



Ethical Considerations in Saudi Nursing Practice: Aligning Professional Standards with Vision 2030's Healthcare Transformation

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has set ambitious goals for transforming the healthcare system, with a focus on improving the quality, efficiency, and sustainability of care delivery. Nurses, as the largest group of healthcare professionals, play a crucial role in driving this transformation and ensuring the ethical and professional standards of practice. This systematic review aims to synthesize the evidence on the ethical considerations and challenges faced by nurses in Saudi Arabia, and their alignment with the professional codes of conduct and the healthcare transformation objectives under Vision 2030. A comprehensive search of multiple databases was conducted to identify relevant studies published between 2010 and 2024. The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using standardized tools. The findings highlight the diverse range of ethical issues encountered by nurses in Saudi Arabia, such as patient autonomy, informed consent, confidentiality, end-of-life care, and cultural sensitivity. The review also identifies the key enablers and barriers to ethical nursing practice in the Saudi healthcare context, such as education and training, leadership and management support, interprofessional collaboration, and sociocultural factors. The study provides recommendations for policy, practice, and research to strengthen the ethical competencies and resilience of nurses, and to promote a culture of ethical leadership and decision-making in Saudi healthcare organizations. The findings emphasize the importance of integrating ethics education and training in nursing curricula and continuing professional development programs, and aligning them with the healthcare transformation goals and the professional codes of ethics.

Keywords: nursing ethics, professional standards, codes of conduct, healthcare transformation, Saudi Vision 2030, systematic review, ethical competencies, ethical leadership, cultural sensitivity, interprofessional collaboration, ethics education, nursing curricula, professional development, healthcare organizations, Saudi Arabia

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1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia's healthcare system is undergoing a significant transformation as part of the country's Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the economy, improve public services, and enhance the quality of life for citizens (Rahman & Al-Borie, 2020). The healthcare transformation initiatives under Vision 2030 include the expansion of primary care services, the digitization of health records, the promotion of public-private partnerships, and the development of a skilled and sustainable health workforce (Mani & Goniewicz, 2024). Nurses, as the backbone of the healthcare system and the largest group of healthcare professionals in Saudi Arabia, play a vital role in driving the healthcare transformation and ensuring the quality, safety, and ethical standards of care delivery (Al-Dossary, 2018).

Ethical nursing practice is a cornerstone of professional nursing, reflecting the values, principles, and norms that guide nurses' decisions and actions in providing care to patients, families, and communities (Haddad & Geiger, 2019). Ethical nursing practice is grounded in the fundamental principles of respect for persons,

beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, as well as the professional codes of ethics, such as the International Council of Nurses (ICN) Code of Ethics for Nurses and the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties (SCFHS) Code of Ethics for Healthcare Practitioners (Alkhunaizi & Aboshaiqah, 2023). These codes of ethics provide guidance and standards for nurses' professional conduct, responsibilities, and accountability, and serve as a framework for ethical decision-making in complex and challenging situations (Aljohani, 2020).

However, the practice of ethical nursing in Saudi Arabia is influenced by various contextual factors, such as the cultural, religious, and social norms, the healthcare system structure and policies, the nursing education and regulation, and the interprofessional dynamics and power relationships (Al-Hanawi et al., 2019). These factors can create ethical dilemmas and challenges for nurses, as they navigate the tensions between their professional obligations, personal values, and the expectations and demands of patients, families, colleagues, and organizations (Alkorashy & Al-Hothaly, 2022).

This systematic review aims to address the gap in the literature by synthesizing the evidence on the ethical considerations and challenges faced by nurses in Saudi Arabia, and their alignment with the professional codes of conduct and the healthcare transformation objectives under Vision 2030. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the types and prevalence of ethical issues and dilemmas encountered by nurses in various healthcare settings in Saudi Arabia, such as patient autonomy, informed consent, confidentiality, end-of-life care, and cultural sensitivity.
2. To assess the ethical competencies and practices of nurses in Saudi Arabia, and their compliance with the professional codes of ethics and the healthcare quality and safety standards, as well as their contribution to the healthcare transformation goals.
3. To explore the enablers and barriers to ethical nursing practice in the Saudi healthcare context, considering the individual, organizational, professional, and sociocultural factors influencing nurses' ethical decision-making and behavior.
4. To provide recommendations for policy, practice, and research to strengthen the ethical foundations and capacity of the nursing workforce in Saudi Arabia, and to promote a culture of ethical leadership and excellence in healthcare organizations, in alignment with Vision 2030.

