



Leading in times of crisis: evidence of transformational and digital leadership among Arab female school leaders

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Abstract

Educational leadership and management research has focused on leaders' transformational style to improve people and organization's performance. During the recent pandemic, educational leaders had to suddenly deal with unprecedented changes that the teaching and learning environment has undergone. Usually in times of crisis, leaders' control of emotions, the quality of relationship between them and the team, and the value congruence play a significant role. In the Arab world, however, cultural, national, and sociological contexts largely impact female leaders' values, beliefs and behaviors. Hence, it is significant to explore these leaders' practices in times of crisis, the factors that helped them cope with the sudden changes and lead digitally, and the extent that the dimensions of the transformational leadership style had on their performance. Through eight semi-structured interviews, results revealed practices and behaviors of Arab female educational leaders that maintained their own and their organization's performance during the Covid-19 pandemic. These include but are not limited to; building relationships, motivating and recognizing team efforts, open communication, adaptability, a strong sense of emotional intelligence and self-control. While these leaders consider themselves as democratic and transformational leaders, an emergent theme showed that they implemented the changes as a coercive activity. Implications and suggestions for future work are discussed.

Keywords: Leadership in times of crisis; Female leadership; Arab world; Transformational leadership; Educational leadership and management; Covid-19 pandemic; Digital leadership

Introduction

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3 The Arab world has always been in crisis. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the civil wars, the Arab
4 spring, the refugees' crisis, the US invasion of Iraq, all have had a detrimental impact on the
5 democratization of the government institutions and sectors. Many of the Arab countries suffer until
6 this date from a strong centralized system that imposes suppression and gives limited authority to
7 the institutions. The Education sector in particular was agonized by the consequences of the
8 autocratic regimes, the lack of democratic values, the excessive bureaucracy and little autonomy
9 (Al-Taneiji & McLeod, 2008; see also Elmeski, 2015; Hammad & Norris, 2009). Public
10 institutions struggled the most, especially from the budget cutting which impacted the quality of
11 principals and teachers hired, the availability of resources, and eventually the overall
12 organizational performance (Akkari, 2004; Akkary, 2014). That being said, educational leaders in
13 the Arab context were always considered to be leading and managing their institutions in critical
14 times. For instance, the influx of Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, has
15 caused abrupt changes on the demographics of public schools and increased principals' and
16 teachers' workload (Akkary, 2014). With that in mind, scholars concur that the social, political,
17 and cultural conditions shaped the role definition and demands of educational leadership in normal
18 and in crisis times (Akkary, 2014; see also Al Chibani & Hajal-Al Chibani, 2013).

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32 With the new conceptualization and modernization of leadership, Arab female leaders seem to
33 follow a combination of transformational and instructional leadership style to improve the
34 performance of the staff and students (author(s), 2021). Coding analysis revealed that some, but
35 not the majority, do practice distributed leadership where decision-making was shared and
36 collaboration was at the heart of the dynamics (author(s), 2021). Similarly, Alsaeedi and Male
37 (2013) presented signs of transformational leadership practices that school principals adopted to
38 face school challenges and meet with the demands of reform and globalization. Transformational
39 leaders are strongly committed to the organization (Khasawneh et al., 2012), establish trust with
40 their followers and guide them to perform better (Ghamrawi, 2011). As such, transformational
41 leadership is positively associated with leaders' and followers' job satisfaction and performance
42 (Fullan, 2014; Mesterova et al., 2015). Transformational leaders also demonstrate high levels of
43 self-efficacy (Fitzgerald & Schutte, 2010; see also Mesterova et al., 2015; author(s), 2020); this
44 attribute is needed because it helps leaders to believe in their abilities and it also sustains their
45 performance in difficult situations and in times of crisis.

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5 Women all over the world face difficulties and challenges when they are occupying a leadership
6 position despite the growing leadership role for women in the Arab world and in western societies.
7 Research on women in top management positions in three Arab Gulf countries (UAE, Oman and
8 Bahrain) found that the challenges faced by those women included discrimination at work, cultural
9 taboos, negative attitudes towards working women and lack of confidence and trust in women
10 managers (author(s), 2021; Wilkinson, 1996). Research identified several inhibiting factors for
11 women that include organizational factors, such as personnel systems/traditional career paths, male
12 employee attitudes and women's own attitudes (author(s), 2021; Cooke, 2007). Perhaps it is the
13 Arab society through its traditional beliefs that tends to associate leadership positions with qualities
14 possessed by men rather than women; qualities such as assertive behavior or motivation. Evidence
15 suggests a number of factors contributing to the lack of empowerment of women leaders. These
16 include lack of administrative efficiency, limited training opportunities, lack of professional
17 exchange opportunities and cooperation with other institutions to gain diverse experiences, the
18 exclusion of women from some policies and regulations and from participating in decision-making
19 (Almenkash et al., 2007). When women leaders face many challenges that limit their effectiveness,
20 that surely will restrict them from exercising their full leadership potential. Hence, it is significant
21 to explore the challenges and successes experienced by female leaders in times of crisis. It is hoped
22 that findings of this study will support educational leadership and management literature in the
23 Arab region to increase its ability to inform policy and practice (Atari & Outum, 2019; see also
24 Hallinger & Hammad, 2019; Hammad et al., 2020). This study aims to answer the following
25 questions:

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43 How did Arab female educational leaders behave in times of crisis (i.e. Covid-19 pandemic)?
44 What are the factors that helped them cope with the unprecedented changes and lead digitally?
45 To what extent do they believe that the components of the transformational leadership style
46 sustained their own and the organization's performance?
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51 **Transformational leaders and change**

