***Unlocking Opportunities: How Women Navigate Informal Networks in Saudi Arabia's Evolving Workplace***

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**Executive summary**

In the context of the Arab countries of the Middle East, Wasta informal networks predominate in the business environment. Whilst historically women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had limited access to informal networks, recent socio-economic changes have had a positive impact on women's participation in the workplace. This research explores the use of Wasta informal networks by women in the context of the new Saudi workplace based on 26 interviews conducted with Saudi professional women. The findings highlight that, due to the changes in the formal institutions, which in turn impacts informal institutions, women are generally afforded more direct access to networks, enabling them to attain jobs and progress their careers. The research also contributes to informal network literature by distinguishing between Wasta (negative practice) and other forms of informal networks (positive/beneficial practice). Suggestions are offered to policymakers, managers, and women practitioners to navigate the use of informal networks and Wasta.

**Introduction**

Access to social capital and networks has been identified as being important for job attainment and career development. This is particularly true in the context of networked societies, where prevalent informal networks such as Guanxi in China, Blat in Russia, and Wasta in the Arab countries of the Middle East have a substantial impact on business activities in the countries where each practice prevails (Horak et al., 2020; Ali & Weir, 2020; Alsarhan, 2021, Al-Twal, 2021; Alsarhan, 2022).

Whilst there is now a developing stream of research on the impact of Wasta informal networks on different Human Resource Management (HRM) functions such as career attainment and development (Alsarhan et al., 2021; Stefandis et al., 2023; Helal et al., 2023), employee evaluation and reward (Harbi et al., 2017), and performance appraisal and management (Melhem et al., 2024), and despite a substantial increase in the percentage of women in the workforce in most countries where Wasta is practiced, previous studies have largely treated Wasta as a ‘one size fits all’ practice, often negating the differences in its access and use by women and men (Alsarhan et al., 2021). Thus, there is limited research that focuses on the use of Wasta by women (Bailey, 2012; Abalkhail & Allan, 2016; Alsarhan et al., 2021). This has resulted in a gap in our understanding of the challenges and nuances of the use of informal networks by women in their career in such societies (Alsarhan et al., 2021).

This is in important issue to explore as women’s careers are largely affected by the social, political, and economic contexts of the countries in which they live and work, which can pose challenges to their access to and the operation of their informal networks (Bailey, 2012; Tlaiss & Mendelson, 2014; Abalkhail & Allan, 2016; Abalkhail, 2018; Alsarhan, 2021; Tlass and Alwaqfi, 2022). There is, therefore, a need to research how women use informal networks in their careers and how they navigate the socio-economic challenges that face them. This is particularly true in the context of the Arab Middle East, as Wasta has been argued to be vital for successful job attainment and career profession (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011; Ali, 2016, Alsarhan et al., 2021; Alsarhan, 2022).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has been selected as an interesting location for this research due to the recent significant socio-economic changes and efforts to increase women's participation in the workforce under the Saudi Vision 2030, which has led to a substantial increase in women’s participation in the workforce; from late 2018 to the end of 2022, the labor force participation rate for Saudi women rose from 20% to 35% (GASTAT Saudi Women's Report, 2023).

This research, therefore, seeks to address the following questions:

1) How do women in the Saudi workplace use Wasta informal networks to attain jobs and develop their careers?

2) How does the use of Wasta informal networks by women in the Saudi workplace differ from how men use these networks?

3) What are the implications of the use of Wasta informal networks for women’s career development?

Following this introduction section, the paper is structured as follows. The literature review starts with a section exploring the definitions of Wasta, and its different types and uses in the countries of the Arab Middle East. The theoretical base is then set by exploring how informal networks including Wasta have been studied using the social capital and institutional lenses. The review then moves to the use of Wasta in the context of HRM and concludes with an exploration of the use of Wasta by women. The methodology is divided into two sections; the first section presents the research rationale, sampling and data collection process and the second section explores the data analysis process. The analysis and discussion of the three main theme findings follows. The contribution to knowledge and managerial implications are signposted after. A section on the limitations and suggestions for future research precedes the conclusion.

**Literature Review**

Informal networks (Wasta) in the Arab Middle East in the context of HRM

Literature on informal networks in the Middle East stresses the importance of Wasta, which has a variety of different definitions ranging from simply describing it as ‘family networks or connections’ (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015) to the more recent literature which emphasizes the ‘network’ aspect of Wasta and its ‘purpose’. For instance, Alsarhan et al. (2021) and Al-Twal et al. (2024) define Wasta as ‘…a network of social connections, be it familial or friendly, endowed to influence decisions and get gains’, which is the definition adopted in this research.

