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Working with Female Participants for Field Work Photographic practice in Saudi Arabia. A Case Study

By Lujain Yousef Mirza
Princess Noura Bint Abdulrahman University

Abstract- My research project documented in this article explores the visual representation of ten Saudi women living in Saudi Arabia. Photography is used as a medium and a critical tool to examine and reframe the representations of Saudi women in a collaborative process. The aims of the project are to understand the place of photography in Saudi women's experience and self-perception; to analyse their response to its creative potential as a tool of self-presentation; to reveal the full potential of creative collaborative photography in research and to explore the complexity and diversity of Saudi women's identities. My research will nuance and contradict the stereotypes about Saudi women depicted as either victims of Islam or the state, covered in black veils, or wealthy women enjoying the luxuries of oil wealth and will illustrate the diversity and complexity of Saudi women who range from extreme religious fundamentalists to young, modern, liberal feminists. Through the women involved, the project introduces a complex and dynamic picture of Saudi society today.

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Lujain Yousef Mirza

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I. Introduction and Background of the Study

The participants in the research were ten Saudi women, ranging in age from 20 to 61, all educated and located in the capital Riyadh at the time of this research. The research employed a qualitative methodology using photography as part of a collaborative process. Photo-elicitation interviews were used as the principal means of data collection in the first stages and were followed with a creative photographic collaboration. Photo-elicitation is a method of using photographs to guide interviews by asking and answering questions about social, cultural and behavioural features (Suchar 1997, p.34). It has the ability to create an interactive dialogue through well-constructed questions. Hence, the key success factors are an understanding of the research topic and proper selection of the photographs (Suchar 1997, p.34). The process of photo-elicitation, is used in visual studies by employing visual images in research interviews (Liamputtong 2007, p.143).

The major findings created new insights on the Saudi women whilst presenting a unique contribution through listening to their voices and experiences of living in Saudi Arabia, gathering and analysing their perspectives through photographic narratives, looking at the ways they negotiate and relate to the photographs, and enabling them to present themselves through their own personal portraits and their participation in the portrait sessions.

This article explores and documents the experiential aspects of fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, specifically in terms of working with female participants, in particular the challenges, expectations and emotions I the researcher –also a Saudi woman – faced and how all this became part of my work.

According to Shaw (2011), few researchers take the time to reflect on their fieldwork experiences; most rush to present their final findings in formal publications. Therefore, to provide clarity regarding the results of this research project, I will discuss the challenges that occurred and provide details on the different stages of the fieldwork. According to Hoggart (2014), the defining characteristics of participatory research depend on the degree of engagement of participants. This participatory process, when adapting methods of research, can work towards change in communities (Hoggart, Lees et al. 2014). This project engaged with ten female participants, with the aim of making them visible from a Saudi female point of view. In the first stages this was achieved by accessing their own photographs and their own narratives, thereby creating an in-depth reflective journey of their identities.

a) Challenges during fieldwork in Saudi Arabia:

There is a growing recognition that undertaking qualitative research can pose many challenges for researchers (Brich and Miller 2000; Campbell 2002). Some of the challenges identified by researchers include issues related to developing a rapport (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005), reflexivity (Ellingson 1998) and managing emotions (Rager 2005). Drawing on my own personal experience, it is important to discuss the challenges and difficulties that arose during the fieldwork, with the aim of reaching useful insights for

Author : Lecturer at Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University, School of Arts and Design, Saudi Arabia.
e-mail: mirzalujain@gmail.com

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those embarking on research projects in Saudi Arabia in the future.

My qualitative fieldwork, which is discussed in more detail throughout this paperfocuses on understanding the representation of Saudi women through photography in the Saudi context. The first stages explore the relationships these women have with their own photograph collections, and how these photographs are able to provide us with detailed perceptions of their lives. During fieldwork, researchers ask a lot of those who allow them into their lives or homes. There are many delays and frustrations; but these provide an opportunity for the researcher to reflect on broader, deeper concepts like the responsibility that comes with embarking on a research project that involves the trust of the participants, the good usage of time and funding allocated to the project, the importance of keeping aware of the goals of the research, and the opportunity to be creative and learn patience.

II. Recruiting Participants

One of the first challenges regarding fieldwork is how to find and recruit participants. In a qualitative study, recruitment is an important process (Arcury and Quandt 1999). Many researchers do not accept generalization as the purpose of qualitative research (Gheondea-Eladi 2014, p.114). For example, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2010) argue that in qualitative research statistical generalization is usually replaced with analytic generalizations, in order to pursue a richer and deeper understanding of those it studies (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2010). Participant recruitment requires particularly careful consideration, beginning with the identification, targeting and enlistment of participants, and involves providing information to potential participants and generating interest in the proposed study (Arcury and Quandt 1999, p.128). A researcher might face problems accessing people in specific situations, especially when studying individuals who cannot be approached easily (Flick 2014, p.161). According to Flick (2014), strategies can range from using the media (e.g. advertisements in newspapers or announcements on radio programs), posting notices in institutions (e.g. schools, centres or meeting points), as well as snowballing. In the current research project, after having the methodology approved by the university committee, I have used social media and snowballing. The useof snowballing method widens the range of people interviewed. According to NoyChaim, snowball sampling can generate a unique type of social knowledge, which will develop and grow (Kothari 2006, p.3). Snowball sampling was used in this project because of the type of sample needed. According to Bernard (2006), when studying hard-to-find or hard-to-study populations, snowball sampling is preferred.



Figure 1: Flier that was circulated

I designed a flier that explained the project in general, and the specifications of the female participants being recruited, together with contact information, this was posted on social media six months prior to commencement of the fieldwork. Many social media web services contain one or more platforms that allow users to view one another's networks and interact with each other. These include comment spaces, chat rooms, Facebook, Twitter and more (Anon 2015).

I attempted to find a sample that would cover a wide range of Saudi women. Several women called asking about the project out of curiosity, but with no intention of participating. When advertisements on social media failed, I decided to contact everyone I knew and ask them to spread the word.

Establishing access to those women who were interested and making contact was the next step. I was given many contact numbers for women who wanted to talk to me and learn more about the project, but I needed to convince them before I was able to start working with them. Some women asked to be sent all the consent forms and explanation via email, however only one woman responded to these emails. According to Patel, Doku et al. (2003) a refusal to participate is considered a response. Recognising that many women prefer talking to a researcher on the phone, rather than receiving emails, made me change my engagement technique. Consequently, phone calls were made and an audio recording with my voice was sent to all those potentially interested in participating. In response to my project needs, I found that recording an Arabic audio explaining in detail the aims of the project and what each participant would be asked to prepare and do was a significant approach, although it was not enough, and some women had concerns and further questions which were later discussed in a phone call.

Establishing initial contact was critical, because Saudi culture is mostly very private, and the research topic is about women, a sensitive topic in the country; therefore, finding the participants took a long time. Many were eager to know more about the project, but very few were actually willing to participate. Due to the fieldwork

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tight three-month deadline, it made sense to start with the first women who agreed to participate while continuing to look for other participants. The final 10 participants were reached by snowball sampling.

III. Meeting the Participants (Presentation of the Participants with Their Portraits)

Each participant approved each of these portraits. Participants also added their own words that were later overlaid on the photograph. Their discussions with me as the photographer and their approval of the portraits and the words that were written are what makes these portraits part of a collaborative process.



Figure 2: Participant A.K.1

Participant A.K.1 studied fine arts at King Saud University. Later, after she married, she worked as an art teacher for a couple of years in a school in Riyadh. When looking for participants, I contacted all my friends, family, colleagues and any artists I knew, and was put in contact with her and explained everything in detail. At first, she was very hesitant, but after she discovered she could remain anonymous if she wanted to, she was more confident about participating. Although she seemed to be from a very traditional family that respects and follows traditions, when I asked her if she needed her husband's permission she made it clear that she did not and that it was her choice that mattered.