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53 It is argued that a transformational visionary leadership style is highly required during times of
54 crisis as an essential step to help the organization recover from the crisis situation (Harwati, 2013),
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3 mainly because these leaders put forth a vision, which is defined as “a leader’s mental image of an
4 organization’s future” (Ylimaki, 2006, p. 622). In the educational context, transformational leaders
5 set directions and develop specific goals and priorities to build a school’s vision and to raise its
6 effectiveness (Fullan, 2014; Mesterova et al., 2015). They are expected to re-evaluate an
7 organizations’ existing strategies before implementing new ones to maintain the organizational
8 performance.
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15 Transformational leadership is believed to inspire employees and nurture the unified vision,
16 beliefs, and values within the organization (Day, 2000; see also Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach,
17 1999; Leithwood, Tomlison, & Genge, 1996). Therefore, leaders should be aware of their
18 followers’ needs and goals and incorporate these with the organization’s vision and mission. Doing
19 so would ensure cohesion of shared values and beliefs and encourage employees’ commitment and
20 consensus for the change (Fullan, 2006). That being said, adopting change is neither heroic nor a
21 one man show or a subversive activity, but rather, it is creating coherence between followers and
22 organizational goals and building their capacity to promote them to become change agents
23 themselves. Moreover, leaders are also expected to stimulate followers’ knowledge and capacities
24 and encourage their independent decision-making skills. These attributes and behaviors are usually
25 exhibited by transformational leaders and are identified by Bass (1985) as (1) idealized influence,
26 (2) intellectual stimulation, (3) inspirational motivation, and (4) individualized consideration. In
27 schools for instance, idealized influence is seen when principals share authority and power with
28 teachers and invite them to participate in decision making. They develop a shared vision and build
29 consensus about school goals. They provide individualized support and build a collaborative
30 culture. They hold high expectations and model organizational values in order to strengthen a
31 productive school culture (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinabach, 1999).
32 Practicing these behaviors would endorse transformational leaders to become change agents and
33 empower them to fulfill their roles and demands even across difficult situations. Studies like
34 author(s) (2020), Fitzgerald and Schutte (2010), and Mesterova et al. (2015) verified the
35 relationship between transformational leadership and self-efficacy. Having this attribute, endorsed
36 the ability of leaders to persevere longer and accomplish leadership roles effectively in difficult
37 times and during a crisis.
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School leadership in times of crisis

A crisis is generally agreed to be of two main types: natural or man-induced; thus, it is fundamental for the success and continuity of organizations to instill transparent and open communication in its employees and leaders. With open transparent communication and collaboration, educational leaders succeed in raising the level of trust in the overall school community and in making the right decisions during times of crisis (Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Sutherland, 2017). Kielkowsky (2013) highlighted the crucial part communication plays before, during, and after a crisis. In a qualitative study on leadership, trust, and response to crisis, Sutherland (2017) examined how stakeholders reacted at the onset of a crisis with low trust and self-preservation. Results of his study revealed that with communication, decision making, and collaboration, the leading team was able to raise the level of trust in the overall school community.

No successful change can happen without allocating necessary resources and building people's capacities (Fullan, 2006). One way to build teachers' capacity is through building professional learning communities that will increase their competence through a collective reflection on the change and on their behaviors (Fullan, 2006). As such, providing teachers with professional development opportunities, supplying them with necessary resources, and providing them with instructions on how to manage and adopt the change are effective strategies that principals should implement during change implementation (Al Sharija & Watters, 2012). When examining the research on change implementation in the educational institutions in the Arab context, most studies claimed that lack of building teachers' capacity was a main obstacle (Oplatka & Arar, 2017). Teachers who were resistant to the change were not fully qualified or trained for such a change (i.e, educational reform). Not only teachers, but principals were not prepared to adopt the change and were given little information about it especially in contexts where they were pressured to move towards the change as quickly as possible (i.e, in Jordan and UAE) (Al- Taneiji & Mcleod, 2008; Badah, 2014). As a consequence, these principals were frustrated and did not see the value or usefulness of the change towards the school's improvement. Another obstacle is when the changes that were brought to the schools in the Arab context were mostly adopted from Western context, both principals and teachers felt little relevance of the change to the local culture and beliefs (Oplatka & Arar, 2017).

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3 With the sudden challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift of the delivery of
4 instruction from face to face to online, school leaders had to suddenly deal with chaos, crisis, and
5 uncertainty. After a few months in the pandemic, Pollok (2020) stated that school leaders are now
6 extending their roles around (a) safe schooling and setting the context for future schooling while
7 (b) simultaneously extending their role to include being a digital instructional leader. This is
8 because principals needed to create certain conditions for students to learn while also supporting
9 online learning and leading the school virtually. Many challenges arose amidst the switch to online
10 learning. Considerations for students included the hardware and software issues (e.g. WiFi
11 accessibility, learning devices such as tablets, laptops and smartphones) and also the skills required
12 to navigate software and new knowledge on how to interact on such platforms. These
13 considerations were also not exclusive to students, but also included teachers and school principals
14 themselves as well. These concerns included internet access at home; access to learning devices
15 such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones; and limited instructional capacity for online learning, to
16 name a few (Pollok, 2020; Netolicky, 2020). Although these concerns were western-based, leaders
17 in the Arab world had similar concerns and challenges as well. Furthermore, schools had to
18 meaningfully continue the education of their students in ways appropriate to current circumstances
19 but with fundamental human needs, compassion and kindness at the forefront. At this time more
20 than ever, we must consider humans before outcomes, students before results and well-being
21 before learning (Netolicky, 2020). Perhaps the pandemic was a practice for leaders to take a closer
22 look at the curriculum and decide what is essential and what can be removed. All these trials were
23 in the face of leaders both in the western and Arab regions and needed to be resolved within a short
24 period of time.
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41 42 43 **Digital Leadership**