In many Arab countries, Wasta is a practice that was historically predominantly used to mediate between conflicting parties, termed by Cunningham & Sarayrah (1993) as intermediary Wasta, or *sulh* (Al-Ramahi, 2008). Subsequently, Wasta’s predominant use shifted to the use of an intermediary (or intermediaries) from one’s informal network to ease the attainment of a specific goal, known as intercessory Wasta (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011; Makhoul & Harrison, 2004). Intercessory Wasta is a widespread practice in the countries of the Arab world and is used for several reasons in most aspects of life, such as political elections (Brainine & Analoui, 2006), mediation in prearranged marriages (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993) and in business, such as cutting through bureaucracy in government interactions and attaining jobs and promotions (Loewe et al., 2007; Alsarhan et al., 2021). Wasta involves different and conflicting emotions, as such a practice of favoritism toward family and tribe members aligns with the tribal nature of many Arab societies (Ali & Weir, 2019). Many situations where Wasta is practiced are viewed as corrupt or unjust acts, which contradict the teachings of Islam, the main source of ethical guidance for most of the people in the region (Hutchings & Weir, 2006; Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011). For instance, Wasta can create an unfair advantage for those who have Wasta compared to those who do not. Entrepreneurs and companies who have access to Wasta in government can save a lot of time and money by skipping procedures and gaining access to governmental biddings and projects which their counterparts cannot access (Alsarhan & Al-Twal, 2023; Loewe et al., 2007). Furthermore, intermediary Wasta is often used in hiring unqualified employees, resulting in lower productivity and service provision, lack of equality and workforce diversity, and feelings of injustice for people who do not possess Wasta (Ali et al., 2024).

It is important to point out that the act of Wasta is not a standalone one; an individual must actively engage with the informal networks granting and receiving Wasta in order to ensure they are able to draw on it when needed (Ali & Weir, 2020). Each actor can take the position of a node in multiple groups and extend network ties by connecting one group to another based on mutual benefit, a function called “network bridging” (Abushaikha et al., 2021; Horak & Paik, 2022). Moreover, since the surrounding society engages with Wasta, an individual can be severely disadvantaged if they do not (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Ali & Weir, 2019). As such, Wasta, as with other similar informal networks, is a self-reinforcing practice; the more it works the stronger it gets; and what works in one context can strengthen the chances of its working in another context (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). The power of intercessory Wasta is so wide-reaching that it is claimed to be a factor in every significant social and economic decision in the Arab world (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Hutchings & Weir, 2006).

In the context of HRM, recent studies conducted on new graduates highlight how they consider Wasta as a gateway to employment (Al-Twal & AlAdwan 2021), and males have a higher tendency to use Wasta at the workplace than do females (Alsarhan et al. 2021). However, these empirical studies were conducted in different Arab countries, most notably Jordan and Lebanon, which, whilst share many cultural and social aspects, such as language and the collectivist nature of the society, differ from Saudi Arabia in many other aspects including the workforce demographics (Adham, 2022). For example, until recently the Saudi private sector relied on migrant labor (more than 80%) and some occupations are restricted to Saudi nationals only (Human Rights Watch, 2021). By investigating how repatriates perceive Wasta in a Saudi firm, Aldossari & Robertson (2016) concluded that using Wasta is inevitable in the workplace despite being considered a negative practice by participants. Likewise, Harbi et al., (2017) found that participants perceived performance appraisal to be unfair due to using Wasta, and some employees adopted some other values that revolved around organizational justice and individual egalitarianism.

**Theoretical base: exploring Informal Networks (Wasta) through Social Networks, Social Capital and Institutional Theories**

There is now a considerable amount of research exploring how informal networks impact business practice. Much of this research focuses on studying a certain informal network such as Guanxi or Yongo and theorizing from these studies to generalize the findings across different informal networks and contexts (Minbaeva et al., 2022; Horak & Paik., 2022; Helal et al., 2023). However, many researchers of informal networks such as Wasta highlight that each has its own internal rules and structures (Chamekh, 2019; Helal et al., 2023; Alsarhan & Al-Twal, 2024; Hora et al., 2023). As a result, there has been a call to theorize informal networks and try to generalize the uniqueness of each construct/network such as Wasta (Minbaeva et al., 2022). The concept of informal networks has gained traction as a theory in itself (Minbaeva et al., 2022). However, in order to understand informal networks theoretically, we need to draw on the meta-theories used to explore informal networks, which are predominantly social networks, social capital and institutional theories (Ali & Weir, 2020; Minbaeva et al., 2022).

Social network theory examines the use of networks by individuals to achieve power and access resources within organizations (Granovetter, 1973, 1995; Weir & Ali, 2024). A concept that is often linked with social networks is social capital, which refers to the intangible ‘value’ which is generated from members of a network interacting with each other (Putnam, 2000). This value is attained by providing important information, assets and resources to these members which can improve their ability to achieve their goals and access other forms of capital such as physical and human capital (Putnam, 2000).

