



Portraits of Impact Viewbook " Women Leading in Jordania Higher Education"

A collection of stories from Women in Higher Education Leadership Network, at Middle East University. Produced as part of the "Leadership in Higher Education: Empowering women in Jordan" Project implemented in 2023

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About the Project



Welcome to this special compilation of leadership stories - Portraits of Impact Viewbook – Women Leading in Jordanian Higher Education. An output from the Project: Leadership in Higher Education: Empowering women in Jordan. A joint project between the University of Strathclyde and Middle East University in Jordan and funded by the British Council through the Gender Equality Partnerships Grant Scheme.

This collection of inspiring stories of the women, who represent a few of the many women academics at Middle East University, is a testament to the resilience, vision, and courage of women within Jordan's higher education sector. Born from the inspiring initiative led by Middle East University's President, Professor Salam Al Mahadin, one of Jordan's pioneering female university presidents, this project reflects a deep commitment to nurturing female voices and celebrating diverse leadership journeys.

Over the duration of the project, through the support of the British Council's Gender Equality Partnerships, the project has fostered a dynamic network of women leaders in higher education. These stories are more than personal successes; they embody a powerful ripple effect creating opportunities for connection, inspiration, and collective growth. Each narrative offers insight into the challenges faced, the barriers broken, and the aspirations that continue to shape the future of female higher education leadership in Jordan.

This Portraits of Impact Viewbook aims to elevate women's voices, encourage dialogue, and facilitate further action toward gender equity. We invite you to explore these inspiring stories, share them widely, reach out to these remarkable women, and consider how collaborative efforts can strengthen the advancement of women leaders across Jordan.

Funded by the British Council through the Gender Equality Partnerships grant scheme and initiated in 2023, this project exemplifies the collective commitment to redefining leadership and fostering a more inclusive and equitable higher education landscape, a journey in which change begins with us all.

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Welcome to the Portraits of Impact Viewbook: Women Leading in Jordanian Higher Education. A message from Professor Salam Al Mahadin

I am delighted to welcome you to this collection. A viewbook that invites you to read, and have a glimpse of the lived experience of some of the powerful stories of women shaping the future of higher education in Jordan. As the first female president of Middle East University and a passionate advocate for women's leadership, I know firsthand how brave stories can inspire change. This Viewbook captures more than success; it reflects the courage to share, to lead in many forms, and to support each other. The stories within reveal how leadership is not just about titles but about showing up with confidence, mentoring others, and creating opportunities for growth. These stories are just a snapshot of the many other stories, that are at Middle East University and other universities in Jordan who form the Women in Higher Education Leadership Network housed and championed by MEU.

The lifespan of this project, our women's leadership network has come together to listen and learn—many stories surfaced that remind us of the rich, diverse pathways women take to make an impact. This project has helped us grow our footprint, foster collaboration, and fuel our shared vision for a more equitable future. But this was only the start. The work and the Network are growing, continuing to drive impact, inspire and learn.

I encourage you to explore these pages, to see and hear the experiences that drive change, and to be inspired to participate in this vital movement. Together, we can continue to elevate women's voices and leadership in Jordan and beyond. Together, let us build on this legacy.

Professor Salam Al Mahadin
President, Middle East University



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**Suha Abu-Doleh**

Vice Dean and Acting Head of
the Department of Basic
Pharmaceutical Sciences
Associate Professor

My Journey in Academic and Administrative Work

Entering the field of academic and administrative work as a woman was not merely a professional challenge; it was a journey filled with confrontations against societal expectations and deeply rooted traditions. From the moment I decided to pursue higher education and engage in administrative roles, I realized that the path would not be easy—not because of the difficulty of the tasks themselves, but because society had already defined a rigid framework for women's roles. Any attempt to step outside this framework was met with scepticism or downplaying of its significance.