44 The abrupt changes of the pandemic imposed pressure and workload on educators and leaders.
45 Digital transformation processes are considered to be a prime challenge for leadership and top
46 management of transforming organizations (Collin et al., 2015). According to a competence model
47 for digital leaders, two dimensions that make up a successful digital leader can be distinguished as
48 follows: attitudes, competences and behaviors that managers need in the digital age (e.g., digital
49 literacy/competences) and competencies that help drive digital transformation (e.g., strong
50 leadership skills) (Westerman et al., 2012). Furthermore, a study conducted by Zeike et al. (2019)
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3 found evidence that upper-level managers with lower digital leadership skills are more likely to
4 have low psychological well-being. To address the obstacles faced by digital transition, leaders
5 must learn a range of digital capabilities, including collaborating efficiently in a digital
6 environment, taking the initiative and responding quickly to new circumstances and activities, and
7 dealing with urgent, challenging issues (Antonopoulou et al., 2021). Being digitally competent as
8 a leader was vital for educational leaders when crisis hits.
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15 Even though digital tools did provide flexibility in communication and autonomy, it also led to
16 increased job demands to the point where boundaries between work and nonwork life become
17 unclear. Furthermore, it did present leaders with new challenges to inspire their teams. Even if
18 virtual communication can be carried out effectively, virtual leaders still have a great deal of effort
19 to direct and guide people remotely. This creates a huge challenge for leaders to create a
20 collaborative virtual culture (Pratama & Kurniady, 2021). In many occasions, school leaders had
21 to force teachers and staff to do tasks outside their working hours. For instance, teachers had to
22 participate in various trainings and professional development workshops to support them in
23 designing the online instruction. Teachers also had to buy devices out of their own money while
24 others had to find alternatives because they could not afford to. A study done by Mokh et al. (2021)
25 recommended that the competent Palestinian authorities develop technical courses in line with this
26 century's technological development and let teachers be ready for any inconvenience. They also
27 recommended providing teachers with laptops and internet service to facilitate their mission. In
28 the Gulf counties, many schools and universities took an unprecedented trend in adapting to the
29 online learning despite its relying on teaching in classes since their inception. These educational
30 institutions were supported by their governments that reacted quickly to the situation and started
31 providing alternative educational instruments through the E-learning platforms and TV channels
32 (Al iimyan, 2020). In Saudi Arabia the government equipped students with multiple televised
33 channels with a comprehensive educational system and a channel on the YouTube platform to
34 ensure facilitating the online educational process. However, this was not the case in all Arab
35 countries.
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41 Online learning for low-income students presented the same challenges worldwide. As the level
42 of poverty increases in the community, the rate of internet accessibilities declined rapidly and these
43 students became vulnerable to fall behind or encounter additional challenges to meet up with others
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3 in online learning (Fishbane & Tomer, 2020). In Lebanon, some schools went forward successfully
4 with teaching online because they were already well equipped, while other administrations asked
5 parents to print out the homework and lessons for students to work on their own due to the lack of
6 strong internet service and the absence of electricity for many hours during the day (Kadi, 2020).
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8 The slow internet connection, the electricity outages and not having more than one phone or laptop
9 at home were the main reasons behind that failure (Rouadi & Anouti, 2020). Furthermore, teachers
10 in Lebanon received little to no training on current technologies to help them deliver lessons
11 smoothly and therefore different stakeholders deemed online learning in Lebanon as catastrophic.
12 In Oman, the significant challenges faced were related to network issues as the signal is generally
13 weak (Slimi, 2020). In Jordan, the Jordanian government closed schools temporarily to prevent
14 this virus from spreading and the lessons of school students were broadcasted through a TV
15 channel. Moreover, students from poor backgrounds also suffered to get resources needed
16 (Shdaifat, Shdaifat, & Khateeb, 2020).
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27 Research provides evidence to show that school closures have social, emotional, and economic
28 impacts (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). Exhibiting compulsory citizenship behavior resulted in a
29 negative impact on teacher performance and engagement. According to a study that analyzed the
30 psychological factors that can affect teachers' ability to be part of the change, teachers reported
31 discomfort, feeling lost, and experiencing doubt and worry when they depart from what they know
32 and what makes them feel comfortable, and move toward something that is unusual and
33 uncomfortable (Flamholtz & Randle, 2008; Ibrahim et al., 2013). Other group factors that have
34 been found to influence teachers' resistance to change are teachers' stress, accumulated fatigue,
35 and mental exhaustion, which, in addition to making them resistant to change, can also negatively
36 affect their performance and level of job satisfaction (Margolis & Nagel, 2006). Teachers faced
37 many challenges amid the crisis and it was up to leaders to bring them together and motivate them
38 while trying to manage the school virtually.
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49 Knowing that fostering a culture of trust and building employees' capacity development would
50 have increased teachers' commitment and motivation, Arab school leaders generally failed to
51 establish channels of communication and collaboration (Arar et al, 2021). These leaders were
52 mostly busy with managing the instructional activities and redesigning their own and teachers'
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3 PDs to learn new technological tools. In centralized educational contexts and particularly in public
4 education, these leaders have displayed authoritarian leadership practices mostly because they
5 were not prepared to deal with systemic change (Arar et al., 2021). Furthermore, in a comparative
6 analysis approach, 27 school leaders revealed that they have combined two models of leaderships
7 (instructional and digital) during the pandemic to ensure that the school survives the crisis.
8 Furthermore, and in the same study, these leaders proved that they have adapted quickly to the
9 digital leadership and supported teachers with online instructional pedagogies to meet different
10 students' needs (Arar et al., 2021).
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19 **Arab female leadership**

