



## Gender Identity and Agency of Women in a Higher Education Institution

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### ABSTRACT

In higher education institutions, we find that there is a dearth of women in decision-making positions. Public universities, as an example, promote the gender roles of both men and women. This research examined the gender performativity of six female faculty members at a Saudi public university. using a methodology of a qualitative case study, utilizing methods of interviews, observations, and documentation. In this research, I answered the question of how do female faculty members perform their gender at their university? I utilized the theory of gender performativity to answer this question. Gender performativity theory believes that, gender is socially constructed through gendered performances. The theory helped to understand why female faculty members build and maintain gender norms in the university. Moreover, the research exposed the effect of gender performativity on how the job opportunities distributed in the women's workplace. The findings were mainly in the areas of: (1) gender identity; (2) women's agency; (3) and regulatory power.

**Keywords:** women, gender performativity, female faculty members, higher education institutions.



## Introduction

There have been many developments concerning changes to live as observed by Saudi women hence a critical part of their country's decision-making. For example, banning women drivers on 24th June 2018 and loosening tight male guardianship rules on 1st August 2019 allows women to leave the country without asking for permission from the male counterparts. These developments form the basis of vision 2030, aiming to minimize oil dependence by diversification of economic resources and building public service sectors such as enhancing infrastructure, health, education, tourism, and recreational activities. ("Saudi Vision 2030", 2020). These developments have promoted awareness among women, especially gender inequality forcing policymakers to establish the right procedures and decisions.

In the last decade, a slight increase in Saudi faculty members has been witnessed; for example, King Abdulaziz University, King Saud University, and Umm Al Qura University are three public universities that have experienced growth. The ministry of education has also confirmed the significant increase in female Saudi faculty members, especially between 2008 and 2018. However, despite the improvement in the number of female faculty members' positions, no significant increase in leadership positions has been registered. There is no substantial change in the underrepresentation of women in the Saudi higher education decision-making domain since the university president position has only been held by one woman and only in the women campus. The reason for the underrepresentation of women in senior positions is numerous ranging from lack of qualifications needed for professional and decision-making positions in the university. The underrepresentation of women has led to a call for a gender perspective concerning leadership in higher education institutions. For example, Denker (2009) analyzes the need of including women in leadership positions in higher education institutions.

Affirming that analyzing this issue through the concept of gender will enable us to expose the challenges faced in organizations, and also understand norms and policies in the institutions and the probability that we would have to make adjustments' (p.103). In other words, for many the number of women to increase in the decision-making position, there is a need to show gender performance issues relating to not only gender roles but also gender values within different institutions and organizations.

Many researchers have been done on women's issues in higher education and the problems they face in such institutions. However, the current studies do not explain how women perform their gender identity regarding Saudi higher education and how gender identity performance may influence women's involvement in higher education, especially in public universities. Therefore, analyze how female Saudi faculty members in public universities may conduct their gender in their workplace as well as how these performances influence their opportunities in taking the leadership roles in Saudi universities.



## Research Purpose and Research Questions

This paper examined female faculty members' gender performativity at a public university in Saudi Arabia. Using interviews, observation, and relevant documentation as methods.

This research examined the following research question:

1. How female faculty members perform their gender identity at a public university in Saudi Arabia?

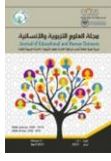
## Theoretical Framework

This study encompasses the Gender performativity theory proposed by Judith Butler in her remarkable book *Gender Trouble*. The theory depicts that gender norms are made and maintained by repeated performance as well as of the culturally created gender values (Buttler,1990). In that gender, performance assumes that the gender identity of a person is socially created by gender performance, which is not considered as an individual-dependent performance but through practicing gender performativity (Butler,2004) hence enabling us to understand mechanisms through which reality is produced and changed in the course of reproduction. Besides, it also enables us to see how values which govern reality are made (p.218). Moreover, Gender performativity also leads to the understanding of the creation of gender socially and the role of regulatory power, including gender values, in the construction process

Gender performativity theory reinstates that gender identity is socially established mainly by the socialization and acquired gender norms following cultural and social practices (Martin, 2003). As a result, how traditional gender values are multiplied and reproduced through gender performance will influence higher learning institutions, therefore, conforming to the theory of gender performativity in this study and also helps in understanding why Saudi female faculty members keep performing culturally created gender roles is critical to know how job positions and tasks were located between male and female faculty members in universities and are affected by culture. For example, critical analysis of the distribution of jobs shows that female faculty members are mainly employed in jobs about services such as teaching, consultations, and social work, which entails performing the roles of an emotional and caring persons as required from accepted gender roles patriarchal hegemony which carries a critical function in the continuing under-representation of women at the top senior roles in the universities in Saudi Arabia.

## Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was used to analyze the gender performance among females in the public university. This approach was mainly used because researchers were much interested in insight, discovery, and interpretations instead of testing the hypothesis" (Merriam,1998, p.10). A case study approach ensures that the



issue is analyzed through one lens and through many lenses allowing multiple facets of the phenomenon to be shown and understood (Baxter and Jack 2008, p. 545), which means that this approach enables the exploration of the phenomenon within its context by the use of different data collection methods.

**Method:** Data collection method in this study includes interviews, observations, and the documentation review. Through the discussion, I managed to study the gender performativity of six-full time women faculty in a Saudi public university. Through the Arabic language, I interviewed every woman at least two times in two different areas. Participants did not need to prepare for the interview; however, some participants were asked to review the questions and think about their answers before. The length of the interviews was approximately 50 to 60 minutes each or 120 minutes in total. The discussions were, as Yin (2009) stated, “guided conversations rather than structured queries” (p. 106).

Individual observations were conducted in their natural environment during the regular working hours, paying particular concern to interactions that the participants had with other people, including expressions and statements of facial and body language. I also monitored their audience closely and about their work environment. The other observations extracted include non-verbal communication for the interaction's participants' by and other factors, including their clothing. Moreover, I also asked my female participants for copies of various documents during my observations; this included emails, reports, or minutes regarding their departments, students, or administration despite being non-confidential and public. Again, I also managed to collect all the written information, including policies, handbooks, human resources job advertisements, brochures, or gender awareness helpful in this study.

## Literate review

### Gender Performativity in Education

Some studies analyze gender identity performativity in an educational field. Judith Butler's gender performativity theory was analyzed in the following educational context. Kelly-Ware (2016) analyzed gender and sexuality by using the lens of gender performativity theory; he pursued the creation and performance of gender and sexuality of New Zealand kids in early childhood development (p. 147). She used data mainly to understand the gender identity performance of children about their various features through the use of gender performativity theory. For six months, Kelly-Ware laid attention on an early childhood education center in New Zealand and took a group of forty children, comprised of twenty girls and twenty boys, four female teachers, and a female administrator (Kelly-Ware, 2016, p. 148).

Worth noting is that Kelly ware founded her theoretical framework on Butler's gender performativity theory which explains how children experiment with gender as a socially created performance affected by the community. This theory depicts that children may draw on many factors that may affect their actions (p. 153). For



instance, children may learn from well-known culture, which perpetuates the values of the society. Kelly-Ware (2016) also uses case studies to understand the children's functionality regarding gender and sexuality. After a critical analysis of the gender-related discourse in the area of study, Kelly-Ware (2016, p 153) summarizes that children at early educational centers integrate partial, multiple, and performed gender identities. The feedback adult interaction with children performance was a reinforcement for desirable and acceptable characteristics (Kelly-Ware,2016 p.153).

Silfver (2016) analyzed the performance of gender of school children by research which needed them to program Lego cars at a given research center. The analysis aimed at explaining the nature of stereotypically gendered power relations, especially during Lego pro cars (Silfver, 2016, p.5).

