The politics and ethics of resistance, feminism and gender equality in Saudi Arabian organizations

Abstract

Greater numbers of women are entering workplaces in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries. Structural features of patriarchy are changing in Middle Eastern societies and workplaces, but women's experiences of gendered segregation, under-representation and exclusion raise questions around the feminist politics and ethics mobilized to respond to them. Building on and extending emerging research on feminism, gender, resistance, feminist ethics and the Middle East, we use data from an interview study with 58 Saudi Arabian women to explore their attitudes toward gender-segregated and mixed workplaces. We develop a novel conceptualization of how gender is experienced through patternings of resistance and conformity shaped by the ethicopolitical, religiopolitical and sociocultural webs of meaning in Saudi society that permeate workplaces. Saudi women's attitudes and actions in the workplace are neither entirely individual and private nor entirely collective and public, but made up of nuanced commitments and resistances to context-relevant identity issues. We discuss implications of our findings for the feminist ethics and politics of gendered resistance and conformity to working practices and norms in Islamic and Middle Eastern settings.

Introduction

In March 2019, human rights groups reported that prosecutors in Saudi Arabia were seeking the death penalty against Loujain al-Hathloul together with ten other women's activists for campaigning against the women's driving ban and male guardianship (Oppenheim, 2019). The charges related to acts of peaceful resistance, including protests, chants, filming, publishing on social media and other attempts to influence public opinion in ways critical or hostile towards the kingdom's regime (Graham-Harrison, 2018). After two and half years of imprisoning Loujain al-Hathloul at a maximum-security jail, she was charged with advancing a foreign agenda and received a sentence of a further five years (Doucet, 2020). While the al-Hathloul case represents a political act of resistance, scholars of the Middle East and Islamic ethics and feminisms stress the interplay of ethicopolitical, religiopolitical and sociocultural contextual factors as shaping how women experience their work and ability to negotiate their places in organizational settings (Koburtay, Syed, and Haloub, 2020). Ethicopolitical and the experiences of women working in the Middle East are therefore important foundations for understanding and explaining business ethics in Islamic and feminist terms, regarding how the relationships between gender, culture, religion, and politics frame and inform Middle Eastern women's issues with organizational conformity and resistance in localized contexts.

Individually and collectively, privately and publicly, women have to navigate difficult political and ethical decisions in organizational contexts about how to resist or accommodate various cultural and patriarchal influences (Salem and Yount, 2019; Sutcliff, 2019). In particular societal contexts like the Middle East, various traditions, customs and codes meaningfully intersect to shape how actors experience and respond to conflicts, power relations, interactions and possibilities for change (Karam and Jamali, 2013; Vachhani, 2020). In Saudi Arabian society for

example, there are tribal and Islamic traditions, and a range of collective group memberships, identities and commitments - religious, familial, personal, regional, communal, tribal - that can unite and divide in informing ethical values and social change (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018,).

However, the gendered negotiations around politics, ethics, resistance and conformity in and around workplaces in Middle Eastern countries remain under-researched (Salem and Yount, 2019). Based on their experiences of history and social changes in their societies, Middle Eastern women are likely to engage in a nuanced variety of feminist, cultural and political engagements and actions in their home-country workplaces (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Interpretations of Islamic texts and ethics shape workplace norms and conduct through observance of the ethical obligations of Islamic culture (Salem and Yount, 2019), while also opening up potential for developing Islamic and Muslim feminisms through activism, pride, agency, solidarity and self-expression (Sutcliff, 2019).

Linking Middle Eastern institutional contexts to an ethicopolitics of resistance entails a "focus on those ethics that are not formulated by an organization, but rather emerge in response to it" (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014, p. 791). A feminist ethics involves a sensitivity to resistance in relation to understanding how women are engaged in "living with, enduring, and attempting to resist forms of exclusion, subordination, and oppression" (Borgerson, 2007, p. 486). A focus on feminist resistance also means broadening definitions of resistance beyond 'all or nothing' struggles to appreciate their gendered and situated construction in context, including complex and contradictory constructions of subjectivities and meanings in cultural and historical locales (Thomas and Davies, 2005). This paper therefore focuses on exploring the feminist ethics and politics of Saudi women's gendered enactments of conformity and resistance. We emphasize a need to move beyond conventional Western representations of Middle Eastern women as

oppressed victims, toward representations of them as individuals with distinct forms of agency, albeit exercised from within the structural and relational conditions of their cultures and organizations (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Metcalfe, 2008; Sutcliff, 2019; Syed, Ali and Hennekam, 2018).

The current paper seeks to contribute to two emerging streams of research relevant to feminist ethics, in the process drawing them more closely together around the distinctive culture, politics and ethics of Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. First, emerging research emphasizing the need to integrate feminist and business ethics in understanding gender and power relations in different cultures and cultural organizational contexts (Borgerson, 2007). Second, emerging critical perspectives on the ethics and politics of difference and resistance in organizations (Mumby et al., 2017; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019). In particular, we propose that as women continue to enter workforces and advance at work in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, they face distinct cultural and institutional barriers and relational webs of meaning (Metcalfe, 2008). These webs are comprised of cultural codes where religious, family, tribal, state and legal influences necessitate particular negotiations of patriarchal conformity and expressions of feminist resistance (Koburtay et al., 2020; Salem and Yount, 2019). Therefore, our aim in the current paper is to develop a novel conceptualization of women's patterned ethico-political responses of resistance and conformity to gendered relational and cultural conditions in Middle Eastern organizations

While systems of classic patriarchy in Middle Eastern settings have continued to erode, women working outside the home occupy a system of contemporary patriarchy, where various individual and structural accommodations to patriarchy, such as religious (Islamic) interpretations, kinship structures and segregated workplaces, are preserved (Salem and Yount, 2019). The current reforms and various steps taken by the Saudi government to increase women's labor force

participation as part of the broader Vision 2030 (Al Aribaya, 2020) are on means by which to challenge the gender patriarchy of social norms and customs that characterize the Arab region (Koburtay et al., 2020). However, little is known about how working women in the Middle East actually experience gender-mixed and segregated workplaces, as well as how the interrelations of contextual and societal attitudes and beliefs shape their ethico-political and feminist responses to patriarchal norms and practices (Koburtay et al., 2020; Salem and Yount, 2019). Our study and research question focus on asking *how do Saudi Arabian women working in gender-mixed and gender-segregated workplaces ethically and politically experience privilege and disadvantage in relation to navigating patriarchal norms and practices?* Before presenting findings from our study, we develop its theoretical background and context by reviewing connected strands of relevant literature on the ethics and politics of feminism, gender, resistance and Middle Eastern contexts.

Feminist ethics, gender and the ethico-politics of resistance

Mainstream feminist research conceptualizes women's resistance to inequality as a visible and organized collective feminist movement enabling social change that leads to valuable political revolution (Sweetman, 2013). This stream of literature stresses the necessity to rely on groups' collective action to challenge male oppression and gender-imposed restraints on women to achieve economic, political and social justice (Alkhaled, 2021). The idea of a collective feminist movement has been criticized as being fundamentally "Western" (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019), and does not capture the subtle forms of individual resistance that could manifest in non-western contexts (Bayat, 2015). In authoritarian contexts, where there is an absence of collective political and legal platforms, gender and feminist resistance can resemble aspects of infrapolitics, where a wide variety of more covert and low-profile forms of women's resistance emerge through shared acts, emotions and

experiences partly hidden from the dominant patriarchal gaze (Jones et al. 2020). In the Middle Eastern context, several researchers (Alkhaled, 2021; Bayat, 2020) have recognized that individuals adopt more subtle forms of resistance to achieve social change, including "quiet encroachment"; defined as "the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied, powerful, or the public, in order to survive and improve their lives." (Bayat 2013, p.7). However, both infrapolitical and quiet encroachment are type of grassroots activism and social movement resistance that's considered unlawful, in context like Saudi Arabia, and "runs the constant risk of suppression" (Bayat, 2013, p.9), particularly with lack of support from NGOs and other supportive organizations at the national level (Bayat, 2015). Therefore, we argue here that those frameworks fall short of developing our understanding of the interplay of ethicopolitical, religiopolitical and sociocultural contextual factors that shape how women experience resistance during their everyday work practices in organizational settings to achieve change instead of organizing collective visible feminist movement that involves lobbying, petitioning, or call for political change.

