



**Leading in times of crisis: evidence of digital transformational leadership among Arab female educational leaders**

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## Leading in times of crisis: evidence of digital transformational leadership among Arab female educational leaders

### Abstract

During the pandemic, educational leaders had to suddenly deal with unprecedented changes that the teaching and learning environment has undergone. 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' behaviors and 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 their performance. Through eight semi-structured interviews, results revealed practices of Arab female educational digital transformational leadership that helped them maintain their own and their organization's performance during the Covid-19 pandemic. These practices include, 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. This study suggests for policy makers to form strategies and policies that would increase teachers' leadership skills in preparation for potential leadership positions.

**Keywords:** Leadership in times of crisis; Female leadership; Digital transformational leadership; Covid-19 pandemic; Educational leadership and management

### Introduction

The Arab world has always been in crisis. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the civil wars, the Arab spring, the refugees' crisis, the US invasion of Iraq, all have had a detrimental impact on the democratization of the government institutions and sectors. Many of the Arab countries suffer until this date from a strong centralized system that imposes suppression and gives limited authority to

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3 the institutions. The Education sector in particular was agonized by the consequences of the  
4 autocratic regimes, the lack of democratic values, the excessive bureaucracy and little autonomy  
5 (Al-Taneiji & McLeod, 2008; see also Elmeski, 2015; Hammad & Norris, 2009). Public  
6 institutions struggled the most, especially from the budget cutting which impacted the quality of  
7 principals and teachers hired, the availability of resources, and eventually the overall  
8 organizational performance (Akkari, 2004; Akkary, 2014). That being said, educational leaders in  
9 the Arab context were always considered to be leading and managing their institutions in critical  
10 times. For instance, the influx of Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, has  
11 caused abrupt changes on the demographics of public schools and increased principals' and  
12 teachers' workload (Akkary, 2014). With that in mind, scholars concur that the social, political,  
13 and cultural conditions shaped the role definition and demands of educational leadership in normal  
14 and in crisis times (Akkary, 2014; see also Al Chibani & Hajal-Al Chibani, 2013).

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26 With the new conceptualization and modernization of leadership, Arab female leaders seem to  
27 follow a combination of transformational and instructional leadership style to improve the  
28 performance of the staff and students (author(s), 2021). Coding analysis revealed that some, but  
29 not the majority, do practice distributed leadership where decision-making was shared and  
30 collaboration was at the heart of the dynamics (author(s), 2021). Similarly, Alsaeedi and Male  
31 (2013) presented signs of transformational leadership practices that school principals adopted to  
32 face school challenges and meet with the demands of reform and globalization. Transformational  
33 leaders are strongly committed to the organization (Khasawneh et al., 2012), establish trust with  
34 their followers and guide them to perform better (Ghamrawi, 2011). As such, transformational  
35 leadership is positively associated with leaders' and followers' job satisfaction and performance  
36 (Fullan, 2014; Mesterova et al., 2015). Transformational leaders also demonstrate high levels of  
37 self-efficacy (Fitzgerald & Schutte, 2010; see also Mesterova et al., 2015; author(s), 2020); this  
38 attribute is needed because it helps leaders to believe in their abilities and it also sustains their  
39 performance in difficult situations and in times of crisis.

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

37 **How did Arab female educational leaders lead digitally in times of crisis (i.e. Covid-19 pandemic)?**

38 **What are the factors that helped them cope with the unprecedented changes?**

39 **To what extent do they believe that the components of the transformational leadership style**  
40 **sustained their own and the organization's performance?**  
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### 46 **Transformational leaders and change**

