# Women managing women: hierarchical relationships and career impact

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper explores the experiences of women in Saudi Arabia who have been managed by other women, and examines how junior women perceive senior women's role in advancing their career.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is based on qualitative data gathered using in-depth semi-structured interviews undertaken with 30 women working in Saudi public organisations.

**Findings** – This study's findings shows that the hierarchical relationships between women and their woman manager are complex due to a multifaceted web of contextual factors including sociocultural values, family values, religious beliefs and organisational cultures and structures. These factors shape the quality of relationships between senior women and their women subordinates. Also, this study reveals that there is solidarity and 'sisterly' relationship between women in the workplace that plays a role in facilitating women's career development and advancement. In addition, this study shows that despite senior women's having supported other women's career advancement, this support tended to be conditional and limited. This can have an influence on women-to-women work relationships, where such relationships can be described as being disconnected and fragile. Furthermore, the study depict that there is evidence of the existence of 'Queen Bee'-like senior women who distance themselves from other women and block their career advancement. The Queen Bee phenomena can actually become a form of hierarchy that mimics the patriarchal structure and excludes women from serving at top management levels.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides an in-depth understanding of the hierarchical relationships between women in the workplace and how these relationships have an influence on women's career advancement. Therefore, the paper makes a valuable contribution to the scarce knowledge that currently exists within the field of management research in relation to women's career development – and the advancement of such research within the Arab Middle Eastern context. Also, the findings of this study could potentially inform practitioners and HR department personnel within organisations about the connections between women's hierarchical workplace relationships and women's career development and advancement.

**Keywords** Hierarchical relationships, Solidarity, Women, Career impact, Queen bee, Saudi Arabia

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been a large volume of literature focusing on women's career development and advancement to leadership positions (e.g. Abalkhail and Allan, 2015; Bagilhole and White, 2011; Burke and Astrid, 2016; Eagly and Carli, 2007; O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005). These studies have highlighted that women's participation in the workforce has increased globally. However, women are still underrepresented among the top leadership positions in organisations (e.g. Eagly and Carli, 2007; O'Neil *et al.*, 2018). The World Economic Forum (2018) reported that across the 149 countries assessed, the percentage of women in top managerial positions ranged from 7 to 34%. Research indicates that there are a complex mix of personal, organisational and societal factors that have been identified to explain the low representation of women in senior positions (e.g. Mavin, 2008; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Derks *et al.*, 2011).

Research on women's workplace relationships has received little attention (e.g. Hurst *et al.*, 2018; O'Neil *et al.*, 2018; Mavin, 2006b, 2008; Jogulu and Vijayasingham, 2015). These studies

identified that the workplace relationships between women can come in different forms or types. For example, these can include positive relationships; ambivalent or mixed relationships; and difficult or negative relationships (e.g. Hurst *et al.*, 2017, 2018; Jogulu and Vijayasingham, 2015; O'Neil *et al.*, 2018). Also, the literature has pointed out that the hierarchical relationships between women in the workplace have an impact on women's careers (either direct or indirect), particularly when these relationships are either positive or negative (Hurst *et al.*, 2017; O'Neil *et al.*, 2018).

For example, a positive kind of relationship – which is referred to as a 'solidarity' or 'sisterhood' relationship – is defined as the expectation that women who enter the workplace will support other women and will stand for other women as well as bring about more women to be representative at all organisational levels (Hurst *et al.*, 2017; Mavin, 2006a). In this sense, women in positions of power within organisations are expected to engage in solidarity behaviours such as building mutual alliances; bonding and supporting; mentoring; and networking (Mavin, 2006b; Kanter, 1977). This is important for career advancement – for bringing about more equal representation at the senior leadership level (Mavin, 2006b). Research has also shown that having women in senior positions benefits organisational performance (Reguera-Alvarado *et al.*, 2017). In addition, it increases the number of women in all management levels (Hurst *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, it increases gender equality in relation to accessing opportunities such as mentoring and networking opportunities (Cohen and Huffman, 2007).

The other type of relationship between women in the workplace that has an impact on women's career is the negative form which is referred to as being a 'Queen Bee'. 'Queen Bees' are defined as senior women 'who pursue individual success in male-dominated work settings. . . by adjusting to the masculine culture and by distancing themselves from other women' (Derks *et al.*, 2016, p. 457) and who 'act as gatekeepers, regulating the movement of other women and their potential to challenge men's dominant status' (Lewis and Simpson, 2012, p. 148). The existing research suggests that Queen Bee women can treat their women employees harshly by resenting them; by sometimes deliberately hold them back, and by being reluctant to support their career or to promote them (Derks *et al.*, 2016; Jogulu and Vijayasingham, 2015; Mavin and Williams, 2011; O'Neil *et al.*, 2018). These types of relationships encourage a closer investigation of women's hierarchical workplace relationships within other context such as Saudi Arabia, where the connection between women's hierarchical workplace relationships and the impact of these relationships has been largely understudied in the literature.

The purpose of this study is examine the perceptions of women regarding the hierarchical relationships between women and how these relationship influences career advancement. This study focuses on women working in public sector. Specifically, it examines (1) the experiences of women who have been working under women managers and (2) how junior women perceive senior women's role in advancing their careers. The context of this study is Saudi Arabia, where women have benefitted from the social and economic changes undertaken by the Saudi government, particularly after the launch of Vision 2030 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2019). Saudi Vision 2030 aims to build a sustainable economic future for the kingdom; provide an equal economic opportunity for both men and women; and increase women's participation in the workforce from 22 to 30% by 2030. This measure is designed to reap the benefits of the high percentage (55%) of female university-level graduates (Ministry of Education, 2019; Saudi Vision 2030, 2019). However, while the ratio of women in Saudi Arabia in higher educational institutions is higher than that of males; and despite the success of Saudi Arabia in increasing the level of women participation in employment; women remain under-represented in senior positions in public organisations (Abalkhail, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2018). For example, the percentage of women in senior positions (e.g. legislators, senior officials and managers) is very low, that number being estimated at 5.8%

(World Economic Forum, 2018). This is not unique to Saudi Arabia. Rather, it reflects a worldwide phenomenon (e.g. Acker, 2009; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Hopkins *et al.*, 2008).

The current research makes several contributions to the literature on management and women's career development and advancement. First, this study empirically investigates the hierarchical relationships between working women – an area which is currently under-studied and is often left unspoken in the literature (Litwin, 2011). This is a timely and important topic; and more research is needed to fulfil calls by Hurst *et al.* (2017), Sheppard and Aquino (2013), Mavin (2008), O'Neil *et al.* (2018) and others for empirical studies to understand the hierarchical relationships between women in the workplace and the role of senior women in other women's career advancement. Hence, the focus of this study is on working women in Saudi public organisations. This focus is an important aspect for providing a greater understanding of the subject and one, which will enrich the existing literature. Second, this study will also support the understanding of how a complex mix of contextual factors shapes the relationship between women in the workplace – thereby having an impact on women's career advancement. Third, this paper is valuable in that it will offer new insights for Human Resources (HR) departments within Saudi public institutions and for practitioners regarding the interrelationship between women, organisational and societal factors – an interrelationship that has an impact on women's career advancement (e.g. Kanter, 1977; Hopkins *et al.*, 2008; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Ely *et al.*, 2011). Finally, the results of this study suggest a number of proposals for future research regarding women's career development.

This paper begins with a literature review on women's hierarchical relationships in the workplace and on women's careers advancement. Following this, a brief overview of the context of this study is outlined. The research methodology is then presented; and the findings are outlined and discussed. The paper closes with the conclusion that focuses on relevant implications, limitations, and future research directions, in light of the findings.