The binary views gendered resistance as public/private and individual/collective (e.g. Mumby et al. 2017), has been challenged by Islamic feminism studies for its "universality claim" and underexploring feminist, relational, non-Western and intersectional manifestations (El Guindi, 2005). Islamic feminist perspective has drawn attention to the limitation of deploying research from the West to majority Muslim countries for its shortage in understanding the contextual and historical factors that significantly shape women's social and economic actions (Ali, 2016; Ahmed, 2002; Ramadan, 2009). In line with Bayat (2013), we argue the importance of understanding everyday gender resistance within the complexities of the socio-political and socio-religious in politically and ethically closed societies.

A feminist ethics and politics of resistance refers to the pressures on women to resist, individually or together, expressions of patriarchal power and privilege gendering organizations in ways that ignore or suppress women's freedoms (Borgerson, 2007; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019). Ethico-political resistance can therefore manifest in practical or political acts in and around organizations, ethically informed by contexts of power relations and how they organize to affect experiences of difference and oppression for minorities (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014). Global spaces, cultures and movements related to difference and dissent continue to shape distinct forms of feminist ethics and politics associated with democracy and resistance (Vachhani, 2020; Walby, 2011). However, given that such forms of resistance in context can occur in multiple directions, range in how overt or collective they are, and interact with degrees of consent, conformity and compliance, more organizational research is needed to understand this diversity (Alakavuklar and Alamgir, 2018).

Where an organizational context is changing, culturally, societally and institutionally, women as a gendered minority may come to ethically and politically reflect on whether or not organizational values are at odds with personal values. These reflections in turn affect how they negotiate particular attitudes and obligations in response to the organizational order, such as avoiding, leaving, voicing concerns and remaining quiet or unconcerned (Salem and Yount, 2019; Van Dyne et al. 2003). This state of affairs reflects a dynamic, multidimensional relationship between various forms of conformity and resistance, and between acts of silence and voice. We wish to build on and extend arguments that conformity, resistance and minority identities intersect to influence one another in distinct relational and cultural contexts (Alakavuklar and Alamgir 2018; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014). In order to have practical and political influence in organizations

without being punished or excluded, minorities have to ethically and politically negotiate between patternings of conformity and resistance to achieve it (Younes et al. 2020).

Developing an ethico-political understanding of patternings of resistance and conformity among women working in the Middle East represents a particular contribution of this paper. It addresses how resistance is gendered and embedded in local contexts at the level of identities and meanings where ethics and politics inform one another (Thomas and Davies, 2005). In Middle Eastern societies and cultures, the laws, religious customs, tribal traditions and various patriarchal and modernizing structures of social organization constitute a multilayered, relational web of influences shaping obligations and resistances along multiple lines - ethico-political, religio-political and religio-cultural (Syed et al. 2018). In terms of the ethico-politics of feminist resistance in organizations, a focus on the Middle East thus also draws needed attention to transnational and postcolonial perspectives on gendered resistance (Syed and Metcalfe, 2017). This is important if research on organizational resistance and feminist business ethics is to avoid reproducing essentialist, orientalist and Westernized understandings of culturally diverse women (Mustafa and Troudi, 2019).

Gender and resistance in organizations in the Middle East

In developing countries and the Arab Middle East, gendered patterns of conformity and resistance regarding ethics and social responsibility emerge in response to changing and contradictory institutional arrangements and power dynamics shaping legitimacy perceptions (Karam and Jamali, 2013). Divergent interests and alternative points of view intersect regarding interpretations of gender roles and contracts, concerning family, religion, the state, activism, society and culture (Karam and Jamli, 2013). Change or the status quo in various institutional logics can potentially be conformed to or resisted, depending on perceived interests and institutional conditions (Karam

and Jamli, 2013). Women's organizational and employment experiences and agency in the Middle East (and North Africa) are localized and interact with a relational and intersecting array of macro-level structural influences. These include economic developments, Western-based globalization, family networks, 'Urf' (custom), interpretations of Islam, laws passed by government and conservative patriarchal norms and practices (Karam and Afiouni, 2014).

From Islamic feminism and ethico-politics of global feminisms perspectives, understanding and empowering the situated ethics and non-universal forms of knowledge and interests of women in the global South involves recognizing such women as subjects of resistance in context and not objects of knowledge viewed in terms of universalizing codes of the global North (Ferguson, 1998). Islamic feminist scholars stress the limitation of the Western-centric lens in capturing the crucial role of cultural, political, and legal mechanisms in shaping women's working experience in the Middle East (Syed and Metcalfe, 2017). For example, Ramadan (2010) argues that the common colonialist lens has tended to capture women's experiences in Muslim countries in ways that undermine understandings of how the social and political context shape the relational and social ethics of women's identity construction within the community. Similarly, the ethico-politics of gender equality and gender roles in Islamic and Muslim majority societies as social change is better served by engagement with more egalitarian and feminist interpretations of Islam rather than individualist Western views of equality in religion, business and culture (Wadud, 2009). Resistance to and liberation from men's patriarchal domination is not equivalent to conforming to secular or western feminist influences (Sidani, 2005).

Resistance, gender and conformity for women in the Middle East cannot therefore be reduced to a binary choice or singular ideal. Rather, notions of resisting and conforming patriarchal and capitalist norms and practices need to be seen in ethico-political terms as multi-dimensional

and intersectional, where patriarchy is negotiated differently in particular societal contexts and various private and public spheres (Benstead, 2020). Women make situated and evolving trade-offs in cultural contexts according to 'patriarchal bargains', where conformity to some arrangements is exercised in exchange for agency in other areas (Salem and Yount, 2019).

Within Middle Eastern states the ethico-politics of gendered resistance and conformity is bound up with "broader socio-cultural debates relating to Islam and gender" (Metcalfe, 2008, p. 86). These debates should be linked to a nuanced appreciation for Islamic institutions concerning equal and complementary gender roles based on valuing differences between men and women in terms of family and maternity support, and "should not be linked to ideas of subordination and deference" (Metcalfe, 2008, p. 98). Two critical assumptions to uphold are (1) that Muslim women are not passive and powerless but have agency in organizations and everyday life, and (2) that Islam can shape women's experiences in diverse and context-specific ways (Ramadan, 2009). For instance, Muslim feminists can outnumber secular ones, and support aspects of feminism while remaining strongly religious, a nuanced mixture of attitudes shaping efforts to resist and subvert patriarchal norms, depending on how Islam and feminism are socially constructed as compatible in the wider society (Glas and Alexander, 2020).

The Arab work ethic in general is one shaped powerfully by values and virtues of conformity and conventionality, as well as loyalty and obedience to the uniformity of wider familial, tribal and collective groupings and affiliations (Ramadan, 2009). Women's developments in access to education and rights to work in many traditional jobs have been accompanied by a diversity of views and heated debates around history, religion, tribal cultural norms and other modernist and feminist projects of reform (Sidani, 2005). Despite explicit recent instances of resistance towards patriarchal orders, such as the Arab Spring and online and revolutionary

activism in some countries, women's positions remain fragmented across the Middle East. More research is needed to appreciate the diverse voices and nuanced experiences reflecting how Middle Eastern women navigate their socio-cultural and political environments in relation to work and management (Sian et al., 2020).

