The Underrepresentation of Iranian Females in Business Leadership Positions: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

Although 60% of university students in Iran are females as a result of huge investments in women's education, highly educated females occupy only 10% of leadership positions (Arasti, 2012). The purpose of this study was to clarify from Iranian female business leaders' perspective the reason or reasons behind such a gap. In this research female business leaders explain their perception about barriers that hinder Iranian females from obtaining higher positions in business organizations. This research was conducted in Tehran, the capital city of Iran, and data was gathered by interviewing female business leaders who have experienced obstacles and barriers to obtaining higher positions. Based on the research questions, familial, cultural, and political barriers were studied and findings were analysed and evaluated. Because there are similarities between Iran and other Middle Eastern countries (Owen, 2000), the findings of this study may be significant to understand obstacles that females in Middle Eastern countries face in their progress to their empowerment and occupying decision-making positions.
Keywords: Women, Leadership, Iran, Discrimination, Glass ceiling, Business, Organization, Female

Introduction

While higher levels of education are believed to improve a person's chances for promotion in the business world, there is a contradiction between the number of educated Iranian females and their representation in the business world as leaders (Arasti, 2012). Since all Iranian university students are required to pass rigorous entrance examinations, and since more than 60% of the students enrolled in Iranian universities are women, academic ability is not an issue (Shavarini, 2003). Given that many Iranian women are not able to enter careers that align with the degrees they have earned (Bianchi, 2005), there appear to be other factors contributing to this situation.

According to Ahl (2002), female business leaders are noteworthy, not only for their talents but also for their persistence. This is in spite of different movement that women have had since post war II for equal rights (Nickerson, 2012). In the Middle East, their accomplishments are considered to be even more extraordinary, despite substantial restrictions (Richardson, 2013). For example, women in Iran are required to follow the directives of the conservative clerics who are in positions of power (Mohammadi, 2007). The focus of this research study was to determine potential reasons that females are so underrepresented in business leadership positions in Iran.

Literature Review

Background shows that from 1900 to present there have been several women's movements in Iran. The Anjoman-e Azadi-ye Zanaan (the Women's Freedom Society), began as a secret underground group (Mahdi, 2004). Many male Iranian students who returned to their homeland from Europe wanted to change their society (Mohammadi, 2007), and lead protests that resulted in the establishment of constitutional law and a parliament in 1906 (Brown, 1966).

However, the establishment of parliament did not bring about immediate societal reforms (Balaghi, 2014). In 1911, a member of parliament introduced a bill to grant voting rights to women, but the bill was rejected by the clerics (Mahdi, 2004) who did not support females' participation in politics or see the need for them to be educated (Cooke, 2000). During Iran's Constitutional Era (1905 – 1911), a large number of Iranian intellectuals advocated for an end to the practice of veiling (Shirazi, 2012).

After the Islamic revolution in 1979, veiling was again required (Shahidian, 2002). At this point in Iran's history, the country's intellectuals determined that women's rights extended beyond how they were dressed in public (Sarafraz & Faghih, 2011), and they advocated for higher education as a means to enhance the status of Iranian women (Kamyab, 2004). Despite the fact that over 60% of the students in Iranian universities are female (Kamyab), only 9.16% of the leadership positions in Iranian businesses are held by women, which is significantly less than the 13.89% regional average (Sarafraz & Faghih, 2011).

The general problem is that Iranian females are underrepresented in their country's business leadership positions. Education alone does not necessarily empower women's position in the Iranian society. For example, Moinifar (2012) has stated that higher education of women in Iran is not necessarily an achievement because unemployment among women with higher education has increased. Although the government promotes females' education, authorities do not seem to appreciate higher education of women. Morley (2014) has stated that authorities in Iran have put bans in universities to require acceptance of females. Perhaps the purpose of such bans is to reduce the number of candidates for leadership positions among women. Javadian and Singh (2012) stated that negative stereotypes and traditions are barriers that Iranian women have to overcome.

