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Shattering a New Glass Ceiling: A Case of Jordanian Women in Leading International Projects

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Abstract

This research studies the various barriers that impede Jordanian female academics' advancement into leadership positions with a focus on the attainment of internationally funded projects. By examining the case of Yarmouk University in Jordan, the study inspects a new "glass ceiling" which women face in leadership positions and the field of international projects in academic institutions. It investigates the many obstacles that female academics face as applicants, participants, and leaders of internationally funded academic projects. With a focus on the personal and academic experiences of Jordanian female academics from Yarmouk University, the study highlights a number of social, cultural, administrative, academic, and personal barriers that hinder their presence as leaders of international projects. While much has been written about women and leadership in higher education in different parts of the world, the very focus on specific leadership opportunities is still lacking in recent research. Therefore, this study comes to fill a significant gap in research about female leadership in the academe.

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1. Introduction

Gender inequality has been recognized as a global dilemma. While women are still far from achieving equality in all aspects of social, political, and economic life, their presence in higher positions of authority, power, and decision-making is still unnoticed. Women's status in most countries all over the world has revealed a discernible marginalization in high-ranking or senior positions of leadership. The global statistics show that women hold only less than 30% of senior management roles (Thornton, 2019). They are still "*firsts* rather than the norm, and inequality is most visible in this sphere because women are rendered virtually invisible" (AbiRafeh, 2022, para. 2). This invisibility is reflected in many leadership positions in the public sphere, including academic sector. The Arab world is no exception as it also reflects the global statistics, which show that Arab countries have the largest overall gender gap between women and men, which is estimated to need 153 years to close (AbiRafeh, 2022). In most Arab countries, women are underrepresented at all levels of decision-making in public administration, and gender disparity is most noticeable at the highest levels of decision-making (United Nations Development Program, 2022). The consequences of gender inequality are noticed in the subordination, stereotyping, and discrimination that women face in society (Muassomah et al., 2023). Such ideology impacts the participation of women in leading and decision-making positions in all fields of the public sector, including the academe.

With the increasing numbers of female faculty in public and private educational institutions in the Arab world in the 20th and the 21st centuries, women have been struggling with multiple visible and invisible barriers that hinder their advancement and progress in many areas, especially in academia. While being a career for high-achieving women, academia has been suffering from a patriarchal dominance in which male academics are offered high-ranked and leading positions while women are excluded from the top of the administrative hierarchy. In its "Review of the Status of Women and Gender Equality in the Arab Region", the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia reflects on how female participation in administrative and

managerial positions is minimal in all areas of the economy. The report shows that women in the Arab region face two major forms of segregation; "horizontal segregation", when women do not do the same types of jobs as men, and "vertical segregation", when women get a lower status than men when they are employed in the same professions. Therefore,

gender-based occupational segregation is a major cause that hinders women in the Arab region from having a role in administrative and managerial positions, and it is often justified by exaggerated accounts of difference between men and women in relation to education, training, work experience, and innate capabilities (United Nations ESCWA, 2016).

However, men, on the other side, are over-represented in decision-making positions when doing the same types of jobs as women. Likewise, in academia, fewer women are offered these leadership positions due to the same gender-based occupational segregation that inflict most of the economic and public sector. Such segregation has many impacts on women's professional advancement, work opportunities, and equality in the workplace.

Building on the many studies that examine the marginalization and exclusion of women from academic leadership positions, this current study examines a new "glass ceiling" that women face in the field of international projects in academic institutions. While international opportunities for collaboration, networking, and partnership between universities in the Arab world and other Western/European universities have been recently increasing, male dominance has been noticed in which female academics are held back due to several reasons. The study investigates the many obstacles that female academics face as applicants, participants, and leaders of internationally funded academic projects. With a focus on the personal and academic experiences of Jordanian female academics from Yarmouk University, the study highlights a number of social, cultural, administrative, academic, and personal obstacles that hinder their presence as leaders of international academic and research projects. By using the qualitative research method of the focus group, this study has in-depth discussions with 24 female academics

from Yarmouk University in Jordan. The studied women academics are divided into three focus groups to answer a set of questions in a moderated setting for the researchers to be able to get more nuanced feedback for the research questions. Each group is chosen due to predefined demographic traits that distinguish the women participants in terms of their scientific, social, or humanitarian disciplines, their academic ranks (associate professor, assistant professor, and instructor), their years of expertise, and their previous or current leading administrative positions in the university. Thus, the participants are enlisted demographically in the three focus groups. The various questions raised for discussion in the focus groups are classified according to the kind of barriers faced by the women academics of the study, such as social and cultural obstacles, administrative obstacles, academic and professional obstacles, and personal obstacles. However, the results of the study show that female academics face a number of social and cultural barriers due to previously constructed stereotypes of gender roles in society which burden them with traditional domestic, familial, and financial responsibilities. While they show a number of personal barriers related to fears of failure, risk-taking, time management, and lack of support, the participants reveal a larger set of academic and professional barriers, such as lack of knowledge, training and mentorship, mutual coordination, and networking available to them in their institution. Other limitations that are related to the participants' specific disciplines are a number of administrative barriers, including institutional bureaucracy and complicated promotional procedures.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Women Academic Leadership in a Global Context