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48 It is argued that a transformational visionary leadership style is highly required during times of  
49 crisis as an essential step to help the organization recover from the crisis situation (Harwati, 2013),  
50 mainly because these leaders put forth a vision, which is defined as “a leader’s mental image of an  
51 organization’s future” (Ylimaki, 2006, p. 622). In the educational context, transformational leaders  
52 set directions and develop specific goals and priorities to build a school’s vision and to raise its  
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3 effectiveness (Fullan, 2014; Mesterova et al., 2015). They are expected to re-evaluate an  
4 organizations' existing strategies before implementing new ones to maintain the organizational  
5 performance.  
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10 Transformational leadership is believed to inspire employees and nurture the unified vision,  
11 beliefs, and values within the organization (Day, 2000; see also Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach,  
12 1999; Leithwood, Tomlison, & Genge, 1996). Therefore, leaders should be aware of their  
13 followers' needs and goals and incorporate these with the organization's vision and mission. Doing  
14 so would ensure cohesion of shared values and beliefs and encourage employees' commitment and  
15 consensus for the change (Fullan, 2006). That being said, adopting change is neither heroic nor a  
16 one man show or a subversive activity, but rather, it is creating coherence between followers and  
17 organizational goals and building their capacity to promote them to become change agents  
18 themselves. Moreover, leaders are also expected to stimulate followers' knowledge and capacities  
19 and encourage their independent decision-making skills. These attributes and behaviors are usually  
20 exhibited by transformational leaders and are identified by Bass (1985) as (1) idealized influence,  
21 (2) intellectual stimulation, (3) inspirational motivation, and (4) individualized consideration. In  
22 schools for instance, idealized influence is seen when principals share authority and power with  
23 teachers and invite them to participate in decision making. They develop a shared vision and build  
24 consensus about school goals. They provide individualized support and build a collaborative  
25 culture. They hold high expectations and model organizational values in order to strengthen a  
26 productive school culture (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinabach, 1999).  
27 Practicing these behaviors would endorse transformational leaders to become change agents and  
28 empower them to fulfill their roles and demands even across difficult situations. Studies like  
29 author(s) (2020), Fitzgerald and Schutte (2010), and Mesterova et al. (2015) verified the  
30 relationship between transformational leadership and self-efficacy. Having this attribute, endorsed  
31 the ability of leaders to persevere longer and accomplish leadership roles effectively in difficult  
32 times and during a crisis.  
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### 51 **Leadership practices in times of crisis**

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53 A crisis is generally agreed to be of two main types: natural or man-induced; thus, it is fundamental  
54 for the success and continuity of organizations to instill transparent and open communication in  
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3 its employees and leaders. With open transparent communication and collaboration, educational  
4 leaders succeed in raising the level of trust in the overall school community and in making the  
5 right decisions during times of crisis (Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Sutherland, 2017). Kielkowsky  
6 (2013) highlighted the crucial part communication plays before, during, and after a crisis. In a  
7 qualitative study on leadership, trust, and response to crisis, Sutherland (2017) examined how  
8 stakeholders reacted at the onset of a crisis with low trust and self-preservation. Results of his  
9 study revealed that with communication, decision making, and collaboration, the leading team was  
10 able to raise the level of trust in the overall school community.  
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18 No successful change can happen without allocating necessary resources and building people's  
19 capacities (Fullan, 2006). One way to build teachers' capacity is through building professional  
20 learning communities that will increase their competence through a collective reflection on the  
21 change and on their behaviors (Fullan, 2006). As such, providing teachers with professional  
22 development opportunities, supplying them with necessary resources, and providing them with  
23 instructions on how to manage and adopt the change are effective strategies that principals should  
24 implement during change implementation (Al Sharija & Watters, 2012). When examining the  
25 research on change implementation in the educational institutions in the Arab context, most studies  
26 claimed that lack of building teachers' capacity was a main obstacle (Oplatka & Arar, 2017).  
27 Teachers who were resistant to the change were not fully qualified or trained for such a change  
28 (i.e, educational reform). Not only teachers, but principals were not prepared to adopt the change  
29 and were given little information about it especially in contexts where they were pressured to move  
30 towards the change as quickly as possible (i.e, in Jordan and UAE) (Al- Taneiji & Mcleod, 2008;  
31 Badah, 2014). As a consequence, these principals were frustrated and did not see the value or  
32 usefulness of the change towards the school's improvement. Another obstacle is when the changes  
33 that were brought to the schools in the Arab context were mostly adopted from Western context,  
34 both principals and teachers felt little relevance of the change to the local culture and beliefs  
35 (Oplatka & Arar, 2017).  
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51 With the sudden challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift of the delivery of  
52 instruction from face to face to online, school leaders had to suddenly deal with chaos, crisis, and  
53 uncertainty. After a few months in the pandemic, Pollok (2020) stated that school leaders are now  
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3 extending their roles around (a) safe schooling and setting the context for future schooling while  
4 (b) simultaneously extending their role to include being a digital instructional leader. This is  
5 because principals needed to create certain conditions for students to learn while also supporting  
6 online learning and leading the school virtually. Many challenges arose amidst the switch to online  
7 learning. Considerations for students included the hardware and software issues (e.g. WiFi  
8 accessibility, learning devices such as tablets, laptops and smartphones) and also the skills required  
9 to navigate software and new knowledge on how to interact on such platforms. These  
10 considerations were also not exclusive to students, but also included teachers and school principals  
11 themselves as well. These concerns included internet access at home; access to learning devices  
12 such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones; and limited instructional capacity for online learning, to  
13 name a few (Pollok, 2020; Netolicky, 2020). Although these concerns were western-based, leaders  
14 in the Arab world had similar concerns and challenges as well. Furthermore, schools had to  
15 meaningfully continue the education of their students in ways appropriate to current circumstances  
16 but with fundamental human needs, compassion and kindness at the forefront. At this time more  
17 than ever, we must consider humans before outcomes, students before results and well-being  
18 before learning (Netolicky, 2020). Perhaps the pandemic was a practice for leaders to take a closer  
19 look at the curriculum and decide what is essential and what can be removed. All these trials were  
20 in the face of leaders both in the western and Arab regions and needed to be resolved within a short  
21 period of time.  
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### 38 **Digital Leadership**