Ali & Weir (2020) conducted a systematic literature review of Wasta which highlighted that most research on this practice has explored it from either the social networks and social capital lens or the institutional lens. Researchers who adopted the social networks and social capital perspectives in exploring Wasta (e.g. El-Said & Harrigan, 2009; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011; Bailey, 2012; Gold & Naufal, 2012; Fawzi & Almarshed, 2013; Aljbour et al., 2013; Berger et al., 2019; Harbi et al., 2017; Albin Shaikh et al., 2019), fundamentally view Wasta as an asset, ‘social capital’, which can be mobilized through different bonding (familial and tribal) and bridging (work connections, friendships, and acquaintances) connections (Ali & Weir, 2020). Although some researchers clearly highlight that they have used either social network theory (e.g. Abalkhail & Allan, 2015) or social capital theory (e.g. Bailey, 2012; Albin Shaikhet al., 2019) in exploring Wasta, many have drawn on elements of both these inherently related theories in exploring this practice (although one theory may prevail in their analysis). Moreover, there is a consensus among these researchers that Wasta should be treated as a form of currency that favors exchange between individuals and that is neither innately positive nor negative but might produce outcomes that are positive or negative for different stakeholders (Ali & Weir, 2000).

Institutional theory describes that relevant events help in shaping the cultural ideas which become validated within the society and its institutions (Eisenhardt, 1988). Kostova et al. (2008) highlight that institutional arrangements are shaped by a country’s national culture and are therefore country-specific. This view proposes that certain cultural practices, such as Wasta informal networks, are developed and normalized by the national culture which, as it develops, constantly influences these institutional arrangements (El-Said & Harrigan, 2009; Sidani & Thornberry, 2013).

North (1990) classified institutions into formal and informal institutions. Formal institutions are defined as the written (or codified) rules or constraints which include laws, policies, regulations, constitutions, contracts, property rights and formal agreements (North, 1990). Formal institutions have received the majority of attention from researchers (Helal et al., 2023). Informal institutions, on the other hand, are defined as the typically unwritten but socially shared rules and constraints that generate social behavior expectations, including shared norms, customs, traditions, sanctions and reward structures (Dau et al., 2022). These are mobilized through informal networks such as Wasta which are culturally ingrained in the social, political and economic practices in Arab countries (ALHussan et al., 2014; Berger et al., 2019; Minbaeva et al., 2022). Many institutional researchers in international business research argue that, when institutions are underdeveloped, which often is the case in emerging markets, the absence of formal intermediary mechanisms to effectively connect buyers and sellers and support market formation, leads to institutional voids, high transaction costs and market inefficiency (Liedong et al., 2020). This, in turn, leads to the need for mechanisms that help to support the transfer of information, reduce transaction costs, and bolster efficiency (Doh et al., 2017). Indeed, informal networks researchers often argue that such informal networks prevail when formal institutions are weak or non-existent, thereby acting as pipes and prisms in which informal institutions operate (Owen-Smith & Powell, 2008; Minbaeva et al., 2022). Thus, researchers who have studied Wasta from the institutional lens (e.g. Loewe et al., 2008; Brandstaetter, 2011; Sidani & Thornberry, 2013; Barnett et al., 2013) argue that it is a result of the social context of institutions, which shapes the institutions and individuals’ actions (Sidani & Thornberry, 2013). Research exploring Wasta from the institutional perspective has been important for deepening our understanding of the function Wasta serves as a source and regulator of resources when formal governing institutions are absent or weak (Ali and Weir, 2020). Some institutional researchers, however, can be criticized for focusing on the negative aspects of Wasta, as many have treated Wasta as an inefficient practice that needs to be replaced by formal, more efficient institutions (Loewe et al., 2008). To this point, Minbaeva et al. (2022) present the idea that formal and informal institutions coexist in symbiotic relationship – a mutualistic symbiosis rather than replacing or weakening each other, presenting key features of informal networks relevant for channeling continuity and change in informal institutions. These informal networks were classified as ranging from “relatively open” to “relatively closed” and from “relatively affective” to “relatively instrumental”, with Wasta being categorized as a relatively open and relatively affective network labelling it as a ‘Redistribution network’, which also includes Guanxi in China and Inmaek in South Korea (Minbaeva et al., 2022).

Exploring these views enables us to develop a deeper understanding of Wasta as an informal network that is persistent, self-re-enforcing, and neither inherently positive nor negative but dependent on the context and ways it is operationalized. However, there remains ambiguity in understanding when Wasta is negative or ‘bad’ and when it is positive or ‘good’.