While women have got an increased representation in leadership roles in various domains of the economy and the public sector, they remain starkly underrepresented in senior academic leadership roles. As compared to the number of female faculty in public and private universities and in community colleges worldwide, as well as the increasing proportion of female students attending these colleges at the undergraduate and graduate levels, the number of female academics holding senior

higher education leadership positions has remained very small. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization UNESCO report has revealed that the average tertiary enrollment rate rose from less than 10% in 1970 to 41% in 2017, and the number of females enrolled in higher education has doubled in the same period of time (Salmi, 2020). However, women's advancement in higher education careers is still starkly low. Ensour et al. (2017) reflect on how women have started to find active participation and labor market advancement, but this is not the case for women faculty in the higher education sector. These women still face gender discrimination if they seek higher positions. Mousa (2021) highlights that there is a lack of policies guaranteeing gender egalitarianism in academia despite the development of many laws and dynamics that ensure empowerment and representation for women in both economic and political spheres. As a globally examined phenomenon, research has shown a limited role in women's leadership in academia. Corneille et al. (2019) argue that the underrepresentation of women faculty at professional levels is a global reality that could be solved only by urging universities to implement a policy of inclusive culture. For example, in the US, women hold the least senior administrative positions and are the lowest paid among higher education administrators (Bray et al. 2020). Studies of women in higher education in Austria, Australia, Germany, Italy, Sweden, South Africa, and the UK indicate that women are still underrepresented in higher education leadership (White & Burkinshaw, 2019). O'Connor (2018, p. 1) affirms that "formal positions of academic leadership in HE remain concentrated in male hands". With the many gains that women have made in higher education and the increasing numbers of women earning more degrees than men, one would expect a similarly high number of female academics in leadership positions. Espinosa (2011) connects the underrepresentation of women faculty in senior academic positions and the low aspiration female students might have as they recognize how academia does not treat female faculty fairly. Among the many gender equality issues that are reflected in HE systems worldwide, a recent report by the British Council highlights the major struggles for women as unequal

access to HE, the fewer resources and opportunities available to women, the existence of violence against women students and staff, and above all the sustained underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in HEIs (Mott, 2022). Male faculty members in HEIs remain advantaged at every stage of their academic careers. Although women tend to outnumber men in the enrollment rate in HE and progress through different academic ranks, “the senior positions are very disproportionately held by men” (Mott, 2022, p. 9). Yet, barriers to women’s advancement in academic leadership are affecting numerous attempts of women trying to lead in different approaches of academia. Mousa (2021) classifies the barriers that determine the representation of women faculty as both cultural barriers (e.g., familial obligations, “*think manager think male culture*”, and religious barriers) and institutional limitations (e.g., lack of administrative support, gender bias, and greediness of academic institutions). However, research on leadership in HE finds that in addition to “the discriminatory and exclusionary practices in recruitment, selection, and promotion,” many women find that the idea of leadership is unattractive and “difficult to navigate culturally” (Mott, 2022, p. 9). While this previous literature reveals the number of personal and cultural barriers faced by women in academic leadership, the impetus for the present study lies in its focus on specific leadership opportunities that are being sought by women in academia and the many other barriers that they face.

2.2. A New Glass Ceiling: Jordanian Women Academics

Observing the increasing numbers of female faculty teaching at Jordanian universities and the number of those leading or participating in the many opportunities of academic leadership, one cannot deny the apparent discrepancy between these numbers. This discrepancy is attributed to the many obstacles that the female academics of this study have revealed depending on their own perspectives and academic experiences. One of the recently excavated academic opportunities is the soliciting and leading of internationally funded academic and research projects. Observations from Jordanian universities have shown a new

“glass ceiling” to which female academics aspire but cannot reach. While much has been written about women and leadership in higher education in different parts of the world, the very focus on specific leadership opportunities is still lacking in recent research. Therefore, this study comes to fill a significant gap in research about female leadership in the academe, which touches on the many obstacles that hinder women academics from leading various international projects. With a focus on Jordan as a representative country, the research presents an example of a highly educated nation that is stepping into many global opportunities while struggling with several economic, social, and political challenges. While the research does not generalize about other Arab countries of the Middle East region, its findings confirm a similar situation in neighboring countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Lebanon, Kuwait, and the UAE.

The significance of this research study lies in its examination of the reality of female leadership opportunities in Jordanian universities and the many barriers that female academics face when trying to solicit and lead internationally funded academic projects, with Yarmouk University as an example. It not only fills a gap in higher education research but also helps in public administration and management policy construction. Additionally, it also provides a number of recommendations that academic leaders and decision-makers can find beneficial to increase women’s academic participation and leadership of international projects. Furthermore, this research adds a new perspective to the many studies of women’s leadership in academia and opens the door for further investigation of the challenges that Arab female academics face while seeking leadership positions at an international level. Thus, the current research studies the experiences of 24 female academics from Yarmouk University in Jordan who represent various disciplines and academic rankings, and it tries to answer the following questions:

1. What are the obstacles that female academics at Yarmouk University face while seeking a leading opportunity for international research projects?
2. Are there any differences in the answers of the studied participants depending on the

variants of a) Their Discipline/Department/Faculty, b) Academic rank, c) Years of expertise/academic experience, and d) Current or previous leading or administrative positions?

Jordan, officially The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, is a small Arab country in Western Asia. With a population of almost 10.5 million, making it the eleventh-most populous Arab country, Jordan is known for its diversity and inclusion of many nationalities, as it received many waves of refugees over the years. However, it is a country with a small economy but with a high rate of education. The UNESCO reports reveal that the literacy rate in Jordan is 98.01% which is considered the highest in the Middle East and one of the highest in the whole world (UNESCO, 2018). Hofstede Insights (2023) indicates that Jordan has a “hierarchical society” which means that people accept a hierarchical order that reflects inherent inequalities and centralization. Hofstede’s power distance dimension also reveals that less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country “expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (para. 2). Nevertheless, Jordan is considered a feminine country in that the focus is on “working in order to live”. People value equality, solidarity, and the quality of their working lives. While this dimension does not show that people believe in competition, achievement, and success, it reveals that the dominant values in society are caring for others and quality of life. This discrepancy in the analysis of the Jordanian society reveals the massive transformation in the country, with more educated women now competing for different job opportunities, seeking professional advancement, and aspiring for higher leadership positions.