Existing empirical research on gender relations in organizations in the Middle East is relatively limited, but research has emerged on some countries and some general experiences in some business and work contexts. Salem and Yount's (2019) study of young university-aged Qatari women finds complex attitudes towards employment, resistance to patriarchy being constrained by state and employer through gender-segregated workplaces, and interactions with men shaped by considerations of family, marriage, modesty and reputation. In a study of Jordanian settings, Koburtay and colleagues (2020) found that despite Islamic guidelines towards fairness and justice (*haqq* and *adl*) in employment, tribal traditions and Bedouin customs maintained gender discrimination and power relations through patriarchal interpretations of Islam. In other studies, the institutional contexts of women entrepreneurs from several Arab countries (UAE, Lebanon, Kuwait and Oman) entrepreneurial careers and enterprises allowed them some agency to project particular Islamic and feminist work-related values in ways distinct from more traditional, doctrinaire interpretations (Tlaiss and McAdam, 2020).

We consider Saudi Arabia as a specific national and organizational context framing the current study further below. Here, based on existing literature, we note that despite the significant interest given over to resistance in and around organizations, there is still considerable scope to build on and extend more explicit integrations with feminism, gender and culture in particular ethico-political contexts (Alakavuklar and Alamgir, 2020; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Vachhani, 2020; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019). This is important to address, given

that women are globally oppressed but also likely to continue to engage in distinct ethico-political patterns of consent and resistance under various cultural and ethico-political conditions, such as those found in Middle Eastern contexts like Saudi Arabia (Badran, 2005).

We therefore wish to make our contribution to interconnected literature on gender, feminisms, the ethico-politics of resistance and the societally embedded, relational organizational contexts of the Middle East. These areas are jointly addressed below by investigating how women working in gender mixed and segregated Saudi workplaces experience ethical and political tensions related to how and to what extent they might resist patriarchal norms and practices from within cultural and relational webs of identities and meanings. In particular, we trace how Saudi women perceive particular workplaces they would like to work in or end up working in (e.g. segregated or mixed), which gendered norms and practices they perceive as salient, and patterns by which they report experiences of ethico-political conformity or resistance. With these aims in mind, we present our empirical setting, approach and findings more directly below.

Study Context: Women working in Saudi Arabia

Compared to other Middle Eastern countries in terms of gender equality, Saudi Arabia has often ranked relatively low in the region regarding the legal and organizational normalization of women's employment and participation in higher education , partly because it is a very rich country with less economic pressure to make reforms (Syed and Metcalfe, 2017). However, in recent years, rapid changes and reforms have been implemented in relation to certain key objectives of the Saudi Vision 2030 development plan introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, such as increasing the participation of Saudi women in the labour market to 30 percent, up from 22 percent (Vision2030, 2016). Indeed, one year after the announcement of the 2030 vision, around 500,000 Saudi women have joined the labor market (General Authority for Statistics, 2018). The

government has also introduced several initiatives to enable the economic representation of women, including the 'feminization' of certain jobs and sectors previously inaccessible to women, and requirements for employers to accommodate segregated spaces for women working in their organizations (Khan, 2018). Other notable and globally celebrated recent reforms have included ending the ban on women driving (Al-Otaibi, 2018), and amendment of guardianship laws to allow women over twenty-one greater freedoms without needing a male guardian's permission (for education, healthcare, employment, marriage, and travel), all eliminating potential obstacles to women pursuing a career and access to workplaces (Arab News, 2019).

At the state level, there have been several appointments of women to senior government positions, such as the first appointment of a woman as Deputy Minister of Labor (Arab News, 2018); first female ambassador to US (The Guardian, 2019); and several women in senior leadership positions on the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques (Al Arabiya, 2020), to promote modernization. However, in line with Karam et al. (2020), we argue it is important to recognize the privileged background and socioeconomic status of these individuals (for example the first ambassador is a princess), and the wider status differences among Muslim women (Ali, 2016). In addition, Sian et al. (2020, p.6) stress that "despite these efforts gender inequality in the workforce remains an issue as many of these reforms were enacted despite general disapproval within Saudi society". These reforms and narratives have also been described by critics as superficial, aimed at improving Saudi Arabia's international image in the west (Al-Rasheed, 2019b).

While the government has been pursuing an executive and political leadership strategy for promoting women's opportunities in employment as part of its modernization project, such changes are arguably not accompanied by corresponding changes in social norms, continuing to

conflict with a predominantly conservative tribal culture and strictly patriarchal interpretations of the Islamic religion (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Firstly, the Wahhabi Islamic ideologies have positioned family at the heart of the society, and women as essential foundations of the family and representative of its honor (Ali, 2015). As a consequence, women are simultaneously honored and controlled by the patriarchal authority of male members to protect the family honor and reputation as symbolized by women's purity and morality (Al-Rasheed, 2013). As a result, gender segregation became a cultural norm governing social, educational, and work interactions, and contributed to establishing a Saudi collective cultural identity that differed from other Muslim Majority countries to some extent (Ali, 2016).

Secondly, tribal affiliations add another unique layer of patriarchal influence on the position of Saudi women in the society (Al Alhareth et al, 2015). Moghadam (2014) stated that tribal identity "is based on blood ties which is patriarchal in the classic sense" (p. 118). Al-Rasheed (2013) argues that the interaction of Wahhabi Islamic religious nationalism with tribal identity has reinforced the control and subordination of women in Saudi Arabia. Being a tribal woman imposes certain expectations in terms of how to behave, who to marry (tribal women cannot marry a non-tribal man while the reverse is tolerable), and restriction in terms of what are considered suitable educational and occupational choices for tribal women (Samin, 2012). Several researchers (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018, Hakiem, 2021; Maisel, 2014; Mazawi, 2005) emphasize tribal traditions that regard women working in a gender-mixed environment as taboo and therefore restrict women's entry to specific fields of study or professions. For example, Hakiem's (2021) research on women academics in Saudi Arabia's higher education system reveals that the current escalation in the percentage of Saudi female faculty members is less related to a rise in gender equity than to the absence of work prospects for educated, particularly tribal, women beyond

education sector that are considered acceptable for their family's tribal position. While tribal affiliation might impose restrictions on women, tribal women also experience greater privileges relative to non-tribal women in the form of access to resources (Samin, 2019). Within this context, Al-Rasheed (2013) stresses that "women became important not only for the physical reproduction of the new pious nation but also as the repository of its morality, ethics, and religious purity. Women became a religious and ethical subject rather than a social agency, and were required to be at the service of a masculine religious state" (p. 73-74). Therefore, the combined influences of conservative Wahhabi interpretations of Islam and tribal values have enforced restraints on Saudi women and significantly impacted their decisions on where to work and be involved in the labour market (Sidani, 2005).

Recent and exploratory research on women studying and working in Saudi contexts have highlighted how government initiatives have not invariably been accompanied by progress in Saudi Arabian social attitudes and norms as experienced in daily work and career development. (Syed et al. 2018; Sian et al. 2020). Socio-cultural and patriarchal norms can construct organizational processes and practices as barriers for women to access leadership positions, and family honor can influence which job options are seen as socially acceptable (Syed et al. 2018; Vidyasagar and Rea, 2004). For example, Vidyasagar and Rea's (2004) research on Saudi women doctors highlights how the medical sector in Saudi Arabia is seen as a socially acceptable work environment for women, and therefore, participants in the research perceived working in the hospital as a great opportunity, regardless of the influence of context in limiting their choice of speciality. Alternatively, research by Sian et al. (2020) in a large global auditing organisation in Saudi Arabia showed how management created a female segregated section within the firm to

accommodate Saudi social expectations of an acceptable work environment for women, and attracted Saudi women auditors in line with Vision 2030.

