Article

Challenges to Cracking the Glass Ceiling among Saudi Women in the Tourism Industry

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Abstract: Women's participation in the tourism workforce is growing intensely in response to Saudi Vision 2030. Notwithstanding this, Saudi women still have limited access to senior management positions. This study explores the barriers that Saudi women face to reach top managerial positions in the tourism industry and explores how Saudi women could crack the glass ceiling. For these reasons, this study undertook a phenomenological approach using in-depth interviews with Saudi women who were able to reach senior management. The purpose of the interviews is to explore their lived experience and their accessibility to senior management positions. The results of a thematic analysis showed that there were four overlapped barriers for the glass ceiling among Saudi women: cultural and social barriers, regulatory barriers, organizational barriers, and personal barriers. These main barriers have sub-barriers that contribute to the glass ceiling and prevent many women from reaching senior positions. This study shows that overcoming these barriers, particularly cultural and social barriers, could help Saudi women to crack the glass ceiling and achieve their dream of leadership. This study discusses the implications for policy makers, academics, and practitioners on the effective contribution of Saudi women to the tourism labor market, which contributes to sustainable tourism development and, ultimately, to Saudi Vision 2030.

Keywords: glass ceiling; gender equality; SDG 5; career progression; leadership; women's empowerment; Saudi Arabia; tourism industry

1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia (SA) launched Saudi Vision 2030, which intends to replace the country's heavy reliance on oil and expand its economic resources [1]. For these reasons, the Saudi government has encouraged entrepreneurship and localized business and fostered the development of new industries, particularly tourism [1,2]. In this regard, Abuhjeeleh [3] indicated that tourism was recognized as an important industry for the Saudi economy in order to reduce the country's reliance on oil as a source of income. Certainly, Saudi Vision 2030 has supported women's rights and fostered their participation in a number of industries, including tourism [4]. As a result, these endeavors were supported by the Ministry of Tourism's restoration initiative that attempted to increase the ratio of women working in tourism to 30% [5], since nearly 50% of Saudi Arabia's population are women. In this regard, the "Regional Report on Women in Tourism in the Middle East" [6] revealed that the proportion of Saudi women employed in the tourism industry in SA is 8.1% of the entire workforce. However, the same report showed that the ratio of women at the global level of the tourism labor market is 54%.

Elshaer et al. [7] anticipated that women would make a rise in the Saudi tourism industry over the coming years. This is because the Saudi government is prioritizing

female empowerment through their joining newly developed industries and attaining management positions in industries such as tourism. Hence, the government mandates tourism enterprises to recruit women in all subsectors of the industry [4]. Earlier studies (e.g., [8,9]) have confirmed that the tourism industry supports gender parity and women's empowerment. Additionally, it is widely established that tourism has the potential to empower women and successfully incorporate them in the transformation of the country, particularly in countries such as SA [6,10,11].

The Saudi leadership launched Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016 to advance three main pillars: an ambitious nation, a thriving economy, and a vibrant society [12]. Vision 2030 comprised 96 strategic objectives to fulfill the requirements of these pillars. As a part of this vision, women have better opportunities to pursue higher education, political participation, empowerment, and access to leading positions [12]. In this regard, earlier studies (e.g., [13–16]) indicated that Saudi women have been empowered psychologically, economically, politically, and socially. As a result, Khalid and Aftab [17] confirmed that cultural, economic, and political empowerment has been clearly noticed in the growing proportion of women joining the labor market. In the tourism setting, recent studies [7,11,18] showed that the tourism industry is a means to empower Saudi women. To clarify, Al-Qahtani et al. [14] stated that the economic and managerial empowerment of Saudi women is positively impacted by political empowerment. Additionally, Elshaer et al. [7] argued that Saudi women have perceived political and psychological empowerment, which has a significant and positive association with the tourism industry's development. Nonetheless, Elshaer et al. [7] stated that Saudi women in the tourism industry did not perceive social empowerment. Similarly, other recent studies conducted by Al-Qahtani et al. [14] and Hassane et al. [18] confirmed that the SA community does not support the social empowerment of its women, which negatively impacts their intentions for entrepreneurship.

Saudi women have limited access to high-level positions despite the huge efforts and support from the leadership of SA [19]. Women are underrepresented in upper-level positions [20,21]. A significant invisible barrier called the "glass ceiling" hinders women from making career progress and achieving equality with men in leading positions. In this regard, Kattara [22] found that despite the large number of women employed globally in the tourism industry, only a few of them were able to access top executive/managerial positions. In an industry with a diverse workforce like tourism, the status of women and their career progression is a matter of great concern [23]. There is a still a need for more studies to understand why the glass ceiling exists in societies like SA. Hassane et al. [18] argued that Saudi women are underrepresented in the top managerial positions in the Saudi food industry. Kattara [22] indicated that less attention has been paid to investigate the phenomenon of the glass ceiling in the Egyptian tourism industry, which is also the case in SA [17]. Similarly, Li and Leung [24] illustrated that women's career progress in the tourism industry has been an issue of interest in North America and Europe. However, earlier studies did not analyze the glass ceiling in countries with a male-dominant culture such as SA, and women's empowerment is a recent initiative by the Saudi leadership. Therefore, this study is an attempt to highlight Saudi women's career progression in the tourism industry and if Saudi women would be able to shatter the glass ceiling due to the empowerment received politically, socially, and psychologically. This study fills the current gap relating to the glass ceiling in SA and the reasons behind this phenomenon. This study explores the barriers to top managerial positions for the Saudi women in the tourism industry. The study findings have multiple implications for tourism practitioners, policy makers, and scholars. The leading research questions are as follows:

1. What are Saudi women's perceptions toward career progression in the tourism industry?
2. What are the barriers that restrain women from fair representation at the top managerial level?
3. How could Saudi women overcome the barriers of career progress in the tourism industry?

The next section of this article tries to fulfill the above objectives. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature regarding Saudi women's empowerment. Furthermore, it reviews the

reasons behind the phenomenon of the glass ceiling in the Saudi labor market. Section 3 explains the research methods employed in this study for collecting and analyzing the data. Consequently, Section 4 shows the study results. The discussion and implications are then shown in Section 5. At the end, the conclusion and possible directions for further study are suggested in Section 6.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Saudi Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment refers to the promotion of women's sense of self-worth that leads them to make their own choices for their development [25,26]. It is a multifaceted process that includes psychological, economic, and sociological aspects at multiple levels, i.e., the group, community, and individual levels [27,28]. The empowerment of women is not essentially about granting them authority; however, it is about allowing them to practice that authority [29]. Women's empowerment is critical because it leads to the formation of a better family, better community, and, eventually, better nation [30]. According to Huis et al. [26], women's empowerment occurs in a three-dimensional model: (1) the personal dimension or the micro-level; (2) the relational dimension or the meso-level, and (3) the societal dimension or the macro-level.

