

Empowering Saudi women through vocational skills

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This study aimed to assess the level of empowerment experienced by Saudi women through the vocational skills taught in educated-neighbourhood programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the research sought to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in empowerment levels based on marital status and the number of courses under-taken. The research uncovered the challenges faced by women during the pandemic, utilising descriptive statistics to collect data. The sample consisted of Saudi females enrolled in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. The results indicated that Saudi women experienced empowerment through the vocational skills acquired in educated-neighbourhood programs. Furthermore, the findings revealed no statistically significant differences in empowerment levels among women based on marital status. However, there were statistically significant differences in the empowerment levels of the participants based on the number of courses taken. The results illustrated that the various challenges faced by women during the pandemic, included isolation at home, psychological coping, dis-

continued economic activities, adherence to safety precautions, and access to healthcare.

Keywords: *educated-neighborhood programs, vocational skills, Saudi women, COVID-19, empowering women*

Introduction

Currently, Saudi Arabia has a great desire to be a developed country and to attain a considerable number of achievements. Therefore, the Saudi government invests in human capital development for future economic growth. Saudi Vision 2030 focuses on continuous learning and training, and it provides a chance for people to improve their abilities and skills to contribute to society's development. In line with Saudi Vision 2030, a fundamental principle of sustainable development is the empowerment of women. A first step for women's empowerment is to use teaching methodologies that are most suitable for the majority of learners in the class and to have curricula that are designed to enable people to become more independent learners (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

Moreover, according to Saudi Vision 2030, the female participation rate in the labour market will increase from 22% to 30% by 2030. Over 50% of Saudi women graduate from universities (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). To reduce unemployment, these graduates need lifelong training, allowing them to develop a high-performance work team and to improve sustainable skills to build the country's society and economy. Several research studies (Aldossari, 2020; Alfarran, Pyke, & Stanton, 2018; Calvert & Al-Shetaiwi, 2002) indicated that there is a lack of Saudi women' participating in the workforce, especially in the private sector.

One of the most significant courses that offers various skills is the Learning Neighbourhood Programme. These proficiencies include vocations, life, self-awareness, and reading and writing skills. According to Shah (2020), vocational training is an essential measure to develop an individual's skills; this instruction can create a better future, reducing unemployment and migration to other countries. Therefore, this study aimed to answer the following research questions: How much are Saudi women empowered through vocational skills at the Learning

Neighbourhood Programme during the time of COVID-19? Is there a statistically significant difference in marital status and the number of courses, for Saudi women's responses about their empowerment through vocational skills at the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes during the time of COVID-19? What challenges have adult women faced to practice vocational skills during the COVID-19 pandemic?

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 2030 strove to expand vocational training in all cities and regions of the kingdom. In this study, vocational skills, which were taught by the Learning Neighbourhood Programme, were the focus. These skills included 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 a global crisis across every aspect of society, including the economy, security, education, the labour market, and health. This crisis was a challenge for everybody, particularly women. According to the United Nations (2020), the shutdown of many educational 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 at their schools.

Learning Neighbourhood Programme

The Learning Neighbourhood Programme is a lifelong-learning project which was created by the Saudi government to achieve a positive effect on economic, social, and cultural factors. The classes are informal education and are under the adult-education department. The first programme was established in 2006; the pilot project was in Jeddah City's communities which had poor environmental, educational, and economic conditions. After the pilot phase, the Learning Neighbourhood Programme was rolled into all regions of Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Education engaged people through television, the internet, newspaper

advertisements and publications, and advertisements at mosques and health centers so that citizens could benefit from the classes. Over 1,000 learners enrolled not only in literacy-skills training courses, but also in other courses, including computing, English, sewing, photography, cooking, flower arranging, and crafts, that were offered by the programme. All the courses were free, and anyone in the community could attend. These programmes were designed 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 labour market; providing women with the necessary skills to obtain financial self-sufficiency and to be independent learners; and enriching the work culture for women.