**The use of Wasta by women**

Until very recently, there have been several restrictions that led to very low participation of Saudi women in the workplace. In 2013, Saudi women represented half of the population but only 9.2% of the total workforce (Alfarran et al., 2018). It is argued that this was due to the many legal (national work and employment legislation) and societal, social, and cultural barriers (a negative view of female participation in the workforce, absence of networking opportunities for females) to female employment (Alhejji et al., 2016; Alfarran et al., 2018; Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2022). For instance, until recently, according to Article 4 of the Saudi Labor Law, all workplace legislation was required to comply with what can be argued to be a very strict interpretation of Shari’a (Islamic jurisdiction), thereby negating the effectiveness of employment opportunity provisions and severely curtailing access to job opportunities ([Ramady, 2010](https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/EDI-08-2017-0159/full/html?casa_token=eE7kEeO-PtwAAAAA:UgJD_pDzSDKrDV2hanH2OY5TVUwf8QgyzemfSQKkXaS19BGt9DzzFZFX39ihai7g50KPhJdeIxflo9o4QRZVqZc92h-e_qTX4lINZFnHdkHjH7Quhr8" \l "ref041)). Gender segregation in the workplace was a legal requirement and employers were required to offer women their own workplace or build high segregation walls (Alfarran et al., 2018). Furthermore, although Article 149 of the Labor Law states that women can work in all fields “suitable to their nature” (Alfarran et al., 2018), there was no clear specification of what is “suitable” and what is not. Therefore, women were commonly not employed in range of fields due to uncertainty about whether or not a given occupation is “suitable” (Human Rights Watch, 2011, 2016). Since the introduction of Vision 2030, there has been a substantial change in the political, legal, and social restrictions on women’s employment. These changes have included equalizing women’s right to choose a place of residency (The World Bank, 2022), prohibiting discrimination based on gender in employment, the dismissal of pregnant women and discrimination based on gender in accessing to credit. Moreover, the decrees introduced pension equality by equalizing the retirement ages for men and women and mandating pension care credits for maternity leave (The World Bank, 2022). Nevertheless, there remains a historical lag that disadvantages women against men in terms of employment and career development opportunities (Abalkhail and Allan, 2015).

Arguably, whilst both the formal institutions (governmental rules and policies) and informal institutions (culture, social norms and attitudes toward women's employment) have changed, leading to the development of a more favorable environment for women in the workplace, the most limiting factor remaining is access to and mobilization of informal networks. Whilst women in western countries might have many restrictions on accessing and benefitting from professional networks (Forret and Dougherty, 2004), they are more able to do so than Saudi women. For instance, Abalkhail and Allen’s (2015) research in Saudi Arabia found that women mostly accessed Wasta through their male guardians to further their careers (ibid). However, while other research into women’s careers in the Arab countries of the Middle East also supports the importance of family identities (Afiouni and Karam, 2014), it also finds evidence of women using non-Wasta networks based on professional and gender identities (Afiouni and Karam, 2014), supporting Tlaiss and Mendelson (2014) and Syed and Metcalf’s (2017) claims of the heterogeneity of the Arab Middle East and the identities of Middle Eastern women. Table 1 presents the key research that focuses on the use of Wasta by women.

Insert Table 1 here

The limited research highlighted in the table signposts that women’s access to Wasta is more limited that men’s (Abdalla, 2015b; Alsarhan et al., 2021), that they face challenges in mobilizing the benefits of Wasta (Bailey, 2012), that they need additional brokerage by men to access Wasta (Bailey, 2012; Abalkhail and Allan, 2015) and that they regard Wasta as a powerful determinant of their career development (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011).

As such, it could it could be argued that, up until recently, women’s use of and access to Wasta might be different and more limited in comparison to men’s in the countries of the Arab Middle East in general and Saudi Arabia in particular due to the limitations imposed on them highlighted in this section. The Saudi culture and workplace have changed a lot since the introduction of Vision 2030; as such, the practice of, and indeed access to, Wasta networks could differ for women in recent times.

**Methodology**

Research rationale, sampling and data collection process

The research set out to develop an understanding of the use women make of informal networks for career attainment and development through an interpretivist and qualitative exploration of their perception of this practice in the context of the Saudi workplace. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate due to its ability to garner in depth-data necessary to understand complex social constructions such as Wasta (Creswell, 2009).

