

EMPOWERING SAUDI WOMEN THROUGH VOCATIONAL SKILLS AT EDUCATED-NEIGHBORHOOD PROGRAMS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: Educated-neighborhood programs are lifelong-learning projects created by the Saudi government to achieve a positive effect on the economic, social, and cultural factors. These programs provide various training skills that should support Saudi Vision 2030 and help adults to deal with their lives. Therefore, this study aimed to discover how much Saudi women were empowered through the vocational skills being taught at educated-neighborhood programs during the time of COVID-19. The research also determined if there was a statistically significant difference, by marital status and the number of courses, for the Saudi women's responses about their empowerment through vocational skills at the educated-neighborhood programs during the time of COVID-19. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics; a self-developed questionnaire was utilized to collect data. The study's sample was female, adult, Saudi learners who were enrolled in Makkah. Saudi Arabia's educated-neighborhood programs to gain vocational skills. The results indicated that Saudi women were empowered with the vocational skills obtained at educated-neighborhood programs. Moreover, the findings showed that there were no statistically significant differences among the women's responses due to marital status. However, there were statistically significant differences among the women's responses based on the number of courses taken. The benefit of the direction was for women who took 5 or more courses. One recommendation from this study was that vocational skills should design in a way that can encourage and empower women for the labor market for the 21st century.

Keywords: lifelong learning, Saudi Arabia, adult learning, women, vocational programs

Currently, Saudi Arabia has a great desire to be one of the developed countries and to obtain a considerable number of achievements. Therefore, the government of Saudi Arabia launched Vision 2030 to achieve its goals and aspirations. This vision consists of three themes: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation; these themes shape the vision's groundbreaking agenda. Through these themes, Saudi polices focus on the individual, society, the economy, and government efficiency. For example, the thriving economy is being utilized to stop the country's reliance on oil; therefore, the Saudi government invests in human capital development for future economic growth. Also, Saudi vision 2030 focuses on continuous learning and training, and it provides a chance for everyone to improve their abilities and skills in order to contribute to society's development (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

Moreover, Saudi Vision 2030 pays special attention to empowering women; according to the vision, women's participation rate in the labor market will increase from 22% to 30% by 2030. There are also over 50% of Saudi women who graduate from universities. To reduce unemployment, these graduates need lifelong training, developing a high-performance work team, and improving sustainable skills in order to build the country's society and economy. One of the most significant programs that offer various skills is educated-neighborhood programs. These skills include vocations, life, self-awareness, and reading and writing skills. According to Shah (2020), vocational training is an

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essential measure to develop an individual's skills; this instruction can establish a better future, reducing unemployment and migration to other countries. Also, vocational training helps to create a "culture of skills" (p.164) that ensures employee productivity, growth, competitiveness, social mobility, and poverty alleviation.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2012a) stated that funding for vocational-skill development must be adequate to meet the demands of citizens and socio-economic growth as well as to avoid waste in education. Therefore, Saudi Vision strives to expand vocational training in all cities and regions of the Kingdom. In this study, vocational skills, which were taught by the educated-neighborhood programs, are the focus. These skills include painting and decor, fashion technology, establishing entrepreneurship and small projects, beauty and hair care, the food industry, repairing computers and mobile phones, and using computers.

In 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for these vocational, sustainable skills appeared because the situation created global crisis across every aspect of society, including the economy, security, education, the labor market, and health. This crisis was a challenge for everybody, particularly women. According to United Nations (2020), the shutdown of many education systems and the effect of the economic sectors put additional stress and demands on women. For example, the demand for childcare and family care increased. As a result, 1.52 billion students and over 60 million teachers were not their schools. Therefore, this study aims to discover how much Saudi women were empowered through the vocational skills being taught at educated-neighborhood programs during the time of COVID-19. The research also determined if there was a statistically significant difference by marital status and the number of courses for responses of Saudi Women about their empowerment through vocational skills at the educated-neighborhood programs during the time of COVID-19.

Educated-Neighborhood Programs

Educated-neighborhood programs are lifelong-learning projects which were created by the Saudi government to achieve a positive effect on the economic, social, and cultural factors. The programs are informal education and are under the adult education department. The first program was established in 2006. These programs aim to extend the concept of adult education from literacy to lifelong learning, preparing individuals, especially women who are less fortunate in terms of education, to contribute to society's development; qualifying women for the labor market; providing women with the necessary skills to obtain financial self-sufficiency; and enriching the work culture for women. To be accepted for the educated-neighborhood programs, individuals should be at least 15 years old and want to develop their skills. Trainees are only awarded a certificate if their absence rate for the training program does not exceed 20% of the total hours (Ministry of Education, 2018).