When asking her to write a sentence that would be added to the photograph she said: "The sentence that I always repeat… always, for the last 20 years is:"

"اللهم اني اشكو اليك ضعف قوتي، وقله حيلتي، وهواني على الناس"

Translation: "Oh God, it is you to whom I complain of my weakness, my helplessness and my insignificance upon people." She explained:

> I can't tell you that I'm a weak person. On the contrary, when I recall my life and my memories, I feel like a strong person… However, you cannot use strength with the people around you, especially people you love. Because then, you will lose them.
> And I personally don't want anyone to be upset for me… maybe, I'm too kind… too emotional. I don't like complications.
> So, when I do face difficulties or any small problems, it is then that I feel very weak… and no one knows about this or feels me except for God.
> He is the one who knows how much pressure I put on myself not to lose the people around me. So… 'God, it is you who I complain to the weakness of my strength and the little force I have…'
> Yes, I can answer back, yes I can defend myself, and face the situation without fear… but I do feel broken and weak because the situation requires that… or… I will lose!
> I will lose the people around me.
> And I want my image to be ideal with people.
> So, I do feel like I have little force… And the humiliation people have towards me…
> Sometimes, I'm treated in a manner that makes me feel like I'm nothing.
> And this is, of course, something that bothers me.
> That's it… So, I always repeat the sentence, and I feel comforted every time I say it…
> but God knows who I am, and what I am, and what's inside of me, and what I'm doing to please the people around me, and I don't upset any of them.
> Therefore, I see myself with this prayer, and I feel comforted after I say it.

In this portrait the participant looks unhappy and depressed. From what she explained during the photo-shoot, and later what she wrote on her photograph, I could say that there no actual problem preventing her from pursuing her art career again. There is no-one preventing her and nothing stopping her. She herself is blocking any change that could happen by focusing only on the things that put her down and not resisting them. At the end of her statement, she insisted that nothing is stopping her from going back to her painting and that she herself is the problem. On the other hand, perhaps she is not to blame. It is similar to whether you see the cup as half empty of half full. The question is why is she blaming herself? It could be said that she is clearly in a stressful situation where she is avoiding confrontation by repressing her feelings and not expressing herself. She says she feels humiliated and struggles with building her self-esteem. She

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believes that she is risking losing people around her if she does express her thoughts or feelings.



Figure 3: Participant D.A.2

I first met participant D.A.2 when we were in the seventh grade, nearly 13 years old. We were at school together for three years during middle school and then during the Gulf War we lost contact. Fifteen years later, at the time when she was adopting her son, we established occasional contact again. I had been turned down many times by women who wear the full niqab and at that time I had not recruited anyone who wore it, so I contacted her explaining the project and the situation. It took her around two months to decide.

Participant D.A.2 wrote: "Can you tell that I'm smiling?" And in Arabic, she wrote a saying:

الناس أعداء ما جهلوا

Which means "people are enemies to what they are ignorant of". She explained:

If you are going to be against something that you do not understand… you are going to be anti whatever you do not understand, and I strongly believe that this fits with my character, because I feel if you are going to judge me, because I cover then you are going to say, 'retarded', oppressed, backward thinking, maybe self-hating female, that she would do that to herself whatever it is and the reason why you would be an enemy to the way I cover is because you do not understand it.

> You do not understand why I am doing it.
> You do not understand that I chose it…
> you do not understand that it makes me feel more comfortable, so in anything in life…
> With the West, for a long time Russia was the bad guy right… and all the shows were about Russia and how bad they are, and represented them as terrorists… Just because you do not understand it, does not mean you should hate it.
> You should just try to understand it.
> Do not try to liberate me because I am liberal… in what I feel comfortable with.
> Oh, we are going to liberate Iraq… Iraqi people… true, they had their problems, but they have way more problems since you tried to liberate them.

When asked if she found this collaborative process helpful in representing her identity, she stated:

> I was hesitant about participating in this before.
> Looking back and how I experience life and how I enjoyed life so far.
> These interviews helped me see all the past years.
> I feel miraculous.
> I feel it is even clear to me now.
> In short, it was great going through my own past and still knowing what I want to do in life.

Participant D.A.2 is mixed, half Saudi and half American. She chose to write her sentence in both languages, Arabic and English. Yet, she states two completely different messages. From the way she chose to write her sentence, we can understand that she has a sense of humour. In her image-text combination, she chose to use both humour and seriousness in the sentence. Her use of Arabic and English text on her photograph expresses a lot about herself, her character and background, which was the purpose of asking the participants to express how they want to be represented visually and to add their own words to their portrait. Her choice to be photographed in her office where she works, the way she is sitting and looking straight at the camera while smiling, represent belief and confidence in what she does.



Figure 3: Participant D.Q.3

I met D.Q.3 in 2007 when I was completing my Bachelor's degree in Brisbane, Australia. She was doing her Master's degree in accounting and later returned to Saudi. She was one of many women I contacted to see if they were interested in participating or might know someone who might be interested. When I contacted her, she told me that she had just changed jobs and was living in the capital now and she would be willing to participate. After calling her several times, and after she requested me to take her photograph on the beach knowing that there are no beaches in Riyadh, I made it

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clear that I could not travel to the Western coast to take her portrait. She agreed that I could go to her house for the final photo shoot.

The participant did not have a clear vision of how she wanted her portrait. She knew the sentence she was going to write on the portrait but not the portrait itself. She showed me several portraits of women from the Internet, and said she would like hers to look similar. I took around ten photographs over a period of two hours. She explained:

I chose to write, 'The best is yet to come'.

I selected this phrase because, after all the ups and downs I have been through in my life, from my divorce, being away from my family and kids, to the passing away of my father, I have decided to look forward to a better, brighter, more successful future.

> I aim to focus on all the positive things in my life, no matter how small.
> I do believe that the best is yet to come. I am working hard for it and looking forward to it. It is a hopeful today for a better future.
> When discussing the process, she stated:
> What happened is that these three stages helped me think of who I really am.
> It made me understand myself more.
> I had never asked myself what represents me and what doesn't represent me.
> But this gave me a chance to understand myself more.

In this portrait the participant sits facing her bedroom window, staring at the open space in front of her. The light coming in, plays a crucial part in adding different shades to the portrait. She is looking into the distance without paying the camera any attention, as if she does no notice its existence. She did not want her face to appear very clear, and this is why she pushed the curtain away and sat with one part of it covering slightly her face. The way she tightly holds the coffee cup, communicates some stress, whether it is from being photographed, or from the future that she is awaiting the best from.



Figure 4: Participant K.Q.4

Participant K.Q.4 is a relative. I was explaining the difficulty of finding participants to my family, especially how hard it was proving to find more religious participants. It was suggested that I contact K.Q.4 which I did, but she said she was not interested at all. After a couple of weeks, she asked me to explain everything in detail and after some encouragement from another family member she contacted me saying, "I don't mind participating as long as you don't give my name, and as long as my face is not apparent. I want Western society to understand and see how lucky women are in Saudi."

At the beginning, the participant stated that she wanted me to take her portrait in her office, but on the day of the photo shoot, she took me to one of the new buildings and told me that I could take her portrait there. There were some artificial palm trees, and because she loves palm trees, she asked me to take her portrait near one. I took around ten photographs with her next to the palm tree, but the lighting was not sufficient to use the reflector. I was also unable to use the flash, because there were many reflecting surfaces around, so the photographs were not technically good. I explained we could go outside and take a photograph with a real palm tree, but she preferred to try the second floor of the same building. This portrait was taken on the second floor. She did not want her hands to be apparent in the portraits. The sentence that she wrote was as follows:

يا حبيبي يا سول الله محمد عليه افضل الصلاه والسلام

"O my dearest messenger of God… My beloved Muhammad peace be upon him." She explained:

> I mean it, really. This touches my heart because we really love him.
> He brought us from darkness into light. All his characteristics are perfect.
> He is our role model.
> This love is pure.
> He is dead now, and he can't do anything for us, but our love is represented in us following what he urged us to do. We hope that we follow his commands completely to show our love.
> If all people in world I mean Muslims or non-Muslims followed Islam's teachings, the world would be a peaceful place for all.
> This project made me think about things in me, I didn't think about before.
> Actually, photographs have meant a lot to me since I was a child.
> Pictures are good things to capture the moment because sometimes people forget. Although, many say that I have a good memory, I still need to capture my moments. One picture can tell a lot. It reminds you of every detail of that previous moment.
> It saves good memories.