A combination of qualitative online self-completion interviews (28) using Microsoft Forms and ‘live’ online interviews using Microsoft Teams (5) was adopted with graduate women who work in Saudi Arabia. The questions were asked in English but respondents were allowed to answer either in English or Arabic to facilitate capturing the interviewees' perspectives. The live online interviews were transcribed in Arabic by the second author. The first author, who is a native Arabic speaker but who also speaks English proficiently, translated all the Arabic data into English to ensure consistency. Online software was used to support in the data translation and to ensure the meaning of cultural and core concepts was not changed. Convenience sampling was utilized drawing on the informal networks of the second author, who is a Saudi woman, to contact interviewees and snowball the sample. Utilizing informal networks, ‘Wasta’, to gather qualitative data has been identified as a beneficial way to gain interviewees' trust and access rich data about sensitive topics such as Wasta in the context of the Arab countries of the Middle East (Ali and Weir, 2019). When approaching the interviewees, the second author explained the purpose of the study and invited them to participate in the interviews. Interestingly, most interviewees chose to complete the interview via Microsoft Forms; this could be attributed to the convenience this offered to them but also to the social restraints women face in the professional sphere. The inclusion criteria were the following: 1) participants had to be Saudi women; 2) they had to be working in a graduate-level job, a job which requires higher education qualifications. Seven of the online self-completion interviews were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria, resulting in a final sample size of 26 interviews. This sample size is considered adequate for our research aim, because our priority is to develop in-depth understanding of informants’ lived experiences rather than generate generalized findings (Creswell, 2009).

Insert Table 2 here

Data analysis process

Thematic analysis was undertaken to interpret data as it allows for easy linkage and comparability between the main themes and the subordinate themes (Namey et al., 2008).

During the data collection, we asked interviewees about their career, whether and how they used informal networks in attaining jobs and developing their careers, their opinions on the use of informal networks in the work environment in Saudi Arabia, and their perceived view of women’s use and access to Wasta in comparison with men. We relied on three steps of data reduction, data display, and data conclusion and avoided using predetermined themes to ensure that our themes emerged from the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). To apply more rigor to our inductive research, we followed a Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) which includes two phases. The first-order analysis uses informants’ terms to develop categories and the second-order analysis uses our concepts and themes. In our study of second-order categories, we began seeking similarities and differences among the first-order categories, such that the second-order categories emerged as a synthesis of the first-order categories, leading to the aggregate dimensions. Figure 1 below details the data analysis process.

Insert Figure 1here

**Analysis and Discussion**

The analysis of the interviews highlighted three main themes:

1) Importance of Informal Networks at the Workplace: informal networks are important for securing employment, career progression and getting things done at the workplace.

2) Gender Dynamics in Career Progression: Despite assertions of gender equality in job opportunities, there are nuanced perceptions of gender dynamics in career progression. While some participants believe that both men and women have equal chances, others note subtle biases or societal expectations that may influence career outcomes.

3) Ethical Considerations of Wasta: Participants discuss the ethical implications of using Wasta in career advancement. While some view it as a necessary tactic in a competitive job market, others emphasize the importance of meritocracy and fair treatment in professional settings.

**1) Importance of informal networks at the Workplace**

Participants viewed informal networks as a key determinant of career success, with many of the interviewees highlighting that they found their own jobs through their networks. One of the key issues that informal relations help with is securing information about vacancies and communicating with employers. Twelve participants disclosed that they got their job through their own informal networks. Interviewee O noted:

“*I was able to secure my first job by a recommendation from my professional network. The organization conducted a thorough interview and assessment process to evaluate my qualifications and suitability for the role.*”

Interestingly, many of the interviewed women clearly disclosed that one of the major factors in getting their job was having a relative or friend in the organization where they were hired (for instance, interviewees V, W, X, and Y), which is a form of bonding relation Wasta (Ali and Weir, 2019). This contrasts with recent research which highlights that, as Wasta is becoming more instrumental rather than affectionate, bridging Wasta informal relations are becoming more predominant (Ali and Weir, 2019; Ali and Weir, 2020). Many interviewees were also very keen to highlight that, whilst they secured the job through informal networks, they were ‘deserving of it’ by having the necessary qualifications and skills and going through the recruitment process, as eluded to in the quote from interviewee O above.

Informal networks benefits go beyond hearing about jobs and securing employment to being a strategic tool for career advancement. Many of the interviewees recognized the importance of building and maintaining professional relationships through actively engaging in informal networks.

Interviewee C explained:

“*Yes it [social relations/ networks] is [important], you can have a job using your certificates and skills, but to reach higher levels you definitely need to make a good connection, and good working relationships will make your job more enjoyable. And it will make you more productive, which leads you to focus on your personal development. Also, the professional connections you make will also help you to further your career*.”