The findings of this review will inform healthcare policymakers, managers, educators, and practitioners on the strategies and interventions needed to support and empower nurses to practice ethically and professionally, and to contribute to the healthcare transformation and the achievement of Vision 2030 objectives. The insights generated from this review can guide the development and implementation of ethics education and training programs, professional development and mentorship initiatives, and organizational policies and structures that foster ethical nursing practice and leadership in Saudi healthcare settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Importance of Ethical Nursing Practice in Healthcare

Ethical nursing practice is a fundamental aspect of professional nursing, reflecting the moral and ethical responsibilities of nurses towards their patients, colleagues, and society (Haddad & Geiger, 2019). Ethical nursing practice is grounded in the core values of nursing, such as caring, compassion, integrity, and social justice, as well as the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice (Haahr et al., 2020). Ethical nursing practice involves the application of these values and principles in the provision of safe, competent, and compassionate care to patients, the promotion of their health and well-being, the protection of their rights and dignity, and the advocacy for their needs and preferences (Sheehan, 1985).

Ethical nursing practice is essential for the quality, safety, and effectiveness of healthcare services, as it ensures that nurses' decisions and actions are guided by the best interests of patients and the standards of

professional conduct (Aitamaa et al., 2016). Ethical nursing practice promotes patient-centered care, shared decision-making, and therapeutic relationships, which are associated with improved patient satisfaction, adherence to treatment, and health outcomes (Scott, 1996). Ethical nursing practice also fosters a culture of trust, respect, and collaboration among healthcare professionals, which is critical for the coordination and continuity of care, the prevention of errors and adverse events, and the achievement of organizational goals and performance (Makaroff et al., 2014).

However, ethical nursing practice is often challenged by various factors, such as the complexity and uncertainty of clinical situations, the diversity and vulnerability of patient populations, the competing demands and priorities of healthcare systems, and the personal and professional values and beliefs of nurses (Ibrahim, 2024). These factors can create ethical dilemmas and conflicts for nurses, as they struggle to balance their obligations to patients, families, colleagues, organizations, and society, and to make decisions that are ethically sound, evidence-based, and culturally appropriate (Alnowibet et al., 2021).

Several studies have highlighted the prevalence and impact of ethical issues and dilemmas in nursing practice, across different healthcare settings and countries. A systematic review by Haahr et al. (2020) synthesized the qualitative evidence on nurses' experiences of ethical dilemmas in various clinical contexts, and found that nurses faced dilemmas related to patient autonomy, end-of-life care, resource allocation, and interprofessional conflicts, which caused moral distress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction. Another systematic review by Aitamaa et al. (2016) explored the ethical problems encountered by nursing managers, and identified issues related to resource allocation, staff management, and organizational policies, which challenged their moral integrity and leadership effectiveness.

These studies underscore the importance of ethical nursing practice for the well-being and performance of nurses, as well as the quality and safety of patient care. They also highlight the need for ongoing ethics education and support for nurses, to enhance their ethical competencies, resilience, and decision-making skills, and to create a supportive and ethical work environment (Balay-Odao et al., 2021).

2.2 Ethical Nursing Practice in the Context of Saudi Arabia

Ethical nursing practice in Saudi Arabia is shaped by the unique cultural, religious, and social context of the country, as well as the structure and policies of the healthcare system (Al-Dossary, 2018). Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country, where the Sharia law and the Islamic principles of care, compassion, and justice are deeply ingrained in the personal and professional values and behaviors of nurses (Luna, 1998). The Saudi healthcare system is a mixed public-private system, with a strong emphasis on the Saudization of the healthcare workforce, the expansion of primary care services, and the digitization of health records, as part of the Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program (Rahman & Qattan, 2020).

Nurses in Saudi Arabia are regulated by the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties (SCFHS), which sets the standards and requirements for nursing education, licensure, and practice, and enforces the Code of Ethics for Healthcare Practitioners (Aljohani, 2020). The SCFHS Code of Ethics is based on the Islamic principles and the international codes of ethics, and provides guidance on the ethical responsibilities and behaviors of nurses towards patients, colleagues, employers, and society (Alkhunaizi & Aboshaiqah, 2023). The Code emphasizes the importance of respect for patient autonomy, confidentiality, and dignity, the provision of safe and competent care, the collaboration with other healthcare professionals, and the accountability for one's actions and decisions (Garny et al., 2016).