20 In a study conducted by Al-Omari (2012), it was found that gender and qualifications had no
21 significant effect on transformational change practice. However, female leaders were most of the
22 time rated as moderate on their leadership effectiveness (Abu-Tineh, 2013). Female leadership in
23 the Arab world is still confined with the conservative and traditional views that limit their human
24 relationships and networks. To that end, their leadership style is mostly identified as authoritative
25 of management in nature with a short-term impact of their leadership on people and institution
26 (Al-Safran et al., 2014; Ghamrawi, 2013). Furthermore, these leaders were not seen as change
27 agents and do not focus on developing the human capital or considering followers' interests and
28 needs. This is mainly due to the low motivation levels that the social injustice has on Arab women
29 at the workplace as well as to the low promotion and professional development or leadership
30 preparation programs for females compared to their male peers.
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41 Even though times are changing, and more women are seen in leadership positions, the challenges
42 they face and have to overcome are undeniable. In education, women are perceived as being better
43 teachers than leaders (Gold, 1996). Furthermore, leadership roles and the factors that affect the
44 women in a top management position vary across countries and cultures. A study conducted by
45 Arar (2019) about six Arab women in three different localities found that these women reported
46 various difficulties and obstacles that they needed to overcome, especially since they were
47 expected to continue to fulfil their homemaker role while complying with the requirements of their
48 demanding profession. It is concluded that Arab women who attain educational leadership posts
49 employ their strong characteristics, their empowered agency, and the values they acquire and
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3 represent to improve their social status, transform their personal and professional identity, and
4 improve their resources despite restrictive cultural norms (Arar, 2019). Another study done in a
5 Muslim country by Shah & Shah (2012) found that the women studied availed the same sources
6 of cultural and religious discourses to partially empower themselves as educational leaders,
7 drawing attention to the power play located within societal culture and belief systems. These
8 women adopted culturally-informed strategies to solve problems they had to solve as leaders. On
9 the other hand, a more recent study conducted by author(s) (2020), reported high scores on the
10 majority of the dimensions of Lebanese educational female leaders' self-efficacy beliefs, which is
11 believed to enhance their performance and the institution.
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20 **Methodology**

21 *Design*

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24 Given the research problem and the political, social and cultural conditions that differ in each Arab
25 country, adopting a qualitative research design would be more useful to answer the research
26 questions and explore participants' lived experiences. Following a phenomenological approach
27 will assist the researcher to understand how participants lived a specific experience each from
28 his/her own perspective (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2019). The researcher's role is
29 to describe the common meaning of this phenomenon and track similarities and distinctions
30 between participants viewpoints about their leadership experience during times of crisis. The
31 researcher of this study is of Arabic nationality and have lived in more than one Arab country.
32 That is why this emic perspective assisted the researcher to depict her understanding of female
33 Arab leaders' voices and opinions about the researched topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).
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44 *Participants*

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46 Adopting a purposeful sampling technique was beneficial to achieve the aims of this study because
47 this sampling technique helped the researcher collect rich data from individuals from whom the
48 most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher, through her network, selected a
49 list of participants who would fit the purpose of this study. A total of 13 participants who were all
50 Arab female educational leaders who lived and worked in the education field and in an Arabic
51 country for more than 10 years and held a leadership position in the public sector for a minimum
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3 of three years were invited to be part of this study. Out of the 13 participants, nine agreed to
4 participate in this study. One out the nine participants has withdrawn due to a family emergency.
5 Hence, a total of eight Arab female educational leaders were purposefully selected to participate
6 in this study. Participants were from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait,
7 Bahrain, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). Participants' average age was 46 years old. All of them
8 had postgraduate degrees (six participants have Master degree and two hold a PhD). Their years
9 of leadership experience ranged from 5 to 25 years. Five of them were married with children, two
10 were single and one was widowed (with children as well). Three out of the eight participants work
11 in a single-gendered school. Half of the participants held the position of public-school principals
12 (middle and high school level) and the other half worked as head of departments.
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22 *Data collection*

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24 This study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. The researcher sent by email the consent
25 letter and explained the purpose of the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through
26 Zoom platform and participants gave the consent to audio record the interviews. Some agreed to
27 have the camera on during the interview while others refrained. Each interview lasted for an
28 average of 45 minutes. Both the researcher and participants used English and Arabic languages
29 during the interview. Before the start of the interview the researcher assured participants'
30 anonymity of their identity and their organization. The researcher assured participants that no
31 judgements will be made about their leadership practices or behaviors and that they have the right
32 to withdraw at any time or refrain from answering any question that they are not comfortable with.
33 This has made participants more at ease and created trust and rapport with the researcher which
34 enhanced the level of openness to share their views and opinions (Creswell, 2013). Participants
35 were asked a total of 10 questions to collect information about their background and demographics
36 of the school; their opinions regarding how educational leaders should behave during times of
37 crisis; how they coped with the pandemic; and the factors that would enable or hinder the adoption
38 and implementation of radical changes. Participants were also asked about their views regarding
39 practices of transformational leadership and successful practices for leading digitally.
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52 *Data analysis*

Data analysis began with the data collection process during which common themes emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher manually transcribed the interviews and due to her fluency in English and Arabic, she translated to English the parts of the interviews that were done in Arabic. The researcher read many times the transcripts and then labeled fragments of texts into codes following a thematic analysis approach (Creswell, 2008). After that, she combined the codes to identify common themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, the researcher grouped the themes together and compared them to identify relationships between them, and similarities and disparities between participants' experiences. This step was important to detect the commonalities and discrepancies found among Arab countries, especially when comparing Gulf and non-Gulf countries. To ensure trustworthiness of results, the researcher invited one of her colleagues who is qualified and experienced in Educational leadership and management to code the data and agree on the codes and themes. Final set of interrelated themes is presented in table 1.