This perspective aligns with previous research which highlights the importance of active engagement with informal networks for women’s career progression (Singh, 2008; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011) and that Arab women senior executives were impeded in their careers as a result of exclusion from informal networks (Abdalla, 2015b). It is important to note here that, bar two interviewees, women highlighted that they have social/work relationships with men. This is of particular interest as the little research on Wasta’s use by women in the Gulf countries highlights that they needed to use their male family members’ connections to gain access to Wasta (Bailey, 2012; Abalkhail and Allan, 2015).

Moreover, interviewees highlighted that another benefits of using informal networks was ‘helping to get the job done. Interviewee H explained:

“*Sure, social relations are very important in [the] workplace; it always helps to done [do] the tasks in a better way. As [an] example: I’ve had a very difficult task and it’s dependent on other majors’ [team members] opinions so I start calling my networks to gather all the information needed, so that lead [led] me to finish the task in one hour instead of [it taking] all the day*”.

This is an interesting finding which builds on the work of Ali and Weir (2020), Alsarhan et al. (2021), and Helal et al. (2023), who identify some positive uses for Wasta informal networks in the workplace for job seekers, employees, and employing organizations.

**2) The difference in engagement with Wasta between men and women**

Most of the interviewees perceived a difference between how Wasta is used by men and women. The two main facets of these differences are the frequency of using Wasta informal networks and the impact of this use on their career. In terms of frequency, the interviewees talked about how frequently they used informal networks with women or men and who they thought used Wasta more. There was a variety of different insights into this as, whilst some women thought that, with the recent socio-economic changes that had happened with Vision 20230, they and other women are now able and comfortable in asking and granting Wasta favors with male colleagues, many of the interviewees said that their interactions were still largely limited to other women. Interviewee S explained:

“*With men you have to make boundaries and be more official; with other women you can make friends, so, as a woman, social relationships with other women will be more than [with] men.*”

Many of the interviewees stated their preference to network with other women, highlighting friendliness to other women, being comfortable interacting with them, and societal restraints to build and use informal networks with men as reasons. The latter point confirms the findings of previous research in the region (Alsarhan et al., 2021; Tlaiss, and Kauser, 2011; Bailey, 2012) highlighting that these barriers still exist for some women. However, it is interesting that some interviewees highlighted that the recent changes in Saudi are enabling and motivating them to create and use their informal networks with men. Interviewee C stated:

“*Saudi Arabia has witnessed significant changes in recent years, particularly regarding women's rights and empowerment. Several reforms, such as allowing women to drive, increasing women's participation in the workforce, and granting them more control over their personal lives, have been implemented. These changes have likely had an impact on the use of social connections/networks and Wasta in job attainment and career development for women. Historically, Wasta played a significant role in Saudi Arabia's job market, where personal connections were crucial for securing employment opportunities. This often placed women at a disadvantage, as their access to such networks was limited due to cultural and societal norms.*”

There was also a disagreement about who used informal networks and Wasta more. Some of the interviewees perceived men to use Wasta more due to traditions (interviewee H), generally having wider networks and more experience (interviewee Q), and because they take life *“more easy”* (interviewee F). Others felt that Wasta is used equally between genders. One interviewee (interviewee Q) felt that women were more social and as such used their informal networks more.

Finally, in terms of the impact on career, interestingly, most interviewees highlighted that women have now ‘caught up’ with men and that informal networks can even be more advantageous for them due to the need to hire more women in the workplace and limit additional Wasta requests. Interviewee G explained:

“*Although, as I said, we are now equal to men, I do think that ‘sometimes’ Wastas are [more] useful to women more than men, because women are known for being professional and go by the rules, where men sometimes let go a little, so they [employers] would like women employees more than men.*”

This highlights how the change in formal institutions (laws and regulations) has initiated a change in the informal institutions (national and organizational culture), which in turn has impacted how informal networks can be accessed and mobilized by women. This is of interest in understanding women’s use of Wasta, as previous research highlights how women are excluded from Wasta (Alsarhan et al., 2021) or only have limited access to Wasta with other women or through a male patrons (Bailey, 2012).

**3) Ethical Considerations of Using Informal Networks**

An interesting finding from the interviews was that the terms used when describing Wasta and informal networks differed when talking about ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ practices. Previous research on Wasta tended to use the terms informal networks, Wasta, and informal social networks interchangeably (Helal et al., 2023). However, the interviewees tended to use the words informal networks, networks, social networks, and social relations when talking about what they perceived as positive practices such as helping others and attaining positive outcomes for individuals and organizations. For instance, Interviewee G, when talking about the importance of informal networks in the workplace, stated:

“*Yes [social relations/ networks are important], because many people find many jobs through relations; just like me.*”

Interviewee O also exemplified this:

“*Offering assistance to others is essential for fostering stronger relationships and building trust. By helping one another, we create an environment of mutual benefit where both parties can grow and thrive.*”

