Career Support and Mentoring for High-School Girls: Creating Networks of Opportunity

March 2020
Full Project: Mentorship, Entrepreneurship, and Labor Market Opportunity in Saudi Arabia

KEY INSIGHTS

- Female high school students ask for career advice mostly from female relatives, but these relatives are unlikely to be employed themselves and have limited experience of navigating the labor market.
- While teachers and other mentors are perceived to be supportive, female students find it difficult to talk to them about their career-related concerns.
- Greater systemic support coming from high schools, institutions of higher education, and future employers could improve the support network of these students and their chances to access the labor market upon graduation.

WHO IS YOUR MENTOR? IDENTIFYING MENTORSHIP NETWORKS

Research Background

The unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia is currently 12.3%, but there are big gender differences: Unemployment rates are 31.1% for Saudi females and 6.0% for Saudi males.[1] Interestingly, even though among unemployed females, those holding a secondary education certificate constitute the largest group (37.6%, compared to 7.2% of males in this educational level), these females have seen the biggest growth in employment opportunities during the last decade,[2] constituting a promising and yet often overlooked educational group. While this demographic shows great promise for improved economic outcomes, we hypothesize that high school girls could benefit from increased support for success after high school. In this context, it is important to understand the support that young Saudi girls currently receive as they graduate high school and decide whether to access university and/or enter the labor market.

Research led by Dr. Alessandra González at the University of Chicago is examining the perceptions of female high school students coming from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. From past cohorts we know that while most of these girls graduate from high school (97%), only about 29% attend university and few join the labor market (with 15% report working full-time and 5% part-time)[3]. In order to enhance young females' labor market outcomes, labor policymakers and universities need a nuanced understanding of the support and mentoring networks that young females are exposed to, and how they can be enhanced to improve educational and career aspirations and goals. Mentorship networks at this age could be extremely valuable for informing career choices, as they expose students to the various employment prospects of different education levels and fields.

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[1] Labor Force Survey. Q2 2019. General Authority for Statistics
[2] GOSI 2015
[3] Internal Al-Nahda' survey of the 2011-2015 cohorts' outcomes

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Research Findings

In collaboration with Al-Nahda Society, a women's non-profit organization that runs a 3-year mentoring program for female high school students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, we conducted a baseline survey with 115 voluntary participants eligible to participate in the 3-year mentoring program to understand their labor market aspirations and support networks. These girls were at the time being recruited for the mentoring program and were on average 16 years old. When asked to select the people they usually talked to in order to take career-related decisions, most girls selected their female relatives as the most prominent option. As shown in Figure 1, 80% of women in the sample ask a family member for advice (most likely their mother, sister, or aunt), while 17% ask a friend or classmate. Teachers and mentors only represent a small 2% of the network for career advice.

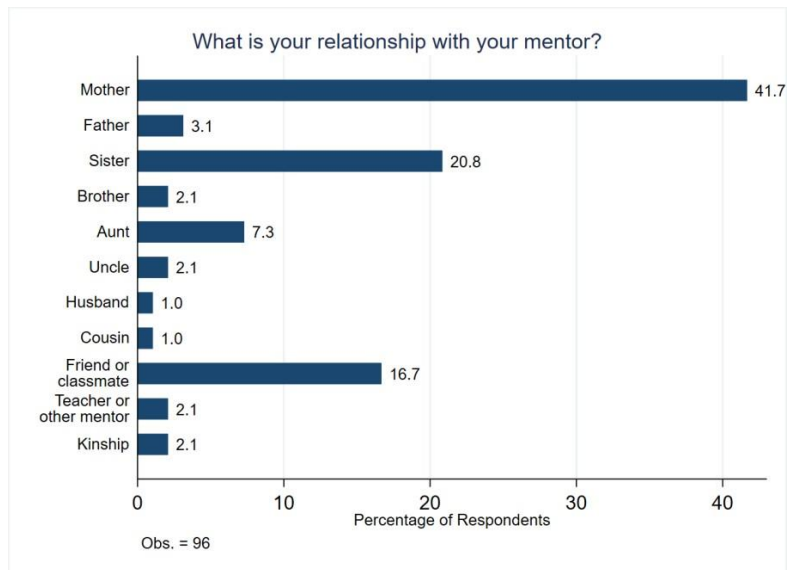**Figure 1**|Reported Relationship with Mentor (n=96)

Figure 2 shows the occupations of career advisors. Only 27% of these mentors are working. Moreover, among mothers who were listed as mentors, more than half are not working, and around 72% are homemakers. While this is consistent with the relatively low female employment rate in Saudi Arabia, it raises concerns about the accuracy of career advice, and types of role modeling and mentorship for labor force participation these individuals can provide to the girls in our sample.

