

*International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*  
Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 116-135, January 2025  
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.1.6>  
Received Nov 8, 2024; Revised Jan 12, 2025; Accepted Jan 22, 2025

## Women Leaders' Experiences at a Kuwaiti Higher Education Institution: Exploring the Leadership Labyrinth

Khadijah M. H. Alrashidi\*  and Aziah Binti Ismail   
Universiti Sains Malaysia  
Penang, Malaysia

**Abstract.** The *leadership labyrinth* is a metaphor to illustrate the ups and downs women workers face on their journey to leadership. This study aims to discover the nature of leadership labyrinths as experienced by Kuwaiti women leaders within a Kuwaiti higher education institution. A narrative approach rooted in the tenets of qualitative inquiry was used. To gather data, field notes, and semi-structured interviews with three women leaders were conducted at the selected institution. Despite the limited number of participants, their narratives offer valuable insights. Findings show that the Kuwaiti women leaders' experiences in the selected context are shaped by four main thematic domains: personal inner journeys, family support system, organizational dynamics, and societal fabrics. Two major concepts in the women leaders' narratives appeared significantly and played a central impact on the analysis. The first, which is a societal factor, is the power of connections or as socially called *Wasta*. The second, which is an organizational factor, is the notion of *Sea*, which is metaphorically used to symbolize the unknown world of the leadership labyrinth and possibly signify the high levels of uncertainty within the organization. This study contributes to the existing discussion on women's leadership calls for further examination into the experiences of women leaders and recommends creating a merit-based work environment that nurtures women's leadership potential and provides equitable opportunities with clearly announced criteria in leadership selection and advancement.

**Keywords:** Kuwaiti higher education; leadership labyrinth; women leaders

---

\*Corresponding author: *Khadijah M. H. Alrashidi*, [khadijaalrashidi@student.usm.my](mailto:khadijaalrashidi@student.usm.my)

## 1. Introduction

Globally, more women are joining the higher education workforce (Stoet & Geary, 2020). However, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions at higher education institutes compared to their male counterparts (Al-Salem & Speece, 2017; Stoet & Geary, 2020). Kuwaiti women, like many others worldwide, continue to face major barriers to achieving leadership positions, especially in higher education institutions, despite the notable advancements in education and workforce involvement. This problem is noted by the World Economic Forum's (2024) Global Gender Gap Report, which demonstrates that women are still underrepresented in leadership roles in various industries, including educational contexts. It also indicates that in "51% of countries, at least one restriction prevents women from doing the same jobs as men" (p.3). This report indicated that Kuwait is no exception. This is shown by a substantial 30% wage gap in the public sector, and a drop of 46 places in economic parity since 2006. This disparity in Kuwait reflects how merits, credentials, and ability are not mainly considered as must-to-have criteria as they do with gender in leadership position selections (Al-Bahar, 2019; Al-Mughni, 2010; Al-Salem & Speece, 2017; Aseri, 2016). There are unconscious prejudices and rooted societal norms that exist in the Kuwaiti context and hinder women's advancement to leadership positions, frequently. Although the number of women in the workforce is higher than ever, organizational structures and cultural norms are slowing their pursuit to the top creating a labyrinth of leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Sczesny, 2019). The term *leadership labyrinth* is a metaphor introduced by Eagly and Carli (2007) to describe the complex and often unpredictable journey that women navigate in their pursuit of leadership roles. Unlike the glass ceiling, a term used since the 1980s that implies a single barrier, the labyrinth represents the unforeseen package of barriers and obstacles- such as cultural biases and work-life challenges. Women carry an extra burden on their shoulders as they need to identify the necessary roadmap to overcome such a labyrinth and achieve their leadership goals (Harrison et al., 2022). This may serve as a clear indication that gender equality practices need to be revised and explored so that women and men share comparable experiences with equitable burdens and benefits.

Despite increased awareness of gender equality, many women still find it difficult to achieve leadership positions, particularly in Arab countries and in specification Kuwait. (Smakman, 2010). Kuwaiti women who do manage to break through the glass ceiling and reach positions of leadership face numerous challenges. As Eagly and Carli (2007) put it, it is like navigating a "leadership labyrinth", a complex journey with many unexpected turns and unforeseen obstacles. According to the World Economic Forum (2024), women around the world battle in a similar way, but cultural norms and societal expectations in Kuwait make the path particularly challenging. Kuwaiti women need to put more effort into balancing their professional ambitions with societal expectations, including prioritizing family responsibilities over any work-related issue. Kuwaiti women in leadership positions must exhibit resilience and adaptation to demonstrate their power and resolve in overcoming obstacles that men in comparable roles rarely encounter. The labyrinth is not only about external challenges like gender bias but also about

internal dilemmas that force women to constantly weigh the consequences of their ambitions against the norms of society.

When it comes to women and leadership in Kuwait, the issue is not only getting to the top but also dealing with the expectations placed on women after they get there. Both how they are viewed and how they are expected to act are influenced by gendered expectations (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2012). In Kuwait, such acts may be done both openly and discreetly. Women are always juggling the need to exhibit traits of leadership that are typically associated with men, such as assertiveness, while still meeting social norms that demand warmth, compassion, and teamwork. This may drive women in double-bind leadership situations to create a unique leadership style that combines emotional intelligence with strategic decision-making. It is as if they are in a flight or fight situation. While this balancing effort is difficult, it develops inclusive and empathic leadership, which has been found to benefit businesses over time (Al-Salem & Speece, 2017; Al-Zufairi & Alenezi, 2021; Bianco, 2017).

For women in leadership roles, Kuwaiti cultural norms provide a challenging environment. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024 (World Economic Forum, 2024), cultural expectations about gender roles are still strongly embedded in many parts of the world, including the Middle East and North Africa. Kuwaiti women leaders are frequently faced with a challenging balancing act as they work to fulfill traditional expectations regarding family and home duties while also reaching professional excellence. The pressure to “do it all” might be draining, but many Kuwaiti women have overcome these obstacles by redefining what it means to lead (Al-Bahar, 2019; Alzuabi, 2016; Alsaleh, 2022; Aseri, 2016; Alhewail, 2022; Olimat, 2013). They are shifting preconceptions by demonstrating that leadership can be inclusive, family-oriented, and collaborative while maintaining professional excellence. Even if they are happening gradually, these cultural changes are paving the path for more women leaders in the future.