The specific problem is that despite the fact that after the Revolution of 1979 Iranian intellectuals promoted higher education for females as a way for them to advance (Morley, 2014; Moinifar, 2012; Javadian & Singh, 2012; Kamyab, 2004), opportunities for Iranian females to secure leadership positions in traditional business enterprises or as entrepreneurs do not appear to have increased. To summarize, while 40% of the students attending Iranian universities are male, they hold more than 90% of the business leadership positions in that country (Figure 1, based on research of Arasti 2012).
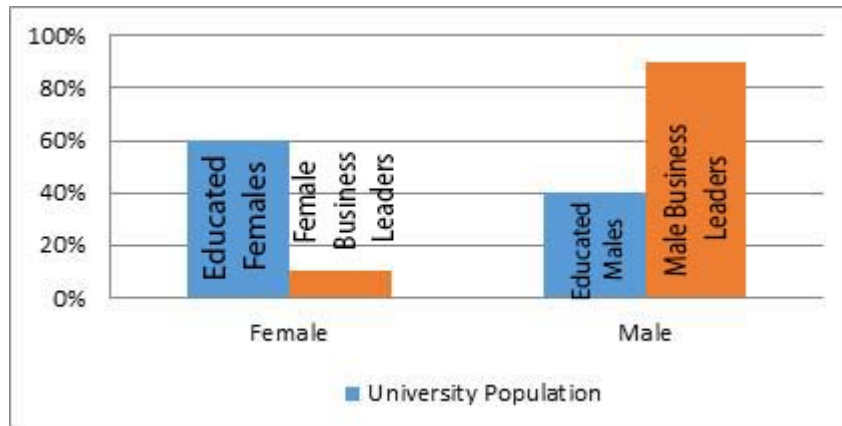
Figure 1. Gender of Iranian University population vs. business leadership positions, created by researcher based on Arasti (2012) and Kamyab (2004) findings.

According to William (2012) based on conservative nature of Iranian societal norms, women are not seen as being as capable as men in making business decisions, and therefore they cannot be as successful as men in these types of leadership positions. Even in the 21st century, the country's culture is still dominated by male values and even college educated females have difficulty entering careers that align with their completed degree programs. William (2012) notes that:

> Over the past three decades, Iranian women emerged to a more prominent position in the labor force, but these gains have been undercut by traditional trends that oppress women inside the system that aids their advancement (para. 1).

Despite the challenges they have encountered in their country, Iranian women have achieved recognition for their achievements (Kashani-Sabet, 2011). According to Isfandyari et al. (2012), Iranian women who perform and publish research are mostly motivated by the following reasons: getting promoted in scientific rank, getting promoted in a job, and feeling useful in society. However, the increasing educational levels of Iranian females have sparked social unrest (The World Bank, 2014). For example, the compulsory veiling that the Iranian government introduced as an Islamic value has been an ongoing subject of conflict for its citizens (Abdo, 2006).

In conducting this study, the researcher hoped to discover why there is such a large difference between the number of male and female business leaders in Iran. The effects of the complex cultural and social barriers that exist in Iran and how they affect leadership, social, and economic development of females will be explored. The issues and concerns that Iranian females experience are similar to those faced in other Middle Eastern and North African countries (Owen, 2000).

Beside this, Iran is a developing country that needs the participation of both males and females to build the country (Ebrahimian, 2003). Therefore, it is important to have first-hand and accurate information about the challenges women face, since they generally comprise about 50% of the population.

Gender standards and democratic standards are usually correlated, and pressures that drive the adoption of gender policies may also promote the adoption of democratic systems (Mili, 2013). According to Ghanim (2009), a critique of social and cultural values in the Middle East can yield more tolerance and a better balance between genders. Gender violence in the Middle East in general hinders women from participating more in social and political activities that can create better opportunities for women.