Figure 2 | Reported Mentor´s Employment Status (n=96)
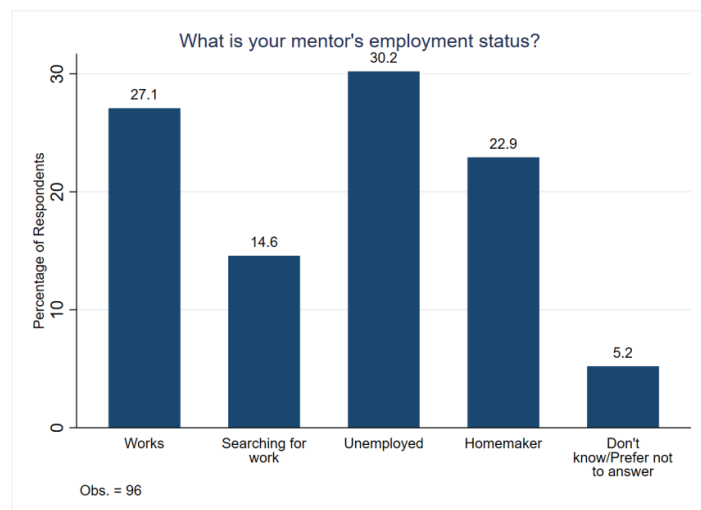
To understand why non-family mentors are rare, Figure 3 reveals that, even though half of the respondents believe their teachers and mentors support their education, a similar percentage feel that it is difficult to talk to them.

Figure 3 | Reported Teacher/Mentor′s Support for Education (n=113) and Reported Ease of Talking to Teacher/Mentor (n=114)
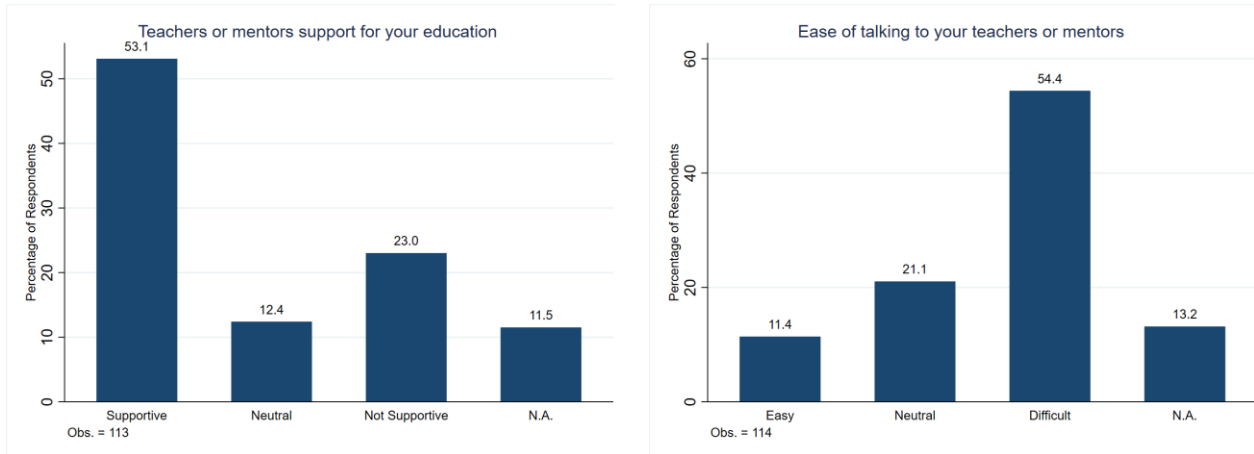
HOW CAN POLICYMAKERS USE THIS INFORMATION?

Policymakers can support high schools and other educational institutions to create a broader system of support for female student career and educational goals. Considering young females' limited networks of employed female role models, expanding their networks during high school years could potentially improve labor market outcomes.

High schools could partner with non-profit organizations to add workshops devoted to the steps involved in the job market search and create opportunities for teachers to become more accessible as career mentors to students. Additionally, high schools could partner with universities, student groups, and companies to organize field trips and bring speakers from different fields to each class. Finally, high schools could also replicate university efforts such as career counseling and alumni networking. It is important that students have access to a breadth of information regarding all their possible options following high school graduation, from continuing their education to accessing the labor market.

Moving forward, Dr. González will work with the women′s non-profit organization to tailor mentoring programs that can support these high school girls' access to the labor market.

RESEARCH TEAM

Dr. Alessandra González – Senior Research Associate, University of Chicago
Dr. Inmaculada Macias-Alonso – Postdoctoral Fellow, Harvard Kennedy School
Dr. Jennifer Peck – Assistant Professor, Swarthmore College

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