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**The role of women in the reforms  
in Saudi Arabia**

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative single case study examines the role of women in Saudi Arabia's ongoing reforms, employing the lenses of modernization theory and normative feminism to offer a comprehensive analysis of this socio-political and economic transformation. Considering the complexity of the topic and the uniqueness of the monarchical political and social system of Saudi Arabia, this thesis provides a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping women's participation and agency within the reform process. The thesis uncovers the complex interplay between modernization and gendered norms in Saudi Arabia through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participant observation. The findings reveal that women's increased participation in the labor market, education, and political representation, contributed to the nation's broader developmental goals under Vision 2030. Finally, it offers valuable insights into the evolving roles of women within Saudi Arabia's reform process, illuminating the importance of addressing structural and normative barriers to gender equality. By highlighting the potential for change and the challenges, this thesis underscores the need for continued efforts to promote women's empowerment and dismantle patriarchal norms to foster sustainable development and inclusive growth.

## **Keywords**

Feminism, Gender mainstreaming, Women Empowerment, Vision 2030, Women participation, Modernization, Normative Feminism, Saudi Arabia

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## **Abstrakt**

Tato kvalitativní případová studie zkoumá roli žen v probíhajících reformách Saúdské Arábie s využitím modernizační teorie a normativního feminismu, aby nabídla komplexní analýzu této sociálně-politické a ekonomické transformace. S ohledem na složitost tématu a jedinečnost monarchického politického a sociálního systému Saúdské Arábie poskytuje tato práce jemné porozumění faktorů formujících participaci žen a jejich působení v reformním procesu. Práce odhaluje složitou souhru mezi modernizací a genderovými normami v Saúdské Arábii, a to prostřednictvím hloubkových rozhovorů, analýzy dokumentů a pozorování účastníků. Zjištění odhalují, že zvýšená účast žen na trhu práce, vzdělávání a také častějšímu zastoupení v politickém dění přispěla k širším rozvojovým cílům národa v rámci Vize 2030. V neposlední řadě nabízí cenné poznatky o vyvíjejících se rolích žen v reformním procesu Saúdské Arábie, což objasňuje důležitost řešení strukturálních a normativních překážek v rovnosti žen a mužů. Zdůrazněním potenciálu pro změnu a výzev tato teze podtrhuje potřebu neustálého úsilí o podporu posílení postavení žen a odstranění patriarchálních norem, aby se podpořil udržitelný rozvoj a inkluzivní růst.

## **Klíčová slova**

Feminismus, Gender mainstreaming, Posílení postavení žen, Vize 2030, Participace žen, Modernizace, Normativní feminismus, Saúdská Arábie

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## **Declaration of Authorship**

1. I hereby declare that I compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.
2. I hereby declare that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.
3. I hereby declare that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

Prague – 03 May 2023

**Salam Kedan**



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## ***Introduction***

Inequality and discrimination against women have existed for as long as history itself can be traced. Although feminist principles had always existed, the first wave of feminism in the late 19th century was the first genuine political movement in the Western world. The first and second waves of feminism, which pushed to challenge women's roles and fight for gender equality and political rights<sup>1</sup>, resulted in the establishment of global women's movements; these movements, later on, were the cause and the primary advocate for establishing the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in 2010<sup>2</sup> — to be known as UN Women today.

"Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women" was the third goal on the agenda for the United Nations Development plan for 2015, which was called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)<sup>3</sup>, where all 193 UN member states came together to achieve the set of 8 ambitious goals from the year 2000 to 2015. While the MDGs have resulted in outstanding outcomes, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>4</sup> that were later implemented in 2015 to achieve 17 goals by 2030 were and still are much more international and globally collaborative. SDG number 5, titled "Gender Equality," works towards achieving gender equality by 2030 on a global level. Such recognition and raising awareness on a global level made "Gender Equality" a global phenomenon of great importance.

This social, economic, and political phenomenon significantly impacts international relations. The results of many studies have shown the importance of women in politics and the extent of their contribution to economic and social development.

The SDGs have influenced many member states to act and push toward achieving these goals. An example of a member state that was greatly influenced to modernize and push for change in their country is Saudi Arabia led by the kingdom's modernizer Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. It is a fascinating case study because Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, and their strict laws on women

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<sup>1</sup> SOKEN-HUBERTY, Emmaline. Types of feminism: The Four waves. *Human Rights Careers* [online]. 24 April 2022. Available from: <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/types-of-feminism-the-four-waves/>

<sup>2</sup> About UN women. *UN Women – Headquarters* [online]. 31 October 2010. Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-un-women>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Millennium Development Goals. *United Nations* [online]. 2015. Available from: <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. The 17 sustainable development goals. *United Nations* [online]. n.d. Available from: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>



have been criticized internationally for decades. In this case study, we will seek to understand the causes, consequences, and implications of this phenomenon in order to develop effective strategies.