According to the Ministry of Education (2018), the criteria to implement and to select the appropriate training programs are fulfilling the needs of the labor market and the participants needs of each department, benefiting from community institutions and volunteers' experience as a community partnership, and achieving the programs' goals.

The training time is 4 hours in the evening for 5 days per week. The training programs have many variations, including educational programs, life skills, awareness skills, and vocational skills. For example, educational training helps individuals to improve writing and reading as well as to learn a new language. For life skills, trainees receive a set of life skills, such as critical-thinking skills, that enable them to deal and to adapt to different life situations. For awareness skills, individuals improve their religious, cultural, health, security, and social level; an example is maternal and child health. For vocational skills, programs are tailored to the labor market's needs, giving trainees the required level of competence. In this study, the vocational skills which were taught at the educated-neighborhood programs are examined.

Vocational Skills

The educated-neighborhood programs' vocational-skill programs pay attention to rehabilitating women for the labor market and providing them with sustainable skills. These programs also enrich women's work culture, including values such as enthusiasm and sincerity. The programs' objectives are to take advantage of free time and to invest it for the benefit of participants and their families; to promote a positive view of occupations, especially manual ones; to support economic and social growth as a factor that contributes to society's development; and to decrease unemployment. Examples of vocational skills include painting and décor; buffet preparation; fashion technology; establishing entrepreneurship and small projects; beauty and hair care; the food industry; repairing computers and mobile phones; and using a computer for programming, web design, marketing, and photography (General Department of Continuing Education, 2018).

With the emergence of a knowledge-based economy developing individuals' skills has become an urgent need for governments around the world. Any country's prosperity and growth depend on developing a skilled workforce. For example, there is a relationship between quality training and the labor market. In European countries, the data show that a 1% rise in training days leads to a 3% rise in productivity. Also, quality training empowers individuals to continue their training, to develop their full skills, to seize job and social opportunities, and to enhance innovation (International Labour Office, 2010; UNESCO, 2012b). According to Langer (2013), vocational skills are needed for specific professional tasks. For instance, the French Development Agency conducted a qualitative survey with a group of 110 association leaders from central Africa. The survey's result showed that 60% of students who completed their higher education join the labor market by enrolling in informal vocational training. Additionally, vocational programs support active labor-market policies by supplying necessary skills that help to find a job or to generate job opportunities (Acevedo, Cruces, Gertler, & Martinez, 2020).

There are several studies that confirm the important effect of vocational skills in people's lives (Johnson, 2015; Langer, 2013; Olagbaju, 2020; Wu, 2019). Johnson's (2015) study showed that vocational training programs have an essential role for empowering rural women to have new income and to eradicate poverty. In the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is significant for individuals to have vocational skills in order to empower them to deal with crises. According to the International Labour Organization (2020),

during crisis and epidemic situations, there some recommendations when the labor market faces challenges. One suggestion is that institutions should provide more training programs. People should also seek to create income-generation opportunities by developing their skills. During these complex circumstances, learners, especially women, have to be self-reliant to benefit from their skills in order to obtain opportunities and to take advantage of the resources and possibilities which are available within their families. United Nations (2020) said “Emerging evidence on the impact of COVID-19 suggests that women’s economic and productive lives will be affected disproportionately and differently from men” (p. 4).

Theoretical Framework

Human capital investment is substantial for the sustainable development of any country. The investment could be skills, competencies, and knowledge that clearly improve economic growth and social development. Several research studies (Aldossari 2020; Alfarran, Pyke, & Stanton, 2018; Calvert & Al-Shetaiwi, 2002) indicate that there is a lack of Saudi women’ participating in the workforce, especially in the private sector. Therefore, the Saudi government recognizes the important role of women’s participation in social and economic development. Saudi Vision 2030 emphasizes women’s rights to participate in the labor market and encourages them to work in either the public or private sector. Thus, women’s empowerment programs are needed to achieve the vision’s ambitions.