He used the methodology to achieve effective feedbacks for the research questions. The initial research question seeks feedback on how to involve in various tasks. In contrast, the second question seeks to understand how students analyzed the tasks as well as their engagement with the science center. (Silfver, 2016, p. 3). The researcher also performed a semi-structured interview involving seven students during science lessons. The recorded video material was used to ease the interview with only the students who agreed to take part in the research process. Moreover, the interview was framed mainly to capture the students' interests by using questions concerning their perceptions on school, science center, technology, and the expectations of their future careers. Additionally, twenty students were added to work in pairs during the programming visits to the science center (Silfver, 2016, p. 5); six of the students. The primary findings showed the occurrence of culturally gender patterns; however, Boys appeared to be more confident and used to programming activities than girls who were anxious when faced with similar activities. Additionally, the science center teachers enhance and equate gender-stereotypical values by using appreciation messages which only praise the male students for exemplary performance. Silfver (2016) recommended that researchers and educators unite to develop learning institutions that promote the development of subject roles which support the performance of every gender in the problem-solving scenario. This approach is useful since it may help both teachers and students understand, explore, as well as resist the gendered cultural performances (Silver, 2016, p.15).

Masuchika Boldt (2004) utilizes Butler's gender performativity theory as a foundation for research that analyses teachers' interventions in the elementary school environment concerning student gender-related language and behavior (p. 8). He established that it is impossible to avoid talking about gender issues without sexism in classrooms. The researcher also introduces the teachers to two ways to allow the judge when and how to show up during a student's gender-related issues of interactions. First, teachers should work wholesomely to eliminate students' unequal treatment based on their gender. Many studies and research show that children are less informed and indulge in less discrimination compared to adults. The second way consists of using numerous stories and examples in the classroom environment, which



work in normalizing gender equality and also helping students practice their gender without gender-discriminatory values. For instance, drawing pets and flowers widely acceptable for boys and girls by showing scenarios of a male artist who loves flowers and animals (p .16).

Tyler and Cohen (2010) enhanced Butler's theory of gender performativity by putting attention on the evocation and materialization of these values through gendered inhabitation of institutional space "(p. 177). Up to currently, the idea that gender roles affect the institutional space had not been comprehensively followed. Tyler and Cohen were motivated through artwork written by Sofia Hulten known as Grey Area.

Moreover, Sofia was motivated by Butler's assumptions on gender performativity, founded on the desire for a gendered self (p. 176). Butler's ideas of gender have aided in identifying reasons why women are known as "others" in the institutional world, with feedback showing that women discuss themselves and what other people think in the context of institutional life.

The recent study data shows that Saudi public universities continue to be dominated by males; hence educational contexts, including schools, classrooms, and teachers enhance stereotyped gender values (Kelly-Ware, 2016, p. 150; Silfver, 2016, p.10). However, Masuchika Boldt, affirms that educational organizations could be a place for combating gender values (2004, p.14). Boldt also highlighted two methods necessary for helping teachers propel how and when to involve in the gender-related classroom communication of children. The two opinions act as a tool for resistance and could also lead to the subversion of gender values.

Butler emphasizes that gender creation does not occur singly as an individual act but is established by cultural intersections (1999, p. 7). For instance, Tyler & Cohen (2010, p. 177) analyzed institutional environment using gender performativity theory. They also analyze how women's gender performances were included in institutional space at the university. Tyler & Cohen (2010, p. 191) summarizes that institutional values regulate gender relations. As a result, women in confined areas ensured that their gender performance was conforming to culturally learned values. By analyzing the educational concepts through field studies. Taylor and Cohen (2010) conclude that learning organizations could be a patriarchal mechanism for reproducing and maintaining gender values. Therefore, I conclude that learning institutions are agents of socialization working for the normalization, enforcement, and maintenance of hegemonic patriarchy [<http://www.sofiahulten.de/daten/greyarea.html>]

## **Finding and Discussion**

### **Gender Identity**

Gender identity is socially constructed, exists only when performed. Moreover, it is subject to change through repetition (Butler, 2004, p. 10). Regulatory power forces individual identities to naturalize within the commonly accepted social norms, thereby