As an absolute monarchy, Saudi Arabia has a unique government system based on a combination of Islamic law and traditional tribal customs<sup>5</sup>. The monarch is both the head of state and the head of government, and he has the power to make all major decisions related to the country's governance.

Additionally, Saudi has a Council of Ministers, comprised of senior members of the royal family and other government officials, who are responsible for advising the king on matters of state. Finally, there is also a Consultative Assembly, which is a legislative body that is appointed by the king that has the power to review and propose laws. However, the king retains the power to veto any legislation<sup>6</sup>. Overall, Saudi Arabia's political system is highly centralized and controlled by the monarchy, with limited opportunities for political participation or representation by the general public, which means the monarchical government completely controls political change and any significant reforms. In this case, we will see how and why the current Saudi government is pushing towards achieving the SDGs focusing on the transformation for women in the country.

Strict laws on women were implemented first in Saudi Arabia due to the 1979 traumatic event, which was an attack and seizure of the Ka'aba in Mecca for several days by Juhayman al-Otaibi, a former corporal in the Saudi National Guard<sup>7</sup>. At the time of the attack, the Saudi king responded by implementing a stricter version of Islamic Law and giving scholars and religious police more power. The Kingdom's current, self-styled modernizer Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman credits the Kingdom's swerve toward state-sponsored ultraconservative Wahhabism<sup>8</sup> to that traumatic event and says that extremism started after 1979.

In an interview in March 2018, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman said that before 1979, *"We were living a normal life like the rest of the Gulf countries, women*

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<sup>5</sup> The World Factbook. Saudi Arabia. *Central Intelligence Agency* [online]. 2023. Available from: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/saudi-arabia/#introduction>

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> HEARST, David. How 1979 reshaped Iran and Saudi Arabia. *Middle East Eye* [online]. 10 February 2020. Available from: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/why-us-and-israel-are-working-so-hard-stop-saudi-iran-rapproachment>

<sup>8</sup> Named after its founder, theologian Mohamed ibn Abdul Wahhab. Wahhabism is a conservative strict movement within Islam's Sunni branch which is the subject of much debate and criticism within the Muslim world

were driving cars..."<sup>9</sup>- After being criticized internationally for decades; for their treatment of women, Saudi Arabia is finally trying to modernize and achieve a new vision called the Kingdom's 2030 Vision.

Since the ruling of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in 2015, unprecedented economic and social transformations have taken place in the Kingdom. As a result, the Kingdom has implemented a "record number of reforms" in one year, according to the World Bank Group, which ranked the Kingdom as one of the top 20 reformist countries in the world<sup>10</sup>.

The 2030 Vision represents a significant step forward for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. While there is still much work to be done to achieve gender equality, the plan represents a commitment by the government to address the historical barriers that have held women back and create a more inclusive society. According to the former UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka; "There is already enough evidence in the world to show the positive impact of women's leadership. Women have successfully built and run countries and cities, economies, and formidable institutions."<sup>11</sup> Additionally, studies showed that increasing the participation of women in the workforce results in a more significant economic benefit, as well as increasing the cooperation across party lines<sup>12</sup>.

The 2030 Vision and its focus on empowering women are politically and socially relevant in several ways. Politically, increasing women's participation and empowerment leads to a more inclusive and diverse political system. This could have several potential impacts, such as more inclusive decision-making, which would ensure that the needs and perspectives of all members of society are taken into account. Additionally, it leads to greater political participation and representation and would create more progressive and sustainable policies. Moreover, such a transformation could attract foreign investment and international cooperation and enhance Saudi's standing internationally.

It is critical to increase women's political participation through raising awareness of available options and improving confidence and abilities. Women's empowerment at

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<sup>9</sup> BBC. Mecca 1979: The Mosque Siege that changed the course of Saudi history. *BBC News* [online]. 27 December 2019. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-50852379>

<sup>10</sup> *Know About Kingdom* [online]. n.d. Available from: <https://www.my.gov.sa/wps/portal/snp/aboutksa>

<sup>11</sup> Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is the former UN Women Executive Director. Available from: <https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/everyone-benefits-from-more-women-in-power>

<sup>12</sup> JARROUD, Mariana. Everyone Benefits from More Women in Power. *Our World* [online]. 7 March 2015. Available from: <https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/everyone-benefits-from-more-women-in-power>

the grassroots level has yielded significant achievements, as evidenced in Saudi Arabia, where women are now permitted to compete as candidates in local elections for the first time.<sup>13</sup>

Socially, the 2030 Vision recognizes the importance of empowering women and increasing their rights and opportunities, which could help to create a more inclusive and equitable society. This thesis portrays the role of women in the transformation in Saudi Arabia, analyzes the impact of their participation and how that leads to achieving sustainable development.