In the context of SA, women are empowered socially, politically, and economically and have priority because women's empowerment is part of the government transformation policy [31]. It was argued that women's empowerment is a required policy in SA, where gender disparity is still pervasive [9]. Nevertheless, according to a recent report by the World Bank in 2020, SA leadership has made significant progress toward gender equality since 2017, i.e., after the inauguration of Saudi Vision 2030. Al-Qablan [32] illustrated that women are a dynamic and important part of society if they have the opportunity to advance their abilities. Consequently, Bin Shalhoub [33] illustrated that giving women their legal rights in society and boosting their social and personal strength are the two most important aspects for empowering Saudi women. Hassan [34] demonstrated the recent progression of women's empowerment compared to the last decades. In that sense, Parveen [12] reported that the empowerment of Saudi females in education emphasized the fact that Saudi females represent 51.8% of students in universities. However, earlier studies, e.g., [35–37], revealed a variety of challenges that have reduced the efficiency of a Saudi woman's function, including cultural bias against women. Earlier studies [8,38] claimed that in order to fully comprehend empowerment in the context of tourism, it is essential to explore political, psychological, economics, and social aspects.

Political empowerment gives women the right to vote, while allowing them to take part in regional, state, and national elections [39]. Politically, empowering women has evolved as a paradigm to help them to lead powerful, independent lives with dignity at the personal, professional, and societal levels. Women's political empowerment is the process that helps women to reach their potential by giving them access to opportunities, a voice to change, and assisting them to put their mark on society [40]. This perception can be categorized into four fundamentals: rule of law [41], resources, agency, and achievements [42]. The rule of law supports women's economic activity and allows for their political engagement. Al-Qahtani et al. [14] added that the Saudi government has analyzed the needs for women's empowerment and consequently launched many programs and initiatives for the benefit of women. The socio-political context was examined by Ibarra and Stengel [43] and they indicated that many challenges should be addressed in order to empower women. It was found that women's economic and social empowerment have increased significantly, but political empowerment has not yet been fully adopted. Nevertheless, in the Saudi context, legislation that promotes women's rights has strengthened women's social, economic, and political power at the national level [1]. According to Elshaer et al. [7], Saudi women are empowered through involvement in tourism development, and as a result, they have effectively contributed to the development of sustainable tourism.

Psychological empowerment can be defined as "*a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact*" ([44], p. 1444). This describes how a person evaluates the worth of a job's goal using his or her principles [45]. Competence, also known as self-efficacy, is a reflection of a person's confidence in their capacity to do tasks effectively [46]. Self-determination represents individuals' realization that they have the ability to initiate and control various activities [47]. The impact is the degree to which a person affects the various work outcomes [48]. An earlier study conducted by Morrison and Phelps [49] showed that psychologically empowered subordinates are more, creative, productive, efficient, and resilient and take more initiative, and that these qualities lead them to greater levels of achievement. In the context of the tourism industry, psychological empowerment is developed when travelers, who are aware of the exclusivity value of their community's natural resources and culture, improve women's self-esteem and pride [38]. A study conducted by Elshaer et al. [7] indicated that the psychological empowerment of Saudi women has a significant impact on sustainable tourism development.

Economic empowerment relates to the process by which women gain the ability to be "bread winners", become independent, produce wealth because of development programs, and struggle against poverty and inadequacy [50]. According to Dahlum et al. [51], a positive association is confirmed between the political empowerment of women and the growth of the economy. Similarly, Bhoganadam et al. [52] argued that economic growth and the empowerment of women are mutually beneficial. By fostering this connection, women have become better able to participate in various aspects of development, such as pursuing opportunities and obtain education. Earlier studies (e.g., [53–56]) indicated that female empowerment and gender equality have an influence on a country's growth and its economic results. Almathami et al. [11] stated that among the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030 are empowering and supporting Saudi women to join the workforce in different industries, including tourism. Certainly, the increased participation of women in tourism would have a positive influence on the SA economy [11].

The social empowerment of women tackles areas relating to gender equality from the social perspective [57,58]. Women should be treated with the utmost respect in society and their dignity should be appreciated. In this regard, Page and Czuba [59] stated that social empowerment is a multifaceted process that assists people to overcome societal constraints; hence, they can fully control their lives and speak freely about problems that are important to them. Culture and social practices are the two primary realms that influence women's social empowerment [60]. Furthermore, Aghazamani et al. [61] added that cultural and societal practices have a significant impact on how women perceive employment and empowerment. Elshaer et al. [7] stated that while women are empowered politically and psychologically in Saudi tourism, they are not socially empowered. Hassan et al. [62] found that Saudi women felt less socially empowered than men did. This restricted social empowerment negatively influences women's intention of entrepreneurship [62]. To conclude, despite the huge effort conducted to empower Saudi women, whether politically, economically, or psychologically, there are still challenges that need to be addressed to ensure social empowerment.

2.2. The Phenomenon of the Glass Ceiling in the SA Tourism Industry

Women's engagement in the global labor market has expanded significantly in recent years [63]. Notably in Asian countries, the pattern is shifting as more women are represented in the workforce [63]. Furthermore, women are no longer engaged in traditional occupations that were prescribed for them, such as nursing and teaching, but their presence in professions traditionally attributed to men is growing [63]. This increasing percentage of females in the labor market can be ascribed to different factors such as increasing the number of females registered in universities and government support through quota and policy reforms [63,64]. However, multiple studies (e.g., [63–69]) have indicated that women are misrepresented in leadership. The under-representation of women in senior management

is referred to as the "glass ceiling" [63,68,69]. The roots of the phenomenon go back to Ann Morris in 1980. Morrison [70] described the term "glass ceiling" as hidden blockages or barriers that make hurdles for females and other minorities from achieving the highest level of leadership. The glass ceiling prevents women from taking more responsibility inside their workplace, blocking them from any opportunities and promotions [63–65,68,69]. Additionally, it prohibits qualified women from promotion to the top-management level because of organizational beliefs, which often support men [63,64,71]. Although the glass ceiling may vary between organizations and countries, the way to handle it in the workplace determines the level of business success.