## Literature review
### Women's workplace relationships
There is a large volume of literature focusing on women in management and on women's career development and advancement to leadership globally (e.g. Abalkhail and Allan, 2015; Bagilhole and White, 2011; Burke and Astri, 2016; Eagly and Carli, 2007; O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005). However, little attention has been paid to women's solidarity or to sisterhood-behaviour relationships (e.g. Hurst *et al.*, 2018; O'Neil *et al.*, 2018; Mavin, 2006b; Jogulu and Vijayasingham, 2015). The few available studies on women's work relationships show that there is solidarity between women in the workplace (e.g. Ely *et al.*, 2011; Ibarra *et al.*, 2010; Mavin, 2008; O'Neil *et al.*, 2015b). The concepts of solidarity behaviour according to Mavin (2006a) imply the assumption that women will support other women by virtue of their gender identification, particularly at a senior level where they act as role models and mentors.

A number of studies show that senior women do support women in the workplace – for example, by offering mentoring; providing positive role models; enhancing networking skills; and empowering their colleagues (Ely *et al.*, 2011; Ibarra *et al.*, 2010). Women have been described as adopting a more participative and collaborative style of leadership (e.g. Eagly and Carli, 2007; O'Neil *et al.*, 2015a); and as being more mutually open with other women in the workplace (Madsen, 2008, p.199). Research by Lucifora and Vigani (2015) backed up these findings in a large study covering 30 European countries over the 1995–2010 period. They found evidence that supportive female leadership generated positive 'spillover' effects in terms of lower gender discrimination and better career prospects. Similarly, Sealy (2010) found evidence of solidarity behaviour amongst senior women investment bankers in the UK; the women in Sealy's study reported women networks as being a significant factor in

advancing women's careers. There was, however, disagreement over the usefulness of women's networks, because women may have difficulty accessing influential circles (Bagilhole and White, 2011). Also, women's networks may not facilitate women's career advancement to leading positions in different contexts, such as in some Arab Middle Eastern countries (Abalkhail and Allan, 2016). Women within this specific context tend to rely more on the networks of male family members to facilitate their career advancements (Abalkhail and Allan, 2016). These findings support the claim by O'Neil *et al.* (2011, p. 748) who stated that 'no matter the quality, a women's network, especially one that is not embedded within a system and culture that already supports gender diversity, cannot cure all of an organisation's problems'.

Solidarity behaviour, therefore, depends on women acting collectively, which creates the expectation that women in senior management positions will assume the mantle of supporting other women within their organisations (Mavin, 2008). Gender role theory indicates that there are specific allocation of gender roles for men and women (Eagly, 1987), and that therefore, women have been assigned primary responsibility for maintaining relationships and for undertaking relational activities – activities traditionally undertaken in the family and, more recently, in the workplace (Fletcher, 1999; Miller, 1986). In other words, based on expectations of gender role about what people actually do and what people ought to do (Eagly and Karau, 2002), women are expected to be oriented towards maintaining personal relationships (Miller, 1986) – whereas men are expected to be task-oriented in the workplace (Brock, 2008). These gender role expectations also affect how women perceive their women managers; so when workplace relationships are meaningful or mutually empowering, this can lead to the formation of an emotional connection (Litwin, 2011; Miller and Stiver, 1997). Hence, in the workplace, women tend to expect other women – particularly senior women managers – to support their career as well as to provide emotional and social support (Fletcher, 1999; Miller, 1986; O'Neil *et al.*, 2008). This is particularly true in Arab Middle Eastern societies where women are socialized into caring family roles; and males are socialized into pursuing education and careers (Metcalfe, 2011). Thus, women are encouraged to be responsible for maintaining relationships within the family (Joseph, 2000). Also, Arab culture is characterized by collective and masculine societies where group connections and conformity are highly valued – and where gender roles are firmly distinguished, strictly defined, and specifically designated (Hofstede, 2001). This situation obligates individuals to be loyal to their in-group and to share each other's aspirations and achievements (Pringle and Mallon, 2003).

*Women's careers and advancement*
Women's career paths are unique and different from those of men's (Mavin, 2000; O'Neil *et al.*, 2008). Women have traditionally followed less linear career paths, because their career is expected to be broken and interrupted by family and domestic responsibilities (Burke, 2016; Terjesen *et al.*, 2009; Hopkins *et al.*, 2008; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2008). Some studies suggest that because of the fact that traditional career development systems were developed based on the frameworks derived from male constructions of careers, women's career success has been negatively impacted (O'Neil *et al.*, 2008; Sullivan and Crocitto, 2007). In the same vein, Sullivan and Mainiero (2008) asserted that because women's career is situated within the broader life context, their career decisions are influenced by their relationships with others (family, friends, co-workers, and clients) – and that this has contributed to the slowing down of the progress of women's career advancement (Abalkhail, 2019).

Eagly and Carli (2007) described women's careers as being a complex labyrinthine path with indirect solutions. They depicted a woman's career path – one which women need to navigate on their way to leadership positions – as being littered with obstacles at all stages. The labyrinth analogy 'conveys the idea of a complex journey that entails challenges and

offers a goal worth striving for. Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead' (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Women's careers, therefore, are influenced by a multifaceted set of factors such as discrimination in selection and recruitment (Alimo-Metcalfe, 2010); a lack of organisational advancement opportunities (Kanter, 1977); gendered stereotyping (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Hopkins *et al.*, 2008); a lack of skills and qualifications (Metz and Tharenou, 2001); a lack of social capital (Sealy, 2010); and the impact of masculine organisational cultures (Acker, 2009).

More recently, a small body of research has identified another career barrier caused by negative interrelationships between senior women and junior women in the workplace (Derks *et al.*, 2011; Ellemers *et al.*, 2012; Sheppard and Aquino, 2013). This characterisation of negative women-to-women work relationships has been referred to as the 'Queen Bee syndrome' phenomenon (Derks *et al.*, 2016; Chesler, 2001; O'Neil *et al.*, 2018; Staines *et al.*, 1973). Derks *et al.* (2016) defined Queen Bees as 'be-ing' senior women 'who pursue individual success in male-dominated work settings (organisations in which men hold most executive positions) by adjusting to the masculine culture and by distancing themselves from other women in a male-dominated organization' (p. 457). When women are a minority or a token in male-dominated workplaces, they try to assimilate by emphasizing the characteristics they associate with career success – characteristics that are stereotypically male (Lewis and Simpson, 2012). Consequently, these women turn against their own social category (Derks *et al.*, 2011; Kanter, 1977). According to Derks *et al.* (2011), token women described themselves as having masculine characteristics and being highly committed to their organisations. Also, the study reported that such women engage in increased competitiveness due to the fear that junior women might outperform them.

Social identity theory explains the Queen Bee attitude in terms of there being a perceived threat to women's social identity in the workplace; i.e. discrimination against women (Ely, 1994; Derks *et al.*, 2016). According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), social identity is an aspect of self-image, which individuals derive from their own cultural and gender norms. Organisations that devalue women as they enter the workplace pose a threat to women identity. Consequently, women might try to adapt themselves to a masculine organisational culture and distance themselves from other women by focusing on their individual mobility and by assimilating into the masculine organisational culture (Derks *et al.*, 2011, 2016). Or, they can work to change the organisational culture for all women by engaging in collective action (Derks *et al.*, 2016, p. 459). Faniko *et al.* (2017) conducted two detailed investigations into why women in managerial positions are less supportive of gender quotas than one might expect. This study involved 222 women employed in the public sector (52%) and private sector (48%) of Switzerland; and 156 women employed in the public sector in Tirana (Albania). The researchers found that although these women tended to be perceived as being change agents in the workplace, they distanced themselves from junior women and were rarely supportive of policies to improve professional opportunities. By contrast, the study found that women managers did not distance themselves from women at the same rank and that they were supportive of quotas that would be beneficial. One justification for such behaviour is that senior women expect junior women to make the same sacrifices to climb the leadership ladder. Some women who experience tension between their career ambitions, gender stereotypes, and discrimination do fight for gender equality and support women's careers (Branscombe *et al.*, 1999). However, the Queen Bee phenomenon creates another level of gender discrimination. Queen Bees use overt, visible, direct, or covert competition with other women, as a deliberate strategy to advance their own careers (Chesler, 2001).