### ***The Significance of this topic in International Relations***

Saudi Arabia is a critical player in the Middle East, and its policies and actions have implications for regional stability and global security<sup>14</sup>. The 2030 Vision represents a significant shift in the country's economic and social policies, and its success or failure could have broader implications for the region and beyond.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia has faced criticism from the international community over its treatment of women and human rights more broadly. In 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) raised concerns about the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia, including the restrictive male guardianship system and the imprisonment of women's rights activists. Several NGOs, such as Amnesty International<sup>15</sup> and Human Rights Watch, have also criticized Saudi Arabia's treatment of women, including its restrictive laws on dress, mobility, and access to education and employment.

From another perspective, this study shows how International Organizations can influence member states to perform better. While the SDGs did not directly lead to the creation of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, they have influenced the plan's design and objectives. Vision 2030 aligns with many SDGs and shares common aspirations in areas such as economic diversification, social development, and environmental sustainability<sup>16</sup>. The SDGs have provided a global framework that has guided the

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<sup>13</sup> HAWKEY, Sean. Empowering Women in Political Participation and Leadership. *New Tactics in Human Rights* [online]. 2007. Available from: <https://www.newtactics.org/conversation/empowering-women-political-participation-and-leadership>

<sup>14</sup> SOURS, Martin H. "Saudi Arabia's Role in the Middle East: Regional Stability within the New World Order." *Asian Affairs*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1991, pp. 43–51. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30172296>

<sup>15</sup> UN: End hypocrisy of Saudi Arabia in Human Rights Council. *Amnesty International* [online]. 11 October 2021. Available from: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/07/un-end-hypocrisy-of-saudi-arabia-in-human-rights-council/>

<sup>16</sup> Creating a vision for all. *Vision 2030* [online]. Available from: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/creating-a-vision-for-all/>

development and implementation of Vision 2030. Saudi Arabia has engaged with the international community to report on its progress toward achieving the goals.

Finally, the 2030 Vision could have implications for international relations in the sense that it represents an opportunity for increased cooperation between Saudi Arabia and other countries since the plan includes a focus on international partnerships and foreign investment to strengthen ties between Saudi Arabia and other nations.

### ***Literature Review***

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has witnessed significant socioeconomic and political reforms over the past decade, aimed at modernizing the nation and diversifying its economy. At the heart of these reforms lies the pivotal role of women, who have increasingly become active participants in shaping the country's future. This literature review examines the empirical and theoretical sources that explore the transformative role of women in Saudi Arabia's recent reform initiatives, focusing on their impact on social, economic, and political spheres. By scrutinizing the existing body of knowledge, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the progress made thus far, the challenges women continue to face, and the potential implications for the future development of the Kingdom.

The review begins by offering a brief historical context of women's status in Saudi Arabia, followed by an overview of the major reform initiatives introduced under the Vision 2030 plan. Subsequent sections will delve into the key domains where women have played a significant role, including education, the workforce and political participation. Finally, the review synthesizes the findings to identify gaps in the literature and suggest areas for future research.

The two main primary theoretical literature include works of Jacqui True on Feminism, in particular, her chapter on Feminism in general in the book “Theories of IR”<sup>17</sup>. In addition to Judith Ann Tickner chapter titled: “Engendered Insecurities: Feminist Perspectives on International Relations,”<sup>18</sup> from her book *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*. Additional theoretical literature, especially on Gender Mainstreaming is used from Prudence

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<sup>17</sup> TRUE, Jacqui. Feminism. In: *Theories of international relations*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. p. 213–234. [ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-4865-6](#)

<sup>18</sup> SYLVESTER, Christine, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*. By J. Ann Tickner. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. 180p. *American Political Science Review*. 1993. Vol. 87, no. 3p. 823–824. [DOI 10.2307/2938810](#).

Woodford-Berger “Gender Mainstreaming: What is it (About) and Should We Continue Doing it?” and a study done by Renee Andersson on Gender Mainstreaming as feminist politics<sup>19</sup>.

Regarding empirical literature on the topic, the main books used to portray the status of Saudi women are written by Saudi women about their experiences and reflections on earlier studies about Saudi women which include Liela A. Jamjoom’s book - “Women Business Leaders, Identity, Resistance, and Alternative Forms of Knowledge in Saudi Arabia”<sup>20</sup> and the work of Madawi Al-Rasheed, her book “A Most Masculine State - Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia.”<sup>21</sup> shows an earlier view from 2013 which is a necessary read to comprehend the number of changes and reforms, in addition to the research to compare to recent publications in the past couple of years. Another older view from 1997 written by Mona AlMunajjed which shows Saudi women in 1997, and discusses the status of women under Islamic Law in general<sup>22</sup>. Last but not least, the book “Modern Woman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Rights, Challenges and Achievements” written by Hend T. Al-Sudairy published in 2017 talks about Abandoning the Traditional Role and Saudi Women’s Achievements and Challenges. Additional empirical literature is used such as an article by Julie Hodges called “Cracking the walls of leadership: women in Saudi Arabia”<sup>23</sup> and a book review by Ibrahim Almarhaby<sup>24</sup>. Finally, speeches given by Princess Reema Bint Bander Al-Saud who is a Saudi woman leader currently serving as the Saudi ambassador to the United States of America are referenced and used. In addition to official Saudi governmental websites that are examined and more works that are listed in the bibliography.