According to Powell and Graves [72], management has historically been considered primarily a male-dominated profession, and women managers have to contend with barriers of mobility, prejudice, and preconceptions. Sabharwal [69] identified several obstacles that hinder women from advancing to top management roles, including limited access to high-quality education, stereotypical attitudes, cultural hurdles, occupational gender segregation, and other prejudices. Choi and Park [66] categorized these obstacles into socio-psychological, human capital, and systematic barriers. Factors such as socio-psychological, gender stereotypes, and sex roles contribute to the limited number of women in leadership [66], while the human capital models show that females are not equal to men in term of experience, job-related abilities, and education. Systematic barriers are challenges ingrained in organizational systems that make it hard for women to achieve managerial positions, such as organizational support and networking [66,68]. Women in Asian nations have had sociological and cultural obstacles when trying to network. Holding positions in upper management needs networking and socialization activities that many women could find to be a challenging task [73].

The basic argument of the glass ceiling focuses on the social role theory, which draws on cultural impacts and the attributes of leadership [74–76]. It is claimed that females' social role in a country with a male-dominance culture like SA face many barriers to reach leadership positions. According to Eagly and Schmidt [77], women are seen as subservient and take on the responsibility of family caregiver. It is perceived that if women stick to their gender roles, they would become unsuccessful at fulfilling the requirements of the leadership position, and vice versa. Furthermore, women have difficulty in holding senior roles because of their emotional, subservient, and supporting natures, which are considered as undesirable traits for top managerial positions. In the context of the hospitality industry, a study conducted by Kattara [22] reported that relationships at work, gender discrimination, cultural conflict, and gender stereotyping are associated with the glass ceiling.

Despite the increasing number of women in management, the proportion of women in both the workforce and management in the Middle East is the lowest compared to other parts of the world [78]. According to the SA Labor Market Statistics Report (2022), 42% of SA's population were female in 2021. The same report indicated that 47% of all higher-education students nationwide were female. Recently, Saudi women were found to represent 33.6% of the entire Saudi workforce [79], a proportion which has raised from 17.4% five years ago. Saudi women have made progress and undergone changes in the workforce, but they still do not have equal access to the same benefits as men [80]. Multiple factors were found to affect the participation and the promotion of Saudi women negatively such as employer bias, discrimination, stereotyping, parental issues, policies, and limited training [12]. Ahmed [81] added that Saudi women face other challenges such as religious conditions and conservative culture, balancing family hours and job responsibilities.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Approach

This research used phenomenology as the research methodology to achieve the aim of the study and address its questions. Phenomenology was chosen for this study to explore the experiences of senior managers about women's accessibility to senior management positions and barriers to the phenomenon of the "glass ceiling". Phenomenology is a

qualitative research approach that enables researchers to build on the lived experience of participants. The research focuses on the experiences of women in the tourism industry, especially those in leading positions. Phenomenological research focuses on the experiences of participants and how they were shaped [82]. More specifically, this research adopted a transcendental or descriptive phenomenology approach [83]. This approach requires the researchers to understand the phenomenon as lived by an individual. *"This requires the researcher to suspend his/her own attitudes, beliefs, and suppositions in order to focus on the participants' experience of the phenomenon and identify the essences of the phenomenon"* ([83], p. 93). Hence, this study used the experiences of interviewees to cultivate the meaning of the essence of the glass ceiling phenomenon.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

To undertake the phenomenological approach properly, the study adopted in-depth interviews with the participants to understand their lived experiences. Unstructured interviews, face to face, were conducted with interviewees to explore their perceptions of tourism careers and experiences with their accessibility and other women to senior management positions. The reason for selecting in-depth interviews was because they allowed us to gain rich and in-depth information about the phenomenon of the study [84]. In-depth interviews enabled us to probe responses and gain more insights about the experiences of interviewees. All interviews were undertaken at the place selected by the interviewees for their convenience, i.e., their office in the workplace. The interviews started by introducing the research topic and purpose of the study. The interviewees were asked about their personal details, especially those related to their tourism career such as years of work in tourism and their education, their choice of tourism career, etc. After their consent, interviews were recorded and notes were taken to make sure all given information was carefully noted. Each interview took at least one hour.

3.3. Sampling

The population of this study included exclusively female managers in the Saudi tourism industry. This included managers in hotels, restaurants, cafes, travel agencies, airports and recreation centers. It was very difficult to identify the actual number of female managers in Saudi tourism industry because there were no published statistics related to this issue. It was very difficult to access female managers, but with support from the university and colleagues working at the tourism industry, a total number of 24 female managers participated in this study. This number achieved data saturation, as there was a consensus among the participants about their comments when this number was reached.

3.4. Ethical Issues

The participants in this study were informed that their input in this study was voluntarily and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. The reason for conducting the study was explained to all participants before undertaking the meetings. Participants were asked to give their consent for their contribution in the study. They were told that their input was for research purposes and no comments would be shared with other parties to avoid power bias. No personal information was collected from the participants. The names and positions of the participants were replaced with codes during data presentation to protect the identity of the participants.

3.5. Data Processing

As highlighted earlier, this research adopted a phenomenological approach using in-depth interviews with the participants to understand their lived experiences. Thematic analysis was adopted in this study. Therefore, five steps were adopted during data analysis. Step 1 started with transcribing the recorded interviews. The transcripts were read several times by the researchers to note initial ideas. Step 2 included developing initial codes. More specifically, interesting features of the data were coded. Step 3 included searching for

themes. Themes were generated from the coded extracts. Step 4 included reviewing themes and developing a thematic map of analysis. Step 5 included defining and presenting the final themes. Four main themes/barriers were identified to contribute to the glass ceiling: social and cultural barriers, regulatory barriers, organizational barriers, and individual barriers. These themes will be discussed in the following section.

4. Results

4.1. Respondents' Demographics

All the interviewed managers were part of the senior management. The majority of them (11 managers) were working at various managerial positions in different Saudi airports. Six interviewees were managers of travel agencies. Five managers were working at large hotels. Two interviewees were managers of small restaurants. All interviewees had at least a university degree and five of them had a Master's degree. The experiences of participants in their current management position varied between 2 and 5 years.