However, many of the interviewees distinguished this from Wasta, which, whilst not clearly defining what it is, eluded to it being a negative practice of using informal networks to replace formal procedure by bending the rules rather than helping somebody who is ‘deserving’. Interviewee I explained:

“*For social relations, there is no doubt that they are important, but Wasta in reality does not exist anymore, especially in the era of Mohammed bin Salman. I think that a person is accepted based on his experiences and certificates, whether male or female, and of course the right to work for the hardworking, where empowering women does not necessarily mean injustice for men, but who of them deserves will get it.*”

Interestingly, whilst the previous quote reflects the opinion that Wasta is diminishing, other interviewees highlighted that they perceived that it still exists. Interviewee J explained:

“*Wasta is important in jobs to guarantee your position more and, yes, it can differ from male to female because for males it can be very easy to obtain.*”

These quotes highlight the perceived differences between Wasta and informal/social networks and add to our understanding of how informal networks can be ‘good’ when hiring and promoting deserving and qualified individuals or can be bad, i.e. Wasta, when hiring or promoting unqualified or undeserving individuals.

**Contribution to knowledge**

The research builds on the findings of previous researchers who explore women’s use of Wasta in the workplace by confirming that women mostly regard Wasta as a powerful tool for job attainment and career development (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). It also confirms the findings that Wasta’s use by women is more limited compared to how men use it (Abdalla, 2015b; Alsarhan et al., 2021), and that women face challenges in mobilizing the benefits of Wasta (Bailey, 2012). This research contributes to knowledge in two novel ways. Firstly, it contributes to HRM literature by furthering our understanding of the practice of informal networks/Wasta by women in Saudi Arabia in relation to job and promotion attainment by highlighting that, due to the changes in the formal institutions (opening up of legislation removing barriers and empowering women). This, in turn, impact informal institutions (national and organizational culture), which are now more open to women working in different jobs, women are generally afforded more direct access to networks which, whilst they are predominantly based on bonding relations (relatives and friends), are not just limited to access through their male patrons as previous research indicated (Bailey, 2012; Abalkhail and Allan, 2015).

Secondly, it contributes to informal networks literature which largely viewed Wasta as the embodiment of informal networks in the context of Arab countries of the Middle East (Alsarhan et al., 2021; Alsarhan et al., 2024) by distinguishing Wasta (which was generally perceived as a negative practice by the interviewees) from other terms describing positive uses of informal networks, thus highlighting that Wasta is only one ‘negative’ form of informal networks in this context This conceptual distinction is of substantial importance due to the theoretical need to develop our understanding of Wasta, as called for by previous researchers of informal networks (Minbaeva et al., 2022)

**Managerial implications**

The findings of the research can be used to inform the practice of policymakers, general and HRM managers, and women practitioners in the context of the Saudi workplace and similar contexts:

1. On the macro level: Policymakers are encouraged to build on the regulations which remove barriers for women to actively participate in the workplace and empower them to take different active roles in the economy. Such regulations should include the reduction of the pay gap toward ensuring equal pay and the provision of regulation to support family and child provisions for working women. This could be done through the equal pay for equal work laws, developing and enforcing flexible working arrangements for working parents, and the provision of free/reduced government-subsidized child care. Equally important is the provision of social awareness campaigns to support and encourage women to be active members of the economy and ensure the organizations abide by the spirit of the law rather than its letter. Clear laws that prevent the negative use of informal networks (Wasta) in the workplace should be fortified in the legislation, embedding a clear definition of what is considered illegal practice in terms of using the informal networks in the workplace.
2. On the meso level: General and HRM managers are encouraged to build-in practices which enable women to develop their informal networks, which in turn will enable them to further their careers. These can include in-house networking events, funding to attend external events, and online events to ensure inclusivity.
3. Women practitioners are encouraged to develop their informal networks by attending different events and actively engaging in social and economic forums. This could be done through developing funding pots for women to attend such events and building space for this in their work plan.

**Limitations and future research**

Whilst the research offers some very interesting insights, it is important to highlight its limitations. Firstly, this qualitative research is based on a rather small sample that limits its generalizability to other geographical contexts. Secondly, whilst some of the interviews were conducted face to face, most of the interviews were done online via Microsoft Forms. Whilst this has been identified as useful to access the sample in a context which is still relatively restrictive, it should be acknowledged that it comes with shortcoming on the inability to capture the body language and emotions of the interviewees.

Future researchers of this topic are advised to expand on this research by further exploring how different characteristics of the interviewees (e.g. age) and type of industry they work in and length of experience could impact on their perceptions of the use of Wasta. Others might want to explore how Wasta impacts other HRM functions such as compensation and reward. Moreover, researchers can develop a comparative exploration of the use of informal networks in different cultures (Wasta, Guanxi and Yongo). Finally, researchers are also advised to further delve into the distinction between Wasta and informal networks to better our understanding of these very impactful practices on business in networked societies.