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

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17 In a study conducted by Al-Omari (2012), it was found that gender and qualifications had no  
18 significant effect on transformational change practice. However, female leaders were most of the  
19 time rated as moderate on their leadership effectiveness (Abu-Tineh, 2013). Female leadership in  
20 the Arab world is still confined with the conservative and traditional views that limit their human  
21 relationships and networks. To that end, their leadership style is mostly identified as authoritative  
22 of management in nature with a short-term impact of their leadership on people and institution  
23 (Al-Safran et al., 2014; Ghamrawi, 2013). Furthermore, these leaders were not seen as change  
24 agents and do not focus on developing the human capital or considering followers' interests and  
25 needs. This is mainly due to the low motivation levels that the social injustice has on Arab women  
26 at the workplace as well as to the low promotion and professional development or leadership  
27 preparation programs for females compared to their male peers.  
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38 Even though times are changing, and more women are seen in leadership positions, the challenges  
39 they face and have to overcome are undeniable. In education, women are perceived as being better  
40 teachers than leaders (Gold, 1996). Furthermore, leadership roles and the factors that affect the  
41 women in a top management position vary across countries and cultures. A study conducted by  
42 Arar (2019) about six Arab women in three different localities found that these women reported  
43 various difficulties and obstacles that they needed to overcome, especially since they were  
44 expected to continue to fulfil their homemaker role while complying with the requirements of their  
45 demanding profession. It is concluded that Arab women who attain educational leadership posts  
46 employ their strong characteristics, their empowered agency, and the values they acquire and  
47 represent to improve their social status, transform their personal and professional identity, and  
48 improve their resources despite restrictive cultural norms (Arar, 2019). Another study done in a  
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3 Muslim country by Shah & Shah (2012) found that the women studied availed the same sources  
4 of cultural and religious discourses to partially empower themselves as educational leaders,  
5 drawing attention to the power play located within societal culture and belief systems. These  
6 women adopted culturally-informed strategies to solve problems they had to solve as leaders. On  
7 the other hand, a more recent study conducted by author(s) (2020), reported high scores on the  
8 majority of the dimensions of Lebanese educational female leaders' self-efficacy beliefs, which is  
9 believed to enhance their performance and the institution.  
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## 16 17 **Methodology**

### 18 19 20 *Design*

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22 Based on postpositivism philosophical beliefs that serve researchers to look for multiple  
23 perspectives about the topic, this study used a phenomenological approach to answer the research  
24 questions and explore participants' lived experiences. A phenomenological approach will assist  
25 the researcher to describe the common meaning for participants (i.e, female Arab educational  
26 leaders) who have lived a specific experience (i.e, leading during the pandemic) each from his/her  
27 own perspective and describe the essence of the experience using primarily interviews as a data  
28 collection tool (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2019). As such, the essence here is "what"  
29 Arab female educational leaders experienced during the pandemic and "how" they experienced it  
30 when leading digitally. The researcher's role is to describe the common meaning of this  
31 phenomenon and track similarities and distinctions between participants viewpoints about their  
32 leadership experience during times of crisis. The researcher of this study is of Arabic nationality  
33 and have lived in more than one Arab country which assisted her to follow the hermeneutical  
34 phenomenological approach and depict her understanding and interpretations of female Arab  
35 leaders' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).  
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### 48 49 *Participants*