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From the first glimpse of the participant it is clear that she is very religious. Being in her sixties she seems confident in herself and her beliefs, not caring what others might think of her. From the way she hides her hands in the hospital coat, and the extremely small opening of the niqab through which her eye can barely be seen, to the sentence she chose to write, the stress is on her being a proud Muslim woman. Nevertheless, being religious did not prevent her from being highly educated, an active professor and doctor at both the hospital and university.

However, her request to be first photographed inside a new building, next to a fake palm tree, confused me as it contradicted what she was presenting, which was strong faith, connection with nature and not caring for the materialistic; whereas, this photo-shoot was taken in one of newest buildings in the hospital where she works. In addition, her request to be photographed next to a man-made palm tree, does not demonstrate visibly her love of nature. Nevertheless, she may have chosen this building in particular to show Western people the modern facilities, which exist in Saudi Arabia. I presume this is an example that represents some of the contradictions we have with our own selves in Saudi society.



Figure 5: Participant K.H.5

K.H.5 is a childhood friend. I last saw her when we were sixteen, when she got married. She contacted me three years ago when she left her husband and went to court asking for a divorce. She had lost contact with her friends and never finished school until she left him. After she decided to leave her husband she went back to school, completed high school and was accepted at (PNU) Princess Nourah University, enrolling at the school of arts and design, because that had been her passion since she was a child. I called her after I received my ethics approval and told her about this research project and she was very excited and keen to participate.

She chose this one and wrote her sentence, which is a poem by the 4th caliph,[1] Ali Bin AbiTaleb:

وتحسب انك جرم صغير، وفيك انطوى العالم الاكبر

"And you think you are just a tiny object, but you hold the whole universe."

When asked about the statement, she stated:

I used to think that I'm nothing. I didn't believe in myself.

Suddenly, I discovered things in me I had never imagined.

All the disappointments, all the negative comments I got were illusions I believed in.

I really discovered that there is another world inside human beings, so this expression represents the place I reached today.

Every stage in this project helped me set the record straight.

It allows you to focus on things you didn't notice before, especially my photos in the past and the present.

People keep running in this life trying to make accomplishments without focusing on what they have in the current moment.

This process reminded me of our past, present and future.

It was helpful.

I didn't look at these photographs for a very long time.

Every one of these pictures reflects a part of my identity.

It is a part of who I am.

I always feel happy when I look at them.

The way I look at these pictures differs according to my age.

I told you before that I was thinking that my father didn't like me.

But now, when I look to the way my father used to treat me, I understand and I realize that I was wrong.

I discovered so many things.

I am so thankful.

Participant K.H.5 is the exact opposite of participant A.K.1. Even in the hardest moments, she never stopped believing in her capabilities, continuing with her artwork while going back to university after a failed marriage. She focused on the positive things she has. The sentence she chose describes her belief and her desire to be something better and greater. The fact that she is painting a complete face and figure of a woman, knowing that in Saudi conservative Islamic culture drawing a face of a human figure is considered a sin, signifies that she is a woman with her own beliefs and outlooks. Her direct gaze into the camera reflects a woman who is self-assured, optimistic, has a clear

[1]A person considered a successor to the prophet Muhammad.

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vision of her present and is ready to take off into a brighter future



Figure 6: Participant L.K.6

L.K.6 is one of my many cousins. When I was trying to reach as many women as possible, she knew about it but was not interested. However, she offered to ask her female work colleagues, several of whom wanted to know if they would be paid to participate in a research project involving being photographed and sharing private information. When I explained that no payment would be given, they were no longer interested. After several weeks, my cousin contacted me and said she would like to participate, to be part of what would hopefully be a successful project that would highlight the identity of women from Saudi Arabia. Her only concern was her working hours.

The participant has lived with her parents since her separation, which is Saudi tradition and culture for a divorced woman, and if her parents were dead she would live with one of her brothers. However, this is not an absolute rule; it differs from one family to another, and in some families if the woman has children she can live on her own. The sentence she chose was:

"دع ابتسامتك اول ملامحك، فهي لك صحه، وفي الدين صدقه، وفي القلب سعاده، ولمن حولك طاقه من الراحه"

"Let your smile be your first feature. It is health for you, alms in religion, happiness in heart, and a peaceful energy for those around you."

Participant L.K.6 stated:

I chose this because a smile is very important to me.

It has a positive effect on people around us.

I try to smile as much I can. One should smile even if he or she is sad or has problems.

Smiling has a good effect on people around you when they see you always smiling. My previous colleagues in Jeddah always remind me of my smile when I contact them.

It is good to be remembered by this.

That's why one should smile, to leave a good memory wherever one goes.

After I finished, I requested an Uber to pick me up, but the driver could not find the house. Her driver was asleep, and I could not find anyone to drive me back. She and her mother insisted I sleep over in their guest room until morning and then I could use their driver to return home. As embarrassed as I was, I accepted and called my family to tell them I would stay that night at her house. The next morning, at around 7am, their driver drove me home. When I asked the participant to reflect on her experience of this project and whether she found it useful or otherwise, she said:

This entire process made me think of many things.

The old photographs made me think about the things that made me who I am today. Maybe I reached this age and stage in life without focusing on how I became what I am.

I focused on things I have in my life, my identity.

It made me feel proud of myself because I was reminded of what I was, what I became and what I want to be in the future to represent myself. In addition, I felt proud because I wanted to be a part of this successful study that represents Saudi women.

I really like the concept.

Finally, I will be represented, that's why I felt proud.

From the sentence the participant chose, it is clear that she is a constructive person. Posing for the camera with a smile on her face goes together with the sentence she wrote. Her divorce did not change her positive attitude to whatever life throws at her.



Figure 7: Participant L.A.7

The youngest participant was L.A.7, from Riyadh whose older sister is a doctor who works in a hospital where a member of my family also works. She is one of many women who my messages reached. She contacted me and said her little sister admires photography and would be happy to participate, and gave me her younger sister's contact number. When I called her, she was excited and very curious to know

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more. She was also one of the first participants to give me an interview date after just a couple of days.

On the day of the photo shoot, she picked me up at 2pm with her family's driver and we went to Starbucks. We went straight to the family section (cafés and restaurants in Saudi Arabia have single men's sections and family sections). I knew that they had very big windows, so I was sure I would not need any additional light with me. However, I was wrong, as all the blinds were closed, and I was unable to open any of them. When I went to talk to the men working in the café, they said that, to prevent people from opening them the religious police cut all the ropes. The place was dark – with only the dim lights within the café. I had to put the camera's ISO on a very high setting to create more light. The photo shoot was over within ninety minutes, and although the participant was happy with the final photograph, all the other photographs shot that day were high in noise.[2] I asked her if we could repeat the photo shoot at the same place another day, when I would have my external light. She agreed, so I met her again four weeks later. We went at almost the same time, when there were fewer customers. I took around 30 photographs, but the participant still preferred her first portrait. When asked about the sentence, she replied:

"It's a line from Muhammad Abdu's song,

"غامضه مره ومره مثل نور"

which translates as "extremely mysterious sometimes and sometimes very much like the light".

I chose this phrase because I am very mysterious, yet very bright and clear, like the lights.

So this really does describe me.

When can I be very clear?

Or when am I very mysterious?

I'm very mysterious when I'm upset.

I wouldn't share or tell anyone what's bothering me.

I keep it to myself.

From the project, I felt and realized some features in me that I've never known existed.

The questions helped me a lot to think of who I am and what I believe.

I was surprised to understand that I have these features.

I was just living like anyone else without deeply thinking of who I am.

I seriously enjoyed it, and understood a lot about my personality that I never knew existed.

There are things that never crossed my mind before.

This participant chose to be photographed in Starbucks Café because it represents part of her daily routine. The way she posed for the camera gives the viewer the sense that she is thinking or concerned about something. The sentence she chose to write, "extremely mysterious sometimes and sometimes very much like the light", either represents her, or it could be that she likes that phrase or poetry, so in return she tries to perform it in the photograph; as if she is telling the viewer, "I am mysterious", or "I could be mysterious". From the way she is sitting, looking away from the camera, hiding a part of her face with her hair, it could be argued that she likes playing the role of a mysterious young lady, or perhaps she could be a shy person in nature. It could also be claimed that by holding her iPhone, showing off her watch, purse and drink, that she is contemporary and showing off her style of life.