4.2. Social and Cultural Barriers

4.2.1. Negative Perceptions of Tourism Jobs

The interviewees confirmed that they challenged the general assumption about tourism career as a "servile" job and joined this career. They commented that Saudi women are not encouraged to join tourism and hospitality careers because they hold negative perceptions. Furthermore, Saudis have an inferior view of tourism and hospitality jobs, particularly food preparation and service. In general, the tourism and hospitality sector has a poor image as an employer. In addition, they reported some reasons behind the negative perceptions of females' participation in tourism and hospitality careers such as mixing with males. There was an agreement among participants that gender segregation culture has indeed shaped negative perceptions among the majority of Saudi women regarding tourism and hospitality jobs. In Saudi society, gender segregation is practiced to comply with religious and cultural norms. This segregation limits women's interactions with unrelated males and restricts their access to public spaces and employment opportunities. This cultural and religious context has influenced how some Saudi women perceive tourism and hospitality jobs. Since these sectors often involve working closely with male colleagues and interacting with male customers, many Saudi women feel uncomfortable due to their lack of experience with such interactions.

The gender segregation culture promotes perceptions that certain roles are not suitable for women. Traditional gender roles in Saudi society often place a strong emphasis on women's roles as homemakers and caretakers, rather than active participants in the workforce. This can lead to limited exposure to career opportunities and promotions in tourism and hospitality, which contributes to negative perceptions of the industry. For instance, a couple of interviewees who are business owner and manager commented as follows:

> *For me, I was less prepared to join this career as a worker because the majority of available jobs in that career require direct interactions with customers and this is against our tradition. I preferred to participate as an entrepreneur to run my business.* (M11)

> *As a woman working in the tourism field in Saudi Arabia, I have encountered numerous challenges since the beginning of my career, because of negative perceptions that the Saudi society holds regarding certain industries, such as tourism and hospitality.* (M1)

Nonetheless, the interviewed managers commented that this negative perception of tourism and hospitality jobs is changing gradually. The transformation that the country has witnessed after the initiation of Saudi Vision 2030 promoted women's participation in public life. This has led to a gradual shift in mindset towards working in the private sector, including tourism industry. This is because Saudi individuals prefer to join the public sector or to be an entrepreneur than to join the private sector. Hence, some of the interviewed managers stated that many Saudi women now aspire to pursue careers in the private sector and recognized the potential for personal and career progress and professional growth.

Additionally, the interviewees believe that the negative perceptions toward the career progress of Saudi women in the tourism and hospitality will be diminished in the near future because they have perceived political empowerment in parallel with a high level of education. As a result, below is one of interviewees' comments:

> *Despite the society having negative perceptions toward the tourism and hospitality careers, Saudi women have the ability to hold a managerial level in tourism because they are politically empowered and they are well educated.* (M7)

4.2.2. Negative Perceptions of Working Women

There was an agreement amongst interviewees that negative perceptions of working women are because of cultural and social customs. The customary gender roles dictate that women should primarily focus on their roles as homemakers and mothers, with their main workplace at their homes. Interviewees added that gender stereotypes in SA often expose women as delicate, emotional, and in need of protection. This leads to assumptions that a woman should prioritize her family over her professional ambitions. Consequently, there might be less emphasis on women's career development, which can further reinforce these stereotypes. There was an agreement among the interviewees that the majority of Saudi men believe that a woman's participation in the workforce can challenge traditional family structures, potentially causing instability and neglecting traditional duties. This perception associates a working woman with a lack of commitment to her family and a potential threat to societal harmony. This could be noticed from these comments:

> *Despite the advancements in Saudi Arabian society, there is still gender disparity, particularly regarding working women. Traditional gender norms have deeply ingrained the perceptions that women should primarily be housewives, resulting in women being followers to their male counterparts in many aspects of life.* (M21)

> *Once I decided to join the tourism career, I have had a decision to do work–family balance as much as I can. Hence, I have received the full support from my family because I do my home responsibilities as a mother . . . Certainly, this is a great challenge.* (M3)

4.2.3. Lack of Support from the Family and Work–Family Conflict

Interviewees have confirmed that one of the key challenges of Saudi women in joining the labor force and particularly tourism is a lack of support from their families. There are many reasons behind the lack of family support as reported by interviewees such as social norms, the nature of work and tradition, and interactions with customers, albeit the major contributing factor was work–family conflict. Furthermore, interviewees illustrated that in Saudi culture, women are often expected to prioritize their role as wives, and kids' care, leading to a lack of support from their families when it comes to pursuing career advancement. As a result, Saudi women may struggle to balance their professional aspirations with their family responsibilities, resulting in limited opportunities for career progresses. Furthermore, traditional gender roles and expectations play a substantial part in impeding the career progress of Saudi women. The society often places more value on women's roles in the household, which can lead to limited support or understanding for their professional pursuits. A lack of support from family members can create pressure on women, making it difficult for them to focus on their career development.

Interviewees commented on the lack of adequate policies and infrastructure to support working women, such as affordable childcare services and flexible working arrangements, further exacerbate work–family conflict experienced by Saudi women. Without proper support systems, women are facing several barriers and feel compelled to prioritize their family duties over their professional ambitions. One of the managers added that aspects such as family-friendly policies and inflexible working hours influence the glass ceiling by constructing an overstressing effect on the work–family relationship. Among the comments were the following:

A top challenge for Saudi women to achieve career advancement is the lack of support from our families because of work–family conflict. Hence, we had to prioritize family responsibilities over work duties. (M16)

How do Saudi women balance between family and work? Balance requires family support, experience, and training, but family members' support is the key for success. (M2)

4.2.4. Social Influence and the Effect of Community on Decision of Working Women

In a collective society such as SA, social influence play a significant role in determining the decisions of career progression in the tourism industry. In that sense, there was an agreement between interviewees that SA has a deeply rooted culture and societal norms that heavily impact on the behavior and choices of individuals for leadership, especially women. Therefore, some interviewees commented the following:

The community members have a negative impact on the decision-making of working women. Relatives, friends, and parents shape the decision process. Sometimes parents accept certain jobs, but for social considerations they change their minds. (M5)

There are some factors that assist me to deal with social influence such as engaging with family. (M8)

Managers argued that in Saudi society, family ties are strong, and the opinions of family members are highly valued when making important decisions. Hence, working women in the tourism industry seek the approval and support of their families before pursuing a career. If the community and family members perceive such a career as acceptable and are supportive, it can positively influence women's decisions to enter and progress in the tourism industry. One more issue that has been added by interviewees related to women's uniform and appearance. The community perceptions of females working in the tourism industry also relate to issues of modesty and public appearance. In a conservative society like SA, there are certain expectations regarding dress, behavior, and interactions with the opposite gender. Working women in the tourism industry might face judgment or criticism from their community if they do not conform to these cultural norms, potentially influencing their decision-making process.