The results of this study may contribute new knowledge about the importance of female business leaders in male-dominated societies like Iran and the contributions that women can make to the country's development. The wider influence of women can lead to more stability, and even to peace (Vavrus, 2003). According to Nuket (2002), gender issues are a global concern and scholars should identify the issue and show how it is affecting societies and the world.

Research Methodology

Since the purpose of this study was to provide information about a particular case, an explanatory single case study methodology was selected as the most appropriate. An explanatory single case study allows the researcher to understand the interactions of women with government institutions, financial organizations, or other entities, and allows the researcher to interpret the challenges faced by Iranian female business leaders. The target population of this case study was Iranian businesswomen who have been in business 10 or more years. Participants in this case study had tried to gain leadership position or had left their organizations and established their own businesses. The sample is minimum of six and a maximum of 10 participants who meet the criteria already stated. Association of Iranian Female Entrepreneurs helped the researcher to find participants who were members of the association as well.

Female participants who are aware of challenges that women face in Iran in obtaining business leadership positions were interviewed. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with Iranian women who have experienced the challenges of becoming business leaders or starting their own enterprises.

The research questions explored in this study were:

RQ1: What are the perceived cultural barriers that limit Iranian females' representation in business leadership positions?

RQ2: What are the perceived social barriers that limit Iranian females' representation in business leadership positions?

RQ3: What are the perceived political barriers that limit Iranian females' representation in business leadership positions?

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of this study included patriarchy, social capital, and the glass ceiling. Each of these frameworks directly impact females throughout the world as they navigate the intricacies of becoming business leaders. Sorokina (2014) has stated that the number of female business leaders in the world's countries, except for Norway, does not exceed 20 percent.

Patriarchy: Much of the literature indicates that Iran is a patriarchal society (Mahdavi, 2003), or one that subordinates and exploits women publicly and privately. In most developing countries women are sexually dominated and are not granted certain privileges because of their gender (Semali & Shakespeare, 2014). The private form of patriarchy is evidenced by women being controlled by the male head of the family. In public patriarchy, women become victims of segregation and discrimination in the form of lower salaries and limited access to public institutions (Mahdavi, 2003). According to Halimi, Bagherzad, Chavosh, Namdar, and Behjati (2011), Iranian men purposefully create barriers to limit women's freedom because it is assumed that it is hard to control independent women.

Social capital: In traditional countries like Iran, it is difficult for women to access financial resources and become a part of business social networks (Arasti, 2012). When a woman establishes her own business enterprise, having enough money or being able to borrow it may be an issue (Hakala, 2007). As a result, potential investors may be reluctant to provide the necessary backing because of difficulty in founding or growing a female-owned business in this type of environment (Hakala, 2007). Sarafraz (2017) in her book has referred to a study done by Rabiee and Sarabi (2013) that shows three dimensions of social capital in Iran including the structural, relational, and cognitive aspects. This study suggests structural social capital that includes network ties is not strong among women. Sarafraz (2017) also mentions that, according to research based on Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), the greater number of male entrepreneurs in Iran somehow is related to social capital.

According to Woolcock and Narayan (2000), social capital leads to economic development. If women cannot be actively part of networks that build social capital, economic development will be slower. According to the World Bank (2011), since women are usually care givers, they play an important role in the early development of social capital in a society. However, no country has ended gender discrimination yet and according to Picciotto, (1998; cited in The World Bank 2011), in a system where women are confined to their homes, not much social capital building can be expected. Levitt (2010) states that although the face of leadership has changed, the extent of any increase in women's leadership positions is uncertain, as traditional leadership models and expectations still create challenges for women.

Surprisingly, lack of social capital may even create health risks. For example, according to Sackey and Aminu (2011), social and cultural barriers like gender discrimination promote stagnation of women's upward mobility in business leadership positions and can create mental health issues for them. Furthermore, Edwards and Cheers (2007) state that mortality risk increases among women who experience the greatest degrees of social isolation (e.g. those with the fewest ties). Overall, those who lack social ties were about two to three times as likely to die within nine years as people who have many sorts of contacts (Edwards & Cheers).