limiting its expression of innate identity. Butler (2004) submits that society often finds it acceptable to apply authority in suppressing an individual agency's choice of identity when such choices appear to contravene the restrictive social norms (p.88). My research in Saudi Arabia was able to examine the role of regulatory power in defining gender identities. The results from the female participants demonstrated a pattern of identity negotiations within the culturally constructed norms, a pattern supported by the currently available studies on this topic. The study data shows that gender performance and professional identity in the field of academia, especially in the university, in Saudi Arabia have a complex relationship that go beyond the simple feminine-masculine performance. Education Statistics Center (2020) data indicates that men dominate Saudi Arabia university professional field in almost all levels including professorship, governance, and senior administration. The apparent male dominance of leadership positions in the Saudi Arabia universities strengthens their entitlement to these positions while also contributing to their normalization of male success in academia. This phenomenon has led to the development of a male-oriented culture in the academic field. This culture subjects woman who work in this field to a daily repeated reproduction of gender performances that emphasize male hegemony norms; and forces women to replicate these norms in their performance. Butler (2004) submits that many women are of the opinion that "undoing of gender and doing gender differently, to fit in and to survive" (p. 27) is necessary. For instance, the female participants in this study seemed to have improved their gender performance to incorporate "masculine attributes" such as confidence, assertiveness, and boldness to enable them fit into the male-oriented culture of the Saudi Arabia Academic sector. In most cases, the study participants negotiated their gender identities and adopted performance approaches that align with the social gender norms in this society. In some care cases, they used several maneuvers to resist the restrictive gender constructs and masculine hegemony. They would portray professional outlook, apply silence, avoid work events, and use humor to circumvent restrictive gender constructs and masculine hegemony. Consequently, they developed complex, new identities that differed from the prevailing social constructs. Results from this study are important in examining the intersection of social norms and gender performance. For instance, the female faculty members who negotiated their gender identities did so to fit into the societal social norms. They were motivated by the fear of being labeled emotional, uncompetitive, rebellious, and uncooperative if they had performed otherwise. These negotiation strategies led to the development of new identities that would help these women safeguard their professions and reputations. On the other hand, the women who resisted masculine hegemony and restrictive gender norms experienced difficulties in attaining professional growth and securing important opportunities.

### Women's Agency

Gender performativity theory defines agency as the freedom to choose, deliberately or unintentionally, how one performs his or her identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 49). Regulatory power- gender norms, women capacity misconception, guardianship laws, and patriarchal hegemony- limit this freedom. Butler (2004) argues that regulatory



power works when the society label behaviors and actions as inappropriate or appropriate. Individual members of the society have the choice to accept or resist this regulatory power when exercising their agency (p. 52). My research on the female professors in the Saudi Arabia universities showed that most of them preformed their gender identities through creating separate identities at home and at work. These women had to develop different personas to enable them fit into the varied social constructs at home and at work. The male-centered culture at work made it difficult for the women to exercise their individual agency without suffering difficulties in professional growth and career opportunities. Hence, these women had to negotiate their gender performance to align with the regulatory forms, job requirements, and obligations.

Regulatory forms of power forces women in the Saudi Arabia university education sector limits women's performance of their agency. Gender segregation, behavioral rules, norms, gender roles, and male hegemony are all sources of regulatory power. The findings identify the use of absence and findings by the women to cope with the male-dominance culture at workplace. The participants used different approaches to the performance of gender through silence. Moreover, some applied absence and silence unconsciously, some did it consciously, while others did a combination of both. For instance, Amal's friend advises her to avoid conflicts with the male colleagues, open doors, and remain silent in meetings as an effective strategy for attaining career advancement. "I can't remain silent, but I'm more cautious now, and I am trying to avoid arguing about everything," Amal responds. Effectively, she would consciously practice gender performance through silence.

The female faculty members' gender performance through absence and silence had different interpretations. Butler (1990) notes that the performance of gender through silence and absence in this society shows the existence of regulatory power which limits women agency and exercise of freedom. Failure to comply with this authority could lead to punishment (p. 31). The women in this society, in an attempt to avoiding the outcomes of collusion with the cultural norms, chose the performance of gender through silence and absence. They were alive to the possibility of being subjected to gender discrimination and exclusion for resisting the regulatory power. Amal, for instance, chose to remain silent instead of arguing in her department's meetings, she was avoiding conflict. Gender performativity theory submits that absence and silence are subtle forms of resistance against restrictive regulatory power and norms. On the other hand, hegemony is a mechanism for maintaining the male gender constructs that promote male dominance. Therefore, hegemony limits women agency.

The gender performativity theory maintains that regulatory power or societal gender norms cannot completely limit individual's agency. Butler (1999) adds that individual agency has numerous strategies it can use to continuously resist the influence of regulatory power, leading to transformation, rebuilding, dismantling, or mitigation of its effect (p. 12). The findings in my study support this argument by showing participants who despite the slow, limited changes and possible consequences, continued to resist regulatory power in their society.