4.3. Regulatory Barriers

4.3.1. Absence of a Legal Framework on Women's Empowerment

There was a consensus among the interviewees that there is an absence of a comprehensive legal framework that addresses the challenges facing the career progress of Saudi women. The interviewees commented that there is an absence of legal support for Saudi women particularly in fighting for gender equality. Although recent reforms have allowed women to drive, attend sports events, and participate in the workforce, there is still no specific legislation safeguarding women's rights and ensuring gender equality. The following quote could show this:

There is a lack of legal protection for Saudi women. This leaves women vulnerable to discrimination and unequal treatment in various areas including employment accessibility and career progress. (M10)

Nonetheless, some interviewees commented that there have been some positive developments in recent years supporting Saudi women. Saudi Vision 2030 has a target to maximize women's participation in the labor market, with initiatives to support female entrepreneurs and provide better career opportunities. Additionally, the efforts of the MoHRSD "Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development" have addressed gender inequality in the workplace. On the other side, other managers commented that more steps need to be taken to break the glass ceiling and establish a legal framework for women's empowerment. This includes introducing anti-discrimination laws and regulations that protect women's rights, implementing affirmative action policies to promote gender diversity in leadership positions, and creating educational programs that challenge societal

norms and stereotype, while others commented that there are policy-related factors which encompass obstacles such as the ineffective execution of gender equality laws, insufficient awareness-raising about barriers to advancement for women, and infrastructure issues that add to the difficulties in shattering the glass ceiling.

4.3.2. Work Quota and Anti-Discrimination Regulations

Interviewees have confirmed that the Saudi government has launched some legalization policies to localize Saudi individuals and to go forward toward a Saudization policy. Nonetheless, interviewees added that the proportion of Saudi women in the tourism industry is not subject to any specific work quota or anti-discrimination regulations solely based on their gender. In that sense, two managers commented the following:

> *Saudi Arabia lacks a specific work quota that ensures a minimum representation of women in tourism. Such regulations ensure equality and equal opportunities for women in this field.* (M3)

> *Discrimination exists from some male managers. The priority is for males regardless of efficiency or skills. Hence, as women we need more legislation to fight against gender discrimination.* (M2)

The interviewees commented that female employees in the tourism industry might face discrimination and bias related to hiring decisions, career progression, and salary disparities comparing their male colleagues. This can discourage women from pursuing or progressing in tourism. Additionally, managers added that Saudi women might encounter challenges in career advancement and promotion within the tourism industry due to factors, e.g., limited access to training programs and a lack of mentorship opportunities. One of the interviewed managers stated the following:

> *There is no quota applicable to preserve Saudi women's presentation in top-level positions. As a result, in cases of vacancy for the management level they think to hire males automatically. Men usually think that women miss the required skills of males.* (M19)

4.4. Organizational Barriers

4.4.1. Perceived Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support "POS" and organizational culture are interconnected in influencing career progress for Saudi women in tourism. Hence, there is an agreement between managers that the level of perceived support from their organizations can influence how they are valued at their workplace and enable them to shatter the glass ceiling. They added that if they perceived organizational support, equal opportunities, and the valuing of their contributions, they were more likely to feel motivated and confident in shattering the glass ceiling. There are many forms of organizational support for women such as motivation, psychological well-being, and job engagement. In that sense, one of the managers stated that if employed women have POS they become more motivated to work hard, take on challenges, and feel valued and appreciated, satisfied, and more committed to organization and career. Among the managers' comments were the following:

> *A supportive organization understands the barriers faced by Saudis in balancing work and family responsibilities. When organizations provide flexible work hours, parental leave, and other policies that support work–life balance, Saudis are more likely to continue their career journey without feeling overwhelmed.* (M9)

> *A supportive organizational culture that actively promotes gender equality can have a significant effect on Saudis' career progress. When organizations treat women fairly, provide equal opportunities, and challenge gender stereotypes, it creates a more inclusive environment for career advancement.* (M22)

> *Perceived organizational support positively affects Saudi women's psychological well-being in the workplace. When they feel supported and cared for, they experience lower*

stress levels, higher self-esteem, and greater satisfaction with their personal and professional lives. (M20)

In the context of organizational culture, interviewees indicated that organizations could contribute to changing societal norms around gender roles and women's career progress by promoting gender equality. By actively challenging gender biases and stereotypes while providing a supportive culture, organizations can create a positive environment where Saudi women feel empowered and crack the glass ceiling. An appropriate organizational culture invests in development programs specifically designed for women to enable them to acquire the necessary skills. Some examples of comments are given below:

A good organization culture is the culture that promotes gender equality and values diversity. It creates a positive environment for women. (M24)

Organizations that foster an inclusive culture make it easier for women to break the glass ceiling by promoting equal opportunities, fair treatment, and respect for all employees regardless of their gender. (M14)

4.4.2. Networking and Job Involvement

There was an agreement among interviewees that both networking and job involvement have an impact on the glass ceiling. To clarify, the interviewees indicated that job involvement refers to the level of interest, engagement, and satisfaction they have towards their job. It reflects the extent to which they feel connected to their work and are motivated to perform well. Thus, managers confirmed that if women get involved in their jobs, they are more likely to shatter the glass ceiling and hold top-level positions. The interviewees reported some causes related to a lack of job involvement such as a lack of female-friendly work environments, limited training opportunities, and limited networking and mentorship opportunities.

The interviewees confirmed that developing a network and engaging in social activities are crucial attributes for attaining and holding senior managerial roles. However, many tourism organizations do not help women to develop their networks. They added that Saudi women are reluctant to advance networking with their work colleagues and male counterparts for cultural/social reasons. Additionally, managers argued that networking allows women to learn about job openings, training programs, and other professional development initiatives which enhance their skills and increase their chances of career advancement. Here are some of interviewees' comments:

Shattering the glass ceiling requires good networking because it enables exchanging information, sharing experiences, and gaining mentorship from other professionals. (M4)

Certainly, promotion to top-managerial level does depend mainly on individual skills, capabilities, and education but networking is an important factor. However, many Saudi women have a limited network and relationship with male colleagues. (M2)

4.4.3. Gender Stereotype

It was obvious from the interviews that there is a gender stereotype which perpetuates the belief that tourism and hospitality careers are more suitable for men, hence creating enormous assumptions that women have limited access to several job roles, which limits their opportunities to top managerial positions. However, some interviewees confirmed that there are improvements as Saudi women have joined some professions that they have never joined before, such as festivals, hospitality, tourism, and entertainment. Managers argued that in hotels and restaurants, gender stereotypes lead to limited career options for women. This can result in fewer opportunities for women to advance professionally, as well as unequal access to development programs and networking opportunities. Below are some examples of comments about this issue:

The attitude and perceptions towards gender roles are evolving among the younger generation. Many young Saudis, both men and women, are challenging traditional stereotype and advocating for greater equality. (M1)

Gender stereotypes can limit opportunities for women. Therefore, there is an urgent need for regulations to promote equality between genders in every aspect of life. (M9)

4.5. Individual Barriers

4.5.1. Self-Confidence

One of the main barriers for career progression amongst Saudi women in tourism is self-confidence as reported by the interviewees. The interviewees argued that the absence of self-confidence among some female workers definitely influences women's career progress and their accessibility to senior positions. The interviewees mentioned some reasons for self-confidence such as a lack of training, education, motivations, and social norms. One of the interviewees commented:

The lack of self-confidence poses a challenge for women when it comes to branding themselves, which in turn causes them to miss out on valuable professional growth opportunities at work and fail to display their significant contributions to the organization. (M8)

The interviewees commented that self-confidence is required in the workplace for career progress because it leads to many advantages. In that sense, some managers stated that a woman with self-confidence has the ability to deal with stereotypes and preconceived notions about women's roles in the workplace. Additionally, self-confidence enables women to look for better job positions. By demonstrating their worth and advocating for their rights, Saudi women can overcome gender-based discrimination and secure equitable opportunities. One of the managers commented:

Self-confidence empowers Saudi women to actively participate in networking activities, engage successfully in meaningful conversations, and seek guidance and support from mentors who can help them overcome barriers and navigate career challenges. (M6)

4.5.2. Interpersonal Skills

Tourism requires interpersonal skills because the industry depends on interaction between customers or travelers and workers at the workplace. Therefore, interviewees confirmed that top-management positions require interpersonal skills, since they need to communicate with team members. Interviewees added that culture and the Saudi society have an impact on Saudi women as they are less prepared to interact with males out of their family members. A lack of interpersonal skills has a negative influence on career progress for Saudi women in the tourism industry. Nonetheless, some of the interviewees indicated that Saudi women have become more educated and empowered over the last five years; hence, they have developed good communication skills. Below are some of interviewees' comments:

Saudi women have a good level of education in tourism over the last few years. It provides students with required skills such as interpersonal skills and other skills. (M20)

The Kingdom has witnessed a dramatic change in all aspect of life since the inauguration of the 2030 vision. Hence, Saudi females have been empowered, supported, and educated. Therefore, the traditional image for Saudi women is changing. From my point of view, Saudi women have the required skills to hold top positions like their male counterparts. (M9)

4.5.3. Psychological Empowerment

There is an agreement between interviewees that Saudi women will not shatter the glass ceiling without psychological empowerment in parallel with other kinds of empowerment such as economic, social, and political empowerment, which could be seen in the following comments:

Psychological empowerment cultivates a positive mindset, which is crucial for overcoming the self-doubt and social perceptions of working women. It helps women challenge traditional norms and pursue lucrative positions in the tourism industry, breaking the glass ceiling. (M8)

Psychological empowerment fosters resilience and enables women to handle setbacks and criticism effectively. As women face challenges on their path to break the glass ceiling, developing resilience helps them bounce back and persevere in their pursuit of career growth. (M11)

Furthermore, interviewees recommended that there is a need for mentoring programs to connect Saudi women in tourism with experienced professionals who can provide guidance, support, and career advice. Regular coaching sessions can help to build confidence and empower women to overcome barriers and challenges. Some of the interviewed managers commented:

Facilitating professional networking enhances women's visibility, builds relationships, and offers opportunities for career growth. (M5)

Launching campaigns that showcase the accomplishments and contributions of Saudi women in the tourism sector is important. Highlighting success stories can help other women follow the path. (M21)

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1. Discussion

This study is a reply to women's participation in the Saudi labor market and their empowerment in various spheres after launching Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016. Notably, there is a growing participation in fresh industries developed to meet the objectives of the 2030 vision, such as events, festivals, tourism, and hospitality [4,7,11]. The main purpose of this study is to address an existing research gap by exploring the challenges that affect the career progression of Saudi women in the tourism industry. This study aimed to shed light on the barriers faced by Saudi women in shattering the glass ceiling, consequently reaching their professional goals. This study used phenomenological research through in-depth interviews with senior female managers to understand their lived experiences about the glass ceiling phenomenon. This study distinguished itself from previous studies that primarily utilized quantitative methods [17,22,85,86].

Barriers to the glass ceiling were categorized under four main themes: social and cultural barriers, regulatory barriers, organizational barriers, and individual barriers. Among these barriers, managers unanimously identified social and cultural barriers as the primary obstacle for the glass ceiling. Interviewees revealed that there is a prevalent negative perception towards the tourism and hospitality jobs. This result is consistent with the research conducted by Sobaih [87] and Sobaih and Abu Elnasr [88], which also indicated that Saudi people hold negative attitudes towards careers in hospitality, perceiving them as "disrespected" jobs. It is important to note that this negative perception is ingrained deeply in Saudi culture, leading to the rejection of Saudi employment in certain male-dominated industries such as tourism. Furthermore, these findings align with earlier research by Rafiah et al. [11] who found gender diversity and cultural values highlighted as significant barriers for women's progression. Hence, the government has encouraged the participation of women in tourism by encouraging them to participate tourism and hospitality education. The aim of government efforts is to combat the negative stereotypes surrounding gender segregation and offer diverse and inclusive career prospects for women in SA. As a result, the negative perceptions towards women working tourism and hospitality are expected to diminish [14]. This positive change can primarily be attributed to a shift in mindset within Saudi families. There has been an overall increase in education and awareness within Saudi society, emphasizing the significance of women's participation and advancement in the workforce.

The results also indicated that gender stereotyping is considered among the top barriers to Saudi women's career progression. Saudi males were found to have a negative impact on the career progress of Saudi women. This aligns with the study of Saleem et al. [73] that females in Asian culture are more susceptible to stereotypes, resulting in their exclusion from career advancement opportunities. Another study conducted by Cortis and Cassar [89] revealed that in Maltese society, gender stereotypes have a detrimental effect on women in managerial positions. These stereotypes lead to negative perceptions towards them, subsequently impeding their career advancement. The research by Tlaiss and Kauser [90] further confirms that these biased attitudes towards female executives play a significant role in impeding their professional growth. However, it is clear that SA is currently undergoing a significant social change, and these perceptions are gradually evolving. Interviewees stated that while traditional gender stereotypes and negative perceptions of working women persist in SA, there is ongoing progress in changing these perceptions. Society is gradually recognizing the importance of women's involvement in the workforce and their significant contributions to the country's development. In that sense, managers added that the issue of imbalanced representation of gender in senior positions is still prevalent in most SA tourism organizations. This observation can be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, tourism is a relatively new career to Saudi workers. Secondly, Saudi Arabia is a conservative society where numerous families adhere to the belief that women should not interact with men in professional settings. Traditionally, women are expected to focus on domestic matters such as children care and supporting their family members.