Societal Challenges for Women in Academia

The greatest challenges I faced were not academic but societal. Traditional perceptions of ambitious women continue to hinder their progress. Some of the most prominent challenges include:

Higher Education as a Luxury, not a Necessity – Society often views advanced studies for women as non-essential, as if the pursuit of knowledge is merely a privilege rather than an investment in their capabilities.

The Challenge of Effort and Balance – It is often said that the demands of higher education exceed a woman's capacity, as if academic ambition is an overwhelming burden rather than an attainable goal.

The Priority of Family Formation – Women are expected to prioritize starting a family above all else, as if personal ambition must always take second place.

The Perceived Conflict Between Education and Marriage – There is a prevailing belief that pursuing higher education might hinder a woman's chances of marriage, as if she must choose between ambition and family life rather than striving for both.

Achievement vs. Marriage – Regardless of a woman's academic or professional accomplishments, marriage and motherhood remain the ultimate measure of success in society's eyes, leading to a constant sense of inadequacy.

The Female Leader Between Strength and Bias – When a woman assumes a leadership role, she is sometimes labelled as "too masculine" or overly strict, or it is assumed that her emotions negatively influence her decisions. In contrast, these same traits are often seen as positive qualities in male leaders.

Lessons Learned from the Experience

Through this journey, I have realized that a predefined framework has been imposed on women to maintain "societal balance." Any achievement beyond this framework is often seen as a threat rather than a success. However, breaking these stereotypes is part of our responsibility as women in leadership positions. Every step we take outside this framework is an opportunity to open doors for future generations.

Women are fully capable of balancing academic and administrative ambitions with personal life. However, to achieve this, we must reshape societal perceptions of women's roles in leadership and higher education.



Dr. Manal Al-Twalbah

Head of the Educational
Technology Department &
Assistant Dean for Academic
Affairs

My Journey in Academia: From Student to Leader

The path to leadership in academia is often filled with challenges, but for those who persevere, it becomes a journey of transformation. My story is one of resilience, support, and continuous development. From my early academic years to my current role, I have navigated societal expectations, professional obstacles, and personal commitments to emerge as a leader in my field.

Challenges Along the Way

Like many women in academia, I encountered difficulties that tested my resolve. The biggest challenges included balancing multiple responsibilities and navigating gender biases.

Striking a Balance Between Roles: Managing academic, administrative, and personal responsibilities required careful planning and prioritization. There were moments of exhaustion, but my commitment to excellence kept me moving forward.

Challenging Gender Stereotypes: Academia, like many fields, has historically been male-dominated. At times, I found my contributions undervalued or questioned. However, I relied on my knowledge of university policies and my confidence in my expertise to assert my role. By maintaining professionalism and perseverance, I was able to establish my credibility and earn the respect of my peers.

The Power of Partnerships and Support

Success is never achieved in isolation. Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to work with inspiring mentors and colleagues who have contributed to my growth.

Fostering Collaboration: Leadership is not about exercising authority—it is about empowering others. I have always believed in creating an inclusive and supportive work environment, ensuring that faculty members and students alike feel valued and heard. Through teamwork and shared decision-making, we have strengthened our academic programs and enhanced the learning experience for students.

Learning from Inspirational Figures: Two exceptional leaders have played a crucial role in shaping my journey. Dr. Salam demonstrated the power of vision and resilience, rising through the ranks to become a university president. Her ability to handle complex responsibilities with clarity and confidence inspired me to pursue leadership with determination. Dr. Ayat exemplified precision and academic excellence. Her work ethic and commitment to quality education motivated me to uphold high standards in my own leadership role.

A Future of Opportunities

Reflecting on my journey, I am proud of what I have achieved and the challenges I have overcome. More importantly, I am committed to paving the way for future generations of women in academia.

To every woman striving for leadership: believe in your potential, seek out strong partnerships, and never stop pushing forward. Our success is not just measured by personal milestones but by the impact we leave on those who follow in our footsteps.