In the following section, the theoretical framework and concepts used to analyze and understand this phenomenon are explained.

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19 ANDERSSON, Renee, Gender mainstreaming as feminist politics. A critical analysis of the pursuit of gender equality in Swedish local government. 2018 *Orebro Studies in Political Science* 41. ISBN 978-91-7529-235-9

20 JAMJOOM, Liela A. *Women Business Leaders: Identity, resistance, and alternative forms of knowledge in Saudi Arabia*. New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023. ISBN - 9781003203643

21 AL-RASHEED, Madawi. *A most masculine state gender, politics, and religion in Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. ISBN: 9781139015363.

22 ALMUNAJJED, Mona. *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 1997. ISBN: 978-0-333-63812-5

23 HODGES, Julie. Cracking the walls of leadership: Women in Saudi Arabia. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*. 2017. Vol. 32, no. 1p. 34–46. DOI 10.1108/gm-11-2015-0106.

24 ALMARHABY, Ibrahim. Modern woman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Rights, challenges and achievements. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. 2018. Vol. 46, no. 1p. 201–202. DOI 10.1080/13530194.2018.1507432.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The theoretical framework for this study synthesizes modernization theory, normative feminism, and gender mainstreaming, offering a nuanced perspective through which to investigate the complex role of women in the context of Saudi Arabia's ongoing reforms

Modernization theory is a theoretical framework that seeks to explain the process of social and economic change, particularly in the developing world. The theory argues that modernization is a linear process of social and economic development that leads to greater wealth, higher levels of education and technological advancement, and the emergence of democratic institutions and values<sup>25</sup>. Following the logic of Modernization theory, it would suggest that a traditional society like in Saudi Arabia will develop as they adopt more modern practices.

When it comes to Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision, the modernization theory provides a valuable lens through which to understand the goals and objectives of the vision. The vision aims to modernize the Saudi economy, society, and culture and to promote greater wealth, technological advancement, and cultural openness. This aligns with the modernization theory's emphasis on economic growth and technological progress as key drivers of development<sup>26</sup>.

However, the 2030 Vision also reflects some departures from the traditional modernization theory. For example, while modernization theory emphasizes the importance of democratic institutions and values, the 2030 Vision emphasizes the state's role in driving economic and social change.

This reflects the reality of Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy political system, as well as the government's desire to maintain stability and control over the pace and direction of reforms. In addition, the 2030 Vision also reflects a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between economic growth and social and cultural change<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> GOORHA, Prateek. Modernization theory. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. 2017. DOI [10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.266](https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.266).

<sup>26</sup> MOSHASHAI, Daniel, LEBER, Andrew M. and SAVAGE, James D. Saudi Arabia plans for its Economic Future: Vision 2030, the National Transformation Plan and Saudi fiscal reform. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. 2018. Vol. 47, no. 3p. 381–401. DOI [10.1080/13530194.2018.1500269](https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2018.1500269).

<sup>27</sup> AL-SOWAYAN, Saad. Saudi Arabia's revolutionary modernization journey. *Al Arabiya English* [online]. 18 November 2020. Available from: <https://english.alarabiya.net/in-translation/2020/11/18/Saudi-Arabia-s-revolutionary-modernization-journey>

While modernization theory views these as closely related and mutually reinforcing, the 2030 Vision recognizes that cultural and social change can be a slower and more difficult process, and that it requires the development of new attitudes and values.

In conclusion, the 2030 Vision for Saudi Arabia can be understood as a response to the challenges and opportunities posed by modernization and globalization. While it draws on elements of modernization theory, such as the emphasis on economic growth and technological progress<sup>28</sup>, it also reflects the unique political and cultural context of Saudi Arabia and the need to balance the goals of modernization with the preservation of stability and control. In this case, where I look at the policy and law changes regarding women, I will use a feminist IR lens to analyze these programs and policies. The following section will show the link between feminism and IR.

Feminism and International Relations (IR) have been intertwined in many ways since the 1970s, when feminist scholars began to critique and challenge the patriarchal norms and assumptions of traditional International Relations. Since then, feminist approaches to IR have expanded and diversified, offering a wide range of perspectives on global politics and highlighting the ways in which power relations at the international level shape gender shapes and. In this essay, I will explore the ways in which feminist approaches have influenced and transformed IR, as well as some of the ongoing debates and controversies within the field of feminist IR<sup>29</sup>.