Furthermore, according to Guillen, Coromina, and Saries (2011), social capital is an important element for empowerment of men as well as women that reduces poverty. Social capital is created when individuals participate in civil society, but men and women do not have equal access to high-level positions as a result of women's lack of social capital. For women who aspire to become top leaders in business, the routes are full of expected and unexpected twists and turns (Eagly & Carli, 2009). According to Picciotto (1998, quoted in World Bank 2011), gender discrimination erodes trust, hinders family relations, restricts social networks, and depletes social capital.

Glass ceiling: Douglas and Taylor (2012) state that the glass ceiling phenomenon impedes the advancement of intelligent women into senior executive positions in public corporations, and a "second glass ceiling" affects women who decide to establish their own businesses. This second glass ceiling is the gender bias that hinders women from having access to financial capital that is needed for either starting a new business or for expanding an existing one.

Women have fewer opportunities to advance to the executive level because of the glass ceiling, a metaphor describing obstacles in organizational hierarchies that impede women from rising to a higher level of leadership (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). Also according to Osnes (2012), this lack of confidence and an unwillingness to exert vocal

strength limits a woman's potential in the business world. Therefore, women who have reached the CEO level must share their stories and mentor other women (McDonagh & Paris, 2012). Mattis (2004) observes that women do not have access to role models to the extent that males do. Also, Nixdorff and Rosen (2010) state that both female entrepreneurs and decision makers in business organizations tend to have similar leadership styles and do not have access to the same networks of role models as their male counterparts. However, women can learn leadership skills and are inclined to be effective because they are better listeners and tend to be empathetic (Applebaum, Audet, & Miller 2003). In business organizations women's leadership styles and approaches tend to be more collaborative, participative, and democratic than the leadership styles of most men (Haber, 2011).

Another factor that reduces females' self-confidence is the male assumption that they are weaker than men and less able to lead (Andibo, 2012). In addition, women face other challenges, such as motherhood, career ambitions, and personal growth (Levitt, 2010).

In spite of all the challenges and barriers in the business world, women continue to seek leadership roles and want to secure leadership positions, especially in Western countries (Levitt, 2010). Education seems to be the main reason that women are deemed qualified to fill leadership positions. According to Levitt (2010), a report made by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2001 shows that women have earned 51% of all bachelor's degrees, 45% of all advanced degrees, 42% of all doctoral degrees, and 43% of all professional degrees, but the percentage of women in leadership positions is low. According to Galagan (2013), the situation has not changed dramatically since 1998. Galagan (2013) states that "Women make up 49 percent of the U.S. workforce, but they account for only 4 percent of corporate CEOs" (para. 1). Having higher education does not mean that women are easily hired into business leadership positions. For example, according to Levitt (2010), although the concept of leadership has changed within the counselling professions, traditional leadership is still the norm in the business world, and women's business leadership capabilities are often questioned.

The general challenges that women face worldwide also exist in Iran, but appear to be more serious. According to Safavi (2013), women who dare to challenge the validity or fairness of Iranian organizational norms often encounter frustration and disappointment. Muslim males often justify their oppression against women as honoring religious rules (McIntosh & Islam 2010). According to Wiggins and Al-Obaidi (2013), based on stereotypes and prejudices, the rights of women in Middle Eastern countries are ignored and it is as if most of the extreme conventional authorities believe that the law of God can be implemented through the oppression of women. Many researchers state that higher education in Iran does not necessarily help women to work without problems and to gain leadership positions. For example, Mehdizadeh (2011states that in 2006 approximately 12.5% of the workforce in Iran was female, and her survey of 800 highly educated mothers shows the need for improvement of work-family balance for mothers to enable them to continue to participate in the labor force.

Education has made great changes in Iranian women's lifestyles (Iravani, 2012). According to Iravani (2012), "It is because of education, research and application that society has progressed the way it has, and it is the lack of education that perhaps can be blamed for many dark spots of human history, particularly for women" (para. 1).