Figure 8. Participant M.A.8

Participant M.A.8 is a therapist I met for a couple of months, seven years ago when I needed some advice and guidance. She was an amazing, inspiring, positive woman who appeared in my life at the right time. As she is also a photographer, we kept in touch due to our common interest. I contacted her about the research project and without hesitation she expressed her willingness to participate.

M.A.8 is a busy therapist as well as an active photographer. She made it clear to me that she is very busy and would not be able to spend long on the photo shoot. She contacted me two days before the photo shoot and said she wanted me to come and meet her at her house, instead of the original venue we had decided on, which was her own private clinic. I reached her house around 9am, and the caretaker opened the door for me and took me straight to her bedroom. On the way, I met her husband, who welcomed me and told me to go ahead to the second floor. When I reached her bedroom, she asked me if I would like anything to drink and I asked for a glass of water. The bedroom was big and had a work area with a desk and computer, a sitting area with a large sofa, and a dressing room where she was. She called to me, but I could not see her. She said, "Please have a seat. I'll be there in a couple of minutes, I'm just getting ready."

[2] The term "noise" is used to describe visual distortion, i.e. when the image looks grainy.

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I sat there looking around at all the family portraits and books she had everywhere. A few minutes later, she came out of the dressing room, smiling broadly, and asked me if I was ready. I asked her where she would like to be photographed, and she said, "Let's go out on the balcony". The door was jammed so I had to squeeze myself through it with my camera. It was a small balcony, with sand roses that she had collected from the desert whenever she went to take photographs, as well as a big plant that was partially green and partially dead. She stood in a corner and looked straight up to the sky. I took several shots over fifteen minutes. She looked at the photographs and chose one immediately. Later, we went back to the sofa and she sat down to write down her sentence. She wrote, "There are many journeys in life, make sure each one ends with a light of your choice".

I chose this sentence… light meaning that opportunity, that way out, that growth.

Some of these lights are very small, coming out from a little hole, from a window or from a wall.

But there is also an exit that light comes through and it means a way out.

It means growth… It means taking that lead of the light, and allowing yourself to grow no matter how dark things may be at a particular time of our lives.

So reach out, look for that light and let it be your choice to grow.

This project was able to represent all angles of my identity.

I think that I had never connected my identity to pictures. I have connected them always intellectually, so going through the process I was very careful in the reason for choosing a random picture of a women holding a scale of justice.[3]

> I just shot that picture there was no second thought. It was a part of my identity. It was a picture of me and it was also the cover of NY Times magazine, but definitely the process was identifying myself through pictures and how much the two are connected which, is my identity and what I gravitate to in pictures.

The way participant M.A.8 presented herself was as a strong woman who has no regrets in her life. She is a woman who has lived her journey with ups and downs and has reached inner peace. Although she does not look towards the camera, she holds her head up with pride. The sunlight hits her face, gently drawing out her features, and the slight smile on her face adds a sense of peace of mind and wisdom. The sentence she wrote signifies the choices she has made in her life, whether right or wrong, they were her own choices no one else's.



Figure 9: Participant R.M.9

I met R.M.9 on a plane traveling from Riyadh to Wadi-Aldawaser in Saudi Arabia. She was with her seven-year-old son, which made it easy for me to start a conversation with them. After introducing myself I talked with her about the research project and asked if she would be interested in participating. She asked me to email her the consent forms and the information related to it. She contacted me after several days to say she would be willing to participate.

We discussed the sentence she wanted written on her photograph. She said:

"I want to write

"في كتاب مكنون لا يمسه الا المطهرون" ,,

This is a phrase from the Holy Quran, describing the Quran itself. It translates as: "It is kept hidden in a book, which no one touches unless they are purified." I explained that she could not use that sentence and that she should think of something else because religiously and culturally it is not acceptable to compare oneself with the Quran.

After around thirty minutes, she came up with another sentence, but I told her to think more about it. Later, she decided to write, "I am an Arabian" or "I am an Arab." When asked to explain why she chose it, she said, "it is my identity, and it makes me feel proud. And even though I am an Arab, it does not prevent me from being an attractive, clever, beautiful woman." When the session was over, she asked me not to leave until I had finished editing all the photographs, added the text and sent it to her. She made lunch and asked me to stay to eat and to continue my work. I was at her place for seven hours; I was really exhausted, because I had had an earlier photo shoot. I was exhausted both mentally and physically.

a) *According to the participant:*

> Because this process was spontaneous and casual, and what I said came out of my heart, I wasn't acting. Basically, I verbalized my thoughts, who I am. I never talked about it… I spoke it… it is the power of words.

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I turned it into words, verbal words. It is as if I shaped and personalized who I am. I was looking forward to representing myself in a photograph, not only a word. Honestly it was fun, being photographed and putting on makeup.

From the sentence she chose to the way she wanted to appear, participant R.M.9 could mean that she wants to represent herself as beautiful, unique and exclusive, giving herself value. Maybe this is related to the fact that she is divorced, or it is just her character; holding on to her visual appearance to feel proud, happy or complete.



Figure 10: Participant S.A.10

Participant S.A.10 was the only participant whom I did not contact myself; she heard about my project and contacted me. I was about halfway through the fieldwork and I already had my ten participants, when I received a phone call from her explaining that she had obtained my phone number from three different people. I accepted her at once and began looking for space in my schedule for her. Two weeks later, one of my original participants dropped out, so S.A.10 took her place. She explained to me during our first phone call hat she had a lot that she wanted to say and share, and she had been waiting for an opportunity to do so.

I used the front window of a shop as a screen on which to reflect her. I took several photographs when, by serendipity, two men walked up the escalator, and I could see them in the glass. I asked her to just stand there for a second, I took that photograph, and she was very happy with it. The participant has been divorced twice, and those two men apparent as shadows in the background represented the two men in her past. They vanished and are not a part of her present.
When asked about the sentence she said,

"الضربه التي لا تكسر الظهر تقويه"

Meaning: "A blow that doesn't break the back, makes it stronger." She stated:

I have been through a lot of things, and I even suffered from aphasia (not being able to speak). That was because of the problems I had during the divorce. I kept my problems to myself and I did not tell my family. I don't know how to share my problems… you know how people see divorce… but I can no longer handle this…
If someone comes into your life, it becomes hard to lose that person… Also, during divorce, one becomes so tired… I did not lose my ability to speak completely, but I had a severe stutter, I would always say, 'Aaaaaa' then I pronounce the word… and that is because I kept my problems to myself…
It's been a long time since I tried to do something that represents my identity, whether by giving a speech or talking about my experiences, but now you have enabled me to express myself.
You made me think of my past since I was little… and how I was… the innocent. Then when we moved onto the second stage where I took photographs of myself. It made me think of the purpose of taking photographs, which is to represent ME and not to satisfy anyone…
There is a Hadith which is translated as 'Allah loves someone who, when he works, he performs it in a perfect manner (*itqan*)'. So I love to complete my work perfectly for the person I work for… it is also in this way that I like to represent myself.
This third stage represents all the aspects of my life as it is…
The first phase: is my study…
The second phase: after my study and my work…
The third phase: is what I want to do in the future…
Therefore, when I said, 'What does not break me, makes me strong', I mean that what represents my photograph, and you will notice that through the way I look, smile and through everything. You will see the strong me.

It appears from the way the participant is standing, and her gaze to the camera; that she is a clever, confidant and a proud woman, knowing what is surrounding her. The sentence she chose to write completely applies to her, meaning whatever breaks me, I will stand up high and strong again. Although it could be said that she is empathizing with her own self, she has a hint of a smile that resembles hope and faith for what the future hold for her, while the past remains in the past.

b) Biographical profiles of participants

Table 1 presents the biographical profiles of the broadly middle-class female participants. All ten participants share the same religion, nationality and social characteristics. They represent different education levels; however, they all hold or are studying for a university degree (BA, MA or PhD). They are aged between 20 and 61, and come from different regions of

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Saudi Arabia and different backgrounds. The table presents in brief their age, city, region, marital status, education level and occupation.