One of the main contributions of feminist IR has been to challenge the patriarchal norms and assumptions of traditional IR. For example, traditional IR has often been criticized for assuming that states are the only relevant actors in international politics, ignoring the role of non-state actors such as transnational corporations, civil society organizations, and individuals. By contrast, feminist international relations acknowledge and emphasize the importance of the experience and perspectives of women and other marginalized groups in global politics, in addition to the ways in which power relations at the international level effect and shape gender relations.

Another key contribution of feminist IR has been to broaden the scope of analysis beyond the state-centric perspective of traditional IR. Feminist IR scholars have studied a wide range of topics, including the gendered dynamics of globalization, the

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<sup>28</sup> GOORHA, Prateek. Modernization theory. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. 2017. DOI [10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.266](https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.266).



ways in which gender affects international security, the role of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and the gendered dimensions of environmental politics. By considering these and other issues, feminist IR has expanded our understanding of international politics and the ways in which power relations at the global level shape gender<sup>30</sup>.

Despite these contributions, feminist IR has also been the subject of ongoing debates and controversies. One of the main debates within the field concerns the extent to which feminist IR should focus on gender as a standalone category of analysis, or whether it should be integrated into mainstream IR. Some feminist IR scholars argue that a standalone approach is necessary in order to ensure that the gendered dimensions of international politics are taken into account and given proper attention. Others, however, argue that integrating feminist insights into mainstream IR is a more effective way of transforming the field and influencing policy<sup>31</sup>.

Finally, there is ongoing debate within feminist IR about the relationship between gender and other forms of oppression, such as race, class, and sexuality. Some feminist IR scholars argue that gender is a primary axis of oppression and that other forms of oppression must be understood in relation to it. Others argue that these forms of oppression are interrelated and cannot be understood in isolation from one another. In conclusion, feminist approaches have transformed IR by challenging patriarchal norms and assumptions, broadening the scope of analysis, and highlighting the ways in which gender shapes and is shaped by power relations at the international level. Despite ongoing debates and controversies, feminist IR continues to make important contributions to our understanding of global politics and to the ongoing struggle for gender justice at the international level. For a deeper understanding and analysis of this topic, I will use Normative Feminism in particular for this research.

Normative feminism is an approach to feminism that emphasizes the importance of social and cultural norms in shaping gender roles and inequalities and seeks to promote gender equality by challenging and changing these norms<sup>32</sup>. These norms are the society values, beliefs and attitudes that are widely held and accepted by a particular

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<sup>29</sup> LEE-KOO, Katrina, 2011, Feminism. In: *An Introduction to International Relations*. 2. Cambridge University Press. p. 76–90. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139196598.008>

<sup>30</sup> SYLVESTER, Christine. *Feminist International Relations: An unfinished journey*. Cambridge University Press, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491719>

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*

<sup>32</sup> AGGESTAM, Karin and TRUE, Jacqui. Gendering foreign policy: A comparative framework for analysis. *Gendering Foreign Policy: A Comparative Framework for Analysis*. 2020. Vol. 16, no. 2p. 143–162. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orz026>



community or culture. Moreover, these values can have a significant impact on gender roles and the way that women are treated within a society. The 2030 vision for women's reform in Saudi Arabia is finally challenging traditional gender norms.

One of the main challenges faced by normative feminism is the fact that social norms can be deeply entrenched and resistant to change. In many societies, gender roles are strongly prescribed and reinforced through socialization, education, and media representations. Normative feminists recognize the need to engage with and challenge these norms in order to create meaningful change<sup>33</sup>.

One way that normative feminists seek to challenge gender norms is through consciousness-raising and awareness-raising efforts. This may involve highlighting the ways in which gender inequalities are perpetuated through social norms, and promoting alternative norms and values that promote gender equality.

Ultimately, normative feminism seeks to create a society in which gender norms and values are more equitable and just. This may involve challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, promoting equal opportunities and rights for women, and creating spaces for women's voices and experiences to be heard and valued.

Society values and normative feminism are closely related concepts that refer to the ways in which gender norms and expectations shape our understanding of femininity and masculinity, as well as the ways in which these norms and expectations are challenged and transformed over time. The specific focus on normative feminism that examines gender relations in international and national policies is called gender mainstreaming.

Gender mainstreaming is a concept that refers to the process of integrating a gender perspective into all policies and programs, with the goal of promoting gender equality and empowering women. The concept emerged in the 1990s in response to the recognition that gender inequality is a pervasive and persistent problem that affects all aspects of society, including politics, economics, and social relations. Gender mainstreaming is now widely recognized as a key strategy for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment at the national and international levels.