The educated-neighborhood program is an empowerment program that invests women’s energy and talent as well as developing their skills so that they can be competent in the workforce and can obtain an appropriate job. The COVID-19 pandemic is now a global crisis with effects all over the world. The situation caused governments to close many services, to suspend social activities, and to practice social distancing. According to the International Labour Organization (2020), during COVID-19, the number of people who attended vocational and technical training courses to continue developing their skills was between 12 and 13 million. Vocational training is essential to improve living and working conditions. Hence, it is necessary to acquire and to apply vocational, sustainable skills in life and in crisis situations; this need is particularly important for women because they are more responsible for their families. United Nations (2020) pointed out that the closure of childcare services and schools put an additional strain and demand on women. These responsibilities require people to have self-directed learning that helps them to continue improving and to apply their skills in daily life.

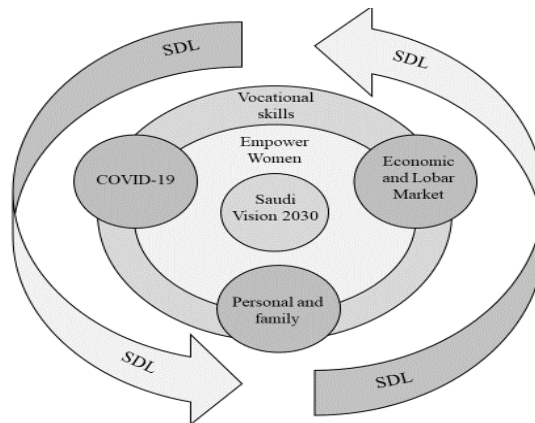
According to Knowles (1975), self-directed learning is known as “a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources, and evaluating learning outcomes” (p.18). Also, Garrison (1992) stated that control and responsibility for adult’s learning are essential with self-directed learning. At educated-neighborhood programs, female adult learners should have self-directed learning because they have self-autonomy to select and to plan their course as well as to continue learning. Many adults’ motivation to learn is self-directed learning that leads them to meet their needs and to achieve lifelong learning (Knowles, 1975; Mezirow, 1985). Mbagwu,

Chukwuedo, and Ogbuanya's study (2020) showed that self-directed learning is a positive predictor of lifelong learning tendencies.

This study is focused on female, adult, Saudi learners who enroll in educated-neighborhood programs to gain vocational skills in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. The meaning of vocational skills is the knowledge and skills, practical competencies, and attitudes which are necessary to perform a certain trade or occupation in the labor market or as part of people's lives (African Development Bank, 2008). Vocational skills help female students to become self-directed lifelong learners. United Nations (2020) pointed out that, during COVID-19, women would be the backbone of a community's recovery because they do a large amount of care work which is unpaid and invisible. Saudi women also have a lot of responsibilities for their family, work, and life. Therefore, this study aims to discover how much Saudi women are empowered through vocational skills at the educated-neighborhood programs during the time of COVID-19. Figure 1 displays the theoretical framework for this study.

Figure 1

The Theoretical Framework of This Study



Methodology

Instrument and Processes

This study is descriptive, exploratory quantitative research that utilizes a self-developed questionnaire. The instrument was designed through a review of related literature and the content of vocational courses at the educated-neighborhood programs. Some statements were modified to correspond with COVID-19 pandemic. The instrument was divided into two parts. The first part the respondents' demographic information related to marital status (married, single, or divorced) and the number of courses (1-2, 3-4, and 5 or more courses). The second part had 23 statements to discover how much the Saudi women are empowered through vocational skills at the educated-neighborhood programs during the time of COVID-19. This part had a personal and family scale (items 1-12) as well as an economy and labor market scale (items 13-23). The responses were measured with a 5-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

The instrument was developed in English, and then, it was translated into Arabic by two bilingual individuals with educational backgrounds. They independently translated the English instrument into Arabic, and then, the researcher joined the copies into one Arabic translation. The Arabic copy was translated back to English and reviewed in order to ensure consistency and accuracy. After the review, the final Arabic version was given launched to participants.

Sample and Data Collected

The population was comprised of female learners who attended vocational-skill courses at educated-neighborhood programs across Saudi Arabia. The total population of learners was around 114, 939. The vocational courses at the educated-neighborhood programs were characterized by the similarity of content and organization. As a result of these similarities, the huge number of learners, the limited research resources, and the current situation during a pandemic, the study was focused in Makkah; there were a total of 525 female learners, (759) participating.

The study’s data were collected by using the online instrument that was distributed to all female learners who only take a vocational skills course at educated-neighborhood programs in Makkah. The link to the instrument was sent via an email message and a WhatsApp message. Participation was anonymous, confidential, and independent. Data were collected between May 20 and June 30, 2020.