Table 1: Biographical profiles of participants

Name of participant or initials	Age	City	Region	Marital status	Education level	Occupation
A.K.1	37	Al-Madinah	Western	Married	Bachelor of Fine Arts	Housewife
D.A.2	39	Riyadh	Central	Single	Doctor of Chiropractic	Chiropractor
D.Q.3	36	Jeddah	Western	Divorced	Master's in Accountancy	Deputy Executive Director of Finance & Administration
K.Q.4	61	Al-Madinah	Western	Married	Post-Doctorate	Consultant in Paediatrics & Haematology
K.H.5	40	Makkah	Western	Divorced	Bachelor of Interior Design	Student
L.K.6	33	Al-Madinah	Western	Separated	Bachelor of English Literature	Assistant Employee Relation Manager
L.A.7	20	Riyadh	Central	Single	Bachelor of Marketing	Student
M.A.8	61	Al-Qaseem	Central	Married	Master's in Counselling Psychology & Education	Psychotherapist & Photographer
R.M.9	37	Al-Madinah	Western	Divorced	Bachelor of Dental Science	Dentist
S.A.10	35	Riyadh	Central	Divorced	Bachelor of Business	HR Manager & Development Executive

IV. Refusal to Participate

Some participants who participated in the project described their main reason for participating as being curious about the topic, while others were purely interested in participating in order to contribute to knowledge. Some were comfortable participating knowing that the project was to be presented in a different countryas my research work is for a PhD in the UK. However, many others refused to participate for different reasons.[3] Finding and interviewing participants requires that the researcher establishes access and makes contact with potential participants. It is not objective to only use people who are easy to talk to, and if researchers are overly shy or hate making phone calls, the process of finding participants and getting started can be daunting (Seidman 2013, p.11).

At the beginning of this research project I was aware that finding and recruiting participants would not be an easy task. I spoke to many women who refused to participate, the majority of whom gave no reason at all, while others gave a brief explanation as to why they rejected the idea of participation. After clarifying that the project was being conducted in the UK, and that it was about their own visual representation, and communicating that to an international Western and Arab audience in order for them understand more about us as Saudi women and Saudi women's identity, reasons for still refusing to participate included:

a) The Western view of Saudi women

"I do not care what Western people think about us as Saudi women, what they know or do not know about my identity. My identity is something private and I don't care to share my beliefs." It is understandable that there may be a sense of resistance towards the Western stereotyping of Saudi women, and reluctance to either reject or clarify these stereotypes. On the other hand, it could be as simple and straightforward as what this

[3] This paper is submitted to an international journal based in United States, United Kingdom and India. The distribution of the all photographs had the approval of the women participants and followed a specific ethical process.

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woman said; her identity is private and she does not like to share it.

b) Presenting a rosy picture

"This sounds very interesting, tell me what you want me to say and I will say it, I will say whatever makes my society, culture, traditions and myself look perfect." This suggests a fear that people who do not know Saudi women will judge them based on false interpretations projected in the media or elsewhere. Therefore this woman wanted to contradict what is presented by saying anything as defence to herself as a woman or to her society in general.

c) Praying to God for my forgiveness

"I pray to God for you, to put you on the right path. What you are researching and your entire project is forbidden (*haram*). May God guide you to what is in his favour." As discussed in the introduction, Saudi women vary from the extremely religious to extremely liberal. Therefore, even today there are women who believe that taking photographs is a sin for which the photographer will be punished.

d) Questioning the project without taking part in it

"I don't understand how a photograph can represent my identity or myself. How can an image represent you? No thank you." The main objective of these interviews was to explore whether or not women were able to represent themselves though photographs. Some women were not completely aware of the research project and its aims, but reached a judgment based on their assumptions.

e) Definite decision

"I do not like participating in these kinds of things… it's not me!" Some women knew from the start that they were not interested in interviews or meetings, no matter what the research project is about. It is a matter of preference, interest or curiosity, and they had none.

f) Payment for involvement

"Will I be paid to participate?" To encourage participation, some researchers offer people money or coupons in return for their participation. In this research project participants were not paid or presented with any offers. Nonetheless, all participants received their final stage three portraits as a part of the collaboration process, and when all interviews were completed, a box of chocolates was given to each of them in appreciation of their participation.

g) Privacy issues

"My mother says we are very private, and these questions and photographs are private, therefore she will never agree to any of this." Privacy and obedience to the elders is always an issue in Saudi Arabia, especially when it comes to issues related to women. Participants were offered anonymity if they wished; however, the narratives they would have shared would still be considered by many people to be private stories which they would not want to share and have published.

h) Guardian's permission

"It's my husband! He would never approve my participation. That's why I cannot participate." One important requirement for the women to participate was the approval of their guardians. Under Saudi law, women require the permission of their male guardian to travel, marry, sometimes to be granted employment, or even to pursue higher education. The guardian is typically the woman's father or her husband if she is married. If she is a widow she has to seek permission from her brother, or son if he is of age. In this project, not all participants needed their guardian's permission. It is different from one family to another, and the women would know whether or not they would require their guardian's permission to participate.

Some of the women who refused to participate provided insight into their reluctance, whereas many others who were contacted did not offer any reasons or explanations for their refusal. Others never answered the phone calls, messages or emails. This illustrates the complexity and sensitivity of this research.

V. The Pre-Interview Phase

Before each interview began, the purpose of the research project was explained, which meant clarifying the material presented when the interviewer first established contact and arranged an appointment. Participants were met with and interviewed three times in total, for an hour each time. Participants were offered the opportunity to either read the consent form themselves or to go over it in detail with me. The consent form was reviewed and explained thoroughly, and further discussions were offered to address any personal concerns about their participation. It is important to determine if a participant fully understands what participation involves (Lipson 1994). It was explained to them in advance what they would have to prepare for each meeting. The project was designed in three stages, following an initial phone call or in-person meeting. In the pre-interview phase, once the project had been explained and any questions answered, the participant was asked to sign the consent form and to give permission for the sessions to be audio-recorded. If they wished to continue, the following three stages were implemented: stage one (observed memories), which involved looking at the participant's existing photographs; stage two (self-engagement), which involved participants taking new photographs of their lives; and stage three (reflections), consisted of the researcher reflecting on the participant's personal insights and narratives to produce the final photographs. All three interviews used photographs as a method of understanding and researching. Participants

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were reminded that they were free to withdraw at any time.

During this initial interview, there was often much small talk, especially if the interview was being conducted in a place where the participant might not feel as relaxed as they would be in their own home, such as in a university or place of work. This was the time when the participant(s) and researcher were able to assess each other and begin to establish a degree of comfort and trust. This initial stage is very important and should never be hurried, because it sets the tone for the forthcoming interview(s) (Corbin and Morse 2003, p.341). Qualitative researchers must start a rapport-building process from their first encounter with the participant, in order to build a research relationship that will allow them access to that person's story (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005; Goodwin, Pope et al. 2003). According to Corbin and Morse (2003), it is the beginning of a temporary but important human connection that will intensify and grow over the course of the interview.

The key factor in arranging an appointment with the participants was to set the first appointment though a phone-call, text or email. Then, after the first meeting I would set the second and third meetings face-to-face, giving them a chance to check the calendar and their obligations and making sure I left with the date of the next meeting. Setting an appointment with the participants was not a simple task and I had to contact each participant several times, some of them numerous times, to set a time and location. Even then, they would often contact me and reschedule new appointments because they could not meet on the agreed date, sometimes a day or even just a few hours before the scheduled time.

Each participant was free to choose any location she was comfortable with, ranging from their own residence (A.K.1, D.Q.3, K.H.5, M.A.8, R.M.9), a family member's or relative's house (L.K.6), a café (L.A.7), a university and a hospital (K.Q.4), or private offices (D.A.2, S.A.10). Some participants wanted to have the meetings away from their own or their families' homes, preferring a public place. Others were comfortable with conducting the meetings not only at home, but in the privacy of their bedrooms.[4] Others would change their minds on the location several times. When a participant was living with her family, she had to receive her family's permission to have me over. A three-month timetable, including weekdays and weekends, with the participant's name, date, time and location she selected, was prepared. Ultimately, establishing contact, scheduling and completing the set of interviews was very satisfying when accomplished.