At the micro-level, it is also important to recognize the role of women's agency and resilience in navigating these relational webs of ethico-political influence, as not being helpless but achieving objectives through increased self-confidence, diverse experiences and where gender intersects with personal class connections (*wasta*) (Syed et al. 2018). While collective resistance is limited by the influence of the state, individuals and groups of Saudi women can take up distinct ethico-political orientations regarding patternings of conformity and resistance to gender and the social order - ranging from liberal and rights-based calls for reform through to feminist and conservative interpretations of Islamic texts and practices (Al-Dabbagh, 2015). Women's attitudes can therefore vary in how openly critical they are of government and employers or eager to work within the system to support reforms that address gender inequality (Alhareth et al. 2015). In women's rights to play football, for example, it has been possible for some Saudi women to build organizations, raise awareness and negotiate norms and regulations through 'rightful resistance', challenging conservative elements of the society while remaining otherwise loyal to the reforms of the regime and royal family (Lysa, 2020). The overall heterogeneity among Saudi women, due mainly to differences within region, tribe, and family, mean that gender developments are more problematic and contested (Doumato, 2000), rendering them an important subject for research. Workplace experiences continue to vary dramatically in various directions not fully explored - by sector, levels of gender openness and mixing, limited leadership representation, views of the west, patriotism, family circumstances and experimenting with new lifestyle choices (Sutcliff, 2019).

Furthermore, prevailing western representations of Saudi women in media and research can be problematic in downplaying the authenticity of local women's movements and resistances

(Al-Dabbagh, 2015). Saudi women tend to be portrayed either as victims of their society and religion needing to be saved, or isolated heroes that accomplish exceptional achievements as 'first' women in leading positions, but the latter tending to come from educated upper-class backgrounds (Al-Rasheed, 2018). Thus, greater awareness of the influence of political, religious, and cultural contexts on gender relations in Saudi Arabia is needed (Al-Rasheed, 2018). More overt and collective forms of resistance cannot be understood in isolation from the dangers and prohibitions of criticizing the state, with there having been many cases of journalists and activists sentenced to prison and even execution for using online platforms to express resistance (Al-Sharif, 2018). The assassination of Saudi dissident and author Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi embassy in Turkey in October 2018 reflecting one high-profile example (Hearst, 2018).

In sum, the Saudi state, society and by extension its workplaces represent an evolving and complex relational web of influences and constraints on forms of gender relations and agency. Under the regime and in the culture, women's lived ethico-political experiences in and around work bear further empirical investigation, as different norms emerge and are restructured through structure and agency interactions, while existing norms are conformed to and resisted in different ways, for different reasons, and with different points of reference (Abu-Rabier-Queder, 2010). Women may be remaining relatively silent, contemplating leaving the country to live and work abroad (a route taken by the first author in writing critically about gender and Saudi Arabia), or bravely continuing to advocate for social and political change on their own terms within their own culture (Al-Rasheed, 2019a).

Data collection and analysis

While there is growing research interest on gender and business in the Arab region, relatively little is known about the ethico-politics of Saudi Arabian women's work experiences in segregated and

mixed organizations. Generally, gender imbalances within organizations can construct sites of minority conformity and resistance, in terms of an organizational culture, perceptions of 'fit', and various practices and processes that affect managerial progression (e.g. Acker, 2006). To critically investigate Saudi Arabian women's working experiences to this level of depth, a qualitative study methodology was therefore adopted. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total 58 Saudi Arabian women working in both gender-segregated and gender-mixed workplaces in Al-Khobar, Dammam (in the Eastern Province) and Riyadh (the capital of Saudi Arabia). A total of twenty-six participants (45% of the sample) work in gender segregated organisations, and thirty-two participants (55% of the sample) work in gender-mixed organisations. The women worked in a variety of hierarchical positions (senior management, middle management and support roles) and varied in marital status (married, single, divorced). The average age of the sample was 35 years (See appendix 1 for more details about the participants' demographic characteristics).

The interview schedule was designed with the broad aim of eliciting different challenges facing working women in Saudi Arabia, and the problems that they encounter in terms of developing their careers and relationships at work. On average, interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. All interviews were conducted by the first author in Arabic and translated into English. Some parts of the English transcriptions were then translated back to Arabic by a third party, and then reverse translated again to English to ensure that meanings after translation had not changed. The interviews took place in the offices of the interviewees or in available meeting rooms at their workplace.

For data analysis, we adopted a combination of a cross-case variance approach (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), and within-case process-tracing (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). By combining variance and process-oriented analysis, we were able to both compare case theorizations and to

trace their fundamental mechanisms (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This mixed-analytical approach enhances validity, particularly as the analysis draws upon two contexts (mixed vs. segregated organizations). In the first stage, we used both thematic coding (Ayres, 2008) and the in-vivo technique (Strauss and Corbin, 2008) to code data from interviews. We began by identifying via open coding those data statements that addressed how participants had come to experience work in segregated or mixed workplaces. Given the specific research question on resistance and constraints, we then focused on statements that related to ethical and political attitudes and behaviors emerging in response to aspects of gendered workplace norms and practices (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014). We organized comparable statements together to form provisional categories (first-order codes).

In the second stage, we performed axial coding to incorporate first-order categories into emergent themes relevant to sources of and responses constituting an ethico-politics of resistance and conformity (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). For example, first-order codes relating to 'strong tribal identity' and 'familial and societal pressure' were grouped together as potential sources of conformity and/or barriers to resistance, in relation to patriarchal norms and practices as the status quo. In contrast, expressions of gendered identities, acts and meanings that were more questioning, querying or outspoken of difference and oppression were grouped as potential sources and manifestations of resistance (Thomas and Davies, 2005). At this stage, similarities and differences between women working in gender-segregated workplaces and gender-mixed workplaces were also incorporated as an axis of the analysis, as were themes relating to the central concept of a *gendered ethico-politics of resistance.* In a third and final stage, we compared and contrasted major themes identified to finalize the analysis in terms of relational, multidimensional patternings and sources of resistance and conformity set against cultural codes, gender and power relations.

Findings

Women working in gender-segregated and mixed Saudi workplaces reported experiencing and enacting various patternings of ethico-political resistance and conformity as they navigated and responded to various gendered norms and practices. Conformity and resistance were co-constituted in relation to patriarchal and tribal norms, and through ethico-political acts such as emphasizing privacy within traditional religious dress (the hijab) or segregated gender spaces, and breaking up with partners. The reported work experiences were constrained and shaped by both societal and organizational influences. We therefore present our findings in two main subsections - *societal resistance and conformity*, and *resistance and conformity in everyday organizational life*.

Societal resistance and conformity

The data highlighted that women have to navigate difficult ethico-political decisions about how to resist or accommodate various cultural and patriarchal influences. In particular, the society's strong beliefs in tribal norms and the family honor performed an important role in participants' decisions about where to work. A total of twenty-six participants (45% of the sample) work in gender segregated organisations, with twenty- five of these participants coming originally from a tribe background. Participants stressed that working in segregated organizations was limiting in career terms, but was shaped by the need to conform to family, tribal and societal pressures for the majority of the women:

> *"Working in a call-centre was never my ambition. In order to develop I need to work in a mixed environment and my family and society don't approve of it, so that's why I accepted any job. Because I come from a tribal family, it is like a curse, they pressure me to accept any job and to not work in a mixed environment for the sake of the family name!"*
> (Participant 29, segregated organization, Tribal).

The above quote highlights how the need to maintain family approval restricted employment options to gender-segregated workplaces, and hence a job that doesn't meet career ambitions. In addition, the inherent worries about a woman's reputation in the society meant that a job should not only be considered acceptable by a woman and her family, but should also conform to the expectations and requirements of her tribe, as explained below:

> *"My father was open-minded but always got in trouble with my uncles. I wanted to apply for a non-segregated organization after high school, my grandfather told me not to apply and scared me, so I didn't apply even though my father agreed. It was about this company is no good for a girl, girls shouldn't work in a mixed environment, this company has a bad reputation, you will bring shame to the family and the tribe, and men will harass you in your workplace. So, I got scared and didn't apply, although it was a great opportunity"*
> (Participant 39, segregated organization, Tribal).