Also, the tendency for women managers to not assist in helping other women accede to senior-management-level positions can be attributed to the embeddedness of gender within organisational cultures and structures. In Acker's (1990) theory gendered organisations, she

reported that gendered organisations 'means that advantages and disadvantages, exploitation and control, action and motion, meaning and identity[,] are [all] patterned [both] through, and in terms of, distinctions between male and female, [and between] masculine and feminine' (Acker, 1990, p. 146). In other words, the processes and practices of organisations reinforce the traditional gender roles, where individuals consciously construct their understanding of gendered organisations and attempt to adjust their behaviour accordingly. Similarly, Mavin and Williams (2011) argue that the increased number of women labelled 'Queen Bees' is linked to the gendered order, which reflects hierarchies of masculinities and which locates organisational power and seniority with men who are situated within a context of patriarchal organisations. Therefore, the outcome of gendered organisational leads to a situation where women do not align themselves with other women; and this problem 'can be seen through women's competition, sexism and reactions to destabilization of the established gender' (Mavin, 2008, p. S77).

In the Arab Middle Eastern context, scant research on women's career advancement has focused on the sociocultural or organisational factors that inhibit women's career progression rather than on the relationships between senior and junior women and on senior women's impact on the career advancement of comparatively junior women (e.g. Sidani et al., 2015; Abalkhail, 2019). For example, consider Sidani et al.'s (2015) study of women leadership in Lebanon. They found that patriarchal ideology within the workplace tends to favour males over women, and that this is considered as being the major obstruction to women's access to leadership. Linked to this is the issue of accessing organisational opportunities, where women have less access to organisational resources as compared to the access that men such as information and mentoring programmers have (Abalkhail and Allan, 2015). Also, some studies suggest that Arab women's careers are constrained by macro-level factors (e.g. socioeconomic factors, legal frameworks, family networks tied to patriarchy, *urf* (custom), and some interpretations of Islam and organisational HR policies) that shape organisational policies and practices – and that therefore, women's career development is constrained by the employment opportunities available to women in any sector (Karam and Afiouni, 2014).

### The Study's context

The context of this study is Saudi Arabia, which is making great efforts to modernize the country economically, politically, and socially; as well as to support women's development. Also, the country is still considered as being traditional and collectivist (Champion, 2003; Hofstede, 2001). The social structure, which is built on notions of tribal affiliation or 'tribal solidarity' (Barakat, 1993), has not changed at the same rate as its economic structure has (Champion, 2003). The role of tribal, kinship, and family system ties is basic to understanding this cultural value system (Joseph, 2000). The family is the fundamental social institution in Saudi society, and its structure is generally compatible with tribal lineage (Barakat, 1993). As a kinship unit, the family is patrilineal; and membership confers collective rights and duties (Barakat, 1993). The strength of this kinship and family relationship provides the basis for solidarity between its members (Joseph, 2000). Hofstede (2001) indicated that, from birth, individuals are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout their lifetime, continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.

Saudi Arabia's government has played a significant role in accelerating social change at an infrastructural level and through addressing issues of public concern, including women's issues (Saudi Vision 2030, 2019). The last 20 years have witnessed significant changes for women in Saudi Arabia due to state-led legal reforms that have recognized the importance of women's development, both socially and economically (World Economic Forum, 2018). Women are now highly educated; they have entered the workforce and have gained professional positions (Abalkhail, 2019). A wide range of rights and opportunities have

facilitated their entry into all fields, including politics and business (Ministry of Civil Service, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2018). Saudi Arabia's five-year development plans include policies on gender equality and nationalization programs that prepare citizens to take active roles in the workforce (Ministry of Civil Service, 2019). Consequently, the gender ratio in higher educational institutions has shifted in favour of women graduates, who make up twice the number of their male counterparts (Ministry of Civil Service, 2019). Nevertheless, the percentage of women in the workplace remains low and is estimated at less than 22.3% as compared with the percentage of men (United Nations, 2018). The number of women in senior positions is very low, being estimated at 5.8% (World Economic Forum, 2018). The new Saudi Vision 2030 is addressing the gender gap in the workplace, particularly in leadership; and is aiming to increase women's participation in the workforce from 22 to 30% (Saudi Vision 2030, 2019).

The low participation of women in the Saudi workforce is due to a patriarchal culture that assigns clear gender-role differences; this belief system is embedded within organisational structures and cultures (Metcalfe, 2011; Afiouni *et al.*, 2013). This results in gender stereotyping; gender segregation; and bias towards women with regard to selection and promotion to leadership positions (Abalkhail, 2017). Yet, the legal rhetoric of Saudi labour laws espouses a greater economic role for women and stipulates measures for equal treatment in terms of wages, training, and promotion (Ministry of Civil Service, 2019). Additionally, Saudi labour law noticeably exhibits special advantages and support granted to working women in areas such as maternity- and widowhood-leave entitlements (Ministry of Civil Service, 2019). Yet, the culture and structure of the labour market continues to reinforce gender segregation and gender-based occupations (Abalkhail and Allan, 2015). Consequently, women work in separate places in most public organisations; and they are mostly managed by women supervisors. Therefore, their participation levels – and their opportunities for job mobility and career advancement to higher levels of management – remain limited (Abalkhail, 2019).

## Methodology
### Aims and questions
This study uses an interpretive epistemological perspective to reveal the different social, institutional, organisational and individual factors (Saunders *et al.*, 2015) that may influence women's careers. This study uses in-depth semi-structured interviews with women managers in Saudi public sector organisations. The study aims to provide new insights into (1) the hierarchical relationships between senior and junior women in the workplace and (2) how these relationships influence women's career advancement in Saudi Arabia. Two research questions have been designed as follows:

(1) What have been the experiences of women in Saudi Arabia who have been working under women managers?

(2) How do junior women perceive senior women's role in advancing their careers?

### Sampling method
The sample was drawn from a list of 345 women employees who joined leadership development training programs at the Women's Branch of the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) in Saudi Arabia during the 2016–2018 period. The rationale behind this selection of the population was due to the absence of reliable governmental databases of women managers in the Middle Eastern region (Tlaiss, 2014). The IPA maintains a database of women in the civil service ranks who are eligible to enrol in its leadership development

training programs. This database was convenient for this research project. Additionally, the IPA database shows the diversity of women's work experiences – i.e. the range of managerial roles available at different institutions in different cities within the Saudi public sector.

Participants with a minimum of four year's work experience were selected across a number of different organisations within the Saudi public sector. Purposive, rather than representative, sampling was used; this method involves selecting a sample of the individuals who are available to participate in the study (Saunders *et al.*, 2015) and who are able to provide some information and insights about the research problems (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, based on the level of data saturation (a process in which the researcher continues to sample relevant cases until no new insights are produced) (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003), a sample of 30 women were included in this study.