In the field of international relations, gender mainstreaming has become an increasingly important topic of discussion, as policymakers and scholars have

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<sup>33</sup> ROBINSON, Fiona. Methods of feminist normative theory: A political ethic of care for international relations. *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*. 2006. P. 221–240. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511617690.014>.

recognized the need to address gender inequality as a central component of global governance. The United Nations has played a key role in promoting gender mainstreaming in international relations, through initiatives such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>34</sup>.

One of the main arguments for gender mainstreaming in international relations is that gender inequality is not just a matter of individual rights or social justice, but also has significant economic and security implications. For example, research has shown that women's participation in the labor force can have positive effects on economic growth and development, while gender-based violence and discrimination can undermine social stability and security. In addition, gender inequality can exacerbate other forms of inequality, such as poverty and inequality based on race, ethnicity, or religion<sup>35</sup>.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of gender mainstreaming in international relations, there are also significant challenges to its implementation. One of the main challenges is the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and cultural norms that reinforce gender inequality, particularly in countries where women's rights are not fully recognized or protected. In addition, there may be resistance to gender mainstreaming from political and economic elites who benefit from the status quo<sup>36</sup>.

To overcome these challenges, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to gender mainstreaming that involves not only policy changes, but also social and cultural transformation. This may involve efforts to promote women's education and economic empowerment, to address gender-based violence and discrimination, and to elevate women's representation in political and economic decision-making. It may also involve international partnerships and collaborations to share best practices and promote global cooperation on gender equality.

Overall, gender mainstreaming is a critical concept in international relations, with significant implications for social, economic, and political development. By

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<sup>34</sup>UN Women. [online]. rep. United Nations, 2020. Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Gender-mainstreaming-Strategy-for-achieving-gender-equality-and-empowerment-of-women-girls-en.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> KLOOSTERMAN, Jeanette, BENNING, Esther and FYLES, Rex. 'measuring the unmeasurable': Gender mainstreaming and cultural change. *Gender & Development*. 2012. Vol. 20, no. 3p. 531–545. DOI [10.1080/13552074.2012.731752](https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2012.731752)

<sup>36</sup> WALBY, Sylvia. Introduction: Comparative gender mainstreaming in a global era. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 2005. Vol. 7, no. 4p. 453–470. DOI [10.1080/14616740500284383](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740500284383)

integrating a gender perspective into all policies and programs, it is possible to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, and to create more just and equitable societies both domestically and internationally.

### ***Hypothesis***

I assume based on the approach of normative feminism analysis that women in Saudi Arabia are a driving force in transforming the societal norms and expectations, and that their participation is leading to a more just, inclusive, and diverse society. By encouraging women's active participation in various aspects of society, Saudi Arabia is working to redistribute resources and opportunities more equitably, which in turn promotes social justice and inclusivity.

I also assume that increased participation of women in Saudi Arabia's workforce leads to a significant improvement in the country's economic growth and social development. It is essential to recognize the importance of human capital in economic development theory<sup>37</sup>. According to the endogenous growth theory, investing in human capital, such as education and workforce skills, is a crucial factor in promoting long-term economic growth. By empowering women and increasing their access to education and employment opportunities, Saudi Arabia is effectively expanding its human capital base, which in turn contributes to the diversification of the economy and reduced reliance on oil revenues. Furthermore, the modernization theory posits that societies undergo a process of economic, social, and political transformation, moving from traditional to modernized structures. By implementing women's empowerment initiatives, Saudi Arabia is demonstrating its commitment to social and political modernization, which could lead to improved governance, increased social cohesion, and a more open and inclusive society. These factors, in turn, contribute to economic diversification and overall development.

Finally, by promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, Saudi Arabia is projecting a more progressive image to the international community, which can enhance its soft power and diplomatic influence<sup>38</sup>. This improved global reputation can

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<sup>37</sup> NAFZIGER, E. Wayne, 2005, Theories of Economic Development. In: *Economic Development*. 4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 123–164. [ISBN 9780511805615](#)

<sup>38</sup> GALLAROTTI, Giulio M. Esteem and influence: Soft Power in international politics. *Journal of Political Power*. 2022. Vol. 15, no. 3p. 383–396. [DOI 10.1080/2158379x.2022.2135303](#).

attract foreign investment, foster international partnerships, and facilitate economic diversification.

## ***Methodology***

This thesis aims to explore the role of women in the recent reforms in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following research question:

***What specific reforms related to women's rights and empowerment have taken place in Saudi Arabia, and to what extent have women contributed to the development and implementation of these reforms?***

To address this research question, this study will employ a qualitative research design, using in-depth interviews and document analysis to collect data. Drawing upon normative feminist theories and gender mainstreaming approaches, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of women in the reforms in Saudi Arabia and their impact on gender equality and societal change. Following I will introduce in detail the research design and methodologies and why I have chosen it specifically.