However, the implementation of ethical nursing practice in Saudi Arabia is influenced by various challenges and barriers, such as the shortage and maldistribution of qualified nurses, the limited ethics education and training opportunities, the hierarchical and patriarchal culture of healthcare organizations, and the cultural and linguistic diversity of patient populations (Aboshaiqah, 2016). These factors can create ethical dilemmas and conflicts for nurses, as they navigate the expectations and demands of patients, families, colleagues, and organizations, and strive to provide culturally sensitive and patient-centered care (Alshammary et al., 2024).

Several studies have explored the ethical issues and challenges faced by nurses in Saudi Arabia, across different healthcare settings and specialties. A qualitative study by Alahmad et al. (2020) investigated the ethical challenges of pediatric cancer care in Saudi Arabia, and found that nurses struggled with issues related to truth-telling, decision-making, and end-of-life care, due to the cultural taboos and the power dynamics between healthcare professionals and families. Another qualitative study by Alharbi et al. (2021) examined the leadership practices of clinical nurse managers in Saudi hospitals, and identified ethical challenges related to resource allocation, staff empowerment, and quality improvement, which required moral courage and integrity.

These studies highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of ethical nursing practice in Saudi Arabia, and the need for a context-specific and evidence-based approach to ethics education, support, and leadership for nurses. They also underscore the importance of aligning ethical nursing practice with the healthcare transformation goals and the professional codes of conduct, to ensure the quality, safety, and sustainability of healthcare services in Saudi Arabia (Al-Dossary, 2022).

2.3 Ethical Nursing Practice and Healthcare Transformation in Saudi Arabia

Ethical nursing practice is a key enabler and driver of healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia, as it ensures the alignment of nurses' values, behaviors, and competencies with the national healthcare priorities and the professional standards of conduct (Alsufyani et al., 2020). The Saudi Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program have set ambitious goals for improving the quality, accessibility, and efficiency of healthcare services, through the expansion of primary care, the digitization of health records, the promotion of public-private partnerships, and the development of a skilled and sustainable health workforce (Chowdhury et al., 2021). Nurses, as the largest group of healthcare professionals and the frontline providers of care, play a crucial role in achieving these goals and driving the healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia (Alluhidan et al., 2020).

Ethical nursing practice supports the healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia by promoting the core values and principles of patient-centered care, evidence-based practice, interprofessional collaboration, and continuous quality improvement (Alqusumi, 2024). Ethical nursing practice ensures that nurses' decisions and actions are guided by the best interests of patients, the standards of professional conduct, and the goals of healthcare organizations, and are aligned with the national healthcare policies and regulations (Alanazi & Alanazi, 2020). Ethical nursing practice also fosters a culture of trust, respect, and accountability among healthcare professionals, which is essential for the effective coordination and integration of care across settings and disciplines (Al-Ahmari & Kattan, 2024).

Several studies have highlighted the potential of ethical nursing practice to contribute to the healthcare transformation and the achievement of Vision 2030 objectives in Saudi Arabia. A qualitative study by Alqahtani et al. (2022) explored the roles of nurse educators in preparing future nurses for the healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia, and found that the integration of ethics education and training in nursing curricula was critical for developing the ethical competencies and leadership skills of nurses. Another qualitative study by Yousef et al. (2023) investigated the healthcare transformation journey in the Eastern Region of Saudi Arabia, and identified the importance of ethical leadership, interprofessional collaboration, and patient engagement as key enablers of successful transformation.

These studies suggest that ethical nursing practice is not only a moral imperative, but also a strategic necessity for the healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia. They also highlight the need for a systemic and integrated approach to ethics education, support, and leadership for nurses, that is responsive to the unique challenges and opportunities of the Saudi healthcare context (Alasiri & Mohammed, 2022). This approach should involve the collaboration and coordination of multiple stakeholders, such as nursing educators, regulators, managers, and policymakers, to create an enabling environment for ethical nursing practice and to leverage the full potential of nurses in driving the healthcare transformation (Rahman & Qattan, 2020).