50 Adopting a purposeful sampling technique was beneficial to achieve the aims of this study because  
51 this sampling technique helped the researcher collect rich data from individuals from whom the  
52 most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Creswell (2013) identified that a heterogenous  
53 group of 4 individuals to 15 could serve as a good sample size for phenomenological studies. As  
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3 such, the researcher through her network selected a list of participants who would fit the purpose  
4 of this study and form this heterogenous group. A total of 13 participants who were all Arab female  
5 educational leaders who lived and worked in the education field and in an Arabic country for more  
6 than 10 years and held a leadership position in the public sector for a minimum of three years were  
7 invited to be part of this study. Despite these common features, these individuals form a  
8 heterogeneous group since they come from different political, social and cultural conditions that  
9 differ in each Arab country that they come from. Out of the 13 participants, nine agreed to  
10 participate in this study. One out the nine participants has withdrawn due to a family emergency.  
11 Hence, a total of eight Arab female educational leaders were purposefully selected to participate  
12 in this study. Participants were from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait,  
13 Bahrain, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). Participants' average age was 46 years old. All of them  
14 had postgraduate degrees (six participants have Master degree and two hold a PhD). Their years  
15 of leadership experience ranged from 5 to 25 years. Five of them were married with children, two  
16 were single and one was widowed (with children as well). Three out of the eight participants work  
17 in a single-gendered school. Half of the participants held the position of public-school principals  
18 (middle and high school level) and the other half worked as head of departments.  
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### 31 32 *Data collection*

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

### *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

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<p>Leading digitally during the pandemic</p> <p>Factors that hinder or support change implementation</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. In particular, this study explored the practices of digital transformational leadership that Arab female educational leaders implemented during the pandemic.

### *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

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3 participant goes on to add "...I believe the main characteristics of successful education leaders are  
4 to consider my employees as co-workers, plan to develop a vision for the future, be a guide who  
5 can influence and inspire others, and most importantly be present in classrooms with teachers and  
6 around students."  
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11 Participants of this study understand that leadership is a service and not a heroic act. Their role as  
12 leaders is to model, support and serve. Additionally, these leaders appreciate the fact that their  
13 success comes from their followers' success. As a result, they empower the team and provide them  
14 with leadership opportunities as a means to improve their performance. As one participant from  
15 Jordan claimed "...it's all about modeling; I go by this idea that leadership is a service, so in my  
16 role as a leader, I am there to serve them (the team) to be better in what they do and to empower  
17 them to become leaders. I am a mentor, I am their (teachers/staff) support system and I learn from  
18 them as much as I hope they learn from me". On the other hand, some of these female leaders  
19 failed to build trust with their team and had low confidence in their abilities. As one participant  
20 from Jordan reported "...it can be frustrating for me... if you want a job done without issues then  
21 it is better to do it yourself. I know that they (teachers/staff) will do the job but not to the level that  
22 I want". She continued by saying that "sometimes I say to myself that I need to compromise and  
23 maybe accept the job that they (teachers/staff) did with its flaws and make this a learning  
24 opportunity for them. So, I invite them to discuss what went well in their work and what they could  
25 have done better."  
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39 In their opinion, these female leaders think that to succeed in times of crisis as well as in normal  
40 situations, leaders must "act with patience and rational, listen to other's advice and be open to  
41 dialogue and discussion, most importantly they must be accepting to change the path". Participants  
42 also concurred that being a lifelong learner, being always open for development and learning about  
43 the new changes is a fundamental leadership characteristic. Furthermore, most participants  
44 demonstrated that they were optimistic leaders who tried to find the positives in time of crisis and  
45 communicated those positive aspects to their teams. As one participant from Egypt explained that:  
46 "...I think there is always development and changes in learning. Learning the changes in  
47 technology...learning the changes with culture..." Similarly, a participant from Bahrain conveyed  
48 "...there is always a silver lining to every crisis. So, we had to tell our teachers from the beginning  
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3 that we are in crisis, but at the end there are good things coming out of it. The biggest thing is, you  
4 are going to be more technology based, so those of you who were not friendly with technology,  
5 you are going to be happier because you have learnt something new and that should be a  
6 motivator.” Another participant mentioned “...I think we were lucky when the pandemic happened  
7 because we already knew our students.”  
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### *The practices of digital transformational female leadership*