*Data collection*
The interview questions were designed to collect demographic information about the personal and professional backgrounds of the participants – including educational level, position, years of work experience, institutions and location.

The questions were also designed to elicit in-depth information that would provide nuanced answers to the research questions. Some examples are: What is your experience of working under a women manager? How do you perceive your relation with your women manager? Do you think senior women support other women in general – and, in particular, by empowering and encouraging them to seek a high-ranking position? Based on your experience and observations, has your women manager impacted on your career advancement? (See the Appendix for interview protocols.)

A panel of four academics reviewed the interview protocol to test the clarity of the questions and to test whether they were appropriate for the research objectives to verify its validity. Based on their comments, some questions were rephrased and other questions were omitted, as they were deemed to have merely repeated other questions or to have been unclear. For example, the question 'Can you discuss, with me, your experiences working under a woman manager?' was rephrased as, and replaced with, 'What are your experiences working under a woman manager?' Five probing sub-questions were also added to the question. (See the Appendix for interview protocols.) In another instance, a question had initially asked, 'Has your manager had an impact on your work? If yes, how?' This was deleted and replaced with the following question: 'Based on your experience and observations, has your women manager impacted on you personally and professionally?'

The interviews were conducted during 2018 with a total of 30 women managers. Interviewees were informed about the nature and purpose of the study; and confidentiality was assured prior to the interview. Twenty-four interviews were interviewed face to face, and six interviews were conducted through Skype, at a time and place suitable to the interviewees. The interviewees agreed to answer questions and to provide any additional information which the researcher deemed relevant to the study. Permissions for the conversations to be recorded were obtained; the duration was between 45 and 60 min in length. All participants had higher-level educational qualifications (8 had BA's, nine had MA's and 13 had PhD's). Their work experience ranged from 8 to 23 years. All participants were in management positions. They held different titles: vice dean (6), supervisor (11) and director (13). The interviewees worked in different public institutions – including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, and the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation. They worked at the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Economy and Planning, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Civil Service. They worked in different cities in Saudi Arabia (see Table 1). To protect the identity of participants, the names of their institutions and positions are not identified in Table 1.

| # | Location | Qualification | Years of work experience |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Riyadh | MA | 18 |
| 2. | Dammam | MA | 17 |
| 3. | Jeddah | PhD | 21 |
| 4. | Jeddah | PhD | 18 |
| 5. | Taif | PhD | 23 |
| 6. | Khamis Mushait | MA | 16 |
| 7. | Tabuk | MA | 15 |
| 8. | Ehsaa | MA | 10 |
| 9. | Riyadh | BA | 23 |
| 10. | Riyadh | PhD | 22 |
| 11. | Buraidah | BA | 14 |
| 12. | Madinah | MA | 17 |
| 13. | Riyadh | BA | 8 |
| 14. | Al Jouf | PhD | 23 |
| 15. | Makkah | BA | 9 |
| 16. | Riyadh | BA | 11 |
| 17. | Riyadh | BA | 8 |
| 18. | Riyadh | MA | 9 |
| 19. | Tiaf | PhD | 23 |
| 20. | Tiaf | PhD | 18 |
| 21. | Tiaf | PhD | 20 |
| 22. | Buraidah | PhD | 16 |
| 23. | Abha | BA | 9 |
| 24. | Riyadh | BA | 12 |
| 25. | Riyadh | PhD | 18 |
| 26. | Riyadh | PhD | 21 |
| 27. | Dammam | PhD | 22 |
| 28. | Dammam | PhD | 19 |
| 29. | Riyadh | MA | 21 |
| 30. | Riyadh | MA | 15 |

Table 1.
Demographic profile of
participants

*Data analysis*
Thematic analysis was used to help identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Miles and Huberman, 1994) as well as to provide a rich and detailed set of information about the perceptions and reflections of participants (King, 1994). Analysis involves 'a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that you are analysing, and the analysis of the data that you are producing' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 15). Therefore, the process of data analysis in this study involved a number of steps, as informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedures for the process of data analysis. At first, the researcher started familiarizing herself with the study data by reading and re-reading each transcript to search for meanings and patterns; to obtain a general sense of the information; and to reflect on the meaning of the data gathered. After generating an initial list of ideas about what had been found, the researcher started producing an initial code from the data by identifying features of the data that appeared interesting; as she looked for the most important element in the data or the information (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The next step was to break down information into smaller and more meaningful components (Willig, 2008) in order to identify emergent themes, sub-themes, explanations and relationships between participants' experiences. Following this stage, a reviewing of the selected themes was done to check if the themes generated were similar and needed to be combined, or if the themes needed to be broken down into separate themes, and so on. After

this, the researcher formed and gave labels to clusters of themes in ways designed to capture their real meaning. This meant 'drawing on one's interpretative resources to make sense of what the respondents were saying; and at the same time, one is constantly checking one's own sense-making against what the person is actually saying' (Smith and Osborn, 2008, p. 72). A production of summary tables – including those themes that captured something about the quality of the participants' experience of the phenomenon under investigation – were formed (see Table 2). A written account was produced in order to ensure that the experiences of each participant were situated and interpreted within the context of her work life (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Miles and Huberman, 1994). These findings are presented in the next section.

The dependability and credibility of the data was established by documenting all procedures and decisions made at all stages of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researcher assured credibility by consciously engaging with the participants during the interviews and by ensuring that the analysis was directed towards understanding their own perspectives. The audio recordings captured the participants' responses verbatim; this method contributed to data credibility (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

## Findings
The findings of this study are organized on the basis of the following research questions: (1) 'What have been the experiences of women in Saudi Arabia who have been working under woman managers?' and (2) 'How do junior women perceive senior women's role in advancing their careers?' These results are summarized in Table 2, and are presented and discussed below, in order to provide comprehensive answers to the research questions. It is important to note that at some point, some themes are interconnected and incorporate several aspects of the interviewee's responses.

> *RQ1.* What have been the experiences of women in Saudi Arabia who have been working under women managers?

This section focuses on the experiences of Saudi women who have been working under women managers. Participants in this study revealed that women's hierarchical relationships in the workplace can take different forms such as solid or strong; fragile or disconnected; and compatible or mixed relations, yet (as discussed below) two main types of relationships were most pronounced: solidarity and fragile relationships.

### Women's hierarchical relationships
*A solidarity relationship*
Almost all women interviewed were working in gender-segregated workplace and have been supervised by women managers. According to the participants, Saudi public sector

| Research questions | Themes | Sub-themes |
| --- | --- | --- |
| RQ1. What have been the experiences of women in Saudi Arabia who have been working under women managers? | Women's hierarchical relationships | A solidarity relationship<br>A fragile relationship |
| RQ2. How do junior women perceive senior women's role in advancing their careers? | Career impact | Positive career impact<br>Negative career impact (Queen Bee attitude)<br>Reasons for Queen Bee senior woman's attitude:<br>- Competition<br>- Fear of weakness<br>- Family background |

Table 2.
Themes and sub-themes

organisations appear to promote the ideal of everyone working together as one big family – a family that is governed by the rules of the wider social system. Eighteen participants talked about sharing sisterly and growth-fostering relationships with their woman supervisor, which gave them an increased sense of worth and self-confidence. These respondents strongly emphasized the word 'we' in most of their conversations, as exemplified below:

> We [women] work as a family; and in fact, the space between my [woman] manager and us at work [organisation] is somewhat fluid [. . .] she tends to treats us like 'sisters' [. . .] she provides guidance and information [. . . she] understands our needs as women who have many family obligations along with our work responsibilities [. . . and] when I am under stress, she listens to my problems, supports me, stand by my side, and sometimes allows me to come late to work or [even to] work from home (Participant 30).