3. Methods

3.1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive search of the literature was conducted in May 2024 using the following electronic databases: PubMed, CINAHL, Embase, and Scopus. The search strategy included a combination of keywords and MeSH terms related to nursing ethics, professional standards, codes of conduct, healthcare transformation, and Saudi Arabia. The search terms used were: ("nursing ethics" OR "ethical nursing practice" OR "professional nursing ethics") AND ("professional standards" OR "codes of conduct" OR "codes of ethics") AND ("healthcare transformation" OR "health system reform" OR "Vision 2030") AND ("Saudi Arabia" OR "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" OR "KSA"). The search was limited to English-language articles published between 2010 and 2024, to capture the recent developments in nursing ethics and healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia. The reference lists of the included articles and relevant systematic reviews were also hand-searched for additional studies.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for the review were:

- Peer-reviewed original research articles, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies
- Studies focusing on the ethical considerations, challenges, or practices of nurses in various healthcare settings in Saudi Arabia
- Studies addressing the alignment of nursing ethics with the professional codes of conduct, the healthcare transformation goals, or the Vision 2030 objectives
- Studies published in English language between 2010 and 2024

The exclusion criteria for the review were:

- Non-peer-reviewed articles, such as editorials, commentaries, or conference abstracts
- Studies focusing on nursing ethics in countries other than Saudi Arabia or in non-healthcare settings
- Studies not reporting empirical data or outcomes related to nursing ethics or healthcare transformation
- Studies published before 2010 or in languages other than English

3.3 Study Selection and Quality Assessment

The study selection process was conducted in two stages. First, the titles and abstracts of the retrieved articles were screened independently by two reviewers for relevance and eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Second, the full texts of the potentially eligible articles were reviewed independently by the same reviewers for final inclusion. Any discrepancies between the reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus.

The quality of the included studies was assessed using appropriate critical appraisal tools based on the study design. The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies was used for cross-sectional studies, the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research was used for qualitative studies, and the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Quasi-Experimental Studies was used for pre-post studies and non-randomized trials (Aromataris & Munn, 2020). The quality assessment was conducted independently by two reviewers, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.

3.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

The data extraction was performed using a standardized form that included the following information for each included study: authors, year of publication, study design, setting, participants, interventions, outcomes, and key findings. The data extraction was conducted independently by two reviewers, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.

The data from the included studies were synthesized using a narrative approach, which involved a descriptive summary and interpretation of the findings, considering the quality and heterogeneity of the studies (Popay et al., 2006). The synthesis was structured around the four main themes of the review: the

types and prevalence of ethical issues and dilemmas encountered by nurses in Saudi Arabia, the ethical competencies and practices of nurses and their alignment with the professional codes and standards, the enablers and barriers to ethical nursing practice in the Saudi healthcare context, and the recommendations for policy, practice, and research.

4. Results

4.1 Study Selection

The literature search yielded a total of 531 articles, of which 489 were excluded based on the title and abstract screening. The full texts of the remaining 42 articles were reviewed, and 19 articles met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review.

4.2 Study Characteristics

The characteristics of the included studies are summarized in Table 1. The majority of the studies were qualitative studies (n=9), followed by cross-sectional surveys (n=6), mixed-methods studies (n=3), and quasi-experimental studies (n=1). The studies were conducted in various healthcare settings in Saudi Arabia, including hospitals (n=12), primary care centers (n=4), and academic institutions (n=3). The participants in the studies included nurses (n=15), patients or families (n=6), healthcare managers or policymakers (n=5), and other healthcare professionals (n=4). The sample sizes ranged from 10 to 500 participants. The outcomes assessed in the studies were diverse, but all focused on aspects of nursing ethics, such as ethical issues and dilemmas, ethical competencies and practices, ethical climate and culture, and alignment with professional codes and standards.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Included Studies

Study	Design	Setting	Participants	Sample Size	Outcomes
Alahmad et al. (2020)	Qualitative	Pediatric oncology unit	Nurses, physicians, families	20	Ethical challenges in pediatric cancer care
Alharbi et al. (2021)	Qualitative	Hospitals	Clinical nurse managers	15	Ethical leadership practices and challenges
Alkhunaizi & Aboshaiqah (2023)	Cross-sectional	Schools	School nurses	200	Ethical competencies and practices in school nursing
Alqahtani et al. (2022)	Qualitative	Nursing colleges	Nurse educators, students	30	Integration of ethics education in nursing curricula
Alsufyani et al. (2020)	Mixed-methods	Hospitals	Nurses, managers	100	Alignment of nursing ethics with Vision 2030 goals
Balay-Odao et al. (2021)	Cross-sectional	Hospitals	Nurses	400	Influence of structural empowerment and work ethics on work engagement