Reliability and Validity

The instrument was reviewed by a panel of education experts. As a result, minor instrument modifications, such as adding items to each scale were considered. Also, the questionnaire’s test-retest reliability was examined with a pilot test that had 70 participants. Those individuals were excluded from the study. The pilot test’s validity coefficient had a mean of 0.90. The time interval between uses was 2 weeks. The correlation coefficient between the items and the entire questionnaire was 0.49-0.88. The correlation coefficient between the items and each scale was 0.57-0.88. Therefore, the correlation coefficients had acceptable degrees and were statistically significant. According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), the acceptable values for Cronbach’s Alpha range from 0.70 to 0.95. The result of using the Cronbach Alpha’s coefficient to determine the instrument’s reliability was 0.92, indicating high values of instrument reliability. Table1 clarifies the reliability’s value in Cronbach’s Alpha.

Table 1

The Value of the Reliability in Cronbach’s Alpha

Scale	Cronbach's alpha
Personal and Family Scale	0.89
Economy and Labor Market Scale	0.83
Total	0.92

Data analysis

The data were examined by using SPSS for the descriptive analysis, including means and standard deviations. Additionally, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess differences based on the respondents' demographic information related to marital status and the number of courses. Post-hoc Scheffé tests were also utilized for multiple comparisons.

Demographics

The study's respondents were female learners who only attended vocational-skill courses at educated-neighborhood programs in Makkah. Data regarding the demographic information's statistics are summarized in Table 2. The majority of the sample (62.3%) was married, and 41.7% of the participants were taking 1-2 courses.

Table 2

<i>Demographic Information</i>			
Demographic Information		N	%
Marital Status	Single	155	29.5
	Married	327	62.3
	Divorced	43	8.2
Number of Courses	1-2 courses	219	41.7
	3-4 courses	115	21.9
	5 and more courses	191	36.4
Total		525	100

Results

Findings for Research Question One

How much are Saudi women empowered through vocational skills at the educated-neighborhood programs during the time of COVID-19? To answer this research question, the means and standard deviations were determined. The total mean for the vocational skills that were obtained by Saudi women during the time of COVID-19 was 3.84. This statement indicated that women were empowered by using vocational skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. The highest-ranked skill scale was personal and family, and its total mean was 4.01. The practice level was high, and the means ranged between 4.37 and 3.80. The second skill scale was the economy and the labor market. The total mean for this scale was 3.60, and the practice level was medium. The means for the economy and labor-market scale ranged between 4.00 and 2.93. Table 3 presents the vocational skills that Saudi women obtained during the time of COVID-19.

Table 3*Saudi Women's Vocational Skills During the Time of COVID-19*

Rank	Scale of Vocational Skills	M	SD
1	Personal and Family	4.01	.628
2	Economy and Labor Market	3.60	.664
Total Score		3.84	.599

Findings for Research Question Two

Is there a statistically significant difference by marital status and the number of courses, for Saudi women's responses about their empowerment through vocational skills at the educated-neighborhood programs during the time of COVID-19? To answer this research question, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to see if there were a statistically significant difference based on marital status. The result showed that there were no statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) among the women's perspectives based on their marital status for both scales (personal and family, and economy and labor market) and the entire instrument. Table 4 summarizes the result of the one-way ANOVA for marital status.

Table 4*The Result of the One-Way ANOVA for Marital Status*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Personal and Family	Between Groups	.231	2	.116	.292	.747
	Within Groups	206.419	522	.395		
	Total	206.650	524			
Economy and Labor Market	Between Groups	.569	2	.284	.644	.525
	Within Groups	230.330	522	.441		
	Total	230.898	524			
Total Score	Between Groups	.184	2	.092	.255	.775
	Within Groups	187.747	522	.360		
	Total	187.931	524			

Additionally, a one-way ANOVA was employed to discover if there were a statistically significant difference based on the number of courses. The results, as seen in Table 5, indicated that there were statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) for scales (personal and family, and economy and labor market) and the entire instrument. To understand the differences among the arithmetic averages, post-hoc tests were utilized. The post-hoc analysis showed the existence of significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) between 5 and more courses, and 1-2 and 3-4 courses. The benefit of the direction was for women who took 5 and more courses.