This account suggests the participant is making the analogy between the workplace and the 'family' system, of which the family values are viewed as being part of the relationship within organisational life. Therefore, she viewed the relationship between working women and their woman manager as being somewhat fluid and informal. Also, the participant described her woman manager as a 'big sister' who provides her with all needed support, such as guidance and advice.

What also emerged from this account is that solidarity and sisterhood between women and their women managers can arise from shared identities and from mutual understandings of each other's feelings, emotions, and challenges. Senior woman managers know what other women are going through in their career-family life and are aware of the societal and cultural expectations of them. Therefore, she supports and fosters their careers. The assumptions about gender roles, where women generally are expected to be caring and understanding, are also noteworthy.

However, a number of questions may arise from the above account. For example, when women do not do a 'good job', will the relationship be broken? Do woman managers treat all working women as 'sisters'? Do junior women take advantages of their women managers who act as a 'big sister'? Or, is this female manager reinforcing family values and traditional gender roles by acting as a 'sister'? Does the fluid relationship between women have an impact on the quality of the work? The answers to these questions are not straightforward. However, one key issue that arises here is that in any relationship, things do not always proceed without any problem. The respondents may have some problems with their women supervisor. Yet, it is important to note that sometimes, participants may find it difficult to criticise their managers directly – due to the cultural value that has traditionally emphasised loyalty to the group.

Some participants discussed their work relationship with their woman manager as being a strong relationship. They related the solidarity between women in general and working women, making specific reference to Islamic values. One respondent revealed this:

> My relationship with all my colleagues, including my woman manager, is generally good [. . .] as a Muslim woman[,] I should treat other women as sisters regardless of their positions and background, and regardless if I have some sort of disagreement with them [. . .] it is our faith that spiritually has strengthen[ed] our relationship [. . .] I recall that my manager was upset with me because I refused to teach a course at [our university – a course] that I have found not to be interesting to teach, and this has [had an effect] on my annual evaluation [. . .], however[,] I [restrained] my anger and did not bear any grudges against her [. . .]. It is the requirement of our religion that encourage[s] us to work as one group, as mentioned in our Book that [we are to] 'hold fast, all together[,] by the Rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves'[;] and also [as is mentioned] in our Hadith[,] where [it is said that] Muslim[s] should act as one body (Participant 28).

This account is interesting, because the respondent sees her relationships with other women as being a good deed that will bring her closer to Allah (God). What also emerged from this

statement is her characterization of social solidarity among and between people (both men and women) as being the ability to perform as a whole in a group and as being part of Islamic teaching that must be implemented by all Muslims. She provided evidence for social solidarity as a social and personal value from the Quran (the holy book of Islam) as well as from the Hadith (the sayings and behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad). The Holy Prophet is recorded as saying, 'The Muslims are like a body; if one limb aches, the whole body aches'.

It is very clear that a tangled web of issues is involved here and also that these issues seem to derive primarily from religious teaching coupled with Arab cultural values about solidarity as being a social and personal value, which is embedded within the relationship between working women. The conclusion that can be drawn here is that with a sisterhood style relationship, the concepts of mutual help, mutual collaboration, mutual trust, mutual understanding, and loyalty will arise – regardless of differences and disagreement.

*A fragile relationship*
The relationship between working women and their women manager can sometimes be problematic. Twelve interviewees – irrespective of their ages, positions, or work experiences – described their relationships with some women bosses in their career lives as somehow being difficult and fragile. One manager portrayed this type of relationship in an interesting way when she observed the following:

> I have had experiences with a woman boss who is working extremely hard and [who] is quite assertive, yet she tends to be ruder and mean toward us [. . .] sometimes she acts without empathy and [can be] always critical of other women [. . .] women are supposed to help each other! Oddly, this is not the case. [. . .] For example, when I [make] a suggestion during a meeting, she undermines my idea; she makes me feel less worthy; which impacts on my confidence, as she thinks she is above us all, 'superior' to us [. . .]. A phrase that my manager repeatedly uses to describe herself is: 'I'm different from any other woman'; and I think indeed she is different [. . .] by controlling us (Participant 4).

What emerged from this account is that participant expected her woman manager to be more supportive and caring. Sociocultural expectations of sisterly solidarity may be thwarted when senior managers are likely to act in ways that are rude, mean, lacking empathy, harsh, critical to women, and undermining of women. These behaviours of senior woman could lead to fragility and disconnections of the relationship between women in the workplace. This type of relationship between working women impacts on women' self-worth and confidence. What also interesting in the account of the participant is that the senior woman being referred to here was perceived as acting 'differently' and 'controlling' in relation to her women employees. The characteristics of being 'different' and 'controlling' most likely means that this senior woman is adopting a more of 'masculine' role that may not be seen by other women as being acceptable. Therefore, when senior women find it difficult to fulfil the expectations of other women, or if/when women undermine her authority, she may modify her behaviour and attitude to be harder on women in order to be taken seriously and to be accepted in the organisation. Here, it can be observed that cultural values regarding gender roles seem to be embedded within women themselves. Such women seem to view 'control' or 'authority' in the workplace as being associated with men; and seem to view nurturing and emotionally expressive emotional behaviours as being associated with women. This serves to shape and structure women's relationships. Hence, this type of relationship between working women creates more conflict between women and adds another barrier to their career.

*RQ2.* How do junior women perceive senior women's role in advancing their careers?

This section focuses on how junior women perceive senior women's role in advancing their career. Respondents in this study indicated that senior women have an impact on their career

–an impact which is positive, negative, mixed, or natural. The emphasis in this section is on the positive and negative aspects of the impact of senior women on comparatively more junior women's career development, as these two types of impact were found to have had the biggest influence on the participants' careers.

## Perspective on career impact

*Positive career impact*
The participants reported evidence of growth-fostering relationships that were facilitating their careers. Thirteen respondents stated that their women managers provided important guidance and advice for their career; and that their managers are keen to empower them. The following account reflects such an experience:

> My boss [woman manager] believes in our ability [. . .] to do a great job. She sits on the organisation's highest committees – [which are] mainly [comprised of] men – and has connived to give us more access to organisational opportunities, which has helped me to gain more information and expertise about the work as well as not shying away from using my voice [. . .] she is really empowering us (Participant 1).

What emerged from the above statement is an equation in which positive relationships with senior woman influence the career advancement of junior women. Women managers provided junior women with important organisational opportunities such as information and resources that help them learn and grow. Also, an important issue that emerged from the above account is that women are gaining confidence and not 'shying away' from using their voice to claim their rights or to state their opinion openly. In view of this situation, it is clear that woman manager feels that it is part of her responsibility to empower women to speak up and to express their ideas clearly and confidently. This skill is not easy to attain in a traditional society, as it requires time and training; yet it is important for boosting their self-confidence.

In addition, the women interviewees reported that their women managers are providing them with psychological support along with personal support, counselling, and career advice; and that all these were vital to facilitating their career. One woman interviewed revealed:

> My manager is so good with [(to)] us [. . .] she is very patient [in getting] to know me as a person [and in order] to provide me with [the] right skills [. . .] She is open and honest [enough] to tell me what I really need [in order] to grow and develop in my work [. . .]. During our meeting[s], she always ask[s] about my work progress, my family, kids, parents [. . .] She tend[s] to challenge me to 'think [outside] the box', yet she is very generous when it comes to encouraging and supporting my career (Participant 29).