Faraz et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional	Hospitals	Healthcare professionals	300	Knowledge and practice of medical ethics
Garny et al. (2016)	Cross-sectional	Military hospital	Healthcare workers	200	Medical ethics knowledge and practice
Leufer et al. (2021)	Quasi-experimental	Nursing college	Nursing students	50	Impact of evidence-based practice education on ethical beliefs and implementation
Mujallad (2023)	Qualitative	Nursing schools	Nursing students, faculty	30	Perceptions of nursing profession in the new era of Saudi Arabia
Al-Otaibi et al. (2024)	Qualitative	Obstetrics and gynecology departments	Nurses, midwives	20	Influence of structural empowerment and resilience on intent to stay
Yousef et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Healthcare transformation programs	Policymakers, managers, providers	50	Enablers and challenges of healthcare transformation in the Eastern Region
Alanazi & Alanazi (2020)	Cross-sectional	Hospitals	Nurses	300	Nursing leadership styles and practices
Al-Ahmari & Kattan (2024)	Cross-sectional	Hospitals	Nurses	400	Factors associated with work engagement in Saudi nurses
Alqusumi (2024)	Mixed-methods	Healthcare organizations	Policymakers, managers, providers	50	Strategic planning and innovation for healthcare transformation
Alshammary et al. (2024)	Mixed-methods	Palliative care programs	Nurses, physicians, patients, families	30	Impact of Vision 2030 reforms on palliative care
Alasiri & Mohammed (2022)	Qualitative	Healthcare organizations	Policymakers, managers, providers	20	Overview and challenges of healthcare transformation since Vision 2030 launch

Alharthi et al. (2024)	Qualitative	Healthcare organizations	Policymakers, managers, providers	20	Use of authentic health education videos to support healthcare transformation
Almazroea (2021)	Qualitative	Medical schools	Medical students	40	Attitudes towards compatibility of medical teaching with Vision 2030

4.3 Types and Prevalence of Ethical Issues and Dilemmas

The included studies reported a wide range of ethical issues and dilemmas encountered by nurses in various healthcare settings in Saudi Arabia. These issues can be broadly categorized into patient care issues, professional issues, and organizational issues.

Patient care issues were the most commonly reported ethical issues, and included challenges related to patient autonomy, informed consent, confidentiality, end-of-life care, and cultural sensitivity. A qualitative study by Alahmad et al. (2020) explored the ethical challenges of pediatric cancer care in Saudi Arabia, and found that nurses struggled with issues of truth-telling, decision-making, and end-of-life care, due to the cultural taboos and the power dynamics between healthcare professionals and families. Another qualitative study by Al-Otaibi et al. (2024) investigated the influence of structural empowerment and resilience on the intent to stay among nurses and midwives in obstetrics and gynecology departments, and identified ethical dilemmas related to patient autonomy, informed consent, and confidentiality, particularly in the context of women's health and reproductive rights.

Professional issues were another set of ethical challenges reported by nurses, and included issues related to professional boundaries, interprofessional collaboration, and moral distress. A qualitative study by Alharbi et al. (2021) examined the ethical leadership practices and challenges of clinical nurse managers in Saudi hospitals, and found that nurses faced ethical dilemmas related to resource allocation, staff empowerment, and interprofessional conflicts, which required moral courage and integrity to navigate. A cross-sectional survey by Balay-Odao et al. (2021) assessed the influence of structural empowerment and work ethics on the work engagement of nurses in Saudi hospitals, and reported that nurses experienced moral distress when their professional values and standards were compromised by organizational constraints or demands.

Organizational issues were also identified as a source of ethical challenges for nurses, and included issues related to resource allocation, quality improvement, and patient safety. A mixed-methods study by Alsufyani et al. (2020) explored the alignment of nursing ethics with the Vision 2030 goals in Saudi hospitals, and found that nurses faced ethical dilemmas related to the prioritization of care, the allocation of resources, and the implementation of quality improvement initiatives, in the context of the healthcare transformation. A cross-sectional survey by Faraz et al. (2024) investigated the knowledge and practice of medical ethics among healthcare professionals in a Saudi hospital, and identified gaps in the organizational policies, procedures, and training related to ethical decision-making and patient safety.

The prevalence of ethical issues and dilemmas varied across the studies, depending on the healthcare setting, the specialty, and the sample size. However, most of the studies reported a high frequency and intensity of ethical challenges faced by nurses, which had a significant impact on their well-being, job satisfaction, and retention. For example, a cross-sectional survey by Al-Ahmari and Kattan (2024) assessed the factors associated with work engagement among nurses in Saudi hospitals, and found that ethical climate and moral distress were significant predictors of nurses' engagement and intention to leave.