Education is one of the most effective instruments for empowering women in Kuwait. The World Economic Forum (2024) emphasizes how important education is in narrowing the gender gap, and Kuwait is no different. Women in Kuwait are progressively outpacing men in educational achievement, particularly at the university level. (Al-Mughni, 2010; Al-Salem & Speece, 2017; Al-Suwaihel, 2010; Alzuabi, 2016). However, it is not always easy to go from academic achievement to leadership roles in the workplace. Opportunities for ongoing education and professional development are crucial for closing this gap. Leadership training, mentorship programs, and access to global networks provide Kuwaiti women with the skills they need to not just enter but flourish in leadership positions. (Ajemba, 2023; Eagly & Sczesny, 2019). Therefore, this study explores the experiences of women leaders at a Kuwaiti higher education institution and examines how they navigate the leadership labyrinth. The study further seeks to understand the challenges, opportunities, and factors that influence their leadership journeys within this unique context. We further highlighted recommendations that will help more women to realize their potential, stretching the limits of what is possible in Kuwaiti society.

## 2. Study Purpose

This study explores the leadership labyrinth as experienced by women leaders in a Kuwaiti higher education institution. By using a narrative-based qualitative approach, the study aims to delve into the lived experiences of three women leaders navigating the labyrinth of leadership in a male-dominated context. It seeks to understand the nature of twists and turns, ups and downs within the leadership labyrinth faced by Kuwaiti women leaders at a Kuwaiti higher education institution. The main question of this study is: *How do women leaders at a Kuwaiti higher education institute experience the leadership labyrinth?*

## 3. Framework of the Study

We approached this study with an understanding of reality as something subjective, particularly when considering the experiences of people (Berger & Luckmann, 2005). This study, as shown in Table 1, focused on exploring the leadership labyrinth as reflected in the narratives of Kuwaiti women leaders in a preset criteria-based selected context. We do believe, in essence, that there is no single, fixed reality in leadership; everyone's journey is shaped by personal experiences, interactions, and cultural expectations. This ontological basis acknowledges leadership experiences of women in Kuwait like in many societies-are influenced by both external (societal or organizational) and internal (personal) factors. It recognizes that women's leadership is not a straightforward path but one shaped by interrelated factors, including but not limited to cultural norms, gender expectations, and the personal circumstances of each individual. (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2016; de Gialdino, 2009).

**Table 1: Foundational outline of the study**

Concept	Question/Focus	Description
<b>Ontology</b>	What is the reality?	Individual experiences of Kuwaiti women leaders are subjective
<b>Epistemology</b>	What is known & how is it known?	Leadership labyrinth is and can be known through lived experiences and narratives
<b>Theoretical perspective</b>	Which approach is used?	Social Constructivist (Carli & Eagly 2001)
<b>Methodology</b>	What paths & procedures are used to acquire knowledge? Why?	Qualitative research, narrative approach
<b>Method</b>	What tools are used to acquire knowledge of women leaders' experiences? How?	Narrative-based interviews & thematic analysis
<b>Sources of data</b>	What data can be collected?	Narratives & field notes

### **3.1 Epistemology: What is Known & How is it Known?**

What is related to human beings cannot be fully understood unless it is reflected and shown by the people within the phenomenon. To truly understand the essence of the lived experiences of Kuwaiti women in leadership, we must explore their narratives. These women navigate a leadership labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007), a path filled with obstacles, yet not impossible to traverse. Through these lived experiences and narratives, we come to understand what leadership means in the context of their lives. The knowledge gained through this research is not abstract or distant; it is grounded in real, lived moments; revealing both the ups and downs that these women encounter daily. Their narratives provide a contextual understanding of leadership that goes beyond theoretical models, anchoring knowledge in personal and cultural realities.

### **3.2. Theoretical Perspective: Which Approach is Used?**

A social constructivist lens helps to frame these experiences, emphasizing that leadership is not only an individual pursuit but also something deeply influenced by society's expectations and norms. It is an interactive relationship between individuals and society, as it is nearly impossible to separate individuals' experiences from their larger domain, which is society. Carli and Eagly (2001) argue that understanding leadership requires us to look at how individuals and society interact to frame roles and expectations. Kuwaiti women leaders, for example, challenge societal norms simply by assuming leadership roles. Yet, they are simultaneously shaped by the cultural scripts that define what leadership is and who is allowed to lead. An example of Kuwaiti women challenging cultural norms is seen in the judgeship domain, which was revolutionized in 2020 when women joined as judges after decades of struggle and advocacy against a male-dominated society (Alhewail, 2022). This perspective allows us to see how these women navigate the space between conforming to and resisting the expectations placed upon them, reshaping their realities and roles as they do so (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 2005).

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1. Research Design**

This study utilizes narrative-based interviews and thematic analysis to explore personal and cultural dynamics of women leaders' experiences in Kuwait. Narrative interviews was used to allow women to share their stories in their own words, creating space for them to reflect on their experiences in leadership. (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). It is not just about collecting facts, it is about the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of their journeys. Through thematic analysis, common patterns and themes emerge across these narratives, allowing us to identify both shared challenges and unique insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These methods, both the narrative interviewing and the thematic analysis, help in discovering the real experiences of how Kuwaiti women in higher educational institutes lead, adapt, and thrive despite facing significant societal barriers.

To explore these personal and cultural dynamics, we further employ a qualitative methodology, specifically to have a better understanding of the narrative approach. Qualitative research, by nature, digs deeper into the context and

complexity of human experience. It does not seek to generalize but rather to highlight the richness of individual stories. The narrative approach allows the voices of Kuwaiti women leaders to come forward, capturing not just their achievements but also the challenges they face along the way. By focusing on the stories they narrate, we can better understand the nuanced ways they navigate the leadership labyrinth and what insights might be grasped and themes to emerge from their personal experiences (Bhandari, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Buscemi & Buscemi, 2019; Flick, 2018).

#### **4.2 Research Setting and Sampling Strategy**

Each participant brings a unique nature to the study, representing a distinct experience and perspective on leadership. A descriptive profile has been created for each participant, utilizing an overall, holistic approach that aligns with the narratively based design of this research. The narratives provide realistic depictions of the experiences and challenges faced by women leaders at a Kuwaiti higher education institution, offering insights into the leadership labyrinth these women navigate and the context-driven obstacles they work to overcome.

