

READERS' CORNER

Book Review: *Women Business Leaders: Identity, Resistance, and Alternative Forms of Knowledge in Saudi Arabia* by Liela A. Jamjoom. 2023. New York & Abingdon: Routledge

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Leadership among Saudi women is not a new phenomenon; however, it has largely remained concealed as, historically, it has not been perceived as a central part of Saudi society. However, in today's globalized world, there is a tendency to recognize and encourage women to contribute alongside men for the betterment of society. This book by Liela A. Jamjoom represents an insightful attempt to highlight the role of Saudi women in leadership within Saudi society. It accomplishes this through 14 interviews with Saudi women leaders and analyses of their stories and experiences, including master narratives, counter narratives, and the author's own perspective. Jamjoom has divided her book into four parts with eight chapters, which make the book easy to navigate. In the first part, Jamjoom highlights the power of stories to effectively convey messages to the reader, thus making a persuasive argument for a focus on narratives and their significance.

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Jamjoom elaborates on the question of why Saudi women in leadership deserve particular attention. She emphasizes three key reasons for focusing on their role, which include the observation that Saudi women have been largely invisible in leadership circles, the economic enhancement opportunities presented under the umbrella of *Saudi Vision 2030* that encourages Saudi women to contribute effectively alongside men, and the transformation of organizations from a predominantly masculine culture to one that embraces mutual participation of both men and women. These reasons are compelling enough to underscore the importance of focusing on Saudi women in leadership. Jamjoom then proceeds to explain the concept of leadership as applied in this book, emphasizing that it involves aspects of social construction, identity, and cultural practice. She elaborates on her research questions, which revolve around leadership identities, resistance to power dynamics, and the potential emergence of alternative forms of knowledge. Subsequently, she delves into a controversial theory known as “postcolonial feminism,” attempting to apply this Western framework to the Saudi or Arab context.

Since Jamjoom conducted semi-structured interviews, the book is clearly qualitative. This approach was deemed necessary, Jamjoom argues, in order for her to deeply explore the realm of leadership among Saudi women during six months of fieldwork in 2019. She conducted interviews with individuals occupying diverse leadership roles in Saudi Arabia, encompassing Vice Presidents, Directors, Deans, Senior Managers, and high-ranking officials from both the private and the public sector. It was a prerequisite for all interviewees to possess a minimum of five years of leadership experience in order to qualify for participation in the study. In Chapter 2, Jamjoom dedicates over 30 pages to theoretical perspectives, which may not be necessary for readers who prefer to delve directly into the narratives and the analyses. In Chapter 3, Jamjoom structures her narratives using an inverted pyramid approach: starting with top-level master narratives, followed by counter-narratives, and then her own narrative. This framework is significant in helping readers understand the unfolding of narrative analysis. Moving on to Chapter 4, Jamjoom provides insights into how other works have represented Saudi women in various contexts. While this information is important, it carries a theoretical flavor and, at times, portrays Saudi women in a negative light. In contrast, Chapter 5 highlights the diverse identity experiences of women leaders within Saudi society. This chapter explores the unique challenges faced by women with different identities or dialects when relocating within Saudi Arabia.

In Chapter 6, Jamjoom delves into how women view power dynamics at work. She employs various stories to illustrate the significant role that factors such as voice and clothing, influenced by religion and culture, play. These influences are similar across Gulf states, prompting

me to reflect on the author's earlier concept of "exclusiveness" and leading me to ponder whether men and women might be exaggerating their perceptions of each other. The author also talks about how her interviewees think of feminism. Some prefer "Humanism" to "Feminism" (157), showing a tendency to stick to their own societal ideas rather than adopting Western terms. Lastly, what lies behind these narratives from Saudi women leaders? In the final chapter, Jamjoom explicitly acknowledges that readers might perceive her as biased, a commendable acknowledgment as I indeed had such a perception while reading this content. However, she asserts that this book should not be considered a generalization of all Saudi women leaders in Saudi society. Instead, she encourages other researchers to delve into this content and explore the topic further.

The style of the book is notably neat, and its ideas flow smoothly. However, Jamjoom dedicates a considerable amount of time to explaining certain concepts with which readers may already have some familiarity. Consequently, she delves into historical and theoretical contexts in greater detail than the core content of the book itself. While these contexts are not insignificant, they do occupy a significant portion of the book. Additionally, it would have been valuable if Jamjoom had included the perspectives of individuals who work under these Saudi women leaders. This would have provided a different viewpoint for comparison with the narratives presented. Furthermore, exploring how Saudi male leaders perceive these narratives from their perspective would also have been insightful. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the fact that this book is a valuable resource for scholars interested in fields such as business, management, leadership, sociology, anthropology, and gender studies. The clear and understandable language used in the book makes it accessible to both undergraduate and graduate students seeking insights into Saudi women leaders within Saudi society.

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