**Conclusion**

This research set out to understand how women use Wasta in the workplace to attain jobs and career development in the context of the new Saudi workplace. The findings highlight that, due to changes in the formal institutions of Saudi Arabia (opening up of legislation removing barriers and empowering women), which in turn impact informal institutions (national and organizational culture), women in the Saudi workplace are now more able to access and operationalize their informal networks to attain jobs and career progression. The findings also distinguish between what is perceived as good use of networks in the workplace (informal networks) and negative practice (Wasta). Recommendations are offered to policymakers, managers, and women practitioners to further enable women in the workplace and promote active positive engagement with the informal networks.

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Table 1: Key research exploring women’s Wasta

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Author | Country of focus | Summary |
| Alsarhan, Ali, Weir and Valax (2021) | Jordan | Men use Wasta more than women in the context of HRM. Professional determinants, such as gendered job segregation and variance in qualifications, affect men’s and women’s access to Wasta. |
| Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) | Lebanon | Female managers perceive their career progression to be affected by organizational culture and networks. They regard Wasta as a powerful determinant of their career development. |
| Bailey (2012) | United Arab Emirates | Emirati women suffer from an inability to capitalize on the “power” of Wasta because they are obligated to rely on fathers or future husbands to broker their access to Wasta’s desired resources. |
| Abdalla (2015a) | Kuwait, Qatar and United Arab Emirates | Female managers resort less to Wasta compared with their male counterparts. |
| Abdalla (2015b) | Kuwait, Tunisia, and Sudan | Women executives throughout their careers confront barriers such as lack of culture fit and exclusion from networks. |
| Abalkhail and Allan (2015) | Saudi Arabia | Women in Saudi Arabia associate networking with their family members rather than with their professional networks. |

Source: adopted from Alsarhan et al. (2021) and updated by authors

Table 2: Interviewee demographics

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ID | Organization Location | Number of Employees | Age | Length of Service in Current Organization | Role/ Sector |
| A | Riyadh | 8 | 44 | 5 | Senior cyber security officer/ Defense |
| B | Riyadh | 3000 | 27 | 1 | Manager Admissions & Registration / Education |
| C | Riyadh | 3000 | 40 | 15 | Dept. collection/ Legal |
| D | Riyadh | 3000 | 22 | <1 | Nurse/ Healthcare |
| E | Riyadh | 40 | 22 | <1 | Recruitment/ Aviation Industry |
| F | Riyadh | 1311 | 26 | 2 | Nurse/ Healthcare |
| G | Riyadh | 18000 | 40 | 3 |  |
| H | Riyadh | 200-300 | 23 | 3 | Social Media Reporting/ Marketing |
| I | Riyadh | 30 | 27 | 4 | Marketing Consultant/ Financial Services |
| J | Riyadh | N/A | 30 | 4 | Trainer- Lecturer/ Educational Services |
| K | Riyadh | 5,000+ | 26 | 3 | Organizational Excellence Lead specialist/ Telecommunications |
| L | Riyadh | 44 | 29 | 1 | Did not Disclose/ Administration assistant, Quality coordinator |
| M | Dammam | 1000+ | 25 | 3 | Did not Disclose/ Oil and Gas |
| N | Riyadh | 1000+ | 28 | 2 | Did not Disclose/ Oil and Gas |
| O | Riyadh | 19000 | 37 | 6 | Internal Audit Director/ Defense |
| P | Riyadh | 100-200 | 22 | <1 | Developer/ IT Services |
| Q | Riyadh | 1200 | 28 | 3 | Marketing/ Aviation |
| R | Dhahran | 65,282 | Above 40 | 5 | Director of Human Resources/Oil and Gas |
| S | Riyadh | 300 | 27 | 2 | Organizational Development/ Business Development |
| T | Riyadh | 90 | 33 | 8 | Nurse/ Healthcare |
| U | Riyadh | 25 | 26 | 5 | Finance executive/ Financial Services |
| V | Riyadh | 5000+ | 33 | 4 | HR/ Tech and Security |
| W | Riyadh | 5000+ | 32 | 2 | Finance/Tech and Security |
| X | Riyadh | 5000+ | 32 | 5 | Operations/Tech and Security |
| Y | Riyadh | 5000+ | 29 | 2 | Technician/Tech And Security |
| Z | Riyadh | 5000+ | 34 | 3 | Research and Coordination/ Tech and Security |

Figure 1: Data analysis using the Gioa methodology

A screenshot of a computer code

Description automatically generated