In exploring the journeys of women leaders within a Kuwaiti higher education institution, four participants initially shared their experiences through the leadership labyrinth. However, as part of the data quality process, known as member checking, one participant chose to withdraw after checking her interview emerged themes, due to personal reasons. The final sample of three participants offers an in-depth, rich view of women's leadership experiences, with each narrative highlighting a different approach, set of values, and strategies for overcoming societal and institutional barriers.

As presented in Table 2, participant 1-3 each symbolise a spirit found in Arab literature, with the emphasis on each member's personality and leadership style being unique and dynamic. For example, like a revolutionary Andalusian poet, participant 1 exhibits bravery and boldness in her role, handling it with determination and a strong will to question social norms. Inspired by heroines of Arab novels, participant 2 skilfully combines cooperation and cultural respect with empathy and patience. The third participant is like a storyteller who overcame challenges with resilience and is a representation of flexibility and strength. The diversity and depth of these women's experiences are reflected in each name. The profiles of these three women reflect not only their roles but also the unique path they each navigate in the Kuwaiti higher education leadership landscape. The personal and professional backgrounds, reflected in their chosen names, enhance our understanding of how each participant's leadership journey is shaped by cultural and societal contexts.

**Table 2: Participants' features**

Category	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
<b>Years of experience</b>	28 Years	30+ Years (exact number not disclosed)	15-25 Years (offered as a range)
<b>Marital status</b>	Single	Married	Married (Struggles with partner's fixed mindset)
<b>Interview platform</b>	Café (Chosen by Participant)	Participant's Office	Researcher's Office (requested by the participant)
<b>Interview time frame</b>	65 minutes	38 minutes	83 minutes
<b>Approach to leadership labyrinth</b>	Strategic, proactive (Deals with it as a "Bomb Field")	Collaborative, inclusive	Adaptive, resilient
<b>Language use</b>	Assertive, commanding	Empathetic, persuasive	Metaphorical
<b>Approach against men and society</b>	Challenges gender biases and societal norms openly	Advocates for gender equality while acknowledging societal and religious barriers	Confronts patriarchal structures with wit and resilience
<b>Narrative genre</b>	Dramatic and thriller (Fluctuated Experience)	Reflective and stable Experience	Mystery and thriller (Progressive Experience)

### 4.3 Research Instruments

In this study, narrative inquiry and field notes were utilized as primary research instruments to collect qualitative data. Both methods were designed to capture the lived experiences of women leaders and provide rich, context-specific insights into how they navigate the leadership labyrinth within the specific socio-cultural and organizational environment of Kuwaiti higher education. The collected narratives were transcribed and analyzed thematically, focusing on recurring themes such as empowerment, challenges, identity negotiation, and societal influence. These narratives were then contextualized within the broader leadership labyrinth concept to illustrate how the participants navigated both visible and invisible barriers. By using narrative inquiry, the study captured not only the challenges but also the resilience, strategies, and growth these women experienced as leaders.

As shown in Table 1, the main source of data comes from the narrative-based interviews, supplemented by field notes. The stories told in interviews provide a direct window into the lived experiences of women leaders. Field notes, taken during interviews, add a layer of understanding by capturing observations about the context. They are used to capture non-verbal cues and contextual nuances;

they can be body language, tone, or environmental details. Creswell and Poth (2016) emphasize that field notes help capture rich, contextual information that supports a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. These qualitative data sources, narrative interviews, and field notes, provide rich insights into not just what these women say but how they express themselves and interact with the context around them. Through these detailed lenses, this study aims to capture the essence of the leadership labyrinth as experienced by Kuwaiti women leaders.

*“Stories are just data with a soul”* (Brené Brown, as cited in Saldaña, 2014, p. 172). This quote sums up the methodological approach used in this study in its entirety. The study adopts a narrative methodology rooted in qualitative inquiry, aiming to capture women leaders’ lived experiences, covering both the technical aspects and the contextual features of their roles. This way of narratively approaching the phenomenon of women’s leadership labyrinth allows for a deeper examination of complexities by adding personal stories to the data, that statistical analysis might miss (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Saldaña, 2014). Three women leaders at a technical higher education institute within the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET), were purposefully chosen for their relevance to the study’s aim and as they are considered rich sources of information. The participants volunteered to take part in semi-structured interviews, with field notes used along the way to gather additional data. For conclusions extraction, a holistic content narrative approach presented by (Lieblich et al., 1998) is adopted which deals with three main aspects: typical themes; Contradictions; Unmentioned things.

To ensure data quality, procedures recommended by Creswell (2015) for qualitative research were used, which included member checking, rich description, and researcher reflexivity. This made it easier to keep our prejudices in check while maintaining the needed quality to evaluate the participants’ stories truthfully. Furthermore, my research’s lens included Islamic gender equality values, which are fundamental to the research. From this point, policies inside organizations and relationships within society should reflect the equal value, rights, and obligations that men and women share as equal entities. The interviews allowed participants to reflect on their leadership experiences in a way that promotes their perspectives while adhering to traditional and cultural values. This was critical for us as researchers who view women’s empowerment as a complementary collaboration between genders rather than a power struggle. The metaphor of the leadership labyrinth, as used by Carli and Eagly (2001), was specifically chosen to convey the complex and nonlinear character of the leadership journeys of women leaders. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Kuwaiti women leaders and what challenges to overcome or strategies to provide solutions that can result in a more welcoming and merit-based leadership environment in Kuwait and any context-related contexts.



#### 4.4 Data Collection

The study utilizes a narrative approach grounded in qualitative inquiry. Data was gathered through field notes and semi-structured interviews with three women leaders. The context is a technical higher education institution at the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET). It is purposefully selected for its relevance and rich information environment with women leaders who are currently in leadership positions. The participants were known through mutual friends, and we arranged to meet once or twice before the actual interview to break the ice and build trust. Saldaña (2014) asserted that if the participants have mutual connections with the researcher, this *“may be better to establish an unspoken bond with the researcher and maybe more willing to openly disclose perspectives on sensitive matters of culture”* (p. 113)

Each interview was conducted using Jovchelovitch and Bauer’s (2000) protocol, as seen in Table 3, allowing the participants’ stories to emerge naturally and reflectively. In the preparation phase, we explored each participant’s professional context, developing open and thoughtful questions to encourage storytelling. This groundwork allowed the interviews to flow with curiosity, welcoming each woman’s unique perspective without imposing a rigid structure.