### ***Qualitative Single Case Study Design***

The research design that is employed in this study is qualitative, which provides context-specific insights into the complexities of this topic, allowing for a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political dynamics at play. Qualitative case studies are particularly useful for investigating complex social phenomena in their natural context and for generating rich, in-depth data<sup>39</sup>. The specific qualitative design that is used is a single case study research design. The analysis will focus on identifying causal mechanisms and exploring the complex relationships among various factors that contribute to the outcome of interest, in line with John Gerring's approach to case study research<sup>40</sup>. According to Baxter and Jack, a qualitative case study methodology provides

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<sup>39</sup> YIN, Robert K. *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018. ISBN: 9781506336169

<sup>40</sup> GERRING, JOHN. What is a case study and what is it good for? *American Political Science Review*. 2004. Vol. 98, no. 2p. 341–354. [DOI 10.1017/s0003055404001182](https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055404001182).

instruments for researchers to investigate complex phenomena and provide a more in-depth analysis using various sources<sup>41</sup>.

Considering the complexity of the topic as well as the uniqueness of the political and social system of Saudi Arabia, that is why such methodology is used. By conducting a single case study of Saudi Arabia's transformation focusing on women empowerment, will be able to gain insights into the specific cultural, social, and political factors that have influenced the role of women in the country.

### ***In-depth Interviews***

Qualitative interviews with experts and Saudi women citizens (see Appendix 1)<sup>42</sup> provide insights into their perspectives and experiences. In-depth interviews elicit rich qualitative data. In addition, the goal of qualitative research, including case studies, is to provide rich and in-depth insights into a specific case or phenomenon, rather than aiming for large sample sizes like in quantitative research. For this case study, inspiring women graciously agreed to give their time and dedicated about an hour each for discussing the reforms in Saudi Arabia and how that impacted their lives, which resulted in amazing conversations, rich, valuable and reflective data that it is difficult to come across most researches on this topic that fail to go to the real source and talk to people who are affected first hand by these reforms.

Interviews with affected citizens are important as they provide firsthand information, contextual understanding, diverse perspectives, and policy relevance. They can help ensure that policies are informed by the voices and experiences of those directly impacted and contribute to more effective and inclusive policy outcomes. The interviews enhance the legitimacy and acceptability of the findings<sup>43</sup> through the following reasons:

1. First-hand information: allows to hear from those who are directly affected by the reforms, and provide unique insights into the lived experiences, perspectives, and opinions of the individuals who are directly impacted, and can provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding.
2. Contextual understanding: provides a contextual understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and political factors that influence their experiences and

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<sup>41</sup> BAXTER, Pamela and JACK, Susan. Qualitative case study methodology: Study Design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*. 2008. Vol. 13, no. 4. [DOI 10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1573](https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1573).

<sup>42</sup> Appendix 1 - the list of conducted and referred to in the text interviews by the author

perspectives, this can help avoid potential biases or assumptions that may arise from relying solely on secondary data or quantitative research<sup>44</sup>.

3. Diverse perspectives: captures diverse perspectives and voices, including those that may be marginalized or underrepresented. It can also help identify potential unintended consequences or impacts of policies on different groups and ensure that policies are equitable and inclusive.
4. Policy relevance: generates qualitative data that can complement quantitative data and help inform evidence-based policy making. The insights gained from interviews can provide rich and in-depth information that can help shape policies that are more relevant, effective, and responsive to the needs of the affected citizens.

The interviews conducted for this case study are with Saudi female experts, lecturers, and students. Some of which asked to be anonymous for their personal preferences and their right to privacy. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom ranging from 35-50 minutes each in length and are recorded with the consent of the participants. The participants were sent an email before the interview with the introduction to the topic and a guide consisting of open-ended questions related to the role of women in the recent reforms in Saudi Arabia.

### ***Content Analysis***

Finally, I will use content analysis<sup>45</sup> which is another research method that involves systematic analysis of texts, documents, speeches, media, and podcasts (see Appendix 2) <sup>46</sup> related to this case study to provide insights into the discourses, narratives, and representations of various actors in these reforms.

### ***Validity and Reliability***

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data collected in this study, I will employ two strategies. First, I will use triangulation<sup>47</sup>, which involves collecting data from multiple sources to verify findings. Second, I will use member checking, which involves

<sup>43</sup> PATTON, Michael Quinn. Chapter 7. Qualitative Interviewing . In : *Qualitative Evaluation and research methods: Integrating theory and practice*. 4. London : Sage Publications, 2014. ISBN: [9781412972123](#)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> CRESWELL, John W. 8. Data Analysis and Representation. In: *Qualitative inquiry et research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles ; London ; New Delhi ; Singapore ; Washington DC : SAGE, 2018. ISBN: [9781506330204](#)

<sup>46</sup> Appendix 2 - the list of the key data analyzed by the author

<sup>47</sup> PATTON, Michael Quinn. Chapter 9. Enhancing the Quality and Credibility of Qualitative Studies - Module 77. Four triangulation processes for enhancing credibility. In : *Qualitative Evaluation and research methods: Integrating theory and practice* 4. London: Sage Publications, 2014. ISBN: [9781412972123](#)

sharing the findings with participants to ensure that their views and experiences are accurately represented<sup>48</sup>.