VI. Transportation

One of the major challenges that women in Saudi Arabia face every day, and which I encountered intensely during the three months of the fieldwork in 2016, was transportation. At the time of writing, women are still not allowed to drive, which prevents them from commuting freely, and is a daily struggle for working women. They are usually driven around by male family members or personal drivers and the cost of hiring a private driver often prevents women from entering the labour market. Therefore, in families that cannot afford a private driver, inexperienced boys as young as 15 assist as drivers, which leads to many traffic accidents.[5]

There is no actual law in Saudi that actually forbids women from driving but usages are more powerful than laws: the majority of the society is not ready for such a change in their customs and traditions and still take a negative view of Saudi women who ask for the right to drive. In 2016, in an interview, Prince Muhammad Bin Salman stated that the reason for women not driving has nothing to do with religion or any civil law, saying:

To this day society rejects and is unconvinced about women driving, and believes it will have very negative consequences, but I stress that this issue is connected with the desire of Saudi society and what they want: we cannot impose something they do not want or accept. However, we do not know what the future holds, and we hope there are to be positive changes (YouTube 2016).

According to where the participants preferred to meet, whether in a private or public place, I would need a car and a driver for transportation. The Saudi Arabian public transport company operates inter-city buses, with the widest coverage in the capital, Riyadh. Some do not allow women at all, and when they are allowed they have separate entrances, with women-only sections at the back reserved for them (2016). Those in the lowest economic bracket use these buses. In general, buses in Saudi Arabia are perceived as not suitable for Saudi women.

During the fieldwork, I was fortunate that my father was sometimes available to drive me to and from interviews and later the photo shoots. At other times, when he was not available, I had to take a taxi, but I felt unsafe because taxi drivers are not registered with a company. Later I learnt that Uber cars were available, something which had not existed a couple of years earlier. Nonetheless, because it is a big city, it took around 45 minutes to an hour sometimes to reach a

[4] I established a lone working protocol for the fieldwork. All safety aspects, physical or emotional were considered, discussed and approved by the ethics committee at the University of Brighton before conducting the fieldwork.

[5] This was before the new regulations regarding women's right to drive would come into place in July 2018.

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location; therefore the cost of the Uber service was a setback.

This transportation issue was in Saudi Arabia during the time of fieldwork in 2016. By the time I finished my thesis, a new law was introduced by the Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman, allowing women to drive starting July 2018.

VII. Photographer and/or Researcher

Participation in qualitative research is almost always voluntary (Hammersley 1995, p.109); people must agree to engage with the project. In Tom Clark's study (2008) "We're Over-Researched Here!", he claims that research would be impossible without the assistance of those who are willing to provide the information that is needed for that research. Therefore, sustaining research relationships is the core of the innovativeness of qualitative research (Clark 2008, p.953). Certainly, much methodological and reflective work indirectly recognizes the challenging relationships that exist between researcher and participants, and the difficulties related to supporting these relationships. According to Clark (2008, p.954), the mechanism identified by researchers includes representation, informing, change, and issues such as power and identity. At the individual subject level, the supporting mechanisms identified include participants' interest, enjoyment, curiosity, introspective interest, material interest and social comparison. According to Clark, some participants are willing to share their personal information and offer their valuable time but actively negotiate their own interests and perceive a benefit from engaging (Clark 2010).During the final photo shoot (stage three) some participants did indeed made certain requests. They discussed what they wanted from me as a photographer (not a researcher) to give to them in return as a favour.

Although I maintained my identity as researcher, I was often seen as a professional photographer. The requests made varied from giving a private family portrait session, traveling to another coastal city to take a participant's portrait on the beach, and giving another participant the portraits I took during the research project photo session in colour and in monochrome versions, edited, signed and ready before leaving her residence. According to Bulmer "no one gives anything away for nothing, especially the truth" (Bulmer 1982, p.3). During this research project several participants actively shared their honest opinions and real-life situations. While research may fulfil one set of needs for the researcher, engagement may fulfil another set of needs for those who engage (Warren 1999). Several of the participants' engagement was for the core reason of self-expression and representation. Some participated out of enjoyment, curiosity, hope of change, and sharing their experiences and beliefs, while others wanted to be a part of a successful project. From my experience as a Saudi woman, talking about the self to a stranger in Saudi Arabia is an unfamiliar experience, especially if you are a woman and even if this stranger is another Saudi woman.

VIII. Feminist Interviewer/Interviewee Practice in the Context of Saudi Arabia

The interview only comes about when the roles of interviewer and interviewee are formalized, which means that individuals are able to come together in dialogue and discuss their experiences (Cisneros-Puebla, Faux et al. 2004). Although interviewing is an instrument of data collection, it is one of many ways in which people talk to one another (Benney and Hughes 1956). In her chapter about interviewing women, Ann Oakley argues that studies do not usually provide information on: the social/personal characteristics of the interviewer; interviewees' feelings about being interviewed; the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee; hospitality offered to the source of information; or the extension of interviewer-interviewee encounters into more broadly social relationships (Oakley 1997, p.31). She suggests that traditional interviewing practices create problems for feminist interviewers whose primary orientation is towards the support of women's subjective experiences (Oakley 1997, p.30). According to Oakley (1997, p.31), "Interviewing is rather like marriage; everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets". During this project, I was surprised to learn the extent to which some participants were willing to share personal information and offer their valuable time. Within just a few meetings they were comfortable enough to open up and share very private feelings and stories, and three out of the ten participants wanted to be referred to by name when discussing their photographs or exhibiting their final photograph. In Oakley's interviews with women, she would also offer to help the interviewees if the interview clashed with the demands of the house or motherhood. According to Oakley, the attitude she conveyed had some influence in encouraging the women to regard her as a friend rather than purely as a data collector (Oakley 1997, p.47).

In my experience I would not call my interview encounters as experiences of friendship; for me it was more aboutfeeling at easefor both interviewer and interviewee, comfort and accessibility. There were moments where it felt as if they were talking to a therapist. In two separate interviews, participants A.K.1 and D.A.2 stated that they believed they were suffering from depression. Participant D.A.2, a successful chiropractor, had feelings of failure for the sole reason that she is single and does not have her own family.

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Participant A.K.1, an artist, mother and housewife, was fighting severe depression due to mistreatment by her in-laws. Likewise, some of the divorced or separated women spoke of their experiences when they were married, while others simply shared narratives related to the photographs they selected for the interviews.

Lincoln (2003) calls for an empowering, educative ethic that joins the researcher with the subjects together in an open, friendly relationship, where barriers such as deception, threats of harm and loss of privacy are removed, stressing the importance of community, voice, exchange, and the building of collaborative, trusting relationships (Lincoln and Denzin 2003, p.218). The stories told not only matter to the participants, they also matter to other women, and telling them to a woman researcher is feminism in practice. The expectations and relationship between the participants and myself evolved over the different stages. Some were clearly more comfortable to talk and share by stage three, while others wanted it over and done with as soon as possible.

As a researcher, throughout my fieldwork, I found some of the interviews exhausting. During this fieldwork, although I was welcomed into some participants' homes and others were more comfortable meeting elsewhere, I was never treated as an outsider or as someone suspicious or hostile, even when the interview was conducted in an office or a café. That could be due to the fact that although I am a Saudi woman from the same culture and religion as they are, this project was directed and to be completed in the United Kingdom and not in Saudi Arabia. Some participants made it clear that they are more comfortable engaging with a project when it is conducted and presented in a Western country, or any other country other than Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, all participants that took part gave their consent to have their photographs, words and views published in any country.

According to Oakley (2005, p.226), the subjective situation is essential to give women greater visibility in society. Interviewing women is a strategy for documenting women's own accounts of their lives (Oakley 2005, p.226). All of those interviewed in this project said that being interviewed and discussing their stories though the photographs changed their interpretation and view of themselves as well as their connection with their photographs. Participant A.K.1 stated, when asked if the interviews and other stages of the project were helpful in any way:

> It wasn't only helpful… It's seriously woken me up!
> I feel like I was sleeping and woke up… Awakened!
> From the first interview I did… and saw the photographs… and you started asking me, and I started talking… I felt like I'm a person who could achieve…
> Why am I doing this to myself?
> All these responsibilities that I have… are all an illusion…
> It's not that big a deal… maybe I'm exaggerating, to make myself feel busy?
> But no… this interview…the project…is extremely, extremely amazing.