By studying women in academia, this research adopts a transnational feminist theoretical approach that enables the researchers to study the experiences of Jordanian female academics within a larger context of women marginalization in a patriarchal cultural and social context. This theory offers transformative options for women around the globe to disrupt oppression, exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination against them. It also helps to study the challenges faced by Jordanian women academics as resonating in other parts

of the world, especially in the Middle East region. This theory “emphasizes intersectionality, interdisciplinarity, social activism, and justice, and collaboration” as explored by Enns et al. (2020, p. 2), which enables this research to find practical solutions and recommendations across disciplines concerning the research problem under study. The transnational approach seeks to explore the diverse experiences of women while speaking to a wide range of “interacting forces that have an impact on gendered relationships and experiences in a geopolitical context” (Enns et al., 2020, p. 1). Such context enables the study to examine the diverse experiences of Jordanian female academics with international projects leadership while exploring the barriers they face as different interacting forces. Furthermore, the transnational feminist context centralizes the voices and concerns of women and feminists from multiple world regions (the Arab world in this study) whose experiences challenge a mainstream Western discourse.

Studies of women in leadership have tackled their role in different domains, such as politics, economics, business, the arts, and sports, and explored a range of varied questions about women’s leadership relevant to women’s values and rights, social gender roles and stereotypes, family dynamics, and how and where women can lead across time and place. In their *Women and Leadership: History, Theories, and Case Studies* (2017), Goethals and Hoyt examine the fundamental aspects of women’s leadership, including the differences between women’s leadership and men’s leadership as well as the barriers to women’s leadership in a wide range of domains. They concluded that “gender” does matter for both how people respond to leaders and what leaders can bring to their roles.

The term “Glass Ceiling” is used to describe the invisible barriers that working women face, especially in high-achieving careers like academia. It represents a restriction that prohibits women from any progress toward leadership positions or the top of the administrative hierarchy. The US Federal Glass Ceiling Commission defines the glass ceiling as “the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from riding to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder regardless of their qualifications or

achievements” (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995, p. 4). While a term to use in the business sector as a metaphor for a barrier that women face at mid-management, the “glass ceiling” has been substituted with “labyrinth” to describe the barriers to women’s advancement in academia. Bray et al. (2020) argue that “women are not simply denied top leadership opportunities at the culmination of a long career but rather such opportunities seem to disappear at various points along their trajectories” (para. 3). Hence, the term labyrinth is utilized to depict this kind of invisible barrier that women academics hit without being able to recognize the reasons. “And even when women attain leadership positions”, Bray et al. add, they “face challenges embedded within institutional structures and systems—and perhaps most important, mindsets—that require transformative change” (2020, para. 3). These institutional structures, as well as social and cultural mindsets are among the many barriers that the Jordanian female academics of this study have revealed.

In a similar vein, White and Burkinshaw (2019) argue that women moving into leadership positions in HE are impeded by a number of barriers. These barriers include disciplinary differences, the underrepresentation of women as full professors, the lack of transparency in recruitment, promotion, and retention despite quality and diversity policies, limited geographic mobility for women, the gender pay gap, work flexibility, and the deep-rooted association of women with family and men with work. The authors find that research indicates that

the intransigent masculinist organizational culture, direct discrimination against academic women, the straightjacket that managerialism imposes on leadership style, and the symbolic violence on talented women produced by the practices of new managerialism are leading young, ambitious women to look elsewhere to build their careers. (pp. 2-3)

In a survey conducted by Pew Research Center in Washington, DC, on women and leadership titled “What’s Holding Women Back from Top Jobs” (2015), most Americans find women “indistinguishable” from men on key leadership traits such as intelligence and

capacity for innovation with many saying they are stronger than men in terms of being compassionate and organized leaders. However, the American public insists that barriers persist though women do not lack leadership toughness, and it is not always all about work-life balance.

On another account, the discrepancy between men and women in leadership in the Arab world is more severe as only 3.2% of leadership positions in academia are attained by women (Patel & Buiting, 2013), and the percentage is even less than 1% in the Gulf countries. Abu Syam and Attari (2018) indicate that only 11% of high academic ranks (professorship) are attained by women, which causes fewer women in academic leadership positions. The official numbers and figures of the General Jordanian Department of Statistics (DOS) have shown an increase in the number of women working in academia, especially during the 20th and the 21st centuries. As for the academic year of 2019/2020, (11394) faculty members work in public and private universities, as well as community colleges, of whom (8217) male academics with a percentage of (72.1%) and (3177) female academics with a percentage of (27.9%). These numbers show a (0.9%) increase in the percentage of female academics in these institutions over the last five years from 2016/2017 (DOS, 2019).

The number of female academics at Yarmouk University has also increased over the last decade, as they form (9%) of all Jordanian female faculty. Yarmouk University has 287 female academics until 2019/2020 who come from the diverse disciplines of STEM (Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Math), Humanities, Business and Administration, and Social Sciences.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Using a qualitative research approach, the researchers depended on in-depth face-to-face discussions with 24 female academics from Yarmouk University, who were divided into three focus groups. This approach enabled the researchers to examine the experiences of these participants to consider the sample representative of the university’s female

academics in general. The studied women academics came from different scientific, social, and humanitarian disciplines, and they differed in their academic ranks; associate professor, assistant professor, and instructor. They were also varied in their years of expertise and whether they had been in any of the leading administrative positions in the university. Thus, the groups were chosen according to predefined demographic traits that reflected the diversity of female academics in the university. Table 1 includes the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The focus group method provided this research with a more nuanced outlook on the studied topic, as well as enabled the researchers to observe the groups' dynamics, natural responses, spontaneous reactions, body language, and diverse arguments, which are preferable over individual interviews. As performed in a structured and moderated setting, the questions directed toward the