A majority of participants explained the importance of accommodating familial and tribal views on gender-mixed workplace to ensure social acceptance. In order to protect their family's reputations, Saudi women were under social, tribal, and cultural pressures to conform and work in segregated organizations. It was evident from the data that restrictions and controls existed on women's employment in relation to what was perceived by the society as good or bad 'working conditions', appropriately gendered for women. This persisting social perception in favor of gender segregation set the conditions for severe tensions for Saudi women torn between accommodating the tribal culture code and pursuing a career. For example, one participant moved to work in a segregated organization to safeguard her family's reputation:

> *"In the beginning of my career I worked in a mixed company, we were few women and everybody was asking me a lot of questions regarding working in a mixed place. My father*

didn't want everyone to know - he asked me not to tell anyone. Although he approved of it, he said he had to protect the family's reputation… Now I work in an all women organisation, everyone is happy" (Participant 53, segregated organization, Tribal).

Notably, almost all participants working in segregated organizations came from ancestral Saudi tribes, which put restrictions on the environment of women's employment through normative pressures to uphold tribal honor and reputation. Resonating with Syed et al.'s (2018) research on women in Saudi Arabia, it appeared that the interaction of gender, tribal norms, and patriarchal culture shaped Saudi women's preferences to work in gender-segregated workplaces. While the majority of participants perceived societal views on gender-segregation as 'old-fashioned' and influenced by customs and traditions that they themselves cannot challenge, some acknowledged that working with Saudi men could lead to difficulties and occasional inappropriate behaviour from men:

"It was my personal choice to work in a segregated organization, not family pressure at all. I wear the Hijab [veil worn by Muslim women] *and there is more privacy for women. I personally prefer to work in a segregated job. It's hard to work with men all the time. My colleague when he saw me passing by on my way out, called me the next day saying 'are you okay, I saw you walking in a different way, are you pregnant?' I was really surprised, I didn't like it at all. It's hard to mix us. Different genders are not used to working around each other"* (Participant 32, segregated organization, Tribal).

"I don't want to work with Saudi men. There is no problem if I have to work with foreign men, the main problem is the Saudis' mentality. But once you work with a Saudi man, or in a mixed place, he will believe you'll go out with him on a date" (Participant 41, segregated organization, Tribal).

Both examples illustrate that some (but not all) participants made conscious decisions to work in all-women organizations as they perceived mixing with the opposite gender as unacceptable in that it could lead to crossing boundaries and perhaps even to sexual harassment. Nevertheless, several participants working in a call-centre, which was entirely gender segregated, stressed being objectified due to their gender, receiving unwelcome attention and flirtation from customers:

> *"Customers ... several men who called to book for a honeymoon or a vacation with his family, they tells me to save his number and me to keep in touch with him ... they try to give you their number indirectly, they ask for your mobile number, they flirt in order to sense whether you accept it; for example some of them say " My darling" or "My sweetie" and other similar flirtatious words"* (Participant 31, segregated organization, Tribal).

> *"There are a lot of inappropriate behaviours from clients, the society was against women working in call centre, they used to call us to tell us that women shouldn't be working in such job, they also wrote about the company on the Internet, criticising that they recruit women in call centre"* (Participant 32, segregated organization, Tribal).

While some participants believed that gender-segregation could prevent sexual harassment, it was evident in the data that working in women-only workplaces does not guarantee women's protection. In line with Le Renard (2014), such findings demonstrate that gender-segregated workplaces provide opportunities for women to participate in the public domain, but also accommodate conservative views of society deeply influenced by the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam in Saudi Arabia (Ali, 2015).

Similar to Salem and Yount's (2019) research findings on women's views of gender-segregated workplaces in Qatar, our participants accommodated the patriarchal, tribal and societal preferences for gender-segregated workplace to maintain their families' reputation and approval.

While most participants in this study perceived that working in a segregated organization limited their career opportunities, their tribal association constrained their options to resist the dominant patriarchal belief systems. Therefore the data highlighted that women have to navigate difficult ethico-political decisions about how to accommodate various cultural and patriarchal influences that extend beyond their direct control, and so their ethico-political decision are more complicated than one-dimensional resistance or conformity.

Alternatively, women's pursuit of their career goals via mixed workplaces reflected a different form of ethico-political resistance asserting their difference against patriarchal power relations that would negate or oppress their presence:

> *"Those women who have made it and work in a mixed workplace are those who have pushed hard, something religious conservatives are resisting."* (Participant 15, mixed organization, Tribal)

> *"To prove herself, a woman must work double as hard or smart* [as a man] *to market herself. There are women who appear in newspapers; but it is a disgrace in our culture for women to appear and express a personal thought...These women don't have tribal restrictions; they don't come from a tribe"* (Participant 49, mixed organization, Tribal).

Notably, a total of thirty-two participants (55% of the sample) work in gender-mixed organisations, and only nine of these participants come originally from a tribe background. These nine participants stressed that the society seems to share hostility toward those who break the norms and challenge the rigid control imposed on them:

> *"Some women feel that to follow what is common in your community for your whole life is easy, as you don't have to think about what is right or wrong. I think all of us working here have undergone a challenge from our parents and families. Not all woman get a chance to*

challenge the society, because they are scared, that's because there is a physical violence, compulsory marriage and a lot more ..." (Participate 19, mixed organization, Tribal).

"You know how is it in our society, they have this view of women working in a mixed environment, it was really hard when I started working here, I was facing a lot of pressure. Even if you were raised by open minded parents it is still difficult because relatives, neighbours, friends, tribes and the society don't accept it... People tell me that I am wrong because I don't have a problem with mixed workplaces and I am encouraging mixing with the opposite gender ..." (Participate 20, mixed organization, Tribal).

Notably, the co-occurrence of privilege (i.e. tribal affiliation) and disadvantage (i.e. strict moral code) emerged in one of our participants' experiences. The participant stresses her need to push the boundaries of the gender norms and patriarchal structures to provide for her family:

"When I first joined here some people were giving me advice. They told me that it is a taboo to work in a mixed workplace, it's forbidden and not accepted in the society, you will have a bad reputation, no one will marry your children. I have children and they are my responsibility; I need the money, they pay well here. I don't need these people to tell me that, to be honest I don't care" (Participant 16, mixed organization, Tribal).

There is a general lack of comprehension around the kind of hardship – understood here as ethico-political resistance - that women experience working in a mixed environment in a traditional society like Saudi Arabia. However, the data highlighted that participants from non-ancestral Saudi tribes also faced similar patriarchal controls rooted in conservative social and gender relations that marginalized women. Several participants who worked in mixed organizations and did not come from tribal origins stressed that they encountered criticism, as societal and organizational norms collided:

"Of course, nothing comes easily, I could have taken the easier way as many Saudi women do and work wherever. I gave up on a lot of things in order to work here. I've set my priorities and made my choices ...and took the road." (Participant 13, mixed organization, Non-tribal).

"Some male patients refuse let me as woman to do their electrocardiogram (EKG), after I tell him that there isn't a male technician, he walks away .... The society view of woman becoming studying medicine is problematic, it was like sending her to prostitution. Nowadays, Saudi women hold good positions in nursing and medicine. I tell the patients who refuse to do the EKG; I tell them if I didn't have the experience to do it then who will do it for your sister or mother" (Participant 24, gender-mixed, Non-tribal).

The participants repeatedly highlighted that a major challenge to gender equality was rooted in a strict interpretation of Islam that confused Saudi traditional norms and Islamic laws:

"Islam doesn't treat women differently; our religion gave women their full rights and dignity in her house and with her families, also in the workplace. But, this problem is our culture. Parents' mentality plays a major role in this issue, our customs and traditions where certain things are allowed and others are prohibited under the name of religion, the word Haram "Taboo" is wrongly thrown around in everything" (Participant 38, gender-mixed, Non-tribal).

As highlighted in the quote above, the interplay between religion and culture is complicated and created tensions between participants and their society, as well as pressures on the women to either accommodate or resist a variety of influences. Resonating with Ramadan (2009, 2014), it appears that interpretation of Islam without considering chronology and context reduces women's rights and limits their opportunities to work and be financially independent in certain Muslim Majority

countries. This is particularly the case in Saudi Arabia where the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, as well as the conservative culture, has shaped the gender roles within the society and suppressed women through gender segregation (Alkhaled, 2021).