Dr. Lama Nusair

Head of the Department of
English Language and
Translation (Assistant Professor)

Embracing the Career Break Journey

Re-entering the workforce after a career break can be daunting, especially for women who often shoulder greater caregiving responsibilities. When I stepped away from academia in 2011, I had no clear plan only the certainty that my young family needed me. Shortly after, we moved from Jordan to England, and my responsibilities grew. At the time, pursuing a career felt like a betrayal of the family life we were building, so I embraced the experience wholeheartedly.

A few years later, upon returning to Jordan, I knew it was time to refocus on my career. Naturally, I was apprehensive. Academia had changed—there was a heightened emphasis on research, peer review, and unfamiliar metrics like Scopus and CiteScore. Even basic tools like Google Drive were foreign to me. Conversations with other mothers on the sidelines of a rugby match in England had not prepared me for this. Then came COVID, and with it, the shift to online learning. I knew it wasn't an ideal time to return, but when the opportunity arose, I was determined not to let the pandemic or my self-doubt hold me back.

Lessons in Empathy and Growth

The process of returning to work was filled with learning curves, but the most valuable lessons were in self-empathy and empathy for others. Many women who take career breaks experience imposter syndrome feeling inadequate or out of place. But I found strategies that helped me navigate this transition:

Be kind to yourself – Self-doubt is inevitable, but harsh self-criticism only holds you back.

Adopt a growth mindset – The workplace evolves; be prepared to learn and adapt.

Recognize your skills – What worked ten years ago may not work today, but your experiences both professional and personal bring value.

Embrace the process – Mistakes will happen. Learn from them without letting them define you.

Avoid the multitasking trap – The idea that women excel at multitasking often leads to unrealistic expectations. Prioritize, set boundaries, and ask for help when needed.

Navigating Gender Bias in Academia

Returning to academia reminded me of the gendered culture in Jordan's professional sectors, where women often struggle for visibility and agency. I noticed a stark contrast in how male and female colleagues responded to my return. Women in leadership positions were empathetic and supportive, focusing on my strengths rather than the gap in my CV. In contrast, many male colleagues were dismissive or skeptical, making my reintegration more challenging.

Despite these obstacles, I persevered with the support of empathetic women in academia. However, meaningful progress requires more than individual resilience. Both men and women in leadership must actively challenge the dominance of male power structures and work to dismantle the stigma surrounding career breaks.



Dr. Nasaybah Awajan
English Language and
Translation Associate Professor

Overcoming Obstacles and Biases: A Journey of Perseverance and Support

We are often asked about the circumstances and conditions that shaped us into the individuals we aspire to be, and the people who played a pivotal role in our journey. If I were to answer this question, my response would encompass both circumstances and people, as they have equally influenced my path.

My academic journey took an unexpected turn when I was awarded a partial scholarship to pursue my MA studies in Cardiff, UK. However, due to my husband's ongoing PhD studies and the financial constraints of affording nursery fees for our five-month-old son alongside university expenses, I had to reconsider my options. As a result, I returned to Jordan and pursued an MA in English Language and Literature at Middle East University (MEU). Later, I embarked on my PhD studies in English Literature at the University of Jordan, all while managing my responsibilities as an English language teacher and coordinator at a prestigious private school in Amman.

During this phase, I faced significant challenges from two individuals who seemed determined to undermine my efforts. One was a professor who taught most of my courses at the university. Despite knowing that I was balancing work, marriage, and motherhood, he constantly reminded me that I would not be able to complete my PhD under such circumstances. The other was an academic manager at my school, who persistently scrutinized my work, attempting to discredit my performance. However, each time, I proved him wrong through my dedication and perseverance.

On the other hand, I was fortunate to receive unwavering support from two remarkable men. My late father, peace be upon him, stood by me with endless encouragement, guidance, and motivation. My husband has also been a pillar of support, always believing in my potential and standing by my side throughout my journey.