Work–family conflict is another barrier for Saudi women to reach executive positions in the tourism industry. This is primarily due to the hostile working environment and the requirement to work long hours. This finding is consistent with earlier studies [88,91,92], which indicated that the tourism industry often presents harsh working environments, including anti-sociable and long working hours, stressful conditions, and a lack of work–life balance. Consequently, women in this industry often face difficulties in receiving support from their families, especially in Asian countries such as SA. Similarly, Batara et al. [93] stated that female managers in the Philippines have to bear a disproportionate burden of family obligations because of societal norms. Women found it difficult to balance domestic duties alongside with their work obligations [94]. In Ireland, Cross and Linehan [95] brought attention to the fact that numerous women relinquish their aspiration to reach top-management positions due to the competing demands of their work and lives. According to Greguletz et al. [96], executive women often face challenges in participating in events outside regular office hours due to their families and domestic responsibilities.

The social influence has a significant negative impact on Saudi women to shatter the glass ceiling. Traditionally, it is commonly believed that men should play the main role in providing financial support to their families as "breadwinners" and they are anticipated to possess qualities such as independence, confidence, decisiveness, and assertiveness. This finding is in agreement with Eagly and Karau [97]. Conversely, there is an expectation for women to take on household duties predominantly, such as childcare and/or taking care of parents [98]. As a result, they are often encouraged to display qualities like shyness, nurturance, and compassion [99]. Moreover, even if Saudi women receive family support to pursue a career in the tourism industry, they may face societal challenges that could potentially undermine this support. Sobaih [87] stated that despite Saudi women making up the majority of the unemployed in SA, particularly educated women, the low percentage of employed women in hospitality can be attributed to societal barriers. As per the social role theory, women encounter stereotypes due to their various social roles. In relation to this, the presence of the glass ceiling for women in leadership roles can be attributed to a lack of alignment between societal expectations and their roles [73].

In order to achieve gender equality and crack the glass ceiling, it is crucial to establish a legal framework that supports women in leadership. There is still a need for legislation that addresses the existing gender equality issues and protect women's rights and their access

to leading positions. Parveen [12] conducted a study that reinforces the significance of dealing with this obstacle. Despite the passing of numerous laws and the implementation of board quotas aimed at creating a more conducive work environment for female employees, the absence of a robust enforcement authority and legal penalties for non-compliance makes it challenging to ensure the proper implementation of these laws [99,100]. The result confirmed that in order to advance gender equality, mitigate discrimination, and bolster women's representation in senior managerial roles, it is imperative for policymakers to implement a specific quota system. This system would ensure that a certain percentage of leadership positions are designated for women, thereby facilitating equal opportunities and reducing gender disparities in decision-making capacities. By embracing such a policy, societies can proactively strive towards attaining greater gender parity and cultivating inclusive work environments. These findings are aligned with earlier research [101–103], which underscored the presence of discriminatory practices against females in the tourism industry, specifically in terms of promotional opportunities and pay disparities. Additionally, a study conducted by Kattara [22] argued that gender discrimination serves as an invisible barrier hindering women from ascending to leadership positions.

The findings from interviews showed that a strong organizational culture plays a significant role in transforming societal norms pertaining to gender roles and facilitating women's career progression. This could be achieved by promoting gender equality within the workplace and recognizing the accomplishments of women. Moreover, organizations that implement mentoring programs, leadership courses, and networking initiatives empower women to overcome the obstacles they encounter and ultimately shatter the glass ceiling. Research on organizational culture [104] solidifies the notion that the prevailing cultural environment within an organization has a profound impact on employee job satisfaction, morale, and engagement. Numerous studies (e.g., [105–108]) have evidenced that the existence of the glass ceiling gives rise to a hostile work atmosphere, resulting in unhappiness, worry, and exhaustion amongst female workers. It is imperative for organizations to address and eliminate such systemic barriers to create an inclusive and supportive environment for female workforce. Additionally, Carvalho et al. [109] emphasized the reinforcement of male culture within organizations by excluding women from informal networks, as observed through their research on Portuguese women managers. This exclusion has detrimental effects on female executives, as it hinders their access to social capital, making it a challenge for them to find mentors and receive the guidance needed to advance in their careers [110]. Surprisingly, a few interviewees agreed that the organization's culture could influence the selection of women to hold managerial level positions by top women managers. This result is in agreement with Derks et al. [111] that the existence of an organizational culture encourages female managers to exhibit "queen bee behavior". Queen bee behavior refers to the tendency of women in high-level managerial positions to uphold the disadvantaged situation of female workers and maintain sexist cultures within the organization [112–114]. According to Derks et al. [111], women who experience gender discrimination during their career progression might conform to prevailing gender stereotypes within the organization and display hostility towards junior women.

Certainly, shattering the glass ceiling requires a significant level of job engagement. When women actively participate in their work, they experience a sense of appreciation and are more likely to be considered for higher positions. However, various factors can hinder their job involvement, including an unfriendly working environment, insufficient development of necessary skills, limited access to training opportunities, and a lack of networking and mentorship programs. These challenges often discourage women from fully engaging in their jobs and hinder their career progression. Furthermore, networking and actively participating in social activities are considered essential qualities for achieving and maintaining senior managerial positions. However, due to cultural reasons, Saudi women show hesitation in engaging in networking activities with their male colleagues and counterparts at work. These findings are in line with the theory of interaction as women hinder their professional growth in high-level positions by not engaging in crucial networking activities

essential for attaining and sustaining success in top managerial roles [64]. Once again, the findings reinforce the detrimental effects of gender stereotypes within organizations on the career progression of Saudi women. Businesses can either perpetuate or mitigate these stereotypes. One way they perpetuate them is by excluding women from attending training sessions, development programs, and networking opportunities, all of which are examples of gender bias. Additionally, the refusal of Saudi men to be managed by female supervisors serves as a clear reason of such biased perceptions. Furthermore, negative societal attitudes towards female managers in SA exacerbate the issue. Consequently, these discriminatory attitudes may impede the career progression of Saudi women. As noted by Tlaiss and Kauser [90], biased perceptions toward female executives have been identified as a significant factor hindering their professional advancement.