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15 In order to successfully implement radical changes, leaders must build urgency to change. They  
16 must include all stakeholders in their vision and seek their suggestions and recommendations. Arab  
17 educational female leaders value the practices and dimensions of transformational leadership.  
18 They conveyed the significance of this leadership style and its impact on the performance of the  
19 organization. They believed that transformational leaders are democratic leaders who delegate  
20 responsibilities, ask the team to suggest solutions for the problem and engage them in the decision  
21 -making process. As one participant from Saudi Arabia stated “I like to think that I am a very  
22 democratic leader or maybe a transformational one even. I am very inclusive; I involve everyone  
23 in my vision and goals. I don’t think of myself as a leader but rather a team member who  
24 encourages the spirit of we work together to lead together. I am very open to suggestions and  
25 recommendations to shape the work we do together because I am confident of the quality produced  
26 and the commitment present because I picked the team, the people whom I am comfortable to  
27 work with.” Interestingly, the same participant explained that she has to be a more assertive leader  
28 because as a female, her team and superiors do not take her seriously, “sometimes my democratic  
29 approach might not be received as an effective leadership style because the culture is not like that.  
30 I find that the culture here responds to much more assertive leadership style which doesn’t  
31 naturally come to me, I am not comfortable with it”. Similarly, her counterpart from Jordan  
32 explained that “we (female leaders) need to be more assertive in leadership position. We need to  
33 be more confident and thrive for leadership roles even if we have family and children to take care  
34 of.”  
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51 Furthermore, to deal with radical changes in times of crisis, leaders should always plan ahead and  
52 develop a vision in order to help everyone succeed to their fullest potential. In addition to this,  
53 leaders must reassess priorities, ensure the availability of resources, and delegate responsibilities.  
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3 Participants agreed that if there is no planning, leaders will fail. As one participant explained “I  
4 think crisis is a change and in crisis you need to plan faster, you have to sit with stakeholders and  
5 see what is your next act, bring forward as much information as you can and talk to as many people  
6 as you can. Then you need to ensure that the resources are available and delegate to the people the  
7 tasks and together we devise a new plan”. Another participant added “I should create a vision about  
8 this whole thing, reassess the organization’s priorities and help everyone succeed to their fullest  
9 potential. Which means the co-worker should succeed, the student as well, the cleaner should  
10 succeed as well in order for me and the organization to be successful.” A participant from Jordan  
11 mentioned “... I had to come up with an online plan, so I did a lot of reading about countries that  
12 preceded us in online learning”  
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22 What made these leaders perform effectively during the pandemic when they had to lead from  
23 behind the screens, was having a system of support based on the relationships that they built with  
24 the team and the stakeholders and also because of the moral and emotional support of their  
25 families. Additionally, the technological training that they received was a necessity to the  
26 continuity of their organization. In turn, they trained their team on some online platforms (such as  
27 Zoom or Google classroom) and interestingly teachers would find other online tools and they  
28 trained themselves and they started training each other. This has opened new aspects for the  
29 teachers to discover new technological applications and show some creativity in their online  
30 instructional approaches.  
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39 Furthermore, open and transparent communication between the leaders and the team/staff is a  
40 keystone to implementing a change and make better decisions. As one participant from Kuwait  
41 explained, “... as long as the vision and the plan are clearly communicated with the teachers,  
42 parents and students, the process will go smoothly with less issues and chaos.” Additionally, all  
43 the participants have expressed that the leadership style and practices support successful  
44 implementation of change during times of crisis. Participants explained that transformational  
45 leadership practices supported them when leading digitally because they were able to recognize  
46 the capabilities of their followers, improve their needs and recognize their efforts. As the Kuwaiti  
47 participant explained “...first I observe each member of my team to know their strong and weak  
48 points, then I start to motivate them and encourage the ones with low level. I manage to have social  
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3 events in the department, and if a team member achieves a progress, I reward her in front of her  
4 colleagues and I send appreciation certificates with gifts to my team.” Another participant from  
5 Saudi Arabia mentioned “during the pandemic, I focused on the performance of my team to ensure  
6 that they are meeting students’ needs. What I did is that together we evaluated our own needs and  
7 created an action plan for improvement.”  
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13 During times of crisis the work dynamics shift and expectations change and people get out of their  
14 comfort zone, the work processes and procedures also change, that is why people need to adapt  
15 quickly to these changes. Adaptability is a crucial leadership practice that is needed during change  
16 and that is modeled to the team. The Jordanian participant explained “I would say that overnight,  
17 the teachers were able to shift the classroom to be online and it shows how adaptable and flexible  
18 and resilient we are and it was nice to model that to the students.” Despite this time of uncertainty,  
19 these female leaders remained considerate to their follower’s personal life and took into  
20 consideration their circumstances and their needs and respected their family time and never gave  