Lessons Learned from the Experience

Reflecting on my academic and professional life, I am immensely grateful to two exceptional female leaders who significantly contributed to my growth. The first is my English Language Lead at my previous academy. After leaving my role at the private school, I joined the academy as an academic advisor, teaching in the Pre-Service Teacher Professional Diploma. She provided me with the space and confidence to develop my skills, encouraging me to fully engage with Student Teachers rather than merely being subjected to criticism. Through co-teaching and mentorship, she instilled in me the value of collaboration and professional growth. My journey continued as I transitioned to working with the University College London (UCL) in the USAID program, focusing on Partnership and Mentorship. Eventually, I became the Academic Reading and Writing Lead at the academy, a role that allowed me to make a substantial impact.

The second female leader who has been instrumental in my journey is Proff. Salam Almahadin The President of MEU. From the moment she interviewed me to this day, she believed in my capabilities and provided unwavering support. She has been a role model not only in her leadership approach but also in her commitment to empowering other women. Her dedication to fostering female leadership is evident in her efforts to place women in positions of influence and decision-making.

**Dr. Tikryat Qaralleh**

Associate Professor & Acting
Head of the Department of
Administration and Curriculum

My Journey of Growth and Leadership

Stepping into a leadership role in academia is about more than administration—it's about vision, collaboration, and fostering a supportive environment. As Acting Head of the Department of Administration and Curriculum, I quickly learned that leadership meant more than managing operations; it required bringing people together, inspiring change, and maintaining academic excellence.

Balancing leadership with teaching and research has been one of my greatest challenges. Success comes from understanding your role, committing to excellence, and integrating leadership with academic responsibilities. But most importantly, I haven't walked this path alone—mentorship, teamwork, and shared goals have shaped my experience.

The Mentors Who Believed in Me

I wouldn't be where I am today without those who believed in me. From the start, Dr. Ayat, our dean, recognized leadership qualities in me that I hadn't yet seen in myself. "I need someone in this position who upholds ethical leadership," she told me. That moment was a turning point—it made me realize that leadership is about trust, responsibility, and integrity.

Another inspiring figure in my journey has been Dr. Salam, a respected academic leader in Jordan. She is a role model for women in leadership, and her dedication to gender equity reinforced my belief that women belong in leadership positions, even in traditionally male-dominated spaces. Watching her succeed made me feel that I, too, could make an impact.

Facing Challenges and Growing as a Leader

Like any leadership journey, mine hasn't been without challenges. One of the biggest hurdles was stepping into a leadership role while still being relatively new to the university. I had to quickly learn about different personalities, work styles, and team dynamics. Leadership, I realized, isn't just about making decisions—it's about understanding people.

I started to see leadership as finding the "keys" to different personalities. Every colleague has a unique key, and as a leader, I had to figure out how to engage with each person in a way that fostered trust and collaboration. Taking the time to truly listen and understand my team helped me prevent conflicts and build strong professional relationships. Over time, I created an environment where everyone felt valued and heard.

Looking Ahead

Women in academia have incredible leadership potential, but opportunities and support systems are essential for success. If you are given the chance to lead, take it. The journey won't always be easy, but with perseverance, strong relationships, and self-belief, you can make an impact.



Dr. Samira Habashneh
Dean of the Faculty of Nursing
at Middle East University (MEU)

My Journey of Growth and Leadership

Dr. Samira Habashneh built a career defined by perseverance, resilience, and the power of mentorship. Her journey reflects the challenges many women face in academia and leadership, yet it also highlights the transformative impact of support and determination.

Her academic path took an unexpected turn when she was awarded a partial scholarship for an MA in Cardiff, UK. However, with her husband pursuing his PhD and financial constraints making childcare unaffordable, she made the difficult decision to return to Jordan. Undeterred, she completed an MA in English Language and Literature at MEU before earning her PhD at the University of Jordan—all while working as a teacher and coordinator at a prestigious private school in Amman.