The Learning Neighbourhood Programme also aimed to link the relationship between adult-education programmes and development plans through training, rehabilitation, and development opportunities by spreading the culture of volunteer work among society's members. The programme was designed to help learners advance their cultural, health, social, and economic levels as well as provide people with the skills that qualify them for the labour market. The project was a model for sustainable development and the path to lifelong education. The Learning Neighbourhood Program has received full, ongoing support from numerous government sectors. The Ministry of Education's division overseeing women's education is in charge of the programmes' primary management. The programme also has backing from several other government ministries and departments as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), charitable organisations, and private-sector organisations. These groups support the programme by awarding prizes to trainees and by contributing training materials and other resources. The NGOs provide volunteers and give talks on life skills while the Red Crescent offers training for first aid. Other alliances have been created with business leadership organizations (providing non-profit loans and project management support to trainees who complete the programme) and an investment bank (providing low-profit loans) (Alsuker, 2015).

To be accepted for the Learning Neighbourhood Programme, 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 courses does not exceed 20% of the total hours. The Ministry of Education is responsible for hiring qualified teachers, such as individuals who work at public schools or adult education centres, as well as people who are retired. All the teachers are trained by the Department of Adult Education so that they know how to deal with adult learners in the classroom (Ministry of Education, 2018).

According to the Ministry of Education (2018), the criteria to implement and to select the appropriate training programmes are as follows: fulfilling the needs of the labour market and the participants' needs for each department, benefiting from community institutions and the volunteers' experience as a community partnership, and achieving the programmes' goals. Adult learners attend class 4 hours in the evening for 5 days per week. The training programmes have many variations, including educational programmes, life skills, awareness skills, and vocational skills. For example, educational training helps individuals to improve their writing and reading as well as to learn a new language. For life skills, trainees receive a set of abilities, such as critical-thinking skills, that enable them to deal with and to adapt to different life situations. For the awareness skills, individuals improve their religious, cultural, health, security, and social levels; an example is maternal and child health. For vocational skills, the programmes are tailored to the labour market's needs, giving trainees the required level of competence. In this study, the vocational skills that were taught at the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes are examined.

Vocational skills

The Learning Neighbourhood Programmes' vocational-skill training prepares women for the labour market and provides them with sustainable skills. These programmes enrich the women's work culture, including values such as enthusiasm and sincerity. The programmes' objectives are to take advantage of free time and to invest it for the benefit of the 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. 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 having a skilled workforce. There is a relationship between quality training and the labour market. 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 the students who completed their higher education joined the labour market by enrolling in informal vocational training. Additionally, vocational programmes support active labour-market policies by supplying the necessary skills that help individuals to find a job or to generate job opportunities (Acevedo, Cruces, Gertler, & Martinez, 2020). In addition to improving economic development, vocational programmes are closely related to human needs such as freedom, justice, participation, and empowerment to develop potential skills. The goal of a vocational skill is to help people take control of their lives and achieve a better quality of life (Nuttavuthisit, 2017).

Several studies confirm the important effect of vocational skills on people's lives (Johnson, 2015; Langer, 2013; Olagbaju, 2020; Wu, 2019). Johnson's (2015) study showed that vocational training programmes have an essential role in empowering rural women to obtain new income and eradicate poverty. In the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it is significant for individuals to have vocational skills to empower people to deal with crises. According to the International Labour Organization (2020), during crisis and epidemic situations, there are some recommendations when the labour market faces challenges. One suggestion is that institutions should provide more training programmes. 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 to obtain opportunities and to take advantage of the resources and possibilities which are available within their families.

The 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).

When women attain knowledge and vocational skills, that training will not only help them to be employable but will also strengthen their empowerment. For example, women who obtain vocational skills improve their social and economic status; therefore, they will be self-confident and financially independent. Vocational skills empower women to have a job and to increase their income for sustainable development and a sense of self-esteem (Ahamad, Sinha, & Shastri, 2016). According to the results of Acevedo et al's study (2020), after women attended vocational training programmes, they became more optimistic and reported higher self-esteem. Boahene (2021) also confirmed that vocational skills promote women's empowerment and decrease poverty.