Familial and Social Barriers

According to Yazbeck and Espostio (1998), although Muslim governments borrowed political, economic, and legal models from Western institutions, family law in Muslim societies was not replaced by Western civil codes. In other words, although societies in the Muslim world may appear to be very modern, women still do not have the same rights and privileges as men.

Others note that Iranian women who cannot participate in physical exercise see marriage as the biggest limiting barrier to that pursuit (Dashti, Joseph, Esfehani, Su, Abd. Lattif, & Esfehani, 2014). In another research study, Halimi et al. (2011) state that the main reason for male resistance is to prevent the financial independence of women.

Cultural Barriers

Culture and religion: It appears that Iranian values and beliefs create a dynamic that supports discrimination against women. The same restrictions exist in countries with cultures similar to Iran's culture (McIntosh & Islam 2010).

Iran is a patriarchal country where men exert control on women's lives and employment (Shahidian, 2002). Katz, Stem, and Fader (2005) state that throughout history, women generally encountered many barriers and instances of inequality. Walby (1991) states that patriarchy exists in both traditional and modern societies, and that public patriarchy in the industrial world can be observed in the labor market. Iran is a neo-patriarchal society where education, economic development, and modern attitudes are in direct contradiction to traditional and religious norms (Moghadam 2004).

Although there is a worldwide belief that Islam is the origin of patriarchal behaviours and beliefs, Shavarini (2003) notes that Iranian religions, particularly Islam, do not advocate limiting the education of females. Shavarini has also stated that "There is evidence that women's lower status prevalent in many Muslim societies is not a function of Islam, but rather of local cultural and social milieus where Islam was adopted" (para.2). However, the subject of the treatment of women in Muslim societies is one that creates strong debate, not only in Iran, but also around the world (Nomani, 2007).

Voll (2013) stated that the transition from a traditional society to the modern world may explain the reason behind oppression against women. Most of the crises in Muslim societies can be explained as a transition from traditional values to modern norms (Voll, 2013), and this transformation is very challenging.

Political Barriers

Challenges of reformists: As previously discussed, the interpretation of religion, particularly Islam, has a great role in creating discrimination against women. According to Labidi (2000), when a minister of education in the Tunisian government undertook the task of removing religious writings which favored discrimination against women from the school curricula, he was declared one of the principal enemies of Islam by fundamentalist Islamist groups. Liberalism in general, and women's rights in particular, may be seen as a threat by conservative groups in Muslim societies who often have their own interpretations of Islam. Adamson (2007) describes that in an Indonesian workshop where the interpretation of Islam was discussed, one male stated that even if discriminatory attitudes towards women are a case of misinterpretation of Islam, such interpretations are good for Indonesian women. His statement was supported by the other males in the group (Adamson).

For example, according to Iravani (2012), only 5% of Iranian women have a decision-making role despite the 1995 national report which stipulates that in Iran, 5.7 percent of university professors, 16.5 percent of associate professors, 21.9 percent of

assistant professors, and 36.9 percent of university instructors were women. In contrast, in 1998, 97.9 percent of parliament members were men and less than 2.2 percent were women (Iravani). According to UN data (2014), not much has changed since 1998. Since the Islamic revolution in 1979 only one female minister (Minister of Health) has been nominated by the government (Guardian, 2009). As a result, modernists are convinced that education is the primary path to enable women to assume leadership positions (Mahdi, 2007). According to Kian-Thiebaut (2006), "Modernists whose projects were focused on law, science, and progress aimed to transform the home by educating women, bringing them into public life, and remaking them into companionate wives of men of the nation" (para.5). In spite of political barriers, Iranian women use information technology to bypass those barriers (Abbasgholizadeh, 2014). Also Shirazi (2012) states that Internet and information technology has been used by Iranian women as a means of voicing their concerns about discrimination. Iranian women have the highest rate of Internet usage (49%) among Islamic countries (Shirazi, 2012).