The initiation phase began with prompts to ease each participant into sharing her narrative. Walada, a Vice Dean in a technical major, shared her strategic, proactive approach, describing her journey as a “bomb field”. Her language was assertive and dramatic, revealing resilience and a determination to challenge societal norms. Om Saad, Head of the Department of Humanities and Arts, presented a collaborative and inclusive story, describing her empathetic leadership style, balancing respect for cultural values with advocacy for gender equality. Meanwhile, Scheherazade, a Head of Department and Quality Assurance Leader, used metaphorical language to portray her resilience and adaptability, framing her journey as a mystery with unexpected challenges.

In the main narration phase, the researcher encouraged participants to share freely, with only nonverbal cues to maintain the flow. The intelligent transcription approach captured the essence of each story without needing verbatim recording, allowing each participant’s personality to shine through, whether it was Walada’s bold, commanding tone, Om Saad’s reflective steadiness, or Scheherazade’s nuanced, metaphorical expressions. Each narrative provided insight into their distinct leadership styles and approaches to navigating cultural and institutional challenges.

During the questioning phase, the researcher kept questions open-ended, like “What happened next?” This approach gave the participants room to expand on their experiences, allowing personal and professional insights to emerge without interference. Avoiding “Why” questions helped keep the focus on the participants’ flow, creating a space for nuanced, unfiltered reflections on their leadership journeys. In the concluding talk, with no recording in place, the conversation became more casual, and the researcher could ask “Why” questions to gather additional context. Immediate memory protocols captured fresh impressions and reflections, preserving the depth of each participant’s narrative.

Through this thoughtful approach, each participant's profile comes to life, illustrating the richness of their experiences navigating leadership in a setting where cultural expectations, societal norms, and ambition intersect in complex ways. The open structure of the interview phases and the nonverbatim transcription method helped to capture the depth of each woman's journey. This approach allowed not only the exploration of personal challenges but also the uncovering of broader patterns that shape Kuwaiti women's leadership experiences, revealing the complexities of their resilience and adaptability.

This perspective laid the foundation for a holistic thematic analysis, enabling the study to move from individual stories to a holistic understanding of shared experiences based on the holistic content approach to narrative data proposed by Lieblich et al. (1998). By examining each narrative with an eagle-eye (holistic) approach, typical themes, contradictions, and unspoken insights began to emerge. These themes, rooted in both personal convictions and societal pressures, paint a rich picture of the complex balance Kuwaiti women leaders maintain between their aspirations and the cultural and institutional barriers they face.

#### **4.5 Data Quality Assurance**

To ensure the credibility of the study, Creswell's (2014) strategies were implemented, focusing on member checking, rich descriptions, and researcher self-reflexivity. Member checking involved returning to participants after interviews to confirm that their stories were captured accurately, fostering a sense of collaboration, and ensuring the authenticity of their experiences. To enable readers to understand the experiences of the women leaders, we employed rich descriptions. Reflecting our personal beliefs and viewpoints ensures that data is interpreted clearly. We ensured that the participants' real-life experiences were discovered clearly and truthfully by keeping them at the center of the research and by remaining conscious of my own opinions and perspectives.

#### **4.6 Researcher's Self Reflexivity**

This study is deeply rooted in *Islamic thoughts* toward gender equality. We do have a strong belief that Allah has created us with the same equal values, rights, and obligations. As the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated, "النساء، "سفانق الرجال"، meaning women are the counterparts of men; this principle is widely accepted as a general Islamic premise. This kind of equality must be well reflected in our societal interactions and the way organizational policies are created.

We do advocate women's empowerment, in a sense where women and men are two equitable parties that form one entity in a real unity: with no clashes of power. This unity and the act of both men and women completing each other is a main pillar in pursuing the advancement of societal fabrics and the progress of humanity toward achieving social justice. With a complementary perspective, where men and women mutually support each other, we intended to explore women leaders' experiences in a Kuwaiti higher institution. This exploratory study aims to discover the women leaders' experiences of the ups and downs they face through their leadership labyrinth.

We purposefully chose the metaphor created by Carli and Eagly (2001) to indicate the multifaceted nature of the leadership journey taken by women leaders as it may disclose overt and covert realities. We see a world in which men and women make equal contributions to the growth of society and the well-being of humanity. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify those turns and twists, ups and downs, standing in the way of this perspective and to suggest possible practices towards a more equal, inclusive society in which leadership merits-based rather than gender-based notion.

#### 4.7 Interviewing Protocol

Informant consent was applied and Jovchelovitch and Bauer's (2000) Model is adopted for interviewing, with one main question: What do you feel about being a leader? The study follows Jovchelovitch and Bauer's (2000) narrative interviewing protocol as presented in Table 3, the interviewer maintains neutrality and refrains from directing or interrupting participants during the primary narrative phase, enabling stories to emerge spontaneously and genuinely. By respecting each participant's story and reducing the possibility of prejudice, this non-intrusive method provides a deeper, more complex knowledge of their experiences. To further improve the depth and dependability of the data gathered, a memory technique is used right after each interview to record details and nuanced feelings that could otherwise go unnoticed. By giving participants' voices top priority, this approach makes sure that their experiences are fairly and truthfully conveyed.

**Table 3: Jovchelovitch and Bauer's (2000) interview model**

<b>Interview phase</b>	<b>Rules</b>
<b>Preparation</b>	Exploring the fields, Forming exmanent questions
<b>Initiation</b>	Formulating the initial topic for narration
<b>Main narration</b>	No interruptions; Only non-verbal encouragement; wait for the coda.
<b>Questioning phase</b>	Only "What happened then?" No opinion and attitude questions No arguing on contradictions No Why-questions Exmanent into immanent questions
<b>Concluding talk</b>	Stop recording Why questions allowed Memory protocol immediately after the interview

To promote a welcoming and open setting, the interviewing protocol lays a strong emphasis on creating a supportive environment in which participants feel comfortable sharing their own experiences and views. As previously stated, some of the participants and I have mutual friends, so we met before the actual interview to help break the ice and create trust. Building this relationship is crucial, especially considering how complex the topic of leadership in a male-dominated environment is.

#### 4.8 Data Analysis

The narrative approach serves as a gateway for voices to be heard; it is a storytelling act that allows people to articulate their experiences and, more importantly, show resistance to power by emphasizing the social aspect of discourse. Rather than being submissive or easily dominated, this approach highlights a dynamic form of storytelling that invites engagement and exchange. It moves beyond the mere listing of evidence or information, focusing instead on the art of selection and suggestion to convey meaning. In this approach, texts are composed of fragments or brief excerpts, and these fragments unite to form broader topics and themes. Rather than following a rigid structure, these fragments come together to create a flexible framework that invites deeper analysis and discussion. (Bhattarai, 2020; Erlach & Müller, 2020; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Lieblich et al., 1998; McKibben & Breheny, 2023).

