation must provide more flexibility, part-time work, telecommuting opportunities, support during pregnancy, and childcare (Kemp and Madsen, 2014). Owing to the disparate demands placed on men and women throughout the workday, if firms can provide workers with a flexible work schedule, it will encourage more women to seek jobs. A flexible work policy is a significant step toward achieving gender equality in organisations (Gardiner and Tomlinson, 2009).

In addition, HRM departments should offer training courses to outfit women with the skills necessary to handle extreme workloads and gain work-life balance. It is also the responsibility of HRM to develop equitable recruiting, selecting, advancement, and evaluation systems which support equality instead of prejudice in order to encourage women and advance their careers (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

Organisations must also support the work-life balance as such practises are critical components of enabling women to obtain successful employment. Work-life balance acts as an attraction technique, strengthens employee connections, and boosts workers' self-esteem and health. When workers have time to concentrate on what matters to them, they have better manage of their own lives and professional matters, resulting in increased productivity for the organisation (Haley et al., 2005; Khan and Agha, 2013).

Additionally, HRM ement at multinational and domestic organisations must devote resources to building more inclusive workplaces for women and establishing structures to support HRM programmes which encourage a female-friendly work environment (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Several such initiatives may be taken to improve the workplace environment for female employees. For instance, HRM might potentially reconfigure women's work responsibilities to allow for telecommuting, a reduced workweek, or job sharing (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Given the significance which Saudi culture places on women's maternal roles, HRM departments could provide onsite childcare facilities to enable working women to attend to these responsibilities more readily (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

Moreover, democratic conversation allows individuals with a variety of perspectives and from various groups to participate in discussions. They may exchange ideas and negotiate throughout the debate to establish agreements which will benefit their professional progress (Leinonen, 2012). Thus, a working conference is critical for creating democratic discourse and providing a forum for resolving gender issues to create an equitable atmosphere. This seems to be a crucial and critical step in achieving gender equality in the workplace (Leinonen, 2012).

However, it should be noted that although flexible work may encourage women to seek employment, flexible occupations are often associated with lower salaries and fewer opportunities for advancement. As a result, this can result in more income and career growth inequalities inside corporations (Gardiner and Tomlinson, 2009). Apart from this, companies continue to face challenges in achieving gender equality across their operations. It has been widely established that laws may be an effective tool in the face of external demands for equality, such as anti-discrimination legislation which addresses concerns of age, gender, ethnicity, and religion (Williams et al., 2010).

The researcher summarises the proposals that would improve the conditions and opportunities for women to participate, including:

Establish structures to support HRM programmes that encourage a female-friendly work environment.

Using surveys to explore the strategic role of HRM in achieving gender equality.

Providing a forum for resolving gender issues to create an equitable atmosphere.

Building more inclusive workplaces for women.

Flexible work schedule.

Training courses.

Encourage a female-friendly work environment.

The researcher adds to her suggestions for the future benefit of organisations and those concerned with HR managers and those responsible for increasing women's employment opportunities by:

First, since there is no previous research that discusses the strategic role of HR managers, we suggest surveying to measure the role of HR managers in their organizations, evaluate the results, and make suggestions for improvement.

Second, since women face the barrier of cultural expression with the presence of men as a culture rooted in Arab thought, the researcher suggests encouraging dialogue sessions, expressing opinions, and giving women an opportunity to occupy high positions.

Third, the geographic mobility of women in KSA means that HR managers should hire Saudi females from cities that are more open at work and deal with men from cities that are less open in order to reflect that in the work environment. And vice versa, by assigning female employees from less open cities to cities with high levels of openness, thus changing the organisations' culture and environment.

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