Organizational Barriers

According to Kephart and Schumacher (2005), women have been fighting for years for equality in pay, roles, and respect. Even in organizations that promote women's rights, the majority of leadership positions are held by men (Dawley, Hoffman, & Smith 2004). Hein & Chavez (2016) state that old mindsets are barriers for effectiveness of organizations and mindsets about women particularly form one the barriers. According to McDonagh and Paris (2012), "Women are often seen as nurturers and rarely as leaders. The stereotype of a strong, commanding, and male leader still influences decisions about placement in leadership positions" (para, 2). In business organizations around the globe there is a scarcity of women in leadership positions (Kochanowski, 2010). According to Kochanowski (2010), in 2008, only 15.2 percent of leaders in Fortune 500 companies and 9.7 percent of the leaders in the top 300 European corporations were females.

Because it is difficult or sometimes impossible for women to become leaders in business organizations where they work, many women prefer to establish their own businesses. According to Mattis (2004), women prefer to have flexible timing, independence, and self-control. Therefore, the number of self-employed women is increasing worldwide. Hakala (2007) states that according to studies done in the Centre of Women's Business Research by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the main reasons for women to choose to start their own businesses are financial independence and a passion for their chosen work. Comparing female business leaders to their male counterparts shows that making money is more important for male business leaders, while family and personal issues are a major motivation for women to establish their own businesses (Orser & Dyke, 2009).

Although the number of self-employed women or female entrepreneurs is increasing worldwide, women are still underrepresented as leaders of business organizations and even more underrepresented in the political realm (Hakala, 2007). Iravani (2012) states that women do not have political leadership roles, but are tasked with carrying out decisions made by men. As a result, women have become disinterested in politics, and have shown signs of depression and pessimism in that domain (Iravani). For example, in Iran's 1998 parliament election, 97.86 percent of those elected were men and 2.2 percent were women (Iravani). In 2012, the number of female members in parliament was 8%, a number that has not increased significantly in 15 years (Iravani). Therefore,

there is evidence that education alone is not enough to empower Iranian women, as long as traditional attitudes remain unchanged.

Organizational Culture

According to Davis, Veguist, and Merrell (2007), surveys indicate that successful female business leaders develop a culture of trust and commitment in their firms and this culture is a main contributor to their successful financial and organizational performance. However, male-dominant organizational culture ignores women's competencies and abilities in leadership (Nixdorff & Rosen, 2010).

However, female business leadership has been an interesting topic for research among scholars. A large number of researchers have corrected the historical inattention paid to female business leaders and their initiatives (Hughes, Jennings, Brush, Carter, & Walter, 2012).

Ahl (2006) states that in spite of the growing number of studies about women's business leadership, there is a tendency to re-create the idea that women are secondary to men and that woman's businesses are less significant than their male counterparts' enterprises. In addition, the achievements of women are portrayed in the media as less important than men's accomplishments.

Jandeska and Kraimer (2005) state that the barriers hindering women from advancing in their careers at the same rate as men is called the opportunity gap. Inhospitable organizational cultures contribute to this gap (Ahl, 2006). Organizational culture is a combination of values and beliefs that shape behaviors and attitudes against women and may support opportunity gaps (Jandeska & Kraimer, 2005). One of the findings in this literature review is the idea that organizational culture is one of the barriers hindering women and can undermine women's abilities.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data gathered from interview questions, survey questions, and individual feedback were analyzed. Survey questions based on the additional three questions enhanced the detail of personal status of the participants that is shown in Table **1**. A majority of participants were between 40-59 years old and all of them were married. All participants had started to work immediately after graduation when they were between 20-29 years old. A majority of participants had children.