Central to the narrative approach are key concepts such as *codes*, *patterns*, *themes*, and *categories*. These form the building blocks of discursive structures that bring together diverse streams of discourse centered around shared topics. Within these structures, each topic branches into multiple subtopics, creating layers of meaning. The flexibility of this approach allows for themes to be revisited, reframed, and summarized in new ways, continuously evolving in meaning and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Saldaña, 2014). This adaptability and focus on the connections between themes make the narrative approach a powerful tool for exploring complex ideas in a structured yet fluid manner. In this study, Interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, as shown in Figure 1.

##### *The analysis circle*

In the analysis, two main codes were created: E for Emotions and A for Actions. As the study progressed, recurring patterns of emotions and actions started to stand out. These patterns naturally grouped into four main categories, as shown later on in Figure 3, namely: personal inner journeys, family support system, organizational dynamics, and societal fabrics, reflecting common emotional responses and actions shared by the women leaders. From these categories, meaningful themes emerged, capturing the essence of their experiences, and offering insights that almost read like proverbs. The analysis circle depicting the analysis methodology employed in this study is depicted in Figure 2.

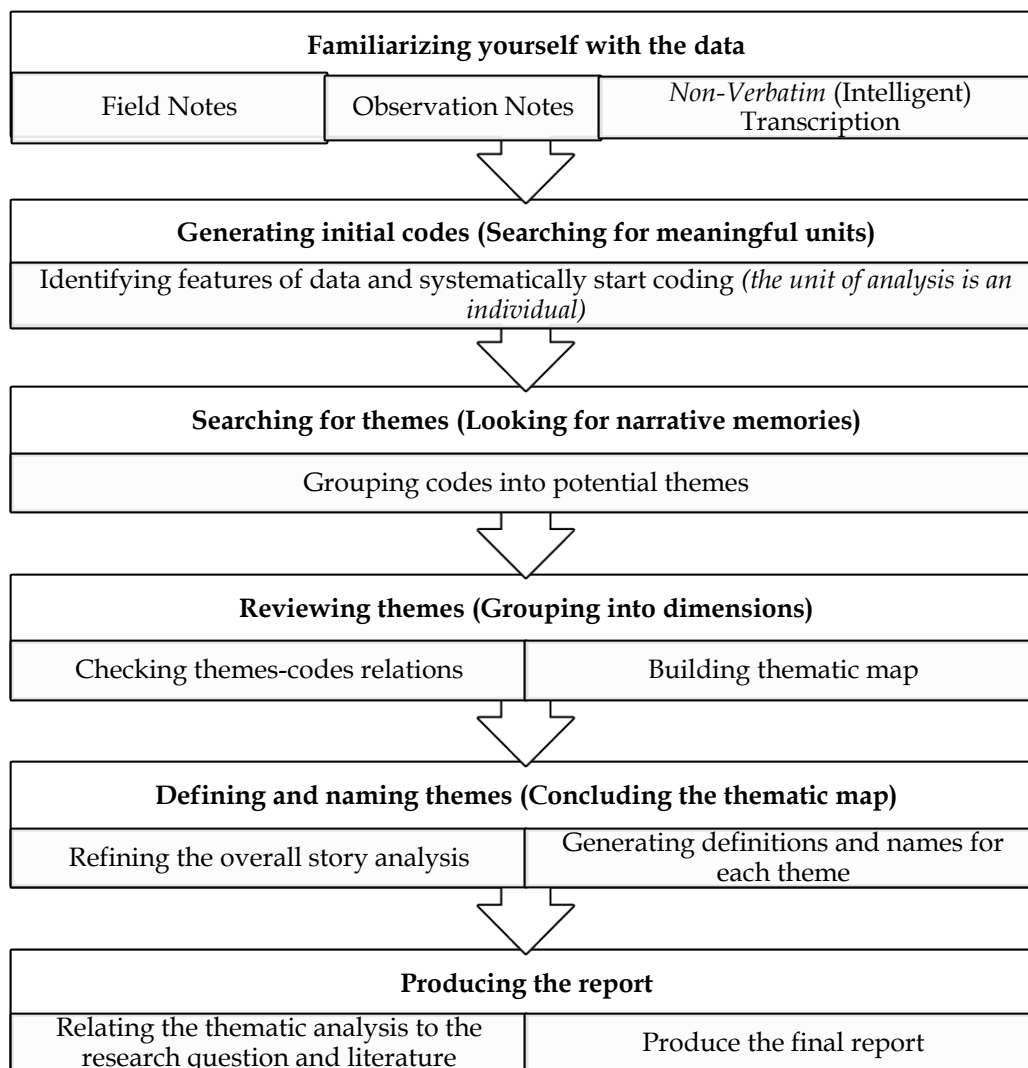


Figure 1: Braun and Clarke's (2006) model

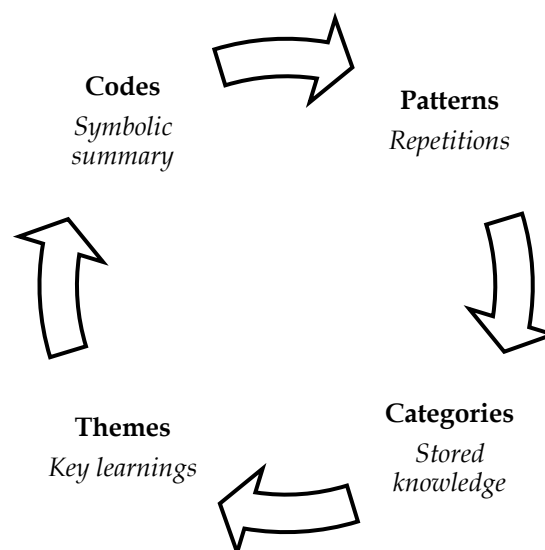


Figure 2: Analysis circle

According to Alnawraj (2023), the main characteristics of the narrative approach include that any narrative discourse is interactive and non-submissive to being dominated. The construction of the narrative does not rely on redundancy or merely listing indicative combinations; instead, it focuses on the art of selection and evocation. Texts form fragments, and these fragments shape topics and themes that create discursive tables. The analysis circle, as depicted in Figure 2, represents the dynamic, iterative narrative analysis methodology employed in this study. This method, which is based on Alnawraj's (2023) ideas, sees the story as dynamic and impervious to oversimplified interpretations. Instead of taking a straight line, the analysis is formed by thoughtfully chosen fragments of participant narratives that, when combined, create significant themes and insights. A fuller, more comprehensive picture of the experiences of women leaders is produced by revisiting recurrent concepts and feelings, which deepens knowledge. This circular framework captures the dynamic nature of the study. Table 4 presents a summary of the analysis circle.