groups were predetermined and fixed in their topic, number, and order. A co-moderator was assigned to facilitate participation, take notes, record the meetings, and observe the reactions of the participants. Eight participants were recruited for each focus group in a stratified sampling method to represent all academic ranks, ages, disciplines, and administrative roles. Such a method provided the current research with real-time, unfiltered responses that revealed the participants' feelings and perceptions toward the studied topic. Consequently, the data collected and analyzed in this current research was taken only from the semi-structured meetings with each group. Since the questions were previously prepared for each meeting, the meetings focused on each set of questions that reflected the various barriers that women face while seeking leadership opportunities in academia. Tables 2-5 show more detailed information about the focus group questions.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Participant/ Respondent	Academic Rank	Age	Academic Discipline	Years of Expertise	Administrative/ leadership position
1	Professor	45-55	Law	Above 15	Yes (Head of Dept)
2	Professor	45-55	Islamic Studies	Above 15	Yes (Vice Dean)
3	Associate Professor	45-55	Humanities	10-15	Yes (Head of Dept)
4	Associate Professor	45-55	Sports Sciences	10-15	Yes (Vice Dean)
5	Associate Professor	45-55	Engineering	10-15	No
6	Associate Professor	45-55	Islamic Studies	Above 15	No
7	Associate Professor	45-55	Humanities	Above 15	No
8	Associate Professor	45-55	Sciences	Above 15	Yes (Assistant Dean)
9	Associate Professor	45-55	Sciences	Above 15	Yes (Assistant Dean)
10	Assistant Professor	35-45	Humanities	10-15	Yes (Assistant Dean)
11	Assistant Professor	35-45	Humanities	10-15	No
12	Assistant Professor	35-45	Humanities	10-15	No
13	Assistant Professor	35-45	Engineering	Less than 10	Yes (Center Manager)
14	Assistant Professor	35-45	Humanities	Less than 10	No
15	Assistant Professor	35-45	Sciences	Less than 10	No
16	Assistant Professor	35-45	Sports Sciences	Less than 10	No
17	Assistant Professor	35-45	Media	Less than 10	Yes (Assistant Dean)
18	Assistant Professor	35-45	Sciences	Less than 10	No
19	Assistant Professor	35-45	Humanities	Less than 10	No
20	Instructor	30-35	Administration	Less than 10	No
21	Instructor	35-45	Humanities	Less than 10	No
22	Instructor	35-45	Humanities	Less than 10	No
23	Instructor	45-55	Humanities	10-15	No
24	Instructor	45-55	Humanities	10-15	No

3.2. Procedure

The total number of participants in this study was 24 female academics, and they were

divided into three focus groups. Each focus group met in person at a certain date and time for 90 minutes on the Yarmouk University campus. Informed consent was attained at each

meeting in which participants were informed about the purposes of the study and the audio recording that followed during the discussion. The researchers and the co-moderator guaranteed an equal response time between the participants, and less talkative participants were asked direct questions to gain information from all participants equally. All of the conducted interviews were in Arabic since the native language of the participants was Arabic. The researchers then translated the responses from Arabic into English and compared both the original responses and translations constantly to guarantee the accuracy of the translation. However, the recordings were transcribed afterward to start the data analysis and categorization of answers. Many other detailed notes were also collected during these

meetings. Throughout this process, confidentiality was secured by using data pseudonymization, in which real names were replaced by pseudonymous identifiers.

The various questions raised for discussion in the focus groups were classified according to the kind of barriers faced by the women academics of the study, which were presented as; social and cultural obstacles, administrative obstacles, academic and professional obstacles, and personal obstacles. While these sections were developed in reference to the previous literature review, they represented an accessible research tool to analyze the responses of the individuals in the study sample. The questions within each of the above research sections were developed as follows:

Table 2

Social and Cultural Obstacles

<i>Interview Questions</i>
1. Do you think that social/cultural stereotypes about women who are incapable of leadership, are major obstacles for women academics to lead international projects?
2. Do male academics think that “women” are incapable of leading in general?
3. Does the academic milieu at Yarmouk University accept women leaders of international projects?
4. Do men accept working under the leadership of women?
5. Is there a social and cultural defect in raising women as leaders or encouraging their leadership opportunities?
6. Does patriarchal culture dominate in academe and monopolize international projects’ leadership or participation?
7. Do you think female academics spend more time and effort than men in leading international projects?
8. Does a stereotype of women as unable to control their emotions prevail in academia and hinder women’s opportunities to lead international projects?
9. Is there a conflict of roles for the female academic concerning her familial/social role and her role as a professor and leader in the university?
10. Do women academics feel jealous of their female colleagues in leadership?
11. Do women academics prefer to work with a male leader rather than a female one?

Table 3

Administrative Obstacles

<i>Interview Questions</i>
1. Are there clear university administrative policies toward empowering women academics to lead international projects?
2. Is there a lack in the opportunities offered for women academics to lead in international projects?
3. Do favoritism and friendships play a role in nominations and collaborations in international academic projects?
4. Do promotion procedures play a role in hindering women’s participation and leadership opportunities in international projects?
5. Are there clear laws and instructions concerning women’s participation and leadership in international projects?
6. Does the university support women’s participation and the leading of international projects?
7. Is there a lack of training and development programs that enable women academics to lead international projects?
8. Is there administrative flexibility that would enable women academics to lead in international projects?
9. Do women academics receive appreciation and encouragement for leading international projects?