Table 1: Social Status of Participants

Age of participants	29-39 years old	22.5%
	40-59 years old	87.5%
Age at start to work	20-29 years old	100%
Educational degree	Bachelor degree	12.5%
	Master degree	62.5%
	PhD degree	25%
Marital status	Married	100%
Motherhood	Have children	87.5%
	Without children	22.5%

The interpretation of the answers to survey questions is that those participants who have had good support from parents as well as husbands agree that there is familial support, while 37.5% of participants have had good support from parents but not from their husband and disagree with familial support because of conflicts that they have had with their husbands. Five of the eight participants see family as part of society, and although they

have gained family support, they have faced challenges in the labor market; one participant has faced fewer challenges than the others, and two have experienced barriers that men put in the way of women in their progress.

In spite of investments in women's education the majority of participants do not see the political system supporting females. The reason can be contradictions between investment and support for education of women, and the barriers that they face later when they want to take part in social activities. The low number of female members of parliament and ministers in Iranian government also can be a basis of this kind of perception. Half of the participants see support in local culture and the other half doubt that support for females exists in local culture. This perception can be interpreted to mean that some women receive strong support from parents and sometimes from husbands, and therefore they do not see a lack of cultural support, but when they come to the labor market and meet men who are strangers to them they feel a lack of support and believe that patriarchal values are in the way of their progress.

Other survey questions were directly connected to research questions. All participants answered all the survey questions. Survey responses included participants' perception about family support, social and cultural support, and political support. The results below were extracted from survey questions.

The majority of participants see familial support for females' empowerment, although before marriage support is more evident, but after marriage it depends on the personal attitudes of the husband. The majority of participants see family or relatives as part of society and therefore their feedback is that society somehow supports females' empowerment. A majority of participants see the political system as the main barrier for females to obtain higher leadership positions.

Table 2. Individual Feedback Results

Question	Responses	Percent who agree
Family support	Parents support	65%
	Husbands support	35%
Iranian society support	Yes	25%
	Somewhat	50%
	Not at all	25%
Political system support	Yes	12.5%
	Somewhat	25%
	Not at all	62.5%
Local culture support	Yes	25%
	Somewhat	50%
	Not at all	25%

Interview Findings

For data analysis without prejudice, the qualitative program NVivo 11 was used to generalize the data and free nodes were created and placed in related categories. After original nodes were created they were identified and added to groups. After sorting the data, categories were created to reflect the perceptions of participants. The answers of each participant to the eight interview questions, as well as answers to survey questions and individual feedback, were used to authenticate themes. Saturation occurred when answers did not produce new themes and continued analysis produced previously identified themes.

To analyse gathered data the method of Leedy and Ormrod (2010) was used. In this methodology, after each interview the data was entered into the software and after several examinations, semantic units were detected one by one and initial coding was done. After the initial interviews, classification was based on comparisons of differences and similarities between the codes, and the classes became more complete; as necessary, classes were merged into each other.

With the help of NVivo 11 software 16 themes were extracted from interview results. Among them, four themes that were directly related to research questions were selected. According to the technique suggested by Evand, Gruba, and Zobel (2014), data findings were categorized according to the research questions.

Results of interviews are shown in Table **3**. Results align with the literature review and research questions. The perception of participants were that beside social and cultural stereotypes; the political system has contradictions for the empowerment of females. On one hand investments for females' education is high, but on the other hand there are limitations in law and regulations that hinder women from achieving higher positions.

Table 3. Result of Interviews

Question	Responses	Percent who agree
Family support	Parents	75%
	Husband	25%
Social and cultural support	Yes	12.5%
	Somehow	37.5%
	No	50%
Political support	No	100%
Religious support	No	100%

Compilation of Results

In this case study sources for triangulated data were a survey, individual feedback, and interviews. The same questions were presented to all participants until data saturation occurred. Responses to the survey, individual feedback, and eight interview questions in this qualitative single case study helped to create and develop themes. The responses of participants confirmed that women who have been trying to gain business leadership positions have faced and perceived pressure or inequality. The findings are organized in four thematic groups. Participants stated that they did not see a chance for their growth in large organizations; although they achieved high positions, keeping the position was challenging because their male colleagues were not cooperating or sometimes poisoning the atmosphere.