Balancing academic and professional responsibilities was no easy task. She faced scepticism from a professor who doubted she could complete her PhD while managing work and family life, as well as scrutiny from a school administrator who questioned her capabilities. Despite these challenges, she remained committed, proving her critics wrong through dedication and excellence.

At the same time, she was fortunate to receive unwavering encouragement from her late father and her husband, both of whom played a crucial role in her success. Two female mentors further shaped her career. Her English Language Lead at a teacher training academy gave her the confidence and space to mentor student teachers, leading her to work with University College London (UCL) on a USAID partnership. Another key figure was Dr. Nusaiba at MEU, who recognized her potential and provided guidance that enabled her to take on leadership roles, including Head of the English and Translation Department.

Facing Challenges and Growing as a Leader

Dr. Samira's journey also reflects the cultural challenges many women encounter. Studies show that up to 83% of women struggle to fully commit to their careers due to family responsibilities. Raised in a traditional Arab household, she faced societal expectations that often placed women in supporting roles. However, she was determined to break these barriers while staying true to her cultural roots.

Her leadership path began early. As an undergraduate, she became the only female student elected to her faculty's student union. Later, during her master's studies, she participated in a sponsorship programme between the University of Jordan and AMIDEAST, spending five months in the US. This transformative experience taught her independence and leadership in a global setting.

In 1991, she took on her first managerial role as a Dean Assistant for Training Affairs. Later, as one of the founding academics of the first Nursing Faculty at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, she navigated cultural resistance to women leading male students. Through collaboration and persistence, she helped create a progressive learning environment.

**Dr Wejdan Shroukh**

Head of the Pharmacology and Clinical Pharmacy Department, Faculty of Pharmacy, Middle East University

My Journey of Growth and Leadership

In the spring of 2020, while I was enthusiastically finalizing my PhD thesis, the last thing I expected was to receive news that would change my life. My four-year-old daughter was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Everything happened unexpectedly fast, and before we could fully process the situation, she underwent surgery and, thankfully, recovered perfectly.

Later that year, after earning my PhD from the University of Manchester, I returned to Jordan with a clear mission: to start my academic career while ensuring that all my daughter's needs were fully met. One of the biggest challenges I faced was homeschooling her, as my husband and I were hesitant to send her to school at that stage. We embarked on this journey together—my husband worked from home to be with our daughter, while I took on a role as an Assistant Professor in Pharmacy Practice at Middle East University (MEU). With this arrangement, I was able to balance my teaching and research responsibilities alongside my daughter's education, thanks to my husband's great support.

The Biggest Challenge: Academic Leadership and Motherhood

Things remained manageable until the 2022/2023 academic year when I was offered a leadership position at the Faculty of Pharmacy at MEU. I was selected as the Head of the Pharmacology and Clinical Pharmacy Department. While I was proud to receive such recognition from my university, the responsibility felt overwhelming. The timing coincided with my husband's new job at the airport, which required me to take on more parenting duties.

Up until that point, I had never shared my daughter's health situation with anyone in the university administration. I had managed to fulfill all my professional responsibilities without any issues, so I saw no need to mention it. However, receiving this leadership offer—an opportunity that reflected my institution's trust in my capabilities—made me realize it was time to share my circumstances with MEU's administration.

Institutional Support and Its Impact on Empowerment

It was not easy to bring up a personal matter in a professional setting, but the response from MEU's administration was incredibly reassuring. They immediately offered me the position with flexible working hours, allowing me to continue homeschooling my daughter while managing my new responsibilities. As simple as this may seem, it meant everything to me as a mother striving to excel in her career without compromising her family's well-being.

In many other workplaces, my situation could have led to doubts about my capabilities. I might have been judged as incapable of handling leadership responsibilities. However, at MEU, I was assessed based on my qualifications and performance rather than my personal circumstances. This level of understanding and support made all the difference.

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