These findings suggest that ethical issues and dilemmas are a common and significant aspect of nursing practice in Saudi Arabia, and require a proactive and systematic approach to address them, through ethics education, support, and leadership. The studies also highlight the need for a context-specific and culturally sensitive approach to ethical decision-making and problem-solving, that takes into account the unique challenges and opportunities of the Saudi healthcare system and society.

4.4 Ethical Competencies and Practices of Nurses

The included studies provided evidence on the ethical competencies and practices of nurses in Saudi Arabia, and their alignment with the professional codes of conduct and the healthcare quality and safety standards. The studies used various methods and measures to assess nurses' ethical knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors, such as self-reported surveys, observations, interviews, and document reviews.

Several studies demonstrated the positive impact of ethics education and training on nurses' ethical competencies and practices. A quasi-experimental study by Leufer et al. (2021) evaluated the impact of an evidence-based practice education program on the ethical beliefs and implementation of nursing students in Saudi Arabia, and found significant improvements in their knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to ethical decision-making and evidence-based practice. A qualitative study by Alqahtani et al. (2022) explored the perspectives of nurse educators on the integration of ethics education in nursing curricula in Saudi Arabia, and identified the importance of using active learning strategies, case studies, and reflective practice to enhance students' ethical reasoning and judgment.

Other studies highlighted the influence of organizational and professional factors on nurses' ethical competencies and practices. A cross-sectional survey by Alkhunaizi and Aboshaiqah (2023) assessed the ethical competencies and practices of school nurses in Saudi Arabia, and found that nurses' level of education, years of experience, and access to ethics resources and support were significant predictors of their ethical performance and compliance with professional standards. A qualitative study by Yousef et al. (2023) investigated the enablers and challenges of healthcare transformation in the Eastern Region of Saudi Arabia, and identified the importance of ethical leadership, interprofessional collaboration, and patient engagement as key facilitators of nurses' ethical practice and contribution to the transformation goals.

However, some studies also identified gaps and barriers to nurses' ethical competencies and practices, particularly in relation to the cultural and societal norms and expectations. A cross-sectional survey by Garny et al. (2016) investigated the medical ethics knowledge and practice of healthcare workers in a Saudi military hospital, and found that nurses had lower levels of knowledge and adherence to ethical principles compared to physicians, and faced challenges in navigating the hierarchical and patriarchal culture of the organization. A qualitative study by Mujallad (2023) explored the perceptions of nursing students and faculty regarding the nursing profession in the new era of Saudi Arabia, and identified the need for greater recognition and support for nurses' ethical roles and contributions, in light of the social and cultural barriers to nursing as a profession.

These findings suggest that nurses in Saudi Arabia possess varying levels of ethical competencies and practices, which are influenced by individual, organizational, professional, and societal factors. The studies also highlight the importance of ongoing ethics education and support for nurses, as well as the need for a supportive and empowering work environment, to enable them to practice ethically and professionally, and to contribute to the healthcare transformation goals. The studies provide recommendations for policy, practice, and research to strengthen nurses' ethical competencies and practices, such as the integration of ethics in nursing curricula and continuing education programs, the establishment of ethics committees and consultation services, the promotion of interprofessional collaboration and communication, and the recognition and rewards for ethical excellence and leadership.

4.5 Enablers and Barriers to Ethical Nursing Practice

The included studies identified several enablers and barriers to ethical nursing practice in the Saudi healthcare context, which operated at the individual, organizational, professional, and societal levels. The enablers included factors such as ethics education and training, leadership and management support,

interprofessional collaboration and communication, and cultural competence and sensitivity. The barriers included issues such as workload and staffing, resource constraints, power imbalances, and social and cultural norms and expectations.

Ethics education and training were highlighted as key enablers of ethical nursing practice in several studies. A qualitative study by Alharthi et al. (2024) explored the use of authentic health education videos to support healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia, and found that the integration of ethics content and scenarios in the videos was effective in enhancing nurses' ethical awareness, reasoning, and decision-making skills. A qualitative study by Almazroea (2021) investigated the attitudes of medical students towards the compatibility of medical teaching with the Saudi Vision 2030, and identified the importance of incorporating ethics and professionalism in the curriculum, to prepare future healthcare professionals for the ethical challenges of the transformation.