**Table 4: Description of the analysis circle**

Stage	Description
<b>Codes</b>	Two main codes were established: E = Emotions and A = Actions.
<b>Patterns</b>	Patterns were identified as recurring sets of emotions and actions.
<b>Categories</b>	The patterns, representing similar emotional and actionable concepts, were grouped into four main categories.
<b>Themes</b>	From these categories, themes emerged based on the experiences of women leaders, providing proverb-like insights.

A clear simplified overview of our analysis of the experiences that women leaders shared, showing how we went from particular details to insightful observations. First, we categorized the information into two main codes: Actions (A) and Emotions (E). Recurring patterns emerged as we dug deeper, demonstrating consistent behavioral and emotional reactions across many narratives. The four primary groups, as shown later on in Figure 3, emerged from these patterns and emphasized recurring themes in their experiences. We discovered deeper themes, almost like proverbs or life lessons, that captured the spirit of their leadership experiences from these categories. This method assisted us in transforming individual narratives into a shared comprehension of the distinct trajectories, obstacles, and Kuwaiti women's leadership labyrinth.

#### **4.9 Ethical Considerations:**

Ethical clearance was sought for and obtained from the Institution Review Board of the institution before the commencement of the study. A letter of introduction was obtained from the Dean where the study was carried out. An informed consent to participate was sought from participants (informed consent for all illiterate participants was obtained. The nature and objectives of the study were explained to each participant and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity was given, to obtain evidence-based, informed, written consent for participation in the study by way of signing the consent form. Participants were made to understand

that participation in the study was completely voluntary ab initio, and individuals who did not consent to participate in the study were exempted. The respondents' right to voluntary participation and right to withdraw at any stage of the study, or absolute refusal to participate in the study was equally emphasized and duly respected. Finally, respondents were made to understand that participation in this study would not cause any physical harm to them, and they understood that as part of the benefit of participating in the study, findings from the study would be used by policymakers to formulate and implement policies and practice. The research was also conducted in accordance with Helsinki Ethical Principles for Medical Research involving human participants and the local guidelines as outlined in the ethical approval guidelines.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The results of this study highlight the nature of the leadership labyrinth that Kuwaiti women face within a higher education institution, reflecting a broader cultural framework that influences gender and leadership. Unlike a single barrier, this labyrinth represents a complex, multi-dimensional path with numerous twists and turns, shaped by cultural expectations, societal norms, and organizational structures specific to Kuwait. Through the lenses of three women leaders within a Kuwaiti higher education institute, thematic insights emerged to reflect the mosaic nature of the leadership labyrinth as follows: 1) personal inner journeys, 2) family support system; 3) organizational dynamics, and 4) societal fabrics.

These emerging themes bring to light the complex balance between personal beliefs and societal burdens, underscoring the layered nature of women's leadership in Kuwait's educational sector. The insights gained from these themes showcase the complex, layered nature of women's leadership in Kuwait's educational sector. The emerging themes came from the four main categorical themes as shown in Figure 3.

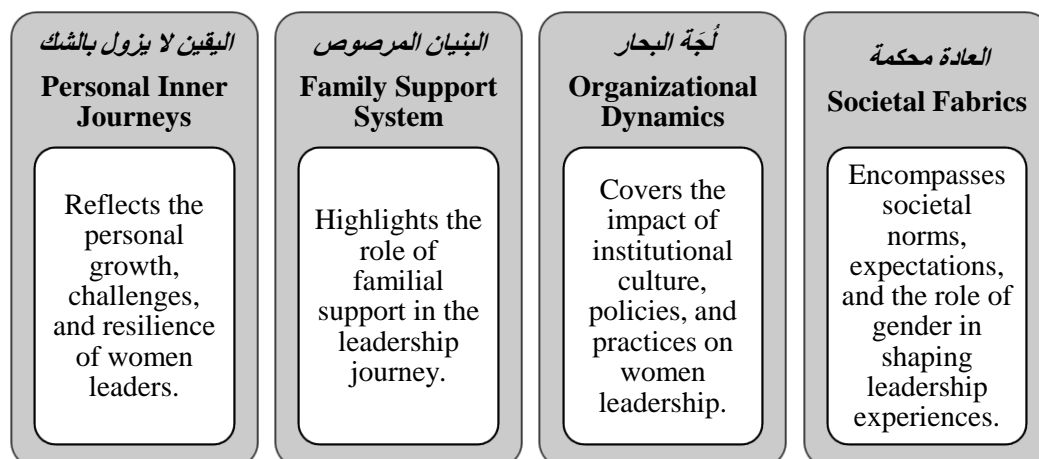


Figure 3: Thematic categorical outline

The thematic analysis revealed several recurring themes and patterns across the narratives, illustrating both shared and unique challenges faced by women leaders. The thematic outlined in Figure 3, represent four main thematic

categories: Personal Inner Journeys; Family Support System; Organizational Dynamics; and Societal Fabrics. The personal journeys of these women demonstrated a strong emotional dimension, reflecting psychological dilemmas both overtly and covertly. Each of these categories highlights the layered interactions between personal, social, and professional forces, showing how they collectively shape the complex reality of women's leadership in Kuwait. These themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the forces influencing these women, from internal struggles to societal expectations, making their journeys both challenging and unique.