Therefore, ethics and politics of resistance and conformity in Saudi society revolved around a context informed by a web of obligations and influences, some explicitly patriarchal, that often comprised negative attitudes towards norm-breaking conduct or conduct that called gender relations into question. Saudi women's attitudes and enactments of meanings and identities in this context were more complex than simple, linear, binary or one-directional conformity or resistance. Societally, those women working in mixed organizations were considered threatening to conservative social norms as they challenged other controls imposed on them. We argue that women working in gender-mixed organizations were actively engaging in an ethico-politics of resistance by resisting those forms of organizing - segregation, invisibility - that oppressed their difference and sought to confine it to conformity toward gendered roles and careers (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014).

Resistance and conformity in everyday organizational life

While the organizations Saudi women worked in had adopted ethically and politically legitimate objectives regarding women's empowerment and equal opportunities, patriarchal norms and processes were still reflected in organizational cultures and practices. In segregated contexts, upper-managers (invariably men) had made accessible a women-only workplace for supporting employment, but presided over limited opportunities for women to develop, be promoted or challenge gender stereotypes.

For example, women argued that managers usually promoted men as they were expected to be the primary earners and were socially connected more directly to other managers, and practices reinforcing this were a shared experience:

"Take for example evaluation. If I am holding a hundred million in the financial portfolio and a man is holding the same, he will get a better evaluation. They believe men have more responsibilities, but we are equal in terms of work - his work is the same as mine. The man will get promoted...Yet this is not professional, as management shouldn't take into consideration our personal life or gender when they evaluate our work, it should be based on the work only" (Participant 36, segregated organization, Tribal).

These issues reflect where notions of gender difference in Islamic and Middle Eastern cultures enter into ethico-political and religio-political conflict with notions of equality, although they need not always do so (Metcalfe, 2008), and indeed, the same ethico-political tensions of equality/difference plague diversity and inclusion in other settings as well (Ahonen and Tienari, 2015). To a significant degree, women were not expected to be primary breadwinners; there were strong pressures to conform to traditional gender norms and role expectations of marrying, staying at home and performing household work.

Women seeking promotion in a gender-segregated context also faced ethico-political tensions around networking - with gendered power relations often making it more difficult to forge social network connections within patriarchal managerial hierarchies (den Brink and Benschop, 2014). At the same time, while those who worked in mixed organizations had more direct interaction with managerial men, they were still excluded from informally segregated social networks. In ethico-political terms, the dilemma was how to enact the norms of the organizational context (working side-by-side with men) while resisting various cultural and patriarchal influences

(familial and tribal reputations and honor). For example, several participants explained it was not considered socially appropriate for women to be friends or informally socialize with men, as this HR manager recounted:

> *"On several occasions we attended a business lunch, and by default all of the girls were sitting at a table and all of the guys at another table, and there is no social interaction, unfortunately. I have asked the girls the reason - the girls said: "we cannot be seen sitting having lunch with them, especially if there is a photographer taking pictures", and sometimes there will be because this is an official business event. If photographs are published in any newspaper, it is going to have negative repercussions for them, for family or whatever."* (Participant 4, mixed organization, Non-tribal).

Thus an absence of informal interactions in such workplaces was due to norms restricting informal gender mixing, disadvantaging women and reproducing gender segregations regardless, making them a contested area for ethico-political conformity and resistance. Within mixed organizations, vertical and horizontal segregation were still very pronounced. Women were recruited mostly in support services rather than core operations, and were under-represented in top management positions. Moreover, interviewees highlighted that male managers had lower expectations of women, considering them less competent and giving them very limited chances to achieve and accomplish anything:

> *"I have a PhD and 17 years' experience in this organization. Our division head is also a PhD holder and every time he goes on leave I have never been called to cover. They bring another man from another department. It means that I am not capable. But I don't go by their opinion, I know I am capable. The mindset is dreadful."* (Participant 1, mixed organization, Non-tribal).

It was evident that regardless of women's qualifications, experiences, or where they studied, they were usually treated by their supervisors as assistants and given administrative work. Despite women indicating that they were willing to commit to longer working hours and even giving up some weekends, their supervisors rejected the idea because it flouted 'traditional norms' that defined women first as wives and mothers, and second as employees. All the societal and institutional constraints for conformity that Saudi women experienced therefore necessitate further ethico-political negotiation inside the organization around how to question and resist such norms and constraints.

Saudi women's ethico-political responses to organizational power relations varied, but were often similar in terms of objectives. Participants were engaged in ethico-politically negotiating and resisting organizational challenges embedded within a macro societal and institutional context. Within both segregated and mixed organizational contexts, Saudi women represented themselves as active subjects finding ways to resist some articulations of patriarchal power, often by subtle means, yet indicative of distinct ethico-political patternings of resistance and conformity. For instance, some participants mobilized feminist resistance to the status quo by recognizing that they needed to push hard to have their presence noticed. A training and development advisor pointed out:

> *"If you saw the movie Shrek - Donkey doesn't have the correct answer, but when there is a question, he says "me, me, pick me ". Donkey reminds me of the male population, they have an empty head but always want attention. Women work very hard but have very low profiles. You have to make them see you, acknowledge you, not in the Donkey way "me me, see me ", but by producing extraordinary work"* (Participant 1, mixed organization, Non-tribal).

While working hard was generally indicative of conformity to one's employer, it also constitutes a subtle 'infrapolitical' resistance tactic - covert, low-profile, partly hidden from the viewpoint of a majority (Vachhani and Pullen, 2019). Women employed such forms of ethico-politics in order to be acknowledged as performing well in the working environment, while also aiming to challenge the ignorance and oppression of patriarchal leadership and co-working norms to an extent.

Another pattern of feminist ethico-political resistance was participants' violations of norms concerning women's modesty, silence and conformity toward men as a dominant organizational group. Participants disclosed several ways by which they expressed their dissatisfaction with their experiences within a patriarchal organisational structure such as expression objections, pushing for their rights, and arguing or filing complaints:

> *"They asked me to address the men's section in doing paperwork. When I went, the manager asked me to let a man speak to him, for my brother or father to contact him. I told him that my father is dead and I can't drag my brothers from their work just for a piece of paper! My blood pressure went up! I had an argument with him, and then he agreed to finish the work. I complained to the upper management and they told me I have to address the minister herself"* (Participant 47, segregated organization, Tribal).

In addition, several participants defied gendered expectations applied to them by the dominant group in closer work interactions:

> *"If we get complaints, the manager will put the blame on us immediately without first looking into it, they will yell at us in public. Once they know that it's not your mistake they never apologize ...They think that we simply ignore this because we are women. I don't!"* (Participant 19, mixed organization, Tribal).

In mixed organizations several women argued for the necessity of navigating men's behaviours through an ethico-politics of perseverance and indifference:

"Some men don't even speak to you and ignore you; and some walk out if you are in a meeting with them. They don't want to be in a mixed meeting, are conservative. It's their problem. I don't care and I show them that I don't" (Participant 13, mixed organization, Non-tribal).

A subtle form of ethico-political resistance therefore arises in Saudi women's organizational interactions with men, even if it is not entirely visible or explicit to many others. This arises where women perceive patriarchal and conservative norms and practices as requiring them to perform particular gender-appropriate behaviours in conformity with broader socio-political and socio-cultural views. However, ethico-political resistance can be enacted by breaking with these expectations of being passive and accommodating and refusing to conform to gender stereotypes as they are experienced in daily organizational life.

Importantly, forms of ethico-political resistance also occurred between and among women in organizations more broadly, as women reflected on building connections, shared experiences and empathy (Vachhani and Pullen, 2019), or the need to address a lack of social change by influencing colleagues, family and friends to create opportunities for other women:

"I work as a career advisor at a recruitment organization. The government links us with unemployed women and we help them finds the right job. I feel sometimes I am pushing them to get jobs. Some women don't want to work, there are open positions and the company is willing to hire women but they were taught that their primary role is to raise children and take care of the household. I talk to them and give them advice based on my own experience and convince them to work. I felt like I couldn't make my own decisions in

my life. Women here aren't free like the women in other countries, so we should push for

change. There has been a lot of change towards the better; a lot of women work nowadays.