## Regulatory Power

Gender performativity theory holds that regulatory power sets the standards of performance, thereby limits women to the performance of societal gender roles. Notably, masculine hegemony and gender norms are designed to force women gender performance to align with societal gender roles that restrict the female agency. Women avoid resisting regulatory power because of the fear of exclusion, bullying, and discrimination. Foucault (1998) set out to explain the reasons why some beliefs and concepts would dominate a society. He found that some discourses, accepted facts, and knowledge form part of the power that determines dominating concepts and beliefs in the society (p. 63). To make them acceptance, the society produces these knowledge and facts in numerous ways. Subsequently, each community has a set of acceptable truths or knowledge that comprises its unifying ideology. Foucault (1991) observes that these dominant facts and knowledge drive the prevalent discourses in the particular society. He identified media, political institutions, education, and economy as the media that produce and propagate the dominant knowledge and facts as well as systemic restrictions.

My study showed that men occupy the top senior positions in the Saudi Arabia university education sector. Hence, they make all decisions, including the proportion of women recruited into this sector. While determining the women candidates for the women candidates, they look at those who are agreeable and able to perform all duties. They are endeared to women who had not criticized decisions of the male colleagues and are able to perform the role to the satisfaction of a male colleague. Women with history of criticism and argument are quickly blacklisted and limited from ascending to senior positions- like one of the female participants of my study. Even in situations where the male-dominated management agreed to recruit women in senior positions, they ensured these women occupied lower management ranks. For example, the furthest a woman could go in the management rank and file in this university is the position of Vice President in the Women Campus. The university seemed to preserve the positions of dean, vice presidency, and presidency to the men. Power is not monopolized by those who occupy leadership positions, in fact, power is used by individuals at all level of an institution (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). In other words, power cannot be fully monopolized by a group or individuals, but rather power flows, and is continuously converted contingent upon the context and circumstance. Hence, in order to protect their job in the university, female faculty members choose, intentionally or accidentally, or perhaps a combination of both, to obey gender norms, which preserve masculine hegemony.

in Saudi public universities, decision-making positions are male-dominated occupations. Thus, all regulations and policies are created by men. Although it is not a written policy; but when a woman occupies a decision-making role, it is usually a secondary role like a vice-dean or a deputy administration. Because of that, regulations and policy of job distributions always occupy female faculty members in the traditional gender roles. The continuing use of traditional gender language; contributes to the continued dominance of gender norms. Unfortunately, some



women use this language, whether in an unintended or intentional way.

As a result, women will continue to be occupied in positions that aligned with these gender norms. Women are not to blame here, as the effect of male dominance plays the main role in reinforcing these gender norms that frame the role women play in society. For example, some participants fighting the male hegemony workplace, and resisting the gender bias, however they were also accepting some other gender norms. For instance, one participant was reconciling her decision to quit her job if her husband asked her that, and if there a good reason for such request. Although female faculty members were resisting and fighting gender discriminations, they were, at the same time, accepting other dominant gender norms and considered them as natural and normal. Gramsci (as cited in Woolcock, A. Joseph, 1985, p. 205) explained that when he indicates:

The dominant class is able to diffuse throughout society a conception of the world, which obscures the nature, and character of class domination. Other classes accept and consent to it as a natural view of the world, thus engendering a new type of social integration.

Male hegemony requires consent, and the situation of female faculty members being accepting, and at the same time resisting, social norms is a paradox.

## Conclusion

This research examined how gender, of six female faculty members, was performed at a Saudi public university. A qualitative case study approach was used as the research methodology of this research. Utilizing research methods of interviews, observation, and documentation. Data showed that, all of the six female faculty members who participated in this research negotiated their gender identity within social gender norms in order to fit in their workplace social norms. Along with resisting these gender norms, women used different levels and multiple mechanisms of resistance. The gender performances of these women had implications for their careers and for the maintenance of the hegemonic system. Policy makers in the Saudi Ministry of Education, should take responsibility to subvert the current discourse and rebuild a discourse that is more supportive and helpful to women.

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