This account shows that the career advancement for women in Saudi Arabia is made doubly possible when a senior woman provides women employees with mentoring and coaching, and when she acts as a role model. The positive attitude of a senior woman in supporting other women would seem to stem from the fact that she apparently believes that it is important for women to play a more productive role in organisations. Also, the positive attitude of this senior woman is more likely due to the fact that she is apparently aware of there being a lack of mentoring programs and formal networks within the organisation. Hence, this senior woman has taken the lead in taking responsibility to be an agent of change and to bring more women into the management level.

*Negative career impact*
The participants in this study reported that although their women managers provided them with some support, this support tended to be conditional and limited to the mid-managerial

level. They further emphasized that the support of their managers gradually weakens when women employees are proactively seeking advancement to top-managerial levels. Fourteen women interviewees revealed that the attitude of their women managers was an invisible constraint on their advancement to top positions. These participants perceived their women managers as being 'Queen Bees', as evidenced below:

> I was a victim of a woman boss for almost 5 years [. . .] she put me under a lot of emotional pressure. She used to ignore my presence. She accused me of mistakes, which I did not do. She excluded me from activities, particularly any events that involved meetings with important people from my [organisation], who might select me for higher positions [. . .]. In fact, she thinks the 'position' is her 'property' and keeps [it] away from any women whom she feels is better than her. She actively attempts to cut my career aspirations off [. . .] Coping with her attitude was not easy, as it affected my self-confidence and my career (Participant 7).

The negative attitude of senior women led to two main career decisions taken by junior women: they left the workplace; or challenged the situation. Five qualified, experienced, and enthusiastic participants were planning to work for another organisation. They believed their work was undervalued; and they felt marginalized by their women managers' reluctance to promote them. Consequently, these women failed to fulfil their career aspirations. This situation (the loss of such talented and capable women) may negatively affect the organisational environment, not least its financial performance. For example, the number of women who are leaving their jobs increases; and sick leave also increases; as described by one participant:

> I have been working in the [university] for more than 15 years, and only during the last three years when we had a new woman supervisor [have] things changed [. . .] for instance, I have noticed that teaching staff have trouble rescheduling their timetable due to their many absences [. . .] Not only that, two of my best colleagues have left work [. . .] because my boss drives them to the edge [(the brink)] with her intolerable behaviour (Participant 21).

Also, 15 respondents revealed that they tend to challenge their woman managers' attitudes. Even though they are fully aware it is not easy to challenge and resist powerful senior women in a collective society, they feel they have no other options. The following quotation offers an interesting insight:

> Women [have] faced bias in the [workplace] – [bias] that is under the [surface] – not from men this time, but from women themselves. Having a woman boss with an attitude [of being] the 'only one' at the top has made things more difficult for us [. . .] When I was not selected for a committee that related to my area of speciality [. . .], my colleagues suggested that I [ask] her, 'Why is this happening?' [. . .] Later, I was told: 'You were not fit for this committee's requirements' [. . .] she was very angry because I raised this question. I then wrote her an email about it, but she did not reply to me – and in fact, she ignored my request. I will keep asking until I get [my/an] answer, as this was not the first time [this has] happened [. . .] I feel [that] it is time to prove that my hard work and determination should be noticed – which will help [to progress] my career (Participant 7).

A combination of self-belief and strong character may explain why this respondent felt able to challenge her manager's behaviour. The feeling of there being inequality in the organisation is noteworthy. This participant believed that it was important to assert her rights. This power imbalance between women may mobilize the energy of employees and keep them working hard. Alternatively, women may doubt their abilities and be discouraged from pursuing promotion, as they may believe that even their best efforts will not pay off.

Women interviewees have provided some explanations for their Queen Bee managers' negative attitudes. These explanations include the following: competition, fear of weakness and family background.

***Competition:*** The first explanation of Queen Bee senior managers' attitude is ruthless competition, which is perceived by thirteen participants as being something unhealthy and damaging to their career. They reported that the fear of their manager being replaced by younger or more experienced women created excessive competition for top leadership posts. This is the scarcity excuse! It is evidenced below:

> Chairs War! My [female] boss feels threatened by any potential woman employee who sits in that 'chair', primarily with the current changes in the country. I have experienced this at work. I am a hard-working person, and I [have] noticed on several occasions that my boss [has] tried to belittle me and [has] downgraded my ability and knowledge [...] so that she prolongs [her time] sitting [in] the chair (Participant 18).

As revealed from the above quotation, the use of so powerful a word as 'war' in the term *Chairs War* describes a situation of conflict and competition between women in the workplace vying to be 'queen' of the organisation. It shows a strong indication that with the current policy changes in Saudi Arabia, there are too few places available at the top echelon of leadership – and more qualified females. Therefore, some senior women are more likely to not be willing to assist women colleagues who could potentially replace themselves than they would be if more seats were available at the table.

What also emerged from the findings is that although participants (eight of them) acknowledged competition among men, they think competition among some women managers (either directly or indirectly) is more pronounced. That view is most likely linked to the increasing number of Saudi women who are entering management positions, as described below:

> We used to be normal co-workers; but when my colleague was [promoted] to be the dean of our [college], she turned into a strange woman [...]. She started to act differently [...] misusing the power she has [....]. One of the most painful moments occurred in the previous months [...] when she convinced the top senior manager not to allow me to take a consulting post at a prestigious [university]. It is very regretful [I regret she did that] [...] men do not compete in the same way! I do strongly believe that woman in power should support us, as there are more qualified females accessing management nowadays (Participant 15).

***Fear of weakness:*** The second explanation offered by women interviewees as to why a senior Queen Bee has the attitude she does is fear of weakness. They highlighted that because senior supervisors were under the supervision and authority of men in the workplace, such supervisors may fear performing in a 'feminine' way that is stereotypically not associated with a 'male' leadership style or with male characteristics. Consequently, they assimilate into a traditionally male workplace by adopting male behaviour and by distancing themselves from other women who do not comply with gender role expectations. One manager portrayed this idea in an interesting way, saying:

> When a woman supervises other women and she is supervised by a man, the situation may become complex [...] because, when a woman boss behaves like a male, she tends to act strangely [...] perhaps a lack of is experiences or weakness? Unfortunately, my woman boss, most of the time, forgets she is a woman and treats us as different from her [...] She acts weirdly; she thinks that she was appointed to [the] position because she works harder [than us], or because of her unique characteristics and leadership styles (Participant 21).

What also emerged from this participant's account is that, as a minority group in organisations, senior women may feel under scrutiny – feeling constantly under pressure to prove to the (predominantly) male decision makers that they are capable of leadership. Also, woman in leadership roles may be was appointed to position as a result of the new policy in Saudi Arabia regarding women's empowerment in the workplace without having enough experience or appropriate organisational support. In addition, women in leadership roles may

have been experiencing a double-bind situation: the need to assimilate – both in order to be accepted and in order to maintain her position. However, in devaluing her feminine traits, she is sustaining gender stereotypes. This could lead to creating another barrier that may prevent such women from succeeding when they try to.

*Family background:* The final explanation of senior Queen Bee women's attitude, as provided by respondents, was family background. About one-third of respondents discussed how some senior women use their family connections to access management positions and how their privileged backgrounds encourage them to exercise [undue] power over other women. These senior women tend to resent junior women – and sometimes deliberately hold them back by not offering any type of support. One respondent commented on this attitude, saying:

> Some women enter a higher post through a 'window', not a 'door' in the [workplace] [. . .] these women tend to come from a powerful family [. . .] who supported them [ financially, socially. . .] and they display 'arrogance' and see themselves [as being] above the system [. . .] [They just] want to be 'the one' and do not wish to help other women [. . .] It is selfishness! Maybe it is [a] feeling of 'superiority' (Participant 5).