The ability to hold managerial positions requires a specific set of traits and skills. This aligns with the findings of Eagly and Karau [97] and Schein [2], who suggested that women are often perceived as caring and shy, while effective leadership traits like independence, aggression, confidence, and dominance are more frequently associated with men. Consequently, this contrast in perceived traits undermines the recognition of women as capable leaders and reinforces the concept of the "Think Manager, Think Male" mindset. This ideology perpetuates a tendency among men in higher positions to prefer hiring other men for important roles within an organization, leading to bias against women in their selection and advancement into leadership [72]. A lack of self-confidence and interpersonal skills is an example of an individual barrier that prevents Saudi women from being promoted to the upper level, as reported by interviewees. This finding is in agreement with the study of Zhao and Lord [115] that a lack of self-confidence and interpersonal skills is a key aspect that impedes women's career progression. The findings confirmed that social norms have an important impact to decrease or increase the level of self-confidence and interpersonal skills. In that sense, Liu [116] indicated that Chinese women's experience affected their self-confidence because of cultural norms prevailing in Chinese society. Women with self-confidence believe in themselves; hence, they are more willing to step outside their comfort zones, take calculated risks, and seize career opportunities. This can lead to career growth, recognition, and breaking through the glass ceiling. Nonetheless, the interviewees confirmed that women at the middle-management level are not fit for the top-management level due to the lack of self-confidence and interpersonal skills. These results are in line with the study findings of Einarsdottir et al. [21].

Due to the growing empowerment of Saudi women, the younger generation has experienced a significant rise in education level, resulting in a more open-minded and skilled population. This shift has also contributed to the development of a greater sense of self-confidence among Saudi women. The study findings confirmed that psychological empowerment positively affects the career progress of Saudi women. This result is an agreement with the study finding of Saleem et al. [73]. Managers reported unlimited advantages for psychological empowerment such as building self-confidence, developing assertiveness and negotiation skills, and encouraging self-advocacy and networking. Hence, managers confirmed that psychological empowerment requires offering training programs and workshops specifically designed for Saudi women interested in pursuing a tourism career.

5.2. Implications

This paper offers some valuable insights for scholar, policymakers, and practitioners. From an academic perspective, this study offers an in-depth analysis of the glass ceiling phenomenon. More specifically, the study fills a gap in the previous studies by offering empirical evidence on the barrier of Saudi women's career progress in the tourism industry. To the best of our knowledge, there are some research studies which have discussed the glass ceiling globally and in SA as well but relating to other fields such as education and medicine. Hence, this study is among the first studies that offer a holistic perspective of the reasons behind the glass ceiling in the tourism industry in SA and offer suggestions to overcome

these barriers. Additionally, the study provides some important notes for academics that additional studies are required toward this phenomenon using an intersectional lens to understand how factors such as age, nationality, socio-economic status, and disability intersect with gender, influencing women's experiences with the glass ceiling.

This study has multiple implications for policymakers. Policymakers in SA have taken effective steps toward women's empowerment. However, it is essential for the government to formulate effective public policies aimed at facilitating women's talents and accessibility to senior positions. They have to determine a specific quota for Saudi women at the managerial level. Certainly, this quota requires the adoption of a legal framework that obliges the organizations to adopt the quota. Additionally, the Saudi women need a supporting law that fights stereotypes and discrimination. Furthermore, policymakers should support Saudi women's education and expand academic programs on tourism and hospitality education. Additionally, the government should collaborate with other organizations to develop specific training courses for enhancing women's management skills. In parallel, policymakers should support gender equity and social empowerment. This could be handled through awareness campaigns using different media channels.

Although Saudi women face many barriers regarding their career path to the top-management level, the primary issue is the prevalence of both conscious and unconscious social preconceptions, which permeate organizations and lead to discriminatory corporate policies and organizational culture. Therefore, the study suggests that top management should express their commitment toward gender equality in a clear and concise manner. Simply, women's promotion to top-management level heavily depends on avoiding double standards. To illustrate that specifically in SA, the participation of women in executive roles would largely depend on disproving Klenke's [117] claim that "the double standard continues at the top". While it is acceptable and unquestioned for a man manager to surround himself with other men, a woman who chooses or elevates another woman to a high position is under scrutiny. As a result, female employees should perceive their organizational support as similar to male colleagues. By establishing a supportive and fair workplace, organizations can effectively address the stress and exhaustion experienced by female employees, thereby resulting in a notable enhancement in their efficiency. Moreover, these proactive measures should contribute to a favorable transformation in societal perceptions regarding the capabilities and potential of women. HR in cooperation with top management can establish a special training program for their female employees and family-friendly programs to the entire organization's employees irrespective of gender. The HR department should provide females with a flexible working schedule and fair annual appraisals and launch internal policies against discrimination and stereotype.

Undoubtedly, the progress of women in the tourism industry would be futile unless Saudi women possess the essential attribute of self-reliance to break through the obstacles holding them back. Hence, it is advisable for women to concentrate on enhancing their career opportunities by pursuing higher education degrees and actively engaging in both formal and informal networking. Additionally, Saudi women should maintain self-confidence and enhance their skills for top management roles. Furthermore, they should cultivate a reliable support network of family and friends who can provide assistance with household and childcare duties when needed in professional situations.

6. Future Research Directions

Despite having several interesting findings from this study, it comes with some limitations. Research conducted within specific geographical boundaries may possess inherent limitations that hinder the generalization of its findings across borders. However, it provides several ventures for future research. Firstly, conducting a cross-cultural analysis would provide valuable insights into the glass-ceiling phenomenon across various regions worldwide. This approach would allow for the examination and comparison of the barriers to advancement that exist in different cultural contexts. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge the limitations related to data collection solely using in-depth interviews

with senior women in the tourism industry. A comparison study of women's experiences in two different industries could be conducted. This comparative analysis would provide valuable insights that could be drawn from one sector to another. Lastly, the current study has been conducted using a qualitative method and from the perspective of women. Hence, a further study could be conducted through a quantitative method and may compare the perspectives of male and female managers. Future studies can delve into the glass ceiling issue as it pertains to minority groups. It can examine the selection and advancement criteria, as well as the personal attributes of both genders. Meta-analysis could be beneficial for future research, allowing an investigation into the extent of the glass ceiling's existence, considering its quadratic nature. The influence of policies and regulations, along with their implementation, could also be examined in subsequent studies to effectively combat the glass ceiling.

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