Throughout their narratives, the participants revealed recurring themes of self-doubt and imposter syndrome, touching on personal and professional challenges that impacted their confidence. All three expressed varying degrees of self-doubt, with Participant 2 (Om Saad) sharing feelings of guilt for not dedicating enough time to her family: "حيل أكون مقصرة مع عيالي واحفادي... إدارة المؤسسات مو شي سهل" ["I feel so guilty for not spending enough time with my children and grandchildren... managing institutions isn't easy"]. Participant 1 (Walada Bint Al Mustkafi), in contrast, conveyed a deep sense of exhaustion, stating, "انهد حيلي... مهما سويتني ما ينفع" ["I'm worn out... no matter what you do, it's never enough"]. The participants also highlighted the role of *Wasta* (power of connections) in shaping their professional trajectories, emphasizing how social connections remain deeply intertwined with career advancement. One participant noted the challenge: "ربعمهم ما يدرون عنج - ما ينفع لازم تشوفين احد- مستحيل اذا ما عنج واسطة" ["Their circle – unaware of you – nothing works; you need to know someone; it's impossible without connections"]. Adding to these dynamics, the metaphor of the sea emerged as a powerful symbol, representing the unknown and unpredictable nature of their organizational environments. As Participant 3 (Scheherazade) expressed, "لازم" "تعويمين - صرت مثل الميدة - غرقنا وبعدها حيينا" ["You have to swim – I've become like driftwood – we drowned, but we came back to life"], illustrating the resilience required to navigate the turbulent waters of leadership.

The concept of personal inner journeys in the thematic analysis of women is central to understanding the leadership trajectories of women in Kuwait (Alzuabi, 2016). Women often face the challenge of reconciling societal expectations with personal ambitions and self-perceptions. Literature has shown that personal growth, self-efficacy, and emotional resilience are critical for women in leadership roles (Falk-Rafael, 2001). Many women continue to navigate concerns between adhering to traditional gender roles while also striving for professional success. These reflective journeys are shaped by an ongoing negotiation between ambition, self-doubt, and personal empowerment (Lwanba et al., 2022). However, the emotional and psychological aspects of leadership, including the development of leadership self-concept, are significant in the leadership labyrinth that Kuwaiti women face. The study has emphasized the importance of self-awareness in the leadership development of Kuwaiti women, noting that a key determinant of leadership success is the ability to overcome internalized barriers such as low self-esteem or societal-induced limitations. This is similarly seen in a study like Harley (2024), which shows that women often embark on personal journeys to cultivate inner strength, which aids their navigation through organizational and societal



obstacles. Over time, such self-reflection and internal growth enhance their leadership capabilities and contribute to more successful leadership outcomes.

However, the concept of family support and organizational dynamics significantly influence women's ability to ascend in leadership roles and is often nuanced in countries like Kuwait. Studies by Alzuabi (2016), Delgado-Herrera et al. (2024), and Bullough (2024) show that women with supportive family environments, particularly from husbands or fathers, tend to experience fewer barriers in pursuing leadership roles. In Kuwait, the role of women in leadership is often accepted more readily when supported by male figures, who endorse their leadership aspirations and offer the flexibility necessary for women to balance family and career. Further, women in families where traditional gender roles are strictly adhered to face more resistance in pursuing leadership positions, which can create significant tension between personal ambitions and family obligations (Trivedi et al., 2024). The role of family in shaping leadership pathways is closely linked to traditional values, where women's roles are often defined by caregiving and nurturing duties. This underscores that family plays a pivotal role in the leadership trajectories of women in Kuwait, serving both as a source of support and a potential source of constraint. Research suggests that family dynamics can either facilitate or hinder women's professional advancement, depending on the extent to which family members, particularly male relatives, support their aspirations (Koçak et al., 2021).

These factors contribute to the "glass ceiling" effect, where women are limited in their upward mobility despite qualifications and skills. The leadership experiences of women are often shaped by a complex interaction of personal, familial, organizational, and societal factors. The themes of personal inner journeys, family support systems, organizational dynamics, and societal fabrics highlight the multifaceted nature of the leadership labyrinth that women in Kuwait navigate. While significant progress has been made in advancing women's leadership opportunities, challenges persist, particularly in terms of societal expectations and organizational structures. To enhance women's leadership participation, future efforts must focus on creating more inclusive organizational environments, reinforcing family support for women's professional ambitions, and continuing to challenge and change societal norms that restrict women's leadership potential. The mosaic nature of the leadership labyrinth reflects both the opportunities and obstacles that Kuwaiti women face in their leadership journeys. These insights emphasize the constant tension between resilience and societal expectations, highlighting the complex interplay between individual agency and external limitations in their leadership journeys.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study, using a narrative approach and thematic analysis, sheds light on the unique challenges that Kuwaiti women leaders in higher education face. Their stories reveal a complex mix of personal, organizational, and societal obstacles, with recurring themes such as psychological pressures, the influence of social connections (*Wasta*), and the uncertainty of navigating an often unpredictable organizational landscape, which they described as "*the Sea*". Supporting these

leaders starts with personal development opportunities, such as encouraging self-reflection and building networks that boost confidence and equip them to handle the demands of leadership. On the organizational side, creating clear, merit-based criteria for leadership roles and reducing ambiguity around advancement would help ease the pressures they face. Empowerment programs and policies that nurture emotional resilience and address issues like imposter syndrome can also make a meaningful difference in their journey.

Looking ahead, further research could deepen our understanding of how societal norms shape women's leadership experiences and explore strategies for navigating similar challenges in other cultural settings. At a broader level, society can play a key role in supporting these leaders by promoting merit over-reliance on connections (*Wasta*) and fostering positive public perceptions of women leaders. Awareness campaigns that highlight the value women bring to leadership can help create a more supportive environment for current and future leaders. Together, these steps can create a more inclusive, merit-based path for women in Kuwaiti higher education leadership.

## 7. References

- Ajemba, M. N. (2023). Women in leadership, gender inequality in Nigeria, diversity, and new trend of women in leadership positions in industries around the world. *GSC Advanced Research and Reviews*, 14(01), 078–087. <https://doi.org/10.30574/gscarr.2023.14.1.0013>
- Al-Bahar, S. (2019, April 19). Kuwaiti women's leadership yet to be reflected in their empowerment in business. *Kuwait Times*. <https://www.kuwaittimes.com/kuwaiti-women-leadership-yet-to-be-reflected-in-their-empowerment-in-business-shaikha-al-bahar/>
- Alhewail, F. (2022). Kuwaiti women's entry into judgeship in 2020: The long journey from law graduates in 1967 to public prosecutors in 2013, and what happened on the path towards the judiciary. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, 13(3), 1085–1117. <https://doi.org/10.35295/osls.iisl/0000-0000-0000-1362>
- Al-Mughni, H. (2010). Kuwait. In S. Kelly, & J. Breslin (Eds.), *Women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress amid resistance* (pp. 223–249). Freedom House; Rowman & Littlefield. [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline\\_images/Kuwait.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/Kuwait.pdf)
- Alnawraj, H. (2023). *Siyāsāt al-khiṭāb.. Fuṣūl taṭbīqiyya [Politics of Discourse Analysis: Practical Chapters]*. Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization
- Alsaleh, A. (2022). Violence against Kuwaiti women. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(5–6), NP3628–NP3649. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520916280>
- Al-Salem, A., & Speece, M. (2017). Women in leadership in Kuwait: A research agenda. *Gender in Management*, 32(2), 141–162. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-02-2016-0025>
- Al-Suwaihel, O. E. (2010). Kuwaiti female leaders' perspectives: The influence of culture on their leadership. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 3(3), 29–40. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1072604.pdf>
- Alzuabi, A. Z. (2016). Sociopolitical participation of Kuwaiti women in the development process: Current state and challenges ahead. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 42(5), 689–702. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2016.1212775>
- Al-Zufairi, A. M., & Alenezi, A. (2021). The impact of organizational culture on the decision-making process for Kuwait University. *China-USA Business Review*, 20(3), 107–125. <https://doi.org/10.17265/1537-1514/2021.03.001>