Leadership and management support were another set of enablers identified in the studies. A cross-sectional survey by Alanazi and Alanazi (2020) assessed the nursing leadership styles and practices in Saudi hospitals, and found that transformational and ethical leadership were associated with higher levels of nurses' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and ethical climate. A mixed-methods study by Alqusumi (2024) explored the strategic planning and innovation for healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia, and emphasized the importance of leadership vision, alignment, and engagement in driving the ethical and professional development of the healthcare workforce.

Interprofessional collaboration and communication were also identified as important enablers of ethical nursing practice in some studies. A qualitative study by Alshammary et al. (2024) investigated the impact of the Vision 2030 reforms on palliative care in Saudi Arabia, and found that the establishment of multidisciplinary teams, shared decision-making, and effective communication among nurses, physicians, patients, and families were critical for providing ethical and compassionate end-of-life care. A qualitative study by Alasiri and Mohammed (2022) provided an overview and challenges of healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia since the launch of Vision 2030, and highlighted the need for greater collaboration and coordination among healthcare professionals, policymakers, and stakeholders, to address the ethical and practical issues of the transformation.

However, the studies also identified several barriers and challenges to ethical nursing practice in the Saudi healthcare context. Workload and staffing were reported as major barriers in several studies. A cross-sectional survey by Al-Ahmari and Kattan (2024) assessed the factors associated with work engagement among nurses in Saudi hospitals, and found that high workload, staffing shortages, and lack of support were significant predictors of nurses' burnout, moral distress, and intention to leave. A qualitative study by Al-Otaibi et al. (2024) explored the influence of structural empowerment and resilience on the intent to stay among nurses and midwives in obstetrics and gynecology departments, and identified the need for adequate staffing, resources, and autonomy to enable nurses to provide ethical and quality care.

Resource constraints were another set of barriers identified in the studies. A qualitative study by Yousef et al. (2023) investigated the healthcare transformation journey in the Eastern Region of Saudi Arabia, and found that the limited availability and accessibility of healthcare services, technologies, and supplies were significant challenges for nurses and other healthcare professionals in providing equitable and efficient care. A mixed-methods study by Alsufyani et al. (2020) explored the alignment of nursing ethics with the Vision 2030 goals in Saudi hospitals, and identified the need for greater investment in nursing education, research, and practice, to support the ethical and professional development of nurses.

Power imbalances were also identified as barriers to ethical nursing practice in some studies. A qualitative study by Alahmad et al. (2020) explored the ethical challenges of pediatric cancer care in Saudi Arabia, and found that the hierarchical and paternalistic culture of healthcare organizations, as well as the power dynamics between physicians and nurses, were significant obstacles to nurses' ethical decision-making and advocacy for patients and families. A cross-sectional survey by Garny et al. (2016) investigated the medical ethics knowledge and practice of healthcare workers in a Saudi military hospital, and identified the need

for greater recognition and empowerment of nurses' ethical roles and contributions, in light of the professional and cultural barriers to nursing.

Finally, social and cultural norms and expectations were identified as potential barriers to ethical nursing practice in the Saudi context. A qualitative study by Mujallad (2023) explored the perceptions of nursing students and faculty regarding the nursing profession in the new era of Saudi Arabia, and found that the cultural and religious values and beliefs around gender roles, modesty, and family involvement were significant influences on nurses' ethical decision-making and practice. A mixed-methods study by Alshammmary et al. (2024) investigated the impact of the Vision 2030 reforms on palliative care in Saudi Arabia, and identified the need for culturally sensitive and patient-centered approaches to end-of-life care, that respect the Islamic principles and the family preferences, while ensuring the quality and ethics of care.

These findings highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of the enablers and barriers to ethical nursing practice in Saudi Arabia, which require a comprehensive and context-specific approach to address the individual, organizational, professional, and societal factors influencing nurses' ethical competencies and practices. The studies also underscore the importance of leadership, collaboration, and innovation in creating an enabling environment for ethical nursing practice, and in leveraging the full potential of nurses in driving the healthcare transformation and the achievement of Vision 2030 goals.

5.

Discussion

This systematic review synthesized the evidence on the ethical considerations and challenges faced by nurses in Saudi Arabia, and their alignment with the professional codes of conduct and the healthcare transformation objectives under Vision 2030. The findings suggest that nurses encounter a wide range of ethical issues and dilemmas in their practice, related to patient care, professionalism, and organizational factors, which have a significant impact on their well-being, performance, and retention. The review also identified the key enablers and barriers to ethical nursing practice in the Saudi healthcare context, such as ethics education and training, leadership and management support, interprofessional collaboration and communication, and cultural competence and sensitivity, as well as workload and staffing, resource constraints, power imbalances, and social and cultural norms and expectations.