All participants believed that Iranian society is patriarchal and that there are stereotype thoughts among some people (even females) that the main job of a woman is to take care of her children and to be a housewife. Although in big cities this kind of stereotype thinking is disappearing, still there are jokes or comments among people about the competencies of women in important decision making. Participants saw a bright future for females and believed that, in spite of some discrimination, females pave the way for their development and society is adapting to women's progress.

All participants believed that the political system invests well in the education of females, but nevertheless they face barriers when they enter the job market. For example, for traveling abroad women need permission of their husbands. This gives full control to

husbands to dictate their will. The political system wants to show off female leaders in some organizations just for international ratings and propaganda; however, in the last 40 years only one female minister has been in the cabinet and she was forced to resign. The number of female members of parliament is much smaller than the number of male members.

The concept of family has two meanings for participants: one is before marriage, and the second is after marriage. Family support from parents is not a challenge, but after marriage cooperation of the husband can be a challenge. Society and culture seemed to be two concepts in the minds of participants. Family and culture are seen as part of society with a positive experience for participants, but most of the participants have faced challenges and discrimination in the labor market. All participants criticized the political system as the main barrier for women's empowerment. Even efforts by politicians to encourage participation of females in positions of power were interpreted as show by all participants. Although the role of religion was not designed in interview questions and the researcher did not ask anything about religion, nevertheless comments of a majority of participants added new data on that topic that is mentioned in research findings.

Data findings show there is a contradiction between huge investments for females' higher education and the regulations, lobbying, and laws that are barriers for empowerment of females. Changing those regulations and facilitating women's participation in high-level decision making may lead to better economic results in the country.

All participants were married and a majority of them had children. Additional research on single females who try to gain business leadership positions may lead to different findings. The researcher did not have access to public sector records. Therefore, future research on female leaders in other parts of Iran as well as research on unmarried leaders and women's challenges in public sector is recommended.

Significance of Study

There are many similarities for businesswomen in all Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries (Wolf, 2015). About 50% of the population in countries like Iran are females and such countries need work force participation by both men and women to build the country (Ebrahimian, 2003). The results of this study can add to accurate and first-hand information about the challenges women face in this part of the world. A critique of social and cultural values in the Middle East can yield a better balance between genders. (Ghanim, 2009). Knottes, Jones, and LaPereze (2004) stated that the number of studies comparing women to men in Middle Eastern countries is small, and therefore this study may be useful for more clarification about the contribution of women business leaders in a male-dominated country. The significance of the study to leadership is that it may provide insights into a problem that has not yet been fully examined in the Middle East and North Africa (Owen, 2000).

Research Limitations and Future Directions

The primary limitation of this study is that its focus is on a group of Iranian females who have had challenges in gaining business leadership positions. Since the proposed participants live in Tehran, their experiences may not represent those of Iranian women in other locations. Therefore, the study results are limited to this particular group and place and may not be generalizable to other groups.

In addition, the researcher does not have free access to Iranian governmental statistics, which might be useful in providing information regarding female-owned

business ventures. Furthermore, this study was limited to perceptions that participants have about the obstacles which prohibit them from advancing in business leadership. Since the researcher may have biases related to the study's focus, he refrained from commenting during the data gathering processes. It was explained to participants that the researcher would not make any comment to avoid biases. In spite of these limitations, the interview questions have been designed to make research results robust (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore barriers that Iranian female businesswomen perceive in gaining business leadership positions. An interpretation of the findings is that parents encourage their female children to achieve higher education. Also, some husbands support their wives and some husbands are the main barrier in the way of their spouses. Technology and the economy play an important role in changing stereotypes about women. Political systems want women in leadership positions as a tool to increase international ratings, but in practice the engagement of capable females is at a low level. Also, in traditions based in religion, females are weaker than men. In spite of barriers and limitations the percentage of female university students is 60%, and although only 10% of women are in leading positions, the activities of women in NGOs advertise their willingness and capabilities to be leaders. Women who do not give up pave the way for women to succeed despite gender discrimination.

Acknowledgments

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