Women before used to work only in teaching. We must all speak out, we must tell everybody

about our jobs and how successful we are, and with time people will start accepting the

idea"(Participant 41, segregated organization, Tribal).

The latter quote points to an ethico-politics of resistance and conformity among women, in terms of a contested transition from classic patriarchy toward a more contemporary patriarchy, with structural influences limiting forms of feminist emancipation (Salem and Yount, 2019). This was particularly acute for several Saudi women working in recruitment roles, who faced resistance from other women as they tried to encourage them to work in mixed organizational environments ("I tried but I got complaints. They sent an e-mail to the Minister accusing me of encouraging immorality, mixing of men and women, and influencing others", Participant 55, segregated organization).

Nevertheless, many participants actively advocated for and created opportunities for other women to renegotiate cultural and organizational norms. This is arguably ethico-politics blurs the line between private and public, between individual and collective, and may start to reach a more contested and externalized tipping point in a particular cultural context. Most women expressed a conviction that it was necessary to push for social change in small steps, negotiating the ethics and politics of everyday organizational life flexibly and adaptively, with resistance resembling sustained patterns of attending to and reflecting on experiences and practices.

Ethico-political circumstances unfolded differently for different individuals, demanding patternings of conformity and resistance in different ways over time, from different sources, and over a series of local struggles and contexts:

"I chose my job over my marriage. In the beginning, my husband didn't accept me working in a non-segregated organization, so he made me choose between work and staying together. I chose work. He came back to me after and asked me to at least change my department…Similarly, I don't care whether I wear Abaya [a robe-like dress worn by Islamic women] *or not ... But it is not entirely up to me. My partner wouldn't like it, and what can I do? I can't fight with him over everything, but I think it is more professional without Abaya"* (Participant 8, mixed organization, Non-tribal).

In sum, our findings demonstrate ways in which women experience the ethico-politics of resistance in Middle Eastern cultural contexts (specifically, Saudi Arabia). Complex relational webs of influence and gendered power relations shape how Saudi women find nuanced ways of negotiating conformity to patriarchal norms and practices while reflecting on and engaging in potential ways of challenging oppression and enacting steps toward feminist emancipation and social change within their societal and organizational context. We find that Saudi women's ethico-political resistance to patriarchal structures is contested, variable and piecemeal, bound up with religious, familial and tribal norms and obligations, accompanied by conformity and bargaining, contingent also on organizational and personal circumstances.

Discussion and conclusion

In the current study we have explored how women working in gender-segregated and mixed Saudi Arabian workplaces experience and enact distinct ethico-political patternings of gendered conformity and resistance. These patternings are culturally and relationally embedded in both societal and organizational webs of meaning, which shape how women navigate and respond to gendered norms and practices in particular ways. These findings contribute to inter-related understandings of feminist business ethics, Middle Eastern organizational contexts, and the ethico-

politics of resistance and conformity in and around organizations (Alakavuklar and Alamgir, 2018; Borgerson, 2007; Karam and Jamali, 2013; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019).

The current research shows how Saudi Arabian women ethically and politically experience options and constraints in relation to resisting patriarchal norms and practices. This contributes to a more developed understanding of resistance in and around organizations, particularly by showing where it may be more infrapolitical and ethico-political - in terms of being more low-profile and influenced by multi-directional cultural and institutional ethical imperatives, respectively (Karam and Jamali, 2013; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019). This contributes to a more developed understanding of resistance in and around organizations by connecting it with ethico-political tensions in underexplored feminist, relational, non-Western and intersectional manifestations. Understanding resistance in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East is important in business ethics because "resistance is always situational and contextual. As such, studies of and theories about resistance need to be sensitive to its historical, economic, and political specificity" (Mumby et al., 2017, p.1161). Understanding women's feminist resistances in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia is important because while "the constitutions of most countries in this region guarantee equality of all citizens before the law (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is an exception), women still face legal forms of discrimination that are systematic and that pervade every aspect of life" (Karam and Afiouni, 2014, p. 506). Finally, understanding an ethico-politics of resistance in Middle Eastern and Saudi Arabian organizations is important because it sets resistance against ongoing patterns of conformity, compliance and control, as an unfinished project that can take many forms, but has to date been "dominated by cases from/assumptions of the Western world" (Alakavuklar and Alamgir, 2018, p. 40).

In Saudi Arabia we find women's ethico-politics of resistance and conformity shaped in two main ways. First, societally - by tribal norms and familial influences on how honor, shame and reputation are constructed in relation to entering gender-mixed and segregated organizations. Second, in the daily experiences of organizational life working in gender-mixed and segregated organizations, in relation to patriarchal and gendered norms, practices and structures that affect constructions of modesty, visibility, norm violations and possibilities of social change. Such an ethico-political understanding of resistance and conformity in a Middle Eastern cultural context engages Mumby and colleagues' (2017) organizing framework for research on resistance in organizations in part by problematizing the more or less binary public-private and individual-collective dimensions. Women's actions, identities and meanings in distinct cultural contexts renegotiate what 'counts as' resistance (its definition) and when resistance 'counts' (its intent or impact) (Mumby et al., 2017). Continuing to shape research on resistance in and around organizations in ethico-political and feminist ways can help show how women struggle to resist oppressions politically while maintaining cultural and ethical connections, identities, meanings, and empathy for other men and women alongside feminist projects of dissent and emancipation (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Vachhani and Pullen, 2019; Vacchani, 2019).

At the societal level, the current study suggests value in future research looking at the ethico-politics of social movements concerned with feminism and social change. To date, most research in feminist organizational and business ethics domains has focused on western movements or broadly global initiatives, such as the #MeToo movement or The Everyday Sexism project (Vacchani and Pullen, 2019; Vachhani, 2020). While highly valuable, this research could be complemented by parallel research on the ethico-politics of Muslim feminisms situated in Middle Eastern contexts, such as campaigns for women to drive and play sports (e.g. Karam and

Jamali, 2013; Lysa, 2020). Closer ethico-political investigations into the conformity and resistance involved in these struggles may shed more light on how Muslim feminisms are mobilized and enacted, through coalitions and collective cultural codes, blurring the private and the public, the individual and the collective, in ongoing ethico-political work (Alakavuklar and Alamgir, 2018; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014).

At the organizational level, it's important to continue to study forces of structure and agency in Middle Eastern organizations because these societies and cultures continue to make complex transitions from forms of classic patriarchy to forms of contemporary patriarchy (Salem and Yount, 2019). Where increasing numbers of women enter organizational life, they are likely to engage with an array of relational, interacting cultural and patriarchal norms and practices. Culturally diverse women will also experience the agency of their conformity and resistance in terms of *what they are resisting* (e.g. patriarchal or oppressive forces, globalization), which in turn presupposes other lines of inquiry in terms of *what they are conforming to* (e.g. cultural or religious beliefs, norms and values and collective identifications). Future research might consider the ethico-political roles and influences of different *targets* (leaders, teams, customers, or other stakeholder groups), different *channels* (e-mail, project work, routines, rules, meetings, or other events), and different *tactics* (humor, irony, sarcasm, ambivalence, spectacle, subterfuge, and so on) (Mumby et al., 2017). In the current study, these appeared in the accounts of Saudi women in a variety of ways, associated with attitudes toward performance evaluations, promotions, networking, transport, gender stereotyping and religio-ethical and religio-political beliefs and customs regarding women's employment and career prospects.

Religion, tribe and family appeared to provide a relational, cultural bridge between Saudi Arabian societal ethico-politics and women's ethico-politics in the daily lived experience of

organizations. The current study suggests future research would benefit from looking at these intersections in greater detail in Middle Eastern countries (Koburtay et al., 2018). This is crucial because it can redress misinterpretations and faulty assumptions. For example, conforming to Islamic norms and values does not mean resistance to gender equality, nor do tribal affiliations bring privilege and progressive opportunities for women; in the current study women reported tribal affiliations as imposing stronger conformity to patriarchal familial expectations (also see Koburtay et al., 2018 on Jordanian women).