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Do women academics practice their complete authority and power as leaders of international projects? 11. Do female academics participate in the administrative process of decision-making at the university? 12. Do you feel that the university is serious in its support for women academics to lead international projects? |
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Table 4*Professional and Academic Obstacles*

<i>Interview Questions</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are there clear opportunities for collaboration and partnership between women academics from different Jordanian universities? 2. Is there financial support by the university for women leaders in international projects? 3. Are there clear exchange opportunities between male and female academics in the same university? 4. Do women academics face any challenges in working with male colleagues under their leadership in international projects? 5. Do female leaders of international projects prefer to work with female academics? 6. Are there any challenges for women academics in: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Time management b. Research planning c. Financial planning d. Human resource planning, which hinders their leadership of international projects? 7. Does the university realize the importance of having women leaders in international projects?

Table 5*Personal Obstacles*

<i>Interview Questions</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do women academics have a lack of self-confidence when it comes to applying for international projects' leadership? 2. Do women academics suffer from the inability to balance social/familial life and their academic/leading responsibilities? 3. Do women academics feel that they are marginalized/excluded from higher administrative positions in the university? 4. Do female academics see leadership as a male job, so they should act in a masculine way as leaders? 5. Are female academics afraid of being fully responsible as leaders of international projects? 6. Do women academics face difficulties in traveling and moving more than men do? 7. Do women academics suffer from stress and anxiety more than male academics in the same leading positions? 8. Do women academics have the appropriate leadership skills as their male counterparts? 9. Do female academics hesitate when they are offered leading positions in the university? 10. Do women academics suffer from the interference of their male relatives, i.e., husbands, fathers, brothers, etc.?

4. Results

Women in Jordan make up almost half of the population, with 5.1 million out of 10.5 million (Nahhas, 2021). According to the UNESCO report (2019), the adult literacy rate is 95% for Jordanian women and 99% for women between the ages of 15 and 25. These numbers are reflected in the high rate of enrollment in higher education by women in Jordan and the increase in female participation in the labor force in the last decade. Female academics in Jordan play a significant role in the academic, social, and economic development of the country, which works towards the general national goals of

sustainable development and progress. Their attainment of leading administrative positions and participation in soliciting and leading internationally funded academic and research projects in their institutions have had a positive impact on their personal and academic development, as well as the economic and professional development of their institutions. However, research has shown a limited number of female academics in Jordanian universities which lead these kinds of international projects as a general indication of the limited leadership opportunities that are offered for women academics to enable them to reach the top of the administrative hierarchy. The head of the Association of

Jordanian Women Academics, Lubna Akroush, indicates that women academics in Jordan are still at the beginning of a long journey toward equality (Nahhas, 2021). Examining the different barriers that women face in academia in Jordan, Akroush discusses the difficulties that women face in receiving promotions, financial/academic scholarships, medical insurance plans, as well as occupying leadership positions in higher education institutions, as compared to their male counterparts (Nahhas, 2021). The lack of equal opportunities for women academics is evident in the number of women leading higher education institutions in Jordan. Since the establishment of the first university in Jordan in 1962, only two women have become senior executives. However, women lead fewer than 7% of Arab higher education institutions (Aleraqi & Salahuddin, 2018). To compare globally, 18% of the institutions that are ranked in the top 200 universities by the UK Times higher education have female leaders, while 30% of US college presidents are women (Aleraqi & Salahuddin, 2018).

This current study focuses on the many barriers that impede Jordanian women academics' moving into the leadership of internationally funded projects, with Yarmouk University as an example. The ladies of the current research sample have revealed a number of challenges that they face as they try to gain leadership positions in their institutions, in addition to the several obstacles that they reveal while attempting to participate in or solicit international projects. While women historically have been resisting all prejudice, oppression, exclusion, and discrimination against them, the female academics of the current research have classified the barriers that hit their moving into leadership or hinder their progress as social and cultural barriers, self/personal barriers, administrative barriers, and academic/professional barriers. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was utilized by depending on in-depth face-to-face discussions with 24 female academics from Yarmouk University who were divided into three focus groups.

4.1. Social and Cultural Barriers

Female academics in Jordanian universities, especially at Yarmouk University, have revealed a number of social and cultural

obstacles from the surrounding milieu that imposes on them specific gender roles and responsibilities as "women" in society. Ensour et al. (2017) indicate that female academics face interconnected and interrelated barriers embodied in cultural, social, economic, and legal factors. The female academics of the current research see that society still looks at the woman as playing an "ineffective" role despite their educational level and academic position. The assigned stereotypical feminine roles are still considered subordinate to their societies; as one female academic describes it, *"They try to limit and constrict the woman with specific roles in which she exists, and she's present, but at the same time she is considered 'ineffective.' She is still the emotional and compassionate entity while the man is the voice of the mind and control which necessarily assign her a less effective position"*. Such views are ingrained in the cultural practices of society, which came to impact women's careers and professional advancement. The influence of culture extends to impact human resource management and policies in that it legalizes discriminatory policies against women (Ensour et al., 2017). These policies deepen the stereotypical pictures of women, emphasizing their domestic roles and "making it harder to break the glass ceiling and old boy network" (Ensour et al., 2017, p. 1).

The above-constructed gender roles have historically hindered women in their career advancement. They create an excluding image for the female as assigned a non-paid "caring job" that limits her within the domestic role of taking care of the husband, the children, and doing the housework. Although naturally an important job in building societies, it is still considered subordinate work as compared with the male work outside the house. There are many social demands placed on women that continue to push them to be only caregivers to children and elders. Penney et al. (2015) argue that these gendered expectations of women as caregivers interfere with their productivity and create stressors and fears that impact women's success in promotion and tenure. Official statistics have recently revealed that the number of female-led families is increasing in Jordan, with 17.5% of the 2.242 million families being led by women (DOS, 2019). While a leading position in itself, these women

are denied the recognition of their work as “effective” or “equal” to the male work in society. Mousa (2021) argues that women are always perceived as caregivers who bear the burden of familial responsibilities, particularly in the traditional societies of the Middle East.