Theoretical framework

Female empowerment

The term "empowerment" has been used in many studies to denote different meanings. For example, Cox, Pawar, and Pawar (2006) stated that empowerment is an individual transformation that consists of consciousness-raising, self-reliance, and fulfilment. Kabeer (2001) defined women's empowerment as "an expansion in the range of potential choices available to women so that actual outcomes reflect the particular set of choices which the women value" (p. 81). In this study, empowering women is known as achieving a significant change in their lives by integrating women into the workforce to increase financial support, manage community affairs, participate in development activities, be self-reliant, and have time for themselves as individuals. Therefore, empowering is known here as "power" and consciousness-raising.

According to Freire (1973), empowering people helps them to develop a critical conscience. The consciousness results from people's knowledge about themselves as well as their potential and ability to make changes for the reality that is best for them. This consciousness is a gradual and complex process that begins with the acquisition of skills. With

Freire's approach, empowerment consists of three steps. The first step is personal empowerment, which means moving away from inferiority complexes and acknowledging one's own strengths, intelligence, skills, and knowledge. The second step is collective empowerment. It has to do with a person's group affiliation, in particular with how people interact and organise. The third step is community change. People will become more "aware" of their situation, gain access to knowledge and skills, and be able to transform their situation towards sustainable solutions (Stacki & Monkman, 2003). Therefore, when women organise themselves as a group of learners to acknowledge their strengths, intelligence, skills, and knowledge, they will change their situation towards a sustainable solution. Women who are empowered through vocational skills usually become more aware of themselves as well as being able to discuss and express their thoughts and to exchange experiences with others. Then, they can make a plan that helps them to change their lives.

Self-directed learning

It is necessary to acquire and 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. The United Nations (2020) points out that the closure of childcare services and schools puts 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). Garrison (1992) stated that control and responsibility for the adult's education are essential with self-directed learning. At the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes, female adult students should have self-directed learning because the women have self-autonomy to select and to plan their courses as well as to continue learning. Many adults' motivation to learn is self-directed, leading them to meet their needs and to achieve lifelong learning (Knowles, 1975; Mezirow, 1985). Mbagwu, Chukwuedo, and Ogbuanya's (2020) study showed that self-directed learning is a positive predictor of lifelong-learning tendencies.

According to Knowles (1975), self-directed learning promotes responsible and collaborative study as well as helping people to manage their time. For example, individuals share and discuss their opinions and ideas with others to develop skills. People are responsible for their learning; therefore, they manage their time by setting priorities, goals, and plans. Moreover, learners will be more effective, and they usually retain and benefit from training materials efficiently. Also, individuals are self-motivated to learn, which promotes social integration, personal development, competitiveness, job opportunities, and lifelong learning (Knowles, 1975; Peen & Mohammad, 2014).

Methodology

The study was designed to answer the following research questions: How much are Saudi women empowered through vocational skills at the Learning Neighbourhood Programme during the time of COVID-19? 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 Learning Neighbourhood Programmes during the time of COVID-19? What challenges have adult women faced to practice vocational skills during the COVID-19 pandemic? This study focused on female, adult, Saudi learners who enrolled in Makkah, Saudi Arabia's Learning Neighbourhood Programme in order to gain vocational skills. Makkah is the capital of the Makkah region and is the holiest city in Islam. Makkah is the third-largest city in Saudi Arabia. Vocational skills are the knowledge and skills, practical competencies, and attitudes which are necessary to perform a certain trade or occupation in the labour market or as part of people's lives (African Development Bank, 2008). Vocational skills help female students to become self-directed lifelong learners. The 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 that 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 were empowered through vocational skills at the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes during the time of COVID-19.

Instrument and processes

Descriptive, exploratory quantitative research was used and was dependent on a self-administered questionnaire. The instrument was designed through a review of related literature and by looking at the content of the vocational courses at the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes. Some statements were modified to correspond with the COVID-19 pandemic. The instrument was divided into two parts. The first part was 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). Marital status and the number of courses were selected to understand if these variables affected the participants' opinions.

The second part had 23 statements to discover how much the Saudi women were empowered through vocational skills at the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes during the time of COVID-19. This part had a personal and family scale (items 1-12); for instance, "In the time of COVID-19, my vocational skills empower me to become a self-directed learner, a better person during the crisis, and provide my family members with the appropriate digital tools (open Microsoft programs or online search . . .)." There was also an economy and labour-market scale (items 13-23); for example, "In the time of COVID-19, my vocational skills empower me to contribute to my family's expenses, continue upgrading my skills through online courses in this pandemic, and build a small business even staying at home."