Table 1.

Themes and subthemes

Leaders' characteristics and behaviors in times of crisis	Accommodating and understanding of others - proactive- flexible- patient- democratic and collaborative with the team- inclusive- a role model to his team- delegate responsibilities- good listener and open to suggestions and recommendations- open to learn new things- do things themselves to ensure that they are done on time and in a good quality- a good communicator
Transformational leadership practices in times of crisis	Build urgency to change- leading with the team- be democratic- accept and adapt to the change- respond to the changes and pressures- reassess organization's priorities- ask the team for solutions- engage the team in decision making
Leading digitally during the pandemic	Adaptability- self-control- build strong relationship with people- build system of support- technological training for self and the team- open communication- upskill new

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16	<p>technological knowledge for self and the teachers- open new aspects for the teachers to show work's creativity</p> <p>Factors that hinder or support change implementation</p>	<p>Working with older people who refuse to change - top down approaches- having a female mentor- getting moral and emotional support from family- training and professional development programs (i.e, online teaching delivery)</p>
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Results

The aim of this project was to explore Arab female educational leaders' behaviors during times of crisis and how they adopted and implemented the unprecedented changes that the Covid-19 imposed.

Leaders' characteristics and behaviors in times of crisis

When participants were asked about their views on effective leadership practices during time of crisis, they stressed on the fact that the leader should accept and respond to the changes and pressures. In their opinions, effective leaders must evaluate their organization's priorities and reassess them to fit the new changes that are taking place. Thus, leaders must be flexible, proactive and good communicators so they convey the changes and goals clearly and effectively to their staff. As one participant from Lebanon stated "the leader should be very clear about the tasks or responsibilities he/she expects from the stakeholders; for instance, teachers and staff want to know what exactly is requested from them, they don't want you (the leader) to add anything in the last minute, they don't want you (the leader) to take part of their job and give it to someone else." This participant goes on to add "...I believe the main characteristics of successful education leaders are to consider my employees as co-workers, plan to develop a vision for the future, be a guide who can influence and inspire others, and most importantly be present in classrooms with teachers and around students."

Participants of this study understand that leadership is a service and not a heroic act. Their role as leaders is to model, support and serve. Additionally, these leaders appreciate the fact that their

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3 success comes from their followers' success. As a result, they empower the team and provide them
4 with leadership opportunities as a means to improve their performance. As one participant from
5 Jordan claimed "...it's all about modeling; I go by this idea that leadership is a service, so in my
6 role as a leader, I am there to serve them (the team) to be better in what they do and to empower
7 them to become leaders. I am a mentor, I am their (teachers/staff) support system and I learn from
8 them as much as I hope they learn from me". On the other hand, some of these female leaders
9 failed to build trust with their team and had low confidence in their abilities. As one participant
10 from Jordan reported "...it can be frustrating for me... if you want a job done without issues then
11 it is better to do it yourself. I know that they (teachers/staff) will do the job but not to the level that
12 I want". She continued by saying that "sometimes I say to myself that I need to compromise and
13 maybe accept the job that they (teachers/staff) did with its flaws and make this a learning
14 opportunity for them. So, I invite them to discuss what went well in their work and what they could
15 have done better."

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27 In their opinion, these female leaders think that to succeed in times of crisis as well as in normal
28 situations, leaders must "act with patience and rational, listen to other's advice and be open to
29 dialogue and discussion, most importantly they must be accepting to change the path". Participants
30 also concurred that being a lifelong learner, being always open for development and learning about
31 the new changes is a fundamental leadership characteristic. Furthermore, most participants
32 demonstrated that they were optimistic leaders who tried to find the positives in time of crisis and
33 communicated those positive aspects to their teams. As one participant from Egypt explained that:
34 "...I think there is always development and changes in learning. Learning the changes in
35 technology...learning the changes with culture..." Similarly, a participant from Bahrain conveyed
36 "...there is always a silver lining to every crisis. So, we had to tell our teachers from the beginning
37 that we are in crisis, but at the end there are good things coming out of it. The biggest thing is, you
38 are going to be more technology based, so those of you who were not friendly with technology,
39 you are going to be happier because you have learnt something new and that should be a
40 motivator." Another participant mentioned "...I think we were lucky when the pandemic happened
41 because we already knew our students."

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55 *Transformational leadership practices in times of crisis*