The account above is interesting because participant uses the words the 'window' and the 'door' in the workplace to refer to how some senior women managed to enter top positions via their strong family connections (the window) rather than via the normal selection criteria (the door). As a result, some of these senior women feel privileged and see themselves as being different from other women or as being 'superior' to them. This can indicate that women who are not coming from advantaged backgrounds are more likely to struggle against same-gender discrimination in the workplace along with other social and organisational barriers.

## Discussion

The findings of this study have clearly demonstrated that the hierarchical relationships between women in the workplace in Saudi Arabia are complex and multi-faceted. This complexity is due to the intertwining of the cultural, religious, social context and organisational contexts in which they live and work. This then creates different types of relationships between women in the workplace – for example, solidarity relationships and fragile relationships which impact on women's careers in different ways. Solidarity relationships (a positive kind of relationship) between working women can be attributed to three main factors. The first factor is that cultural gender role expectations – ones that emphasizes that women are generally assigned primary responsibility for maintaining relationships within family life – have filtered down to the workplace. This means that senior women are expected to engage in and weave a network/tapestry of interwoven relationships with other women in the workplace and be able to fulfil other women's needs. This funding is in accordance with the findings of a number of scholars (e.g. Eagly and Karau, 2002; Fletcher, 1999; Miller, 1986). The second factor is that in a collectivist society like Saudi Arabia, it expected that individuals help and protect each other. Evidence of commitment and loyalty, particularly in relation to senior women managers, was found. This finding aligns with Hofstede (2001), who indicated that in a collectivist culture, individuals are integrated into solid, cohesive in-groups throughout their lifetime in order to protect them – in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. The third factor is related to the religious value that views the concept of solidarity as being part of the social principle in Islam, which is characterized by the unity of people; mutual help and aid; and collaboration and interaction. This finding is unique and adds new knowledge to the existing literature by showing how religious values and beliefs contribute to positive relationship between working women. Hence, the solidarity behaviour between working women in this study suggests that women managers will – by nature, and

by virtue of their cultural values and religious beliefs – work to maintain good relationships with other women.

The fragile relationship (a kind of negative relationship) depicted in this study's findings illustrates that the relationships between a Queen Bee woman manager and other working women lack mutual empathy; such relationships are disempowering and disconnected. For example, the women interviewed confirmed that in a traditional and collectivist society like Saudi Arabia, women are (in general) given the assignment of maintaining family relationships that have trickled down to the workplace. In other words, junior women in the workplace are expecting senior women to naturally care for them like a 'big sister' and protectively nurture their career. When senior women fail to meet junior women's expectations and instead adopt masculine leadership styles or focus on the required task more than on maintaining personal relationships with other women (or, if they simply cannot fulfil junior women's expectations), this leads to a betrayal of sisterhood and a disconnect in relationships and can create conflict between women in the workplace. Gender role expectations can put huge pressures on senior women and place them in a 'double bind' situation, where they are expected to engage in interpersonal relationships with other women in the workplace and assist their career development, and work hard to be acknowledged for their talents and capabilities. This finding is akin to the findings of a number of other researchers (Miller, 1986; Brock, 2008). Hence, the construction of Saudi women's hierarchical relationships in the workplace is linked to the interweaving of cultural gender role expectations and cultural values that influence the expectations of how an organisation's members should behave.

Understanding the nature of hierarchical relationships between women in the workplace can provide an in-depth understanding of how woman manager influence the career advancement of other women. This study provided evidence that a supportive relationship with a woman manager can enhance women's career advancement. For example, senior women offer informal mentoring and coaching; and that they offer access to organisational resources such as networking, knowledge, and information. These finding are consistent with those of Ely et al. (2011), Ibarra et al. (2010), and Miller and Stiver (1997). Also, senior women provide psychological support for women in ways that foster mutual understanding and empathy, as senior women acknowledge the challenges that career women face – challenges such as balancing family and career responsibilities within a traditional and collective society. Furthermore, senior woman mangers can enhance a woman employee's self-confidence and encourage them to have a voice in claiming their rights, including their right to a position of top leadership. These factors are all facilitators of women's career development in general (Madsen, 2008; Sealy, 2010). The justifications for this type of support by senior women are again due to the cultural and family values and religious beliefs, along with the willingness of senior women to be agents of change by empowering other women in ways that help them navigate through and around barriers. However, some studies suggest that the support from a woman manager may not be enough to influence the career advancement of women without changing the culture and structure of organisations regarding gender issues (e.g. Acker, 1992; Eagly and Carli, 2007).

In addition, this study provides evidence that damaging and disempowering hierarchical relationships between women in the workplace have a negative impact on women's careers. This study confirm that although women in leadership role are perceived as being supportive to other women, this support tended to be temporary and conditional only at the middle management level. Three reasons this study provided for this conditional support from senior women who succeeded in male-dominated organisations and behave in a negative way: engaging in 'Queen Bee' behaviour. First, there is a fear of competition – in which senior women may feel intimidated by other professions and by successful women and might therefore block their career advancement and/or distance themselves from other women. This

finding confirms other study findings (e.g. Chesler, 2001; Derks *et al.*, 2016). The competition between Saudi women in the workplace may be linked to the major changes that are taking place within the Saudi public organisational context as a new government policy is established to increase women's employment and to empower them (Saudi Vision, 2030; 2019). This means that accessing top leadership positions in the public sphere is new to Saudi society – and that this generates strong competition among women, which affects the relationships between women. Also, senior women may feel insecure in their jobs; and as a result, they compete with other women in order to prove, to their higher-ranking male colleagues, their commitment. Second, there is a fear of weakness – where women in leadership roles may fear the risk of failing to perform; and as such, they may adopt male behaviour and may distance themselves from women who comply with gender role expectations; they may believe that they are expected to block the advancement of other women. This finding aligns with those of Kanter (1977) Lewis and Simpson (2012), and Derks *et al.* (2011). The fear of weakness by Saudi senior women can be associated with that women were placed into senior positions without managerial experience or support required during a significant time of change and transition in the organisation, and this could place a high degree of additional pressure on relationships. There was often an absence of organisational support such as access to information, mentoring programmers, and professional networks (Abalkhail and Allan, 2015), which affects women's experience of leadership and their relationships. The third reason for why senior women behave as a Queen Bee is related to certain senior women being seen as being privileged by having a family that supports them in order to help them access leadership positions through leveraging their social connection. Hence, career advancement for women who do not have good family connections may be made doubly difficult, as they have to navigate through the twists and turns of their career and same-gender discrimination along with other structural and organisational barriers without such support. This finding is unique and adds new knowledge to the existing literature by showing how strong family and social connections helps some women access career opportunities and that such background is a contributing factor in the Queen Bee phenomenon.

Therefore, the negative attitudes of senior Queen Bee women affect both women employees and the organisation as a whole. This study reported that junior women take action when they are experiencing negative relationships and when they feel discouraged, marginalized, undermined or undervalued. Either they opt out, or they challenge the situation. Women may leave the organisation they were employed in and go elsewhere to fulfil their career aspirations and to balance their family life – thus resulting in a career distribution and the loss of talented, professional women. Also, women employees may resist the situation by challenging their women managers through engaging in personally constructive strategies such as working hard, empowering oneself, and seeking opportunities whenever possible. This could lead to a greater relational disconnect between women in the workplace. These women were driven by their own meritocratic values and their ability to cope in an unhealthy work environment. A woman's career decisions – including decisions regarding whether to leave the workplace or to stay in the workplace and challenge the situation – are most likely have an effect on others around her, including her family. This finding is in line with the findings of Sullivan and Mainiero (2008). However, challenging a Queen Bee manager can be a risky undertaking for women to perform alone without the support of their organisation.