Similarly, gender segregation and mixing is a complex, structural practice that can give rise to conformity and/or resistance, underpinned by complex attitudes and bargaining in organizations, situated against changes in the wider society (Salem and Yount, 2019). Segregation is nuanced insofar as it reinforces cultural constructions of modesty, but also of group membership and a sense of women and men as equal but different, and complementary, with family and maternity support provisions being foundational to Islamic states and institutional frameworks (Metcalfe, 2008). In the current study, some interviewees reported more conservative and traditionally religious attitudes toward the importance and desirability of conforming to gender segregation, because of its morality and centrality to family, reputation, religious observance and cultural harmony. While in other cultures this might potentially be interpreted as essentialist and indicative of inequality, it has a nuanced relationship with feminist ethico-politics elsewhere in diverse global feminisms (Walby, 2011). Women-only settings, for instance, are not a new phenomenon historically, but they continue to emerge in a variety of cultural and organizational forms, and are discussed for their benefits, such as safety and empowerment, as well as their controversial aspects, such as reverse discrimination and elitism (The Economist, 2018).

In conclusion, it bears noting that the current study only looked at the perspectives of a sample of working Saudi women, albeit a relatively large and diverse sample whose experiences it is important to give voice to. Nevertheless, the current study could therefore be complemented by Middle Eastern business ethics research that complements the lived ethico-political experiences of working women by sampling against a broader range of institutional and stakeholder perspectives - legislators, ruling elites, activists, suppliers, business leaders, entrepreneurs and other actors (Karam and Jamali, 2013; Lysa, 2020). Broader conflicts and alliances that intersect progressive and conservative, secular and religious, local and international, feminist and patriarchal, managerial and emancipatory elements in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern contexts will all further shape the ethico-political tensions of conformity and resistance in organizations (Al-Rasheed, 2013, 2018; Badran, 2005). Resistance to patriarchal influences presupposes other forces of conformity and resistance to other ethico-political sources and influences elsewhere, constituted within complex relational patternings. Greater appreciation of these patternings will allow us to continue to more fully understand the considerable ethico-political risks, meanings and achievements women experience and participate in as they continue to navigate the terms of their inclusion - in organizations, institutions and economic and public life.

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Appendix I: Overview of Participants' Demographic Characteristics

N.	Age	Marital Status	Children	Qualification	Workplace	Sector (Company)	Job Title	Tribal affiliation
1	41	Married	0	PhD	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Training and professional development advisor	Non-tribal
2	28	Married	0	BSc Computer science	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Computer Operating system specialists	Non-tribal
3	46	Single	N/A	MBA	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	System Analyst	Non-tribal
4	51	Divorced	2	BSc	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	HR manager	Non-tribal
5	29	Married	0	BSc	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	systems Analyst	Non-tribal
6	38	Single	N/A	Diploma	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	secretary	Non-tribal
7	27	Single	N/A	BSc	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Training coordinator	Tribal
8	31	Married	1	BSc	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Trainee advisor	Non-tribal
9	31	Married	N/A	Bachelor degree	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Division secretary	Non-tribal
10	35	Married	2	BA English Language and Literature	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Digital cartographer	Non-tribal
11	31	Married	N/A	High school, and currently studying BSc	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Training coordinator	Non-tribal
12	33	Married	1	Bachelor in English	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Training coordinator	Non-tribal
13	49	Married	3	Bachelor degree	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	SAP healthcare Admin	Non-tribal
14	28	Single	N/A	Master's degree	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	HR coordinator	Non-tribal
15	31	Married	0	Bachelor degree	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Admin Asst	Tribal
16	43	Divorced	4	Diploma	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Statistical assistance	Tribal
17	42	Divorced	3	Bachelor Civil Eng.	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	counsellor Trainee	Non-tribal
18	35	Married	4	Bachelor Math	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	IT Technical clerk	Tribal
19	33	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree in History	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Travel consultant	Tribal
20	27	Single	N/A	Diploma	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Travel consultant	Tribal
21	28	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Admin Assistant	Non-tribal
22	31	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree in international management	gender-mixed	Oil and gas	Statistical assistant	Non-tribal
23	38	Married	N/A	Bachelor degree	gender-mixed	Hospital	Respiratory Specialist	Tribal

24	40	Married	4	Bachelor degree	gender-mixed	Hospital	Echo therapist	Non-tribal
25	43	Divorced	1	Master's degree in HR	gender-mixed	Hospital	EKG Tech	Non-tribal
26	31	Married	N/A	Master's degree	gender-mixed	Hospital	Respiratory Therapist	Non-tribal
27	30	Married	2	Bachelor degree	gender-mixed	Hospital	Respiratory Therapist	Non-tribal
28	30	Single	N/A	BSc in Management	gender-mixed	Petrochemicals	Financial officer	Non-tribal
29	31	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree in English Literature	Segregated	Travel agency	Travel agent	Tribal
30	38	Divorced	2	Bachelor degree	Segregated	Travel agency	Travel agent	Tribal
31	35	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree in Arabic Language	Segregated	Travel agency	Assistance supervisor at call center	Tribal
32	32	Married	N/A	Bachelor degree at mathematics	Segregated	Travel agency	Call center supervisor	Tribal
33	30	Single	N/A	Diploma	Segregated	Travel agency	Travel agent	Tribal
34	28	Single	N/A	BSc Translation French	Segregated	Travel agency	Travel agent	Tribal
35	25	Married	1	BSc in Marketing	Segregated	Travel agency	Travel agent	Tribal
36	31	Married	2	Masters	Segregated	Banking	Branch manager	Tribal
37	25	Married	N/A	Bachelor degree in English Literature	Segregated	Banking	Deputy manager	Tribal
38	37	Married	1	Bachelor degree in Sociology	gender-mixed	Private Hospital	Sociologist	Non-tribal
39	28	Single	N/A	Master's degree	Segregated	Recruitment	HR Performance manager	Tribal
40	31	Married	3	Bachelor degree	Segregated	Recruitment	Supervisor	Tribal
41	26	Married	1	Diploma	Segregated	Recruitment	Career advisor	Tribal
42	26	Married	2	Bachelor degree	Segregated	Recruitment	Career advisor	Tribal
43	29	Single	N/A	Diploma	Segregated	Recruitment	Career advisor	Non-tribal
44	27	Married	2	Bachelor degree	Segregated	Recruitment	Tutor /Trainer	Tribal
45	32	Single	N/A	Master's degree in Executive business administration	Segregated	Recruitment	Trainer	Tribal
46	30	Single	N/A	Bachelor in History and Diploma in Technical networks	Segregated	Recruitment	Career Advisor	Tribal
47	30	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree	Segregated	Public school	Teacher	Tribal

48	31	Married	3	Bachelor degree	Segregated	University	Data entry	Tribal
49	32	Single	N/A	Master's degree	gender-mixed	Business Development	Analyst	Tribal
50	29	Single	N/A	BSc Medical Lab tech from KFU	gender-mixed	Hospital	Medical LAB Technologist	Tribal
51	26	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree	Segregated	Recruitment	Career Advisor	Tribal
52	30	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree in History	Segregated	Recruitment	Recruitment advisor	Tribal
53	30	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree	Segregated	Recruitment	Performance manager	Tribal
54	36	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree	Segregated	Recruitment	Public relation and sale	Tribal
55	36	Single	N/A	Bachelor degree in Business	Segregated	Recruitment	Public relation and sale	Tribal
56	24	Single	N/A	Master's degree	Segregated	Recruitment	Career Advisor	Tribal
57	24	Single	N/A	Diploma	Segregated	Recruitment	Administrator	Tribal
58	28	Single	N/A	Master's degree	gender-mixed	IT training center	Executive director	Tribal