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3 In order to successfully implement radical changes, leaders must build urgency to change. They
4 must include all stakeholders in their vision and seek their suggestions and recommendations. Arab
5 educational female leaders value the practices and dimensions of transformational leadership.
6 They conveyed the significance of this leadership style and its impact on the performance of the
7 organization. They believed that transformational leaders are democratic leaders who delegate
8 responsibilities, ask the team to suggest solutions for the problem and engage them in the decision
9 -making process. As one participant from Saudi Arabia stated “I like to think that I am a very
10 democratic leader or maybe a transformational one even. I am very inclusive; I involve everyone
11 in my vision and goals. I don’t think of myself as a leader but rather a team member who
12 encourages the spirit of we work together to lead together. I am very open to suggestions and
13 recommendations to shape the work we do together because I am confident of the quality produced
14 and the commitment present because I picked the team, the people whom I am comfortable to
15 work with.” Interestingly, the same participant explained that she has to be a more assertive leader
16 because as a female, her team and superiors do not take her seriously, “sometimes my democratic
17 approach might not be received as an effective leadership style because the culture is not like that.
18 I find that the culture here responds to much more assertive leadership style which doesn’t
19 naturally come to me, I am not comfortable with it”. Similarly, her counterpart from Jordan
20 explained that “we (female leaders) need to be more assertive in leadership position. We need to
21 be more confident and thrive for leadership roles even if we have family and children to take care
22 of.”
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39 Furthermore, to deal with radical changes in times of crisis, leaders should always plan ahead and
40 develop a vision in order to help everyone succeed to their fullest potential. In addition to this,
41 leaders must reassess priorities, ensure the availability of resources, and delegate responsibilities.
42 Participants agreed that if there is no planning, leaders will fail. As one participant explained “I
43 think crisis is a change and in crisis you need to plan faster, you have to sit with stakeholders and
44 see what is your next act, bring forward as much information as you can and talk to as many people
45 as you can. Then you need to ensure that the resources are available and delegate to the people the
46 tasks and together we devise a new plan”. Another participant added “I should create a vision about
47 this whole thing, reassess the organization’s priorities and help everyone succeed to their fullest
48 potential. Which means the co-worker should succeed, the student as well, the cleaner should
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3 succeed as well in order for me and the organization to be successful.” A participant from Jordan
4 mentioned “... I had to come up with an online plan, so I did a lot of reading about countries that
5 preceded us in online learning”
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10 *Leading digitally during the pandemic*

11 What made these leaders perform effectively during the pandemic when they had to lead from
12 behind the screens, was having a system of support based on the relationships that they built with
13 the team and the stakeholders and also because of the moral and emotional support of their
14 families. Additionally, the technological training that they received was a necessity to the
15 continuity of their organization. In turn, they trained their team on some online platforms (such as
16 Zoom or Google classroom) and interestingly teachers would find other online tools and they
17 trained themselves and they started training each other. This has opened new aspects for the
18 teachers to discover new technological applications and show some creativity in their online
19 instructional approaches.
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29 Furthermore, open and transparent communication between the leaders and the team/staff is a
30 keystone to implementing a change and make better decisions. As one participant from Kuwait
31 explained, “... as long as the vision and the plan are clearly communicated with the teachers,
32 parents and students, the process will go smoothly with less issues and chaos.” Additionally, all
33 the participants have expressed that the leadership style and practices support successful
34 implementation of change during times of crisis. Participants explained that transformational
35 leadership practices supported them when leading digitally because they were able to recognize
36 the capabilities of their followers, improve their needs and recognize their efforts. As the Kuwaiti
37 participant explained “...first I observe each member of my team to know their strong and weak
38 points, then I start to motivate them and encourage the ones with low level. I manage to have social
39 events in the department, and if a team member achieves a progress, I reward her in front of her
40 colleagues and I send appreciation certificates with gifts to my team.” Another participant from
41 Saudi Arabia mentioned “during the pandemic, I focused on the performance of my team to ensure
42 that they are meeting students’ needs. What I did is that together we evaluated our own needs and
43 created an action plan for improvement.”
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3 During times of crisis the work dynamics shift and expectations change and people get out of their
4 comfort zone, the work processes and procedures also change, that is why people need to adapt
5 quickly to these changes. Adaptability is a crucial leadership practice that is needed during change
6 and that is modeled to the team. The Jordanian participant explained “I would say that overnight,
7 the teachers were able to shift the classroom to be online and it shows how adaptable and flexible
8 and resilient we are and it was nice to model that to the students.” Despite this time of uncertainty,
9 these female leaders remained considerate to their follower’s personal life and took into
10 consideration their circumstances and their needs and respected their family time and never gave
11 them tasks after their working hours. They also expected that with these new changes, mistakes
12 can happen. As the Bahraini participant conveyed “I don’t expect that they (staff/team) are going
13 to do it (the work) all overnight and it’s okay to do mistakes but you have to decide what to
14 compromise on.”
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25 Another important leadership skill that helped these female leaders to successfully lead digitally
26 during the pandemic, was “self-control”. Leaders, during times of crisis, are unsure how to act and
27 are faced with many decisions whether to safeguard the company financials or to keep jobs alive
28 for employees. So, leaders have to control their emotions and chain of thoughts to make the right
29 decisions and achieve their goals regardless of their feelings. As stated by all participants “leaders
30 should model the behavior and guide the rest through, he should accept and respond to the changes
31 and pressure in these uncertain times”; “leaders must inspire the team and build their capacities”.
32 One way to self-control as explained by the Jordanian participant was having her parents with her
33 during the pandemic and walking outdoors, “this helped me to discover things within and about
34 myself that made my lifestyle better.”
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45 *Factors that hinder or support change implementation*