In sum, it is clear from the discussion above that context played a particularly important role in shaping the relationships between women in the workplace. The study identified contextual factors, including the sociocultural context and the organisational context, which affected women's workplace relationships and their career. On the one hand, the sociocultural context, where there is a high expectation that senior women assist other women's career

advancement, could put enormous pressure on senior women; along with other challenging factors women face as they navigate their 'career labyrinth' (Eagly and Carli, 2007; O'Neil *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, the organisational context can include Saudi women's being placed into leadership positions during times of a major organisational change when they may not have the required experience and where they may not use their roles to facilitate women's career advancement. (They might not do so because of competition; because of feeling afraid of negative gender stereotypes; because of a lack of experience and an absence of support; or other factors.) This could disempower the relationships and lead to the creation of another career barrier and a more complicated situation for women. In other words, the relationship between women, which is supposed to be 'sisterly' – i.e. democratic, based on a relationship of solidarity and equality – can actually become a form of hierarchy which mimics the patriarchal structure and excludes women from serving at top-management levels. Hence – and agreeing with O'Neil *et al.* (2018) – it is not simply a matter of solidarity; or a matter of the fragility of the relationship; or a matter of the manager having a Queen Bee attitude. Rather, Saudi women in the workplace are caught in a complex web of factors – sociocultural values, family values, religious beliefs and gender role expectations), and organisational culture and structure (e.g. the type of support available and gender-related issues), and the impact of a rapid organisational change all influence the relationships between women. In fact, women in power are trapped in a 'double-bind' dilemma (Catalyst, 2007), where they 'are too often caught between the competing needs to be competent and assertive (organisational leadership role) and to be nice and nurturing (societal gender role). If women are the former, they are often labelled as being brash and aggressive; if they are the latter, they can be labelled as being too soft to be leaders – for women[,] it is often a no-win situation' (O'Neil *et al.*, 2015a: 255). Therefore – and in agreement with a number of researchers (e.g. Acker, 2009; Kanter, 1977; Eagly and Carli, 2007; Hopkins *et al.*, 2008; O'Neil *et al.*, 2018; Mavin and Williams, 2011) – the solution to discouraging negative relationship between women in the workplace and to enhance women's career development should not only rely on women managers efforts but should also rely on organisations' support of women employees (such as mentoring, networking, and sponsorship as well as relying on working to change organisational structure and culture).

## Conclusion
### Implications
The hierarchical relationship between women in the workplace, and perceptions of the impact of senior women on women's career advancement, are under-researched in management and women's career development studies. This study is unique because it was conducted in the Saudi Arabian context (which is outside most foci of related research) and because it focuses on women hierarchical relationships in public institutions. Therefore, this study contributes to the knowledge base on hierarchical relationship between women and women's career impact. Moreover, it offers a set of practical implications for practitioners and HR department managers to help them better respond to the challenges encountered by women in hierarchical relationships in the workplace.

On the theoretical level, this study contributes to the body of subject knowledge by providing greater understanding of women's work relationships and the role of these relationships in shaping the careers of women. There are a mix of contextual factors including sociocultural and organisational factors that shape the quality of relationships between senior women and their female subordinates. When a female manager and women employees' relationship is characterized by solidarity, this has a positive impact on junior women's career advancement. Such relationships result in greater access to organisational opportunities. Moreover, the study provides evidence that there can sometimes be a fragility

to the relationship between senior women and female employees in the workplace – a fragility that has negatively influenced women's career development by creating another career barrier. This finding is a novel proposal. Furthermore, this study provides knowledge about the development of the Queen Bee phenomenon and factors related to its occurrence – factors which include competition; a fear of weakness; and family background. Family background's being a factor for the creation of the Queen Bee woman manager's attitude is likewise a novel finding.

On the practical level, this study has implications for practitioners and HR department managers in public organisations. The findings show that many women in leading positions are undoubtedly support and help other women's career advancement; however, there is also evidence that some senior women are unsupportive and act as 'Queen Bee' toward their women employees. This disconnected relationship between a senior woman manager and women employees has negatively impacted the career development of women. Therefore, to solve this complex situation (within the context of women's hierarchical relationships in the workplace), organisations must direct their efforts towards creating environments that foster healthy working relationships between women (and men). Also, it is important that organisations acknowledge that organisational systems are gendered. Therefore, instead of focusing the attention on fixing senior women to make them more cooperative with other women, it is essential, first, to (1) provide organisational programs to encourage supportive and empowering hierarchical relationships between women; and second, to (2) target the underlying assumptions about gender within an organisation (O'Neil and Hopkins, 2015; Mavin, 2008). This can be done by examining and changing the organisation's norms, policies, and practices in order to ensure 'equity in advancement opportunities, work assignments, mentoring, sponsorship, and compensation' (O'Neil et al., 2018, p. 338).

In addition, it is highly important that HR departments in public organisations question senior women when a high turnover of women occurs or when conflict increases. Furthermore, it is vital that the public organisational policy be revised as it needs to be designed in ways to make senior women managers' career track dependent on their successful promotion of women whom they manage. These strategic management steps are particularly important to Saudi Arabia, where women representation at the top leadership still low and where the country is aiming to increase the number of women at senior management levels.

### Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study provided an in-depth analysis and new insight into the hierarchal relationship between women in the workplace and the impact that senior women have on other women's career advancement. However, the study is not without its limitations. One inevitable limitation concerns the generalizability of the findings. As the interviews were conducted with attendees of leadership development programs at the IPA, these findings cannot necessarily be applied to other organisations within Saudi Arabia. Consequently, there is a need for future research that would cover both Saudi public and private organisations in order to provide more in-depth knowledge of this issue. Research focusing on the development of organisational programmes to facilitate more supportive relationships between women in the workplace would also be of interest. Another limitation of this study is that it focuses only on women in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, conducting a comparative study a cross the Arab Middle Eastern region to identify the similarities and differences in relation to the hierarchical relationships between women in the workplace and women's career advancement might also yield interesting results and enable a greater understanding of the range of factors influencing women's relationships in the workplace.

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**Appendix**

**Interview Protocol**

*RQ1: What have been the experiences of women in Saudi Arabia who have been working under women managers?*

(1) Can you tell me about your background and your career?

(2) What type of work do you do in your organisations?

(3) What you are aiming to achieve in your career?

(4) What expectations do you have of your woman manager?

(5) How do you perceive your relationship with your woman manager?

(6) What are your experiences working under a woman manager?

- Could you describe your relationship experiences with your woman manager?

- Is there any specific experience with your woman manager that has had an impact on your career or life in general?

- In your opinion, have the experiences you have had with your woman manager [been characterized by a] strong bond of solidarity? If yes, why?

- From your experiences working under women managers, what advice would you give to other women?

*RQ2: How do junior women perceive senior women's role in advancing their career?*

(1) Would you please describe your women manager?

(2) What do you like/dislike about the characteristics of your women manager, and why?

(3) Why do you think your women manager behaves in the way you have described her?

(4) Based on your experience and observations, has your women manager impacted on you personally and professionally?

(5) In your opinion, do you think senior women generally assist your and other women's career advancement to a high-ranking position? If yes, what type of support do they provide?

(6) In your opinion, do you think senior women can be a barrier to a woman's career?

(7) Have your women managers influenced your career decisions? If yes, can you explain this in more detail?

(8) In your opinion, what have been the consequences of the career decisions you made? If yes, can you explain this in more detail?

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