In this sense, the female academics of this study confirm that the social and cultural stereotypical gender roles assigned to women are major barriers that impede their moving into leadership positions in their institutions and necessarily hinder their reach to international projects. Their familial values and responsibilities reduce their effective participation in management positions (Mousa, 2021). However, they have added a new perspective that some may see as “unconsciously” leading women academics to avoid stepping into this field. The female participants in this study believe that participation and involvement in international projects would consume a lot of their time and add a new burden besides all the burdens and responsibilities they are carrying inside and outside their households. One participant has indicated that *“A woman can reach a point of starting to cut many of the assigned jobs she is tackling, and of course, she is going to give her home and familial responsibilities the priority”*. Women academics tend to sacrifice many opportunities to meet the expectations surrounding their “second shift” or caregiving and household responsibilities (Penney et al. 2015). Another female faculty member adds that *“while women can carry many responsibilities and work in many tasks at the same time, they tend to prioritize their marriage and motherhood roles”*. Penney et al. (2015) argue that for many women in academia, “tensions arise between societal expectations of child rearing and institutional pressure to perform, leaving a sense of guilt surrounding their inability to meet the expectations of either a good parent or a good academic” (p. 460).

Women have been playing the two roles of “childbearing and reproduction” domestically as well as productive work publicly. While biologically, women assume the responsibility of childbearing and maternity, they are assigned a socially constructed reproductive role, including domestic tasks and the care and maintenance of the future workforce. This

underestimated reproductive role is explored by the female academics of the current study as one participant explains, *“Yes, women assume this role but at the expense of her character construction, psychological stability, and physical health, while a man succeeds, yes, but by leaving this important familial role to the woman”*. Therefore, the female academics in this study have confirmed that social gender roles and cultural constructions of women/men’s lives and maternal/paternal roles play a significant role in hindering their attempts to solicit and lead international projects. They believe that women are not offered the space to think of any extra work that would burden them in addition to their already established responsibilities.

4.2. Personal Barriers

The female faculty members in the current study reflect on self/personal barriers that impede women academics from the top administrative positions or the leadership of international projects. Although non-personal barriers may have a larger impact on women’s choices, self-restricting obstacles can also play a significant role in affecting women’s leadership opportunities. While these obstacles, classified as personal, are related to personal knowledge, self-awareness, and subjective perspectives, they may interact with other professional and academic barriers that will be discussed later in this research. As indicated by one of the participants in this study, fear of failure is one of these self-imposed barriers that would obstruct women’s career advancement. Mousa (2021) argues that at the individual (micro) level, a considerable percentage of women find themselves accepting masculine domination due to their fear of failure and lack of confidence. The participants in Mousa’s study reflect on how women always keep themselves apart from managerial roles because *“they are afraid of criticism, failure, and finding opposition from their male colleagues”* (p. 5). Despite their academic positions as holders of Master’s and Doctoral degrees as well as their teaching and communication capabilities, in addition to their long work guiding, supervising, and consulting students, these female academics have shown a self-imposed fear of failure and criticism that impede their work. *“It’s just me, a personal barrier. My fear of failure”* says

one academic. The female faculty members of the study have discussed the lack of training opportunities and forms of mentorship by their institutions. As they lack experience in forms and tactics of leadership, these women reflect on their fear of attaining leadership positions without being previously prepared for them with appropriate training and continuous mentorship. While they realize that this kind of personal barrier is more likely to perpetuate the stereotypical image of women as unable to lead, they believe that they can do it if they are well prepared for it.

Studying many experiences and challenges of women in academic leadership, Smiley et al. (2021) indicate that the gender gap in academic leadership positions in HE persists because of the many barriers that prevent women from entering these positions, including those related to “workplace culture and personal consideration” (p. 1) As a qualitative exploratory study, Smiley et al. (2021) interviewed 38 women leaders in positions ranging from Assistant Dean to President. Despite their diverse and unique journeys, few women revealed that “they entered academia with the goal of transitioning from faculty to administration, and instead became accidental leaders” (p. 2). Nevertheless, they emphasize the value of leadership development, including “formal mentoring, informal advice, and systemic training, but also indicated receiving inadequate amounts of this development” (p. 2). The findings of this research agree with what the academics of Yarmouk University described as a lack of appropriate training and different forms of mentorship and support for women to attain leadership positions and solicit international projects.

In the same sense, another female academic described a different kind of fear that women leaders expose, which is related to the relationships with their male academic counterparts. She explains, “A woman’s mistake is always magnified in the workplace”. Due to negative double standards in reacting to women’s work as compared to men’s work in the workplace, women are more scared of making mistakes or trying new things than men. The women in this study believe that this kind of negative doubleness generates gender discrimination and bigotry in the academe in

which male colleagues would underestimate their female counterparts’ work and look at them as disqualified for leadership. Mousa (2021) has referred to this aspect as “Think manager, think male culture” which reveals masculinist cultural domination in academia that prefers men in leadership positions and marginalizes women as inadequate to lead. The female academic steps into administrative work with great stress and fear that she is going to be judged not because of her work but because of her gender. One participant says, “*The whole atmosphere is stressful, and our male colleagues are unable to get beyond our gender. Why she? They would always ask*”. Another participant adds that “*it’s a sensitive situation as I would always try to avoid any clash with my male colleague*”. Muhaisen (2011) studies the personal and non-personal barriers in scientific research as experienced by faculty members of the Palestinian universities in Gaza. The study found that personal barriers have exceeded non-personal ones in their impact on scientific research. Social barriers affect faculty with a percentage of 71.3%, while cognitive barriers have 65.2% and psychological barriers have 70.2%. These numbers agree with how the female academics in this current research emphasize the larger impact of social and personal barriers that hinder women’s career advancement.