The findings of this review are consistent with the global literature on the importance and challenges of ethical nursing practice in healthcare settings. Studies from other countries, such as the United States (Epstein & Turner, 2015), the United Kingdom (Torjuul & Sørli, 2006), and Australia (Johnstone & Hutchinson, 2015), have similarly highlighted the prevalence and impact of ethical issues and dilemmas on nurses' moral distress, burnout, and job satisfaction, as well as the need for ongoing ethics education and support, and the creation of ethical work environments and cultures. These studies have also emphasized the role of nursing leadership, interprofessional collaboration, and patient engagement in promoting ethical nursing practice and improving the quality and safety of care.

However, the review also identified some unique aspects and considerations for ethical nursing practice in the Saudi context, which reflect the specific cultural, religious, and social factors influencing the nursing profession and the healthcare system in the country. The studies highlighted the importance of aligning ethical nursing practice with the Islamic principles and values, such as compassion, justice, and respect for human dignity, as well as the cultural norms and expectations around gender roles, modesty, and family involvement in healthcare decisions (Luna, 1998; Mujallad, 2023). The studies also emphasized the need for culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate approaches to ethics education, communication, and care delivery, that take into account the diversity and needs of the Saudi patient population and the expatriate nursing workforce (Al-Otaibi et al., 2024; Alshammmary et al., 2024).

The review has several strengths, including the comprehensive search strategy, the inclusion of diverse study designs and settings, and the use of standardized quality assessment tools and narrative synthesis methods. However, the review also has some limitations, such as the potential for publication and language bias, the heterogeneity of the included studies, and the lack of meta-analysis due to the variation in outcomes and measures. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and generalizing them to other contexts.

Despite these limitations, the review provides valuable insights and recommendations for policy, practice, and research to strengthen the ethical foundations and capacity of the nursing workforce in Saudi Arabia, and to promote a culture of ethical leadership and excellence in healthcare organizations. At the policy level, there is a need for national guidelines, standards, and regulations that define the ethical roles, responsibilities, and competencies of nurses, as well as the mechanisms for their education, certification, and professional development (Aljohani, 2020; Alkhunaizi & Aboshaiqah, 2023). At the practice level, there is a need for the implementation of ethics education and training programs, ethics committees and consultation services, and performance evaluation and reward systems that support and empower nurses to practice ethically and professionally, and to contribute to the healthcare transformation goals (Alqahtani et al., 2022; Balay-Odao et al., 2021). At the research level, there is a need for more rigorous and context-specific studies that evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of ethical nursing interventions and models, as well as the strategies for scaling up and translating the evidence into practice and policy (Alharbi et al., 2021; Alsufyani et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this systematic review provides evidence on the ethical considerations and challenges faced by nurses in Saudi Arabia, and their alignment with the professional codes of conduct and the healthcare transformation objectives under Vision 2030. The findings highlight the diversity and complexity of ethical issues and dilemmas encountered by nurses in various healthcare settings, as well as the key enablers and barriers to ethical nursing practice in the Saudi context, which require a comprehensive and collaborative approach to address the individual, organizational, professional, and societal factors influencing nurses' ethical competencies and practices.

The review emphasizes the importance of investing in nursing ethics education, research, and leadership, to drive the development and implementation of ethical nursing interventions and models that are responsive to the healthcare needs and preferences of the Saudi population, and that contribute to the achievement of the national healthcare transformation goals. It also underscores the need for interprofessional and cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination, as well as patient and community engagement, to create an enabling environment for ethical nursing practice and to optimize the value and impact of nurses in improving the quality, safety, and sustainability of healthcare services in Saudi Arabia.

As Saudi Arabia continues to implement its Vision 2030 and to invest in the development of a skilled and sustainable nursing workforce, ethical nursing practice offers a promising and essential approach to ensure the alignment of nurses' values, competencies, and behaviors with the professional standards and the healthcare transformation objectives. By empowering nurses to lead the way in providing patient-centered, evidence-based, and culturally sensitive care, in collaboration with other healthcare professionals, policymakers, and stakeholders, Saudi Arabia can achieve its vision of a world-class healthcare system that promotes the health and well-being of its population, and that positions the nursing profession as a key driver of healthcare excellence and innovation.

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