The responses were measured with a 5-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The third part was an open-ended question about the challenges that women faced in practicing vocational skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 researchers 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 to the participants.

Sample and Data Collected

The population was comprised of female learners who attended vocational-skill courses at Learning Neighbourhood Programmes in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. The vocational courses had similar content and organisation. As a result of these similarities, the large number of learners, the limited research resources, and the situation during a pandemic, the study was focused in Makkah. The total population was 759 women, and the study sample had 525 participants.

The study's data were collected by using the online instrument that was distributed to all female learners who were only taking a vocational-skills courses at the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes in Makkah. The link to the instrument was sent via an email message and a WhatsApp message. Participation was anonymous, confidential, and independent. The data were collected between May 20 and June 30, 2020.

The limitations for this study were the city (Makkah) where the sample was conducted and the lack of previous studies about this subject. Furthermore, the difficult communication/ lake of face-to face interaction with stakeholders due to the Coronavirus pandemic created another limitation; this action would have allowed the researchers to collect more information about the population.

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. 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 0.70-0.95. The result of using the Cronbach Alpha's coefficient to determine the instrument's reliability was 0.92, indicating

high values of instrument reliability. Table 1 clarifies the reliability value for Cronbach's Alpha.

Table 1: The value of the reliability of Cronbach's Alpha

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Personal and Family Scale	0.89
Economy and Labour 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 Scheffe tests were also utilised for multiple comparisons.

Demographics

The study's respondents were female learners who only attended vocational-skill courses at Learning Neighbourhood Programmes in Makkah. Data about the demographic information's statistics are summarised 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: Demographic information's statistics

Demographic Information	N	%
Marital Status	Single	29.5
	Married	62.3
	Divorced	8.2
Number of Courses	1-2 courses	41.7
	3-4 courses	21.9
	5 or more courses	36.4
Total	525	100

Results

Findings for research question one

How much are Saudi women empowered through vocational skills at the Learning Neighbourhood Programme 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 labour market. The total mean for this scale was 3.60, and the practice level was medium. The means for the economy and labour-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 Labour 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 Learning Neighbourhood Programmes 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 results 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 labour market) and the entire instrument. Table 4 summarises 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 and 6, indicated that there were statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) for the scales (personal and family, and economy and labour market) and the entire instrument. To understand the differences among the arithmetic averages, post-hoc tests were utilised. The post-hoc analysis showed the existence of significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) between 5 or more courses, and 1-2 and 3-4 courses. The benefit of the direction was for women who took 5 or 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 Labour 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

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 Labour 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	

* Significant at $\alpha = 0.05$.**Findings for research question three**

What challenges have adult women faced to practice vocational skills during the COVID-19 pandemic? The findings for research question three are as follows. After coding the data to determine the categories, the researchers identified common themes. These themes were isolation at home, psychological coping, down economic activities, safety precautions, and healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of staying at home, the participants stated that self-isolation affected them; for example, they avoided their family and friends, and they could not travel or enjoy outdoor entertainment. One female learner said, "The biggest challenge is to persuade my children to stay at home. They always insist and want to go to an outdoor to play or to buy a happy meal."

In terms of psychological coping during a pandemic, the participants suffered from several things, such as fearing and adapting to changes in their personal, family, and financial life. Also, the women could not manage their time, and they were bored by the home isolation. Some female learners indicated that they faced a challenge to complete their personal and household work. They also felt anxiety and tension to go and buy their necessities, such as food, or to see their parents. The participants were worried because it was unclear how long the crisis would last. Additionally, a participant said, "I cannot control my children's inconvenience." Moreover, when economic activities, such as

restaurants, movie theaters, and malls closed, the participants faced a lot of difficulties. For example, their personal businesses closed, so they became unemployed. An adult learner illustrated, "When stores had shut down, I could not buy supplies for my personal business in order to serve customers." Another person said, "It is difficult to pay monthly rent."