46 Receiving moral and emotional support from family is core to the Arab female leaders’
47 effectiveness particularly in times of crisis. One leader described “my parents were my support
48 system. So, whenever I felt frustrated, I would talk to my mom and play a backgammon game with
49 my dad... They (my parents) supported me a lot during the pandemic.” As such, participants
50 appreciate the importance of building strong relationships with people close to them, listening to
51 them, accommodating their needs and interests, and understanding others in order to convince
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3 them to adapt to change. Another participant said "... I live next to my mother who is very
4 supportive. If you are a hard worker who needs to create a change, the support of your family will
5 help overcome the challenge."
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10 Arab female educational leaders mentioned the importance of professional development and
11 building a system of support as core to preparing teachers for sudden changes in any type of crisis.
12 In their opinion, "the leader should focus on developing the team's skills and upskill new
13 technological knowledge to prepare them to accommodate with the virtual teaching and learning
14 environment." This response came when they were asked about the disruption in education across
15 the globe due to the pandemic and the online learning shift that millions of university faculty,
16 school teachers, academic administrators, and policy makers had to quickly adapt to. Thus,
17 participants concurred that forcing the change from top to bottom would lead to a quick adaptation
18 to the change. Doing so would ensure that teachers had reshaped and restructured their teaching
19 approaches to fit with the online learning. To this end, participants stated that they provided
20 teachers with technological trainings and opportunities for professional development that would
21 assist them to learn new tools and apps (such as screen recording, voice over, recording sessions
22 offline, collaborate online bulletin boards) and develop their creativity in designing online
23 engaging activities and try different pedagogies. Providing these opportunities for teachers would
24 ensure that the leader won the team's loyalty and engaged them with the new changes to reach the
25 goals of the institution. As one participant from Oman explained:
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38 When the pandemic started, we were at the end of the semester, I requested from the
39 teachers to take an online course and to make the curriculum online. I trained them and
40 divided them into teams. One needs to be proactive and at the same time supportive. I also
41 needed to plan ahead and to take advantage from the skills of the people around to be able
42 to benefit the others.
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46 Another way to ensure successful implementation of change is when leaders motivate their
47 followers by praising and acknowledging their efforts. "All it takes sometimes is a simple email
48 or card" the participant from UAE mentioned.
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53 Among the factors that hinder leaders' effectiveness during times of crisis particularly when
54 leading digitally, is having to deal with people who are resistant to change. This was a common
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3 challenge reported by all participants when they explained the difficulties in working with older
4 people who refuse to change. “Older teachers were not flexible and could not see the benefits of
5 transforming their instruction to fit with the online environment... as if they were waiting for the
6 situation to become normal again” the Lebanese participant explained. Another obstacle is the top
7 down approaches that limit the leader’s authority and decision-making process. The Egyptian
8 participant explained “The main challenge for me is the resistance to developing the system; I feel
9 that the development for the education in Egypt has to come from down, but in reality, the minister
10 changes the curriculum, and everyone abides by it.” Not only this, but these female leaders feel
11 that the k-12 curriculum has no room for creativity for both students and teachers which is
12 indirectly impacting the development of their leadership skills and preparation for future
13 leadership positions. Another important factor that hinders change was the lack of ability to make
14 hiring decisions. One participant mentioned “... I discovered that one teacher was good at
15 conducting research, and after I convinced her to participate in a certain project, the decision was
16 to be taken by a specialized committee or from the general manager. Although I am a leader and
17 everything is in my hand, I have minimum control over things.”
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31 **Discussion**