21 them tasks after their working hours. They also expected that with these new changes, mistakes  
22 can happen. As the Bahraini participant conveyed “I don’t expect that they (staff/team) are going  
23 to do it (the work) all overnight and it’s okay to do mistakes but you have to decide what to  
24 compromise on.”  
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36 Another important leadership skill that helped these female leaders to successfully lead digitally  
37 during the pandemic, was “self-control”. Leaders, during times of crisis, are unsure how to act and  
38 are faced with many decisions whether to safeguard the company financials or to keep jobs alive  
39 for employees. So, leaders have to control their emotions and chain of thoughts to make the right  
40 decisions and achieve their goals regardless of their feelings. As stated by all participants “leaders  
41 should model the behavior and guide the rest through, he should accept and respond to the changes  
42 and pressure in these uncertain times”; “leaders must inspire the team and build their capacities”.  
43 One way to self-control as explained by the Jordanian participant was having her parents with her  
44 during the pandemic and walking outdoors, “this helped me to discover things within and about  
45 myself that made my lifestyle better.”  
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55 *Factors that hinder or support change implementation*  
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3 Receiving moral and emotional support from family is core to the Arab female leaders'  
4 effectiveness particularly in times of crisis. One leader described "my parents were my support  
5 system. So, whenever I felt frustrated, I would talk to my mom and play a backgammon game with  
6 my dad... They (my parents) supported me a lot during the pandemic." As such, participants  
7 appreciate the importance of building strong relationships with people close to them, listening to  
8 them, accommodating their needs and interests, and understanding others in order to convince  
9 them to adapt to change. Another participant said "... I live next to my mother who is very  
10 supportive. If you are a hard worker who needs to create a change, the support of your family will  
11 help overcome the challenge."  
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20 Arab female educational leaders mentioned the importance of professional development and  
21 building a system of support as core to preparing teachers for sudden changes in any type of crisis.  
22 In their opinion, "the leader should focus on developing the team's skills and upskill new  
23 technological knowledge to prepare them to accommodate with the virtual teaching and learning  
24 environment." This response came when they were asked about the disruption in education across  
25 the globe due to the pandemic and the online learning shift that millions of university faculty,  
26 school teachers, academic administrators, and policy makers had to quickly adapt to. Thus,  
27 participants concurred that forcing the change from top to bottom would lead to a quick adaptation  
28 to the change. Doing so would ensure that teachers had reshaped and restructured their teaching  
29 approaches to fit with the online learning. To this end, participants stated that they provided  
30 teachers with technological trainings and opportunities for professional development that would  
31 assist them to learn new tools and apps (such as screen recording, voice over, recording sessions  
32 offline, collaborate online bulletin boards) and develop their creativity in designing online  
33 engaging activities and try different pedagogies. Providing these opportunities for teachers would  
34 ensure that the leader won the team's loyalty and engaged them with the new changes to reach the  
35 goals of the institution. As one participant from Oman explained:  
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48 When the pandemic started, we were at the end of the semester, I requested from the  
49 teachers to take an online course and to make the curriculum online. I trained them and  
50 divided them into teams. One needs to be proactive and at the same time supportive. I also  
51 needed to plan ahead and to take advantage from the skills of the people around to be able  
52 to benefit the others.  
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3 Another way to ensure successful implementation of change is when leaders motivate their  
4 followers by praising and acknowledging their efforts. “All it takes sometimes is a simple email  
5 or card” the participant from UAE mentioned.  
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10 Among the factors that hinder leaders’ effectiveness during times of crisis particularly when  
11 leading digitally, is having to deal with people who are resistant to change. This was a common  
12 challenge reported by all participants when they explained the difficulties in working with older  
13 people who refuse to change. “Older teachers were not flexible and could not see the benefits of  
14 transforming their instruction to fit with the online environment... as if they were waiting for the  
15 situation to become normal again” the Lebanese participant explained. Another obstacle is the top  
16 down approaches that limit the leader’s authority and decision-making process. The Egyptian  
17 participant explained “The main challenge for me is the resistance to developing the system; I feel  
18 that the development for the education in Egypt has to come from down, but in reality, the minister  
19 changes the curriculum, and everyone abides by it.” Not only this, but these female leaders feel  
20 that the k-12 curriculum has no room for creativity for both students and teachers which is  
21 indirectly impacting the development of their leadership skills and preparation for future  
22 leadership positions. Another important factor that hinders change was the lack of ability to make  
23 hiring decisions. One participant mentioned “... I discovered that one teacher was good at  
24 conducting research, and after I convinced her to participate in a certain project, the decision was  
25 to be taken by a specialized committee or from the general manager. Although I am a leader and  
26 everything is in my hand, I have minimum control over things.”  
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## 41 Discussion

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

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