For safety precautions and healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants stated that they faced challenges when committing to sterilising all things and applying preventive precautions, especially for children. People were to stay away from infected COVID-19 patients, including family members. The participants cancelled doctor appointments due to the fear of injury. One woman asserted, "It is difficult for me to physically contact people during this crisis." Another participant stated, "Some members of society did not follow and restrict safety precautions, so this situation makes us more worried."

Discussion

The study's results indicated that Saudi women were empowered through their vocational skills at the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes during the time of COVID-19. This statement conforms with Saudi Vision 2030 and the aim of the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes that focus on empowering women to benefit from the skills in their lives. Stromquist and Monkman (2013), confirmed that women could be empowered and could produce change when they attend educational, training and community-development initiatives. The respondents showed that they practiced vocational skills which were 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. When women become self-directed learners, they may foster conscientisation; consequently, they will be able to improve and practice their skills as well as participate in community development (Freire, 1973; Mezirow, 1985).

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

example, the training helps women 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 home isolation. This result stressed that, during the crisis, women obtained self-sufficiency and achieved family bonding. According to Ahamad et al.'s (2016) study, developing vocational skills is essential to empower women to improve household productivity, handle their domestic work and care responsibilities, and enhance sustainable development and livelihoods.

For the economy and labour-market scale, the total means were medium, and the means for all items ranged between the high and average levels. Therefore, for the economy and labour market, women practised these skills for an average amount of time. During this difficult time, women focused more on their family requirements. According to UNESCO (2020), during the pandemic, when schools were closed, parents missed work to take care of their children, leading to negative productivity. This study's 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 skills during this difficult time. These findings concurred with Knowles' (1975) thoughts about adult learning. Knowles emphasised that, if social institutions and associations are concerned about adult learning, that interest will help advance the general level of the local culture. Moreover, the findings agreed with the essential goal of the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes and Saudi Vision 2030. This goal supports women to continue lifelong learning and to be self-directed learners. Also, the vision emphasises a culture of volunteering and cooperation; to illustrate, the Saudi government seeks to have one million volunteers each year (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). Stacki and Monkman (2003) confirmed that women may act to change their lives when they have awareness of their situation, acquire skills that enable change, and work together to create change.

Furthermore, the second question illustrated that there were no statistically significant differences among the women's responses

due to marital status. This result emphasised 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 to improve their skills. 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 was for women who took 5 or more courses. This result was logical because, as Knowles (1980) mentioned, adults' experiences are rich resources to motivate people to learn and to practice what they learn. Cervero, Wilson, and Associates (2001) indicated that adult education programmes aim to help maintain, develop, and empower women's knowledge and skills. For the open-ended question about the challenges that learners had regarding the practice of vocational skills during the COVID-19 pandemic, the results showed that women faced challenges with isolation at home, psychological coping, having few economic activities, safety precautions, and healthcare.

Conclusion

Learning Neighbourhood Programmes contribute to more community participation and empower women with the necessary skills to achieve Saudi Vision 2030. These opportunities are implemented in the neighbourhood to provide women with sustainable skills that help them raise their awareness level about the economy, society, and education (Ministry of Education, 2018). One of these abilities is vocational skills, which is the focus of this study. Vocational skills are designed to get unemployed women into the labour 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 into how to reform the programmes. As far as the researchers know, this study is the first one about COVID-19 and women's vocational skills at Learning Neighbourhood Programmes. The study is consistent with the direction of Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasises participation by members of society in order to improve themselves and their country.

According to the findings, the items that participants mentioned least were "achieve self-actualization needs" and "contribute to their family's expenses." Therefore, the women's needs should be considered

when designing vocational skills for the Learning Neighbourhood Programmes. Decision makers should have created more online, vocational-skill courses during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to help female learners face their challenges, continuously improve their skills, and finish their work with high quality. Also, psychological counselling services that help to reduce women's pressures should be established.

It was also obvious that, in the labour market, women's participation was at an average level, so vocational skills should be designed in a way that can encourage and empower women for the 21st Century's labour market. For example, Government officials should create training programmes that help adult women to practice their vocational skills during difficult times. This study suggested that qualitative research should be done to obtain in-depth information about women's utilization of vocational skills in their lives. In addition, periodic interviews should be conducted with the female learners to understand their experiences and to improve the training programmes.

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