Participant D.A.2 stated:

> I think these interviews helped me see myself…
> Because you know you live from day to day and you do not think of these things and you start asking me these questions… start thinking philosophical stuff in life… identity… etc.
> I feel prouder about myself…
> I guess for a while I went through this phase that I did not achieve enough in life… I do not have the traditional family that is such a big deal here…
> Where is the husband? Where are your own children?
> But I do have my adopted son…
> So there is something where I thought I am lacking or I did not achieve by the time I reach forty, which is so close now.

IX. Selection of Photographs

The participants chose the photographs that were the foundation of the interview, thus making it a participant-driven photo-elicitation project. These photographs came from the participant's personal archives(stage one), and the participants personal participation in taking recent photographs to represent themselves (second stage), and the final (stage three) where I took their portraits as a final stage to their personal visual representation.

According to Auken, Frisvoll et al. (2010), participant-driven photo-elicitation has the ability to break down barriers between the researcher and the participants. This in turn creates opportunities for citizens to be more meaningfully involved in data generation, and control is shifted from the researcher to the participant, as "the subject becomes the teacher" (Harper 1987, p.12). Since it de-centres the authority of the teacher, participant-driven photo-elicitation addresses postmodern concerns about representation, making it a sociological version of visual research (Harper 1987, p.15).

Asking participants to talk about photographs is typically perceived as being less threatening and more engaging than other methods (Collier 1976). In stages one (observed memories) and two (self-engagement), participants were asked to prepare and select up to 10 photographs: however a couple of them brought more than 10 photographs, bringing 30 and asking me to choose the ones I considered to be good or suitable. Although it was made clear that there was no right or wrong in their choices, they felt uncertain about what to choose, which suggests that either they did not

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understand the request or it was not entirely clear to them, or perhaps they lacked the confidence to put forward their own selection. It could also mean that because they were doing this for my (the researcher's) benefit) some may have wanted to be sure that I got what I wanted.

All photographs presented in stage one were viewed together, and participants were asked to talk about them until they felt strongly about a specific photograph and decided to select it. Participant K.Q.4 asked me to select four photographs from the Internet as she did not have those photographs with her; she stated that they are memories and part of what has shaped her identity. The images were an image of the Quran, a palm tree, the Holy Mosque in Al-Madinah and another mosque where her father used to make the call to prayers when she was a child. This participant has only one box of old photographs, where she keeps her memories, saved in her parents' old house in a different city (Al-Madinah) where they live. Hoffman (1996) states that family images may call up pleasant or unpleasant memories, current situations or a journey to a newer world. Drawing on this, although participant K.Q.4 did not bring any old photographs, the images she asked me to select from the Internet brought back happy memories from her childhood that she missed greatly, which made her cry.

Participant K.Q.4 stated, when talking about Al-Ghumamah Mosque:

> Ahhhhh… Al-Ghumamah Mosque, 'Almusala Mosque'
> This mosque is near to the house where I was born. My father bought that house one year before I was born. Before that they lived near the Grand Mosque. God bless my father, he liked to work as a volunteer in that mosque, that's why I now like volunteering jobs.
> He volunteered to call *athan* [the call to prayers] without any salary or anything for 37 years. He took care of this mosque…
> Finally, after many years they told him you have to be employed and you have to take a salary, maybe in the last few years before he died.
> He had his own trade, but for the call to prayers and taking care of the mosque he was a volunteer.
> That's why I love it whenever I see anyone doing a voluntary job… I feel like this person is doing something great. And it gives you pleasure to do something without expecting something in return.
> You won't have any materialistic rewards but you will have many other rewards in life.
> I love this mosque; it's near the area where I was born. And I always remember this since he passed away. God bless him.
> When I was a child I used to go there whenever I heard a call to prayer, I would go there and ask where is my father?
> He was the one who makes the call to the prayers… But his friends would come and talk to me and say 'your father is in paradise'. May his soul rest in peace. [Participant crying]

These photographs represent an emotional attachment with the house, the city and her parents. She has never wanted to remove them from there although she has been living in the capital for over 30 years, which clearly articulates the relation the photographs have in connection to certain places and certain people, as well as her relation to the past. According to Hoffman, when we look at photographs the similarities and differences in our circle of friends, family or even strangers, teach us about our roots. Portrayal of past times in our lives and in those of others can help us to understand our present and prepare for the future (Hoffman 1996, p.1).



Figure 7.1: The Quran



Figure 7.1: A palm tree

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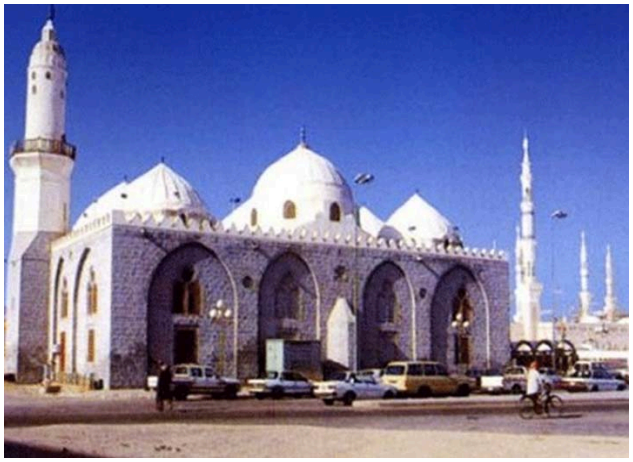


Figure 7.2: Al-Ghumam Mosque

(Mosque where her father made the call to prayer)



Figure 7.3: The Holy Mosque in Al-Madinah

X. Translating and Transcribing

The language used to collect the data during the fieldwork was mostly Arabic.[6] Eight out of the ten participants spoke only Arabic, while two preferred to answer in English or a mixture of Arabic and English, knowing that the PhD for which I was conducting this research was to be completed in the United Kingdom for an English-speaking audience. Arabic, like all languages, has a wide range of words in its vocabulary that are used but do not have a direct translation into English. This was a great challenge when translating; therefore, I tried to paraphrase, explaining words or sentences. Cultural meaning is constructed through discourse between texts (Barrett 1992), and many writers with an interest in the power of the written word and the process by which it is produced have argued that there is no single correct translation of text (Temple and Young 2004, p.165). Similarly, Sherry Simon allows translation to be viewed as a form of re-writing within a specific social and cultural context. Simon argues: "The solutions to many of the translator's dilemmas are not to be found in dictionaries, but rather in an understanding of the way language is tied to local realities, to literary forms and to changing identities. Translators must constantly make decisions about the cultural meanings which language carries" (Simon 1996, p.137). As a Saudi woman based in the United Kingdom, I was in a position to translate these narratives based on the Saudi culture, thereby connecting two different cultures.

Practical challenges arise from the recognition that people using different languages may construct different ways of seeing social life (Temple and Young 2004, p.164). When participants talked about their photographs, they used different dialects with each of them speaking in her own regional dialect. Saudi Arabia consists of various regions, including Najd, Hijaz, Asir, Al-Hasa and Al-Qaseem, with each region retaining certain local characteristics, customs and Arabic dialects. For example, participants from the western region used completely different words from those from central, eastern, southern or northern regions. Women from Hejaz or the western province use modern standard Arabic mixed with Syrian, Egyptian and other dialects from a variety of Arab cultures. Historically, many Hijazis are descendants of pilgrims who settled in Makkah or Madinah long after the time of the Prophet (Yamani 2009, p.25). Women from central Saudi speak in the "Najdi" dialect and with a Bedouin tribal accent. That by itself needed some research either by asking the participants themselves or sometimes by looking for the meaning of the word during the transcription in order to understand what some participants meant by certain words.

According to Temple and Young (2004), the relationships between a language and a researcher, translator and the people they seek to represent, are as crucial as issues of which word is best in a sentence in a specific language. The translating and transcribing of the audio recordings from Arabic to English took more time and effort than the interviews themselves. Every 10-minute audio recording took approximately one hour, and for one hour of recorded interview I needed up to seven hours of non-stop translation/transcription. A situation in which the researcher is fluent in the language they are working with offers opportunities that are not open to researchers in cross-language research (Temple and Young 2004, p.168). In this project, I played the role of researcher and translator. Listening back to the audio recordings with concentration was very different from listening to the participants during the interview, and at times it was as if I was hearing certain things for the first time. I tried to capture and write down as much detail as possible. Sometimes participants would repeat a sentence several times or say it again in a different way, stressing their feelings or how important particular situations were. By listening to the recordings

[6] Arabic used in Saudi Arabia (Arabic including a variations of dialects).