Table 5

The Result of the One-Way ANOVA for the Number of Courses

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Personal and Family	Between Groups	16.138	2	8.069	22.110	.000
	Within Groups	190.512	522	.365		
	Total	206.650	524			
Economy and Labor Market	Between Groups	10.670	2	5.335	12.646	.000
	Within Groups	220.228	522	.422		
	Total	230.898	524			
Total Score	Between Groups	13.593	2	6.797	20.350	.000
	Within Groups	174.337	522	.334		
	Total	187.931	524			

Table 6*Post Hoc Comparison Results by the Number of Courses*

		Mean	1-2	3-4	5 or more
Personal and Family	1-2	3.88			
	3-4	3.88	.01		
	5 or more	4.24	*.37	*.36	
Economy and Labor Market	1-2	3.51			
	3-4	3.48	.03		
	5 or more	3.79	*.28	*.32	
Total	1-2	3.72			
	3-4	3.71	.01		
	5 or more	4.05	*.33	*.34	

* significance at ($\alpha = 0.05$)

Discussion and Conclusion

Educated-neighborhood programs contribute to more community participation and empowering women with the necessary skills to achieve Saudi Vision 2030. These programs are implemented in neighborhoods to provide women with sustainable skills that help them to raise their awareness level about economy, society, and education (Ministry of Education, 2018). One of these skills is vocational skills, the focus of this study. The vocational skills aim to get unemployed women in the labor market and to help them become self-directed learners and active members of society. Therefore, this study is important because it may give decision makers insight about how to reform the programs. As far as the researcher knows, this study is the first one about COVID-19 and women's vocational skills at educated-neighborhood programs. The study is consistent with the directions of Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasizes participation by members of society in order to improve themselves and their country.

The study's results indicated that Saudi women have been empowered through their vocational skills at the educated-neighborhood programs during the time of COVID-19. This statement conforms with Saudi Vision2030 and the aim of the educated-neighborhood programs that focus on empowering women to benefit from their skills in their lives. Therefore, respondents showed that they practiced vocational skills which related to self-directed learning. According to Knowles (1975), self-directed learning presumes that individuals learn when they are required to perform life tasks or to cope with life problems.

For the personal and family scale, the total means and the means for all items were high. Therefore, women practiced these skills at the personal and family skills level often. Diwakar and Ahamad (2015) stated that vocational training makes a big difference for many women's personal and family lives. For example, the training helps them to

improve household productivity, to enhance food security, and to promote environmentally sustainable development and livelihoods. The participants confirmed that, during the time of COVID-19, their vocational skills empowered them to pay attention to their beauty and personal care, to improve their cooking skills when restaurants were shuttered, and to use technology to keep in touch with family members during the home isolation. This result stressed that, in the crisis time, women obtained self-sufficiency and achieved family bonding.

For the economy and the labor-market scale, the total means were medium, and the means for all items ranged between the high and average level. Therefore, in the economy and the labor market, women practiced these skills an average amount of time. Especially during this difficult time, women focused more on their family requirements. According to UNESCO (2020), in the pandemic time, when schools were closed, working parents missed work in order to take care of their children, leading to negatively productivity. The participants confirmed that, during the time of COVID-19, their vocational skills empowered them to continue upgrading their skills through online courses, to share their skills with others, and to encourage others to take the initiative to develop their skills during this difficult time. These finding agreed with the essential goal of the educated-neighborhood programs and Saudi Vision 2030. This goal supports women to continue lifelong learning and to be self-directed learners. Also, the vision emphasizes a culture of volunteering and cooperation; to illustrate, the Saudi government seeks to have one million volunteers each year (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

Moreover, the second question showed that there were no statistically significant differences among the women's responses due to marital status. This result emphasized that all women (single, married, or divorced) were empowered through their vocational skills during the pandemic. According to Saudi Vision2030, the government supports and gives everyone, particularly women, the chance to obtain equal opportunities in order to improve their skills. Therefore, this encouragement may have motivated women to practice their vocational skills. However, there were statistically significant differences among the women's responses based on the number of courses that were taken. The benefit of the direction was for women who took 5 or more courses. This result is logical because, as Knowles (1975) mentioned, adult's experiences are rich resources to motivate them to learn and practice what they learn.

According to the findings, the items that participants mentioned least were "achieve self-actualization needs" and "contribute to their family's expenses." Therefore, women's needs should be considered when designing vocational skills at the educated neighborhood programs. It was also obvious that, in the labor market, women's participation was at an average level, so vocational skills should design in a way that can encourage and empower women for the labor market for the 21st century. For example, create training programs that help adults to practice their vocational skills during a difficult time. This study suggested that qualitative research should be done to have in-depth information about women's utilizing vocational skills in their lives. In addition, a periodic interview with adult learners should be conducted to understand their experiences and to improve the training programs.

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