- Aseri, G. M. (2016). *Kuwaiti women's resistance to patriarchy in the 21st century: An exploration of women's rights from the perspectives of Kuwaiti women* [Doctoral thesis]. Swansea University, Wales. <http://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa41149>
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Doubleday & Company.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (2005). The problem of the sociology of knowledge. *Knowledge: Critical Concepts*, 5, 123. <https://shorturl.at/9CvjK>
- Bhandari, P. (2020, June 19). What is qualitative research? Methods and examples. *Scribbr*. <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/qualitative-research>
- Bhattarai, P. (2020). Discourse, power and truth: Foucauldian perspective. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 5(5), 1427–1430. <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.55.13>
- Bianco, C. (2017). Education, a mirror of women advancement: The case of Kuwait. Euro-Gulf Information Centre. <https://shorturl.at/R05pM>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bullough, A., Guelich, U., Manolova, T. S., & Schjoedt, L. (2022). Women's entrepreneurship and culture: Gender role expectations and identities, societal culture, and the entrepreneurial environment. *Small Business Economics*, 58(2), 985–996. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-020-00429-6>
- Buscemi, E. (2019). *Reforming narratives: Kuwaiti women's cultural engagement and political subjectivity in the post-Arab Spring*.
- Carli, L. L., & Eagly, A. H. (2001). Gender, hierarchy, and leadership: An introduction. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 629–636.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2015). *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*. Sage Publications. <https://www.manaraa.com/upload/d11df289-14cd-482b-a413-54c290668e4b.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2020). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- de Gialdino, I. V. (2009). Ontological and epistemological foundations of qualitative research. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-10.2.1299>
- Delgado-Herrera, M., Aceves-Gómez, A. C., & Reyes-Aguilar, A. (2024). Relationship between gender roles, motherhood beliefs and mental health. *PLoS One*, 19(3), e0298750. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0298750>
- Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2012). Social role theory. *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, 2, 458–476.
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). *Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders*. Harvard Business School Press
- Eagly, A. H. (2007). Female leadership advantage and disadvantage: Resolving the contradictions. *Psychology of women quarterly*, 31(1), 1–12.
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573>
- Eagly, A. H., & Sczesny, S. (2019). Gender roles in the future? Theoretical foundations and future research directions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, Article 1965. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01965>

- Erlach, C., & Müller, M. (2020). Narrative interviews: The big stories. In C. Erlach, & M. Müller (Eds.), *Narrative organizations* (pp. 87–93). Springer Berlin Heidelberg. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-61421-1\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-61421-1_7)
- Falk-Rafael, A. R. (2001). Empowerment as a process of evolving consciousness: A model of empowered caring. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 24(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00012272-200109000-00004>
- Flick, U. (2018). *An introduction to qualitative research* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Harley J. (2024). Developing self-awareness for effective nurse leadership. *Nursing Management*. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nm.2024.e2124>
- Harrison, M., Tran, D. N., Pena, A., Iyengar, S., Ahmed Abubakar, A., Hoernke, K., John-Akinola, Y. O., Kiplagat, S., Marconi, A. M., Vaghaiwalla, T. M., Kalbarczyk, A., & Weinberg, J. L. (2022). Strategies to improve women’s leadership preparation for early career global health professionals: Suggestions from two working groups. *Annals of Global Health*, 88(1), 53. <https://doi.org/10.5334/aogh.3705>
- Jovchelovitch, S., & Bauer, M. (2000). Narrative interviewing. In M. W. Bauer, & G. Gaskell (Eds.), *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound*. Sage Publications. <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/2633/1/Narrativeinterviewing.pdf>
- Koçak, O., Ak, N., Erdem, S. S., Sinan, M., Younis, M. Z., & Erdoğan, A. (2021). The role of family influence and academic satisfaction on career decision-making self-efficacy and happiness. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(11), Article 5919. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18115919>
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Sage.
- Lwamba, E., Shisler, S., Ridlehoover, W., Kupfer, M., Tshabalala, N., Nduku, P., Langer, L., Grant, S., Sonnenfeld, A., Anda, D., Eyers, J., & Snilstveit, B. (2022). Strengthening women’s empowerment and gender equality in fragile contexts towards peaceful and inclusive societies: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 18(1), e1214. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1214>
- McKibben, E., & Breheny, M. (2023). Making sense of making sense of time: Longitudinal narrative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231160928>
- Olimat, M. S. (2013). Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly. *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 12(3), 76–95. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol12/iss3/6>
- Saldaña, J. (2014). *Thinking qualitatively: Methods of mind*. Sage Publications.
- Smakman, D. (2010). *Book review: R. Bassiouney, Arabic sociolinguistics*. Edinburgh University Press. <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/18685>
- Stoet, G., & Geary, D. C. (2020). Gender differences in the pathways to higher education. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 117(25), 14073–14076. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2002861117>
- Trivedi, A., Aggarwal, K., Chaudry, A., Ibrahim, S., Khan-Patel, A., Lal, N., Nasim, M., Senya, H., Teli, S., Thakrar, N., & Thomson, C. (2024). ‘Can you have it all?’ Exploring perceived gender roles in leadership through the lens of the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer’s clinical fellows 2023/24. *BMJ Leader*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/leader-2024-001066>
- World Economic Forum. (2024). *Global Gender Gap Report 2024*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/in-full/>