The female academics of this study confirmed that they had avoided many opportunities for international projects because of the above-discussed fears. One participant comments, “*The anxiety caused by the fear of failure or making mistakes depresses women, so they do not step into this experience from the beginning, or they do not try again if they fail at the first attempt*”. Albaghdadi and Magableh (2020) explored the barriers that hinder women academic leaders from assuming higher positions on the boards of trustees of Jordanian public universities. The study found that female leaders have shown a high level of enthusiasm for work, love, care for details, and accuracy in accomplishment. However, the barriers that face them include family commitments and responsibilities, women’s inability to achieve a work-life balance, and the patriarchal Jordanian society that discriminates against women. A similar finding has been reached by Baker (2010), which is titled “Choices or Constraints?”

Family Responsibilities, Gender, and Academic Career". The study explores how male and female university-based academics, who are introduced as examples of highly educated professionals with strong career commitments, are different in their family formations and household responsibilities. It investigates the many "gendered priorities, perceptions, and constraints reported by academics [male and female] with similar educational qualifications". The paper argues that family patterns and practices are major causes for the academic gender gap, and they also slow women's progression and promotional opportunities and hinder the many reform attempts for gender equity and work-life balance.

The examination of women leaders' work is an added value to the current research in which all the studied female academics agree on the high level of proficiency that women show in leadership positions. One participant indicates, "Women seek perfection in their work, and they show high levels of responsibility and devotion whether it is appreciated or not". However, the kind of praise that women leaders' work receives is also controversial. The above positive reactions to women work in this current research or in Albaghdadi and Magableh (2020) have been questioned by other studies such as Bray et al. (2020). This study questions the support and praise that women in leadership receive.

Conversely, when women leaders receive support and encouragement, too, it is often accompanied by the praise that refers to women as passionate, nurturing, warm, enthusiastic, articulate, and exotic. While well-intentioned, this sort of support and encouragement can, in effect, undermine women leaders' intentional, goal-driven and research-based strategies and efforts and power.

Unquestionably, the references to women leaders as mothers, caring, and nurturing will definitely undermine their power. Women are still stereotyped within fixed constructed gender roles that disable them and marginalize their success in leadership as compared with their male counterparts.

4.3. Academic and Professional Barriers

In addition to the previously discussed personal barriers, the female academics of the current research have revealed a number of

academic and professional barriers. These barriers that impede women's academic progress into the leadership of internationally funded projects can be studied within the various axes of "awareness, knowledge, competency, experience, commitment, and lack of coordination and networking". For example, the female academics in this study show their concerns about the required academic competencies for leading international projects, such as the English language competency that some female academics, especially in the Humanities, do not have, and they think that it will be an obstacle in their way to leading international projects. A participant comments, "There is a lack of English language competency in our field, the Shariah and Islamic Studies". Others from the Humanities departments have revealed their doubt that their majors will not be offered the same opportunities for international projects as the science majors". Although many of the international projects that are recently funded in Jordan have targeted human and social disciplines, the participants in this research believe that most projects are directed toward STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines. One faculty member explains, "We receive many emails daily, but the dominant belief is that they target the disciplines of economic studies, administration, or sciences. I'm from the modern languages department, and I worked on women issues in my research, but I always think that this is a barrier and I will never be able to come up with a successful idea for an international project". However, Mott (2022) reveals that STEM is the field with the most global and persistent issues of underrepresentation and marginalization of women and where the systematic under-valuing of women's work has been demonstrated.

The dominant belief that natural sciences are more significant in society than social sciences and humanities has also affected the way women academics think of their leadership opportunities. White and Burkinshaw (2019) argue that disciplinary differences in women accessing leadership are a barrier. The general belief is that STEM academics are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions in higher education. Such discourse has been a barrier that women stop at while seeking appropriate international projects. A UNESCO

report (2018) revealed that the percentage of females attending universities in Jordan exceeded that of males as it is reaching 53% as compared to 47% for males. However, it is less for doctoral students, with 46% females and 55% males. The percentage is even less in scientific research, with women forming only 21% of all researchers in sciences. The report has attributed these small numbers to the stereotypical images of women in Jordan, the many familial responsibilities assigned to women, and gender discrimination and inequality in the labor market and wages that women face when competing for jobs or scientific research opportunities.

According to the International Relations and Networking Department at Yarmouk University, there are 19 international projects for 2020, with 63.15% of them for the scientific colleges and 36.84% for the humanities. The percentage of male academics leading international projects has reached 57.89%, while 42.10% of internationally funded projects are managed by female academics.

The female academics of the current study have explored a lack of awareness about the significance of these international projects and their incompetency in terms of writing proposals for these projects. One academic says, *"It is a lack of knowledge about how to apply to these projects, how to write good proposals, and how to solicit funding organizations"*. The research has found that academic and professional barriers include the lack of individual communication skills, technological competency, and language proficiency. The participants have also discussed the lack of incentives by the university, as well as the huge competitiveness over few funding opportunities. One participant describes, *"It is more about the lack of institutional encouragement and incentives, lack of training opportunities, and the many clashes in the university, and the weakness of funding options"*. Another female academic adds, *"We do not know 'what projects' to apply for, and we do not see an interest and enough support"*. Mousa (2021) argues that female academics suffer from a lack of workplace support, including vocational training and women's exclusion from informal networks on which their male colleagues depend to be nominated for senior leadership

positions". These barriers may interact with the above-mentioned social and cultural stereotypes of women in leadership to create new "administrative" barriers in women's face and career advancement.