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to translate and transcribe them, it was possible to reflect and analyse parts of the data collected.

XI. Emotions During Fieldwork

During the fieldwork, I was both motivated and nervous at the same time. I did not know what to expect. I worried that the women might not accept me or would not open up, because I am a researcher and I am somehow using their lives to enrich my own research project and data. Although it was not easy to find ten participants at the beginning, they all opened up, each in their own way.

As a female Saudi researcher, I was welcomed into the lives of the participants and became a part of the research process, since I had to meet the participant, ask the questions, take the photographs, discuss them collect the data needed and analyse it. Coffey (1999, p.4) verifies the importance of the role of the researcher. During the study of the ten participants, I spent several days with each of them, recording, observing and listening to them, when they were laughing, smiling, angry or even crying. Later, after each interview, I would listen to the audio recording,the quality of my listening when playing the recordings was different. The emotions I experienced when interacting with the participants made me feel more vulnerable when I was face-to-face with the participants. This did not affect the data collection. It just made me realise how as human beings we can be more sympathetic when meeting someone face to face instead of just listening to a voice recording.

Emotional aspects of fieldwork are considered as issues to be acknowledged and if possible dealt with (Coffey 1999, p.6). Several writers have argued that emotions are an unavoidable part of fieldwork (Marchbank and Letherby 2007, p.31). Ramsay (1996) claims that displaying emotions can be difficult and even dangerous, for both the researcher and the subject (Ramsay 1996). When participant K.Q.4 talked about her parents, her relationship with her mother and that she meant everything to her, she was very emotional and her eyes filled with tears; it was hard for me to hide my own emotions and after I left I cried. Participant K.H.5 fought for seven years to get her freedom from an abusive marriage; she completed high school when she was in her thirties and enrolled at a university to complete a degree in interior design. I was astonished by her strength and persistence and I had to express my respect for her willpower. Certain emotions, reactions and experiences are evoked during fieldwork, and some of those can be used to inform how we understand the situations, people and communities we enter (Cook, Crapanzano et al. 2010, p.1).

According to Davies and Spencer, emotions do not necessarily emerge only out of the "self", or even out of the structures that shape inter-subjective interactions. By recognizing that our emotions are thus influenced, we can direct our analytic attention toward distinguishing the nature of the structures that construct these interactions (Davies and Spencer 2010, p.17). Although it might be said that descriptions of various dimensions of the field research experience have become more rich in recent times, an analysis of the core aspects underlying and shaping researchers' experiences have only just begun to receive specific attention, and the experience of the researcher has become a matter of importance (Hedican 2006, p.18).

"Fieldwork makes you consider your everyday experiences in new ways… but most of all it helps you understand why you react and respond in the ways you do, based on your assumptions. It will encourage you not only to watch others but also to watch yourself as you watch them concisely" (Sunstien and Chiseri-Strater 1997, p.2). After meeting a participant, I would ask myself why I felt a particular way. These interviews made me think about my own family relations, my connection with God, the effort I am putting into being a productive woman every day, and they made me think of all the issues these participants shared with me. As in the arguments of Sunstien and Chiseri-Strater (1997, p.29), the focus on the emotional aspects of fieldwork allowed me as the researcher more in-depth insight into the process of meaning and interpretation, by studying my own self-dialogue in the process.

a) Negotiations between participants and my photographic portrait practice

I began to work with the participants during the third stage called 'reflections'. Stage three involved the visual representations; images of Saudi women from the point of view of another female Saudi photographer (me). Each woman was photographed individually, with the purpose of reflecting on her identity, her stories and to represent each participant visually, providing a chance for self-expression. The aim was to produce ten black and white creative contemporary portraits.

In stage three each participant was asked to write a sentence to be added to the photograph, which expressed and told more about herself. These photographs, combined with the sentences, helped with translating and communicating issues of Saudi women's identity, thereby providing a better understanding of them and giving them the chance to express who they are whilst increasing each participant's self-awareness. These final photographs were also the subject of discussion between the participants and myself as the researcher/photographer.

Discussions and negotiations took place to ensure that participants had a chance to represent themselves, while at the same time making sure that the project reflected the entire collaborative process with all its details. Lincoln and Denzin (2003, p.231) argue that the researcher may feel an irresistible desire to "take

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control", legitimated by the argument that this is necessary to protect the practicality of the study. However, negotiations regarding data, or interpretation, are the best and indeed the only way to proceed in an enquiry marked by face-to-face contact.

Negotiations were made with all participants without interfering in any of their choices or decisions regarding representation. Participant D.Q.3, for example, did not have a clear vision of how she wanted her final portrait to be. She was certain about the caption she wanted written on the portrait, but not the portrait itself. She had several portraits of women from the Internet, and she said she would like hers to look similar. The participant ended up choosing one of many portraits, which was a close-up of her face, looking downwards to the side. Her facial expression contradicted the caption, which was "The best is yet to come", and I had to explain to her why I believed this portrait did not suit the caption. These negotiations between me as the researcher, and her as the participant were aimed at reaching a better understanding of the research practice. I discussed with the participant whether or not the portrait contradicted what she was saying. She replied, "But my nose looks nice. I prefer this one".



Figure 10.1: Participant D.Q.3. 'The best is yet to come'.

Participant D.Q.3 stated:

> I selected this phrase because after all the ups and downs I passed through in my life, from my divorce, being away from my family and kids, to the passing away of my father, I have decided to look forward to a better, brighter, more successful future. I aim to focus on all the positive things in my life, no matter how small. I do believe that 'the best is yet to come'. I am working hard for it and looking forward to it. It is a hope today for a better future.

Her sentence said: "The best is yet to come", yet as the photographer and researcher I had to clarify and explain to her the reasons why I saw that this photograph contradicted the meaning she wanted to convey. This image represents a woman who is clearly thinking or daydreaming. She is holding a cup of coffee and her face seems sad, not hopeful as expressed by the sentence she chose. I suggested we take more photographs until she felt that she was satisfied with her image. I took a couple more shots using the curtain in her bedroom as a partition between her face and the camera, while she sat on a chair. We finally agreed on one final portrait that represented her and her statement.



Figure 10.2 Participant R.M.9.

The second set of negotiations was with participant R.M.9. She identified exactly what she wanted from the beginning. She wanted to be represented as the "Virgin Mary". She wanted to be dressed in white in front of a white background, to represent purity. She said "I want to show people that you can be a modest Muslim woman, yet be sexy at the same time". In other words, signifying purity, religion and sexuality. Her sentence was related to being magnificent or stunning. During the negotiations, I explained to her that it would be possible to have the result that she desired without having to have a plain white background that she would blend in with. In addition, we had to discuss the sentence for several hours. I tried not to interfere with her choice of words, I asked her to give it more thought before reaching the final decision. After long negotiations, she chose to write, "I am an Arab", referring to her Arabic background.

XII. Conclusion

This paper has documented and analysed my fieldwork in Saudi Arabia. I presented the final portraits of my ten participants (stage three) but only a few of the photographic images the participants shared during their interviews (stages one and two of the photo-elicitation method). I emphasized the differences in the women's experiences and personalities and examined how they present themselves using their own photographic images and their participation in the finalisation of their portraits with the superimposition of their own words.

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Conducting fieldwork in Saudi Arabia as a Saudi woman researcher is completely different from being a Saudi woman living in Saudi Arabia. As a Saudi woman and a researcher, I was fortunate to be granted access to these women's lives and homes. The challenges arose immediately, from trying to find female participants, to commuting within Riyadh. Practicalities such as delays or transportation as well as emotional challenges or negotiation skills were all part of this project; however these aspects are rarely discussed when reflecting on fieldwork. By exploring and discussing the challenges of my fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, I hope that this paper will provide new researchers with useful insights on what fieldwork implies; I also hope that this research will give them guidance on how to face these challenges, manage them, and think them through. As an academic researcher, my fieldwork experience made me aware of my own positionality, my privileges and my vulnerability and it taught me the patience and creativity needed to accomplish the goals of the research project.

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