32 In times of crisis, Arab female educational leaders, similar to their worldwide counterparts,
33 followed dimensions of transformational leadership particularly to set directions and reassess
34 priorities and goals to maintain school’s effectiveness. Most importantly, they built strong
35 relationships with their team and encouraged open communication as a means to discover their
36 followers’ needs and build their capacities (Al Sharija & Watters, 2012; Arar, 2019; Fullan, 2006).
37 In the context of this study, Arab female leaders adapted quickly with the sudden changes and
38 ensured that teachers and staff receive technological trainings needed to the success of the online
39 learning. They demonstrated dimensions of successful digital leadership by building digital
40 literacy in teachers and guiding the digital transformation in their schools. Also, by showing
41 attitudes and behaviors such as adaptability and self-control, they succeeded as digital leaders to
42 adopt the changes happening and addressing the obstacles faced by digital transition.
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53 While these leaders claimed that they practiced the skills of transformational leadership, they have
54 mostly exercised assertive leadership during times of change. To this date, Arab female leaders
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3 experience gender discrimination in a male-dominated work atmosphere particularly when it
4 comes to decision making. That is why, when asked about their leadership practices during the
5 pandemic, they have mentioned the need to force the change from top down. This clearly reflects
6 the autocratic regimes, the lack of democratic values, and little autonomy that the Education sector
7 in the Arab world has suffered from (Almenkash et al., 2007; Al-Taneiji & McLeod, 2008;
8 Elmeski, 2015; Hammad & Norris, 2009). Hence, these female leaders do not fully acknowledge
9 themselves as their own bosses and they need to be more assertive as they may not be taken as
10 bold and serious as their male counterparts (Al-Safran et al., 2014; author(s), 2021; Ghamrawi,
11 2013). Interestingly, this emergent theme is not in line with one of the dimensions of
12 transformational leadership; as in creating cohesion of shared values and beliefs for the purpose to
13 build commitment and consensus for the change (Fullan, 2006). This finding also contradicts
14 participants' views about leaders' characteristics during times of crisis. Almost all of the
15 participants described a successful leader as someone who would involve and engage the team
16 with their vision and decision-making process. Arab female educational leaders understand the
17 importance of democratic leadership for the success of the team and organization, but sadly they
18 do not practice these. This is mostly because they do not trust their team's capabilities and abilities
19 to perform effectively during a change, as one participant mentioned "...if you want a job done
20 without issues then it is better to do it yourself". This clearly suggests that these leaders while
21 appreciating the value of transformational leadership to the success of the organization, when in
22 times of crisis they adopt dimensions of autocratic leadership style.
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39 On another hand, data collected from participants showed that the most important skill needed
40 when dealing with crisis management was communication and dialogue. All participants
41 emphasized the importance of communication to know the strengths, weaknesses and emotions of
42 their team to make the right decisions during time of crisis (Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Sutherland,
43 2017). Not only that, but with open communication and collaboration, leaders would better
44 understand their followers' emotions during times of change. With open and transparent
45 communication, leaders built strong relationships with their team which contributed to their digital
46 leadership success. Despite the lack of internet and electricity in some contexts and the limited
47 access to technological resources, Arab female leaders who established strong communication
48 channels with their team were able to overcome these challenges and support teachers' needs.
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3 These leaders showed a strong sense of emotional intelligence as in self-control and empathy. This
4 could be attributed to the nature of the social, political, and cultural conditions that shaped not only
5 the role definition and demands of educational leadership in an Arab context, but also their
6 psychological well-being and ability to manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of
7 others (Akkary, 2014; Al Chibani & Hajal-Al Chibani, 2013). To that end, findings of this study
8 contribute to the model of collaborative crisis management created by Kapucu and Ustun (2018).
9 In their model, Kapucu and Ustun (2018) focused on three main dimensions for leadership traits
10 and behaviors in times of crisis in Turkey: 1- task-related (problem solving and managing
11 innovation and creativity), 2- people-oriented (team building, planning and organizing personnel
12 and motivating) and 3- organization-oriented behaviors (networking and partnering, decision-
13 making, scanning the environment and strategic planning). In the Arab context, findings of this
14 study showed that emotional intelligence is a keystone trait for leaders to regulate one's own
15 emotions and to manage relationships with their team. Not only that, but these leaders showed a
16 great deal of empathy towards their followers. This clearly suggests that the more emotionally
17 intelligent these Arab female leaders are, the more committed and successful they are in their
18 organization (Fitzgerald & Schutte, 2010; Gardner & Stough, 2002; Harwati, 2013). Furthermore,
19 leaders who have high levels of emotional intelligence are also identified as transformational
20 leaders since that individual has the ability to manage their own emotions and those of others which
21 is a key skill of transformational leadership and can positively impact followers' commitments,
22 attitudes and performance (Fitzgerald & Schutte, 2010; Gardner & Stough, 2002). This finding
23 confirms both the leaders and their organization's success (as reported by participants) despite all
24 the challenges that they faced during the pandemic.
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43 Arab female educational leaders and despite the differences between each Arabic country that they
44 came from, reported commonalities in their views about effective leadership in times of crisis.
45 These leaders emphasized the importance of modeling and influencing "adaptability" to the
46 continuity of the organizational success. That being said, Arab female leaders were able to digitally
47 lead during the pandemic through 1- building their team's technological capacities and inspiring
48 creativity 2- finding solutions to overcome the technological challenges and 3- enhancing team's
49 adaptability to the online teaching and learning environment. Interestingly and despite the
50 limitation of the creativity that the curriculum offers in the public education sector, these leaders
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3 were surprised to see how teachers took advantage of the situation to show creativity in their online
4 instruction. Creativity was identified by Kapucu and Ustun (2018) as a task-related behavior that
5 leaders would model to their followers to manage the crisis. In the context of this study, these
6 leaders did not realize that the creativity of their team is a consequence of modeling theirs as well.
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8 This could be considered as an evidence that the efforts of these leaders during the pandemic were
9 not recognized nor acknowledged by their supervisors, and if this persists, it would eventually
10 impact their drive and motivation to adopt the change and overcome the challenges (Razzak, 2015).
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16 17 **Implications, recommendations, and limitations**

18 The importance of this study lies in its potential for initiating cross-cultural discourse and
19 fertilization around the importance of leadership during times of crisis. Such common discourse
20 can lead school leaders to devise effective education responses as the need arises. Thus, it becomes
21 important to exchange knowledge of how schools have responded to the disruption to education
22 caused by the pandemic, and how they have ensured educational opportunities during such
23 turbulent times in different contexts. Furthermore, results of this study shed the light on the
24 controversial leadership roles that these leaders' practice when it comes to implementing the
25 change in their organization. More importantly, this study revealed how attributes of
26 transformational leadership and having strong sense of emotional intelligence promoted Arab
27 female educational leaders to digitally lead during the pandemic despite the challenges they faced.
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37 Based on the study findings, researchers are recommended to investigate the relationship between
38 various emotional intelligence competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness,
39 and relationship management) and dimensions of transformational leadership among Arab female
40 educational leaders to have a scientific evidence of what variables impact their outcomes. It is also
41 noteworthy to conduct qualitative and quantitative studies to collect data about digital leadership
42 in the Arab context as literature around this topic is still absent.
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49 This study suggests for policy makers to form strategies and policies that would increase teachers'
50 leadership skills in preparation for potential leadership positions. Doing so would give teachers
51 and staff the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process as opposed to the top down
52 approach that is currently followed by participating female leaders. Training and providing
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3 teachers and educational leaders with professional development programs that are customized to
4 nurture the dimensions of transformational leadership skills are intervention strategies to increase
5 their leadership effectiveness and transform the performance of their followers. Through idealized
6 influencing behaviors, these leaders would role model effective leadership behaviors in time of
7 crisis.
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13 The literature review presented in this study is a major contribution since it presents recent
14 discussions about Arab female educational leadership and highlights challenges for digital
15 leadership in the Arab world. Despite the contribution of this study to the body of literature related
16 to female leadership and management in the Arab world and also to the recruitment and
17 development of leaders, it presents several limitations. First, using one method only to collect the
18 data imposed some limitation to the trustworthiness of the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell,
19 2015). Second, and due to the nature of qualitative research from one side and the socio-cultural,
20 economic, and political disparities in the Arab world, results of this study cannot be generalized
21 and quantitative studies with a large random sample are needed.
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