4.4. Administrative Barriers

Women academics are confronted with many administrative barriers on a daily basis, especially in the process of their academic promotion. The whole process of one's promotion to a higher rank or assignment to a higher administrative or academic position is full of hardships and challenges as one female academic describes, *"Women are still suffering from discrimination in their promotion procedures. Unfortunately, most members of deanship councils are men, and there are no neutral committees"*. The Board of Trustees at Yarmouk University is made up of 12 members, including the president of the university, with 23.07% women members and 76.92% men. While a recent increase in the number of female academics as members of faculty councils, heads of departments, and assistant deans can be observed at Yarmouk University, the percentage of women participation in leadership positions is still very low compared with the number of female faculty members at the university.

Studying the "Gender Ideology of the Components of the Academic Mind in the Algerian Society," Hayat and Hussein (2016) affirm the continuous traditional division of roles in the university, as well as gender classifications of fields as male or female. The research also indicates that administrative roles are also classified according to gender constructions. These barriers contribute to the exclusion of women academics from administrative and leadership positions, in addition to other "personal", "social", and "organizational" barriers. The studied women academics in Penney et al. (2015) reflected on how the tenure application process makes them feel "extremely anxious and uptight" because "the requirements of the tenure and promotion do not seem to be tangible" (p. 467). Similar distress is revealed by the female academics of the current research as they suffer from the different complications of the promotion process.

In a similar vein, the female academics of the current research have explored an intersection between the social/cultural barriers and the administrative ones. Hence, the administrative position can be used for “tribal” and “familial” benefits in which a new form of discrimination appears in academia. The very practice of “tribalism” in academia destroys all criteria of objectivity and academic professionalism. One faculty member comments, *“My family’s name has been looked at in my promotion, and I’ve been told that I do not need promotion because of that”*. Women of this research believe that these practices are nothing but rigid barriers in front of all female academics aspiring to develop themselves and attain leadership positions. Tribalism and nepotism are both extra barriers that marginalize academic qualifications and professional competencies for both men and women. One academic argues, *“A mindful administration would create an appropriate equal environment for leadership opportunities”*. Women academics have also argued that even after winning the leadership of an international project, the female academic will still be confronted with many complexities and restrictions in getting administrative approvals by the university. *“There is a bureaucratic barrier that a strong qualified female leader should trespass”*, says one female academic. Another participant adds, *“These bureaucratic barriers include official emails and letters, and routine approvals and permissions”*. Penney et al. (2015) referred to these barriers as “unspoken biases” that also work against women academics. The research calls for women to be proactive in getting institutions to address these biases.

Despite these different barriers and challenges, the academics in this research reveal their belief in the ability of a woman leader to produce highly competitive work in which she shows a great deal of responsibility and devotion. Reis and Grady (2018) studied “Women as University Presidents: Navigating the Administrative Labyrinth” by examining 11 universities of the 81 public research universities within the Carnegie Classification of Doctoral Universities that are led by woman presidents. By interviewing five women presidents, the research navigates these women’s experiences with leadership barriers. Findings of this research indicate that women

university presidents demonstrate expertise in the three areas of “Know the Rules, Hear the Message, and Opt-in”. They show how these women moved “through and around organizational barriers to successfully reach the top” (p. 97). These women presidents prove the research participants’ belief that women are able to reach the top of the administrative hierarchy if they are given an objective chance and institutional support.

5. Concluding Remarks

This research has come up with a number of major findings that answer the research questions previously elaborated under the methodology section. By using a qualitative approach (focus groups), this research studies the various barriers that impede women academics’ progress into leadership positions, especially the soliciting and leading of internationally funded projects. The findings are as follows:

1. Women academics face social and cultural barriers that restrict their social contribution within traditionally constructed gender roles, which burden them with additional domestic and economic responsibilities.
2. Female academics think that international projects will consume their time and add an extra burden to their academic work.
3. Female academics have a constant fear of failure when attaining leadership positions or leading international projects despite their highly-achieved academic positions because they are not offered any training opportunities or mentorship to be able to lead international projects.
4. Women believe that their mistakes in leadership are highly magnified and focused on because of their gender, regardless of the many achievements and successes they reach.
5. Female academics complain of many academic and professional barriers that hinder their advancement into leadership positions or international projects, such as the lack of knowledge about the projects’ importance, the absence of coordination and networking, and the lack of English language competency.
6. Female academics believe that the Humanities are less likely to win internationally funded projects as the Sciences.

7. The administrative barriers that female academics face not only obstruct their advancement into leadership positions or international projects but also hinder their promotions and other bureaucratic procedures of the academe.

While the current research has delved into details of the many cultural, social, academic, administrative, and personal barriers that face female academics as they seek leadership opportunities and higher administrative and managerial positions, especially in the field of international academic projects, some key recommendations for public administrators and academic decision-makers are presented as well as suggestions for further future research. This current study sees the need to organize different training and mentorship sessions by higher education institutions for female academics to provide them with the necessary administrative, linguistic, and leadership skills that would enhance their participation in internationally funded projects. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for constant institutional support within a fixed strategy to enhance national and international networking, collaboration, and peer meetings. Since this current study has focused on the experience of female academics from Yarmouk University, it would be beneficial if future research explores the many experiences of Jordanian women faculty from other public and private universities, as well as the experiences of Arab women academics having the same struggles with leadership and international collaboration opportunities. Other aspects, such as women in scientific research and societal involvement outside the university, may enrich further future research on female academics in the Arab world. Finally, future research may consider the various attitudes of male academics of different ranks, disciplines, and ages towards women in leadership and administrative/managerial positions assigned to women in the academe. Such views would enrich our knowledge about the many challenges that men or women academics struggle with in their academic work.

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