### ***Women in Saudi Arabia***

Women in ancient and modern times, especially in Islamic societies, played an essential role in all fields. Men and women enjoy equal legal rights under Islamic law in terms of marriage, property, divorce, inheritance, education, and employment<sup>49</sup>.

Mona Almunajjed wrote an in-depth and comprehensive chapter, providing a thorough examination and analysis of the controversy over the role of women in the Islamic religion; I briefly summarize her words that controversy regarding women's status in Islam is prevalent in both Arab and foreign literature. To address this issue and eliminate preconceptions, it is crucial to distinguish between Islamic teachings and local customs or social traditions mistakenly perceived as part of the religion. Religious documents can be ambiguous, leading to varied interpretations<sup>50</sup>. Which is why we see various approaches of Islamic countries implantations of their own interpretation of Islamic law commonly mixed with their pre-Islamic customs or traditions. One of the many examples she provides which I believe to be one of the most controversial to portray Muslim women in a negative view is that veiling, and seclusion are not mandated by Islamic Law; while modest covering is advised by the Prophet, face-covering is not. These were adopted by Arabs from earlier civilizations, primarily by the upper classes, as status symbols<sup>51</sup>.

Women play an essential role in the economic and social development of their society; an economic development is measured in every economic activity performed by women inside or outside the home to achieve a financial benefit to satisfy the needs of the family or society, in a sense that this activity has an economic value that can be measured or estimated<sup>52</sup>.

Saudi women have been the subject of numerous studies and research in the West, and their portrayal in these works has varied widely. In earlier studies, Saudi women were often depicted as victims of a repressive society, oppressed by patriarchal norms and the strict interpretation of Islamic law. Such studies tended to focus on issues

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<sup>48</sup> CRESWELL, John W. 8. Data Analysis and Representation. In: *Qualitative inquiry et research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles ; London ; New Delhi ; Singapore ; Washington DC : SAGE, 2018. ISBN: [9781506330204](#)

<sup>49</sup> ALMUNAJJED, Mona. *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 1997. ISBN: [978-0-333-63812-5](#)

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Vision 2030, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - [Link](#)

such as gender segregation, the guardianship system, and restrictions on women's mobility and participation in public life. In general, Women's empowerment in Saudi is complicated for historical, cultural, and religious reasons, as it has been considered one of the most "restrictive countries in the world". These studies resulted due to the strict laws that were imposed on women in Saudi Arabia, that is why I will start with a brief historical background to show how these laws came about and why.

### **Historical Background**

The restrictive laws on women in Saudi Arabia have evolved over time and have been influenced by various factors, including cultural, social, and religious norms, as well as changes in political and economic landscapes. Here are some key historical milestones related to the imposition of restrictive laws on women in Saudi Arabia:

1. **20th Century**: During the 20th century, Saudi Arabia underwent significant social and economic changes, including the discovery of oil and the rise of the conservative interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism<sup>53</sup>. These factors contributed to the imposition of more restrictive laws on women, with a focus on strict gender segregation, limitations on women's mobility, and the enforcement of conservative dress codes.<sup>54</sup>
2. **1950s-1960s**: Saudi Arabia implemented a series of reforms known as the "developmental period" aimed at modernizing the country, including efforts to promote education and healthcare. However, these reforms did not lead to significant changes in women's status, and women continued to face significant limitations in various aspects of their lives.<sup>55</sup>
3. **1979**: there was a conservative backlash in Saudi Arabia, known as the "Islamic Awakening" or "Sahwa" movement, which led to the imposition of stricter interpretations of Islamic law and social norms. This resulted in the enforcement of more restrictive laws on women, including stricter dress codes, increased gender segregation, and limitations on women's participation in public life.<sup>56</sup>
4. **21st Century**: In recent years, there have been significant efforts by the Saudi government to implement reforms aimed at empowering women, including

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<sup>53</sup> Named after its founder, theologian Mohamed ibn Abdul Wahhab. Wahhabism is a conservative strict movement within Islam's Sunni branch which is the subject of much debate and criticism within the Muslim world

<sup>54</sup> ALMUNAJJED, Mona. *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*. London: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 1997. ISBN: 978-0-333-63812-5

<sup>55</sup> ibid



granting them the right to vote and run for office in municipal elections in 2015, lifting the ban on women driving in 2018, and introducing changes to the male guardianship system in 2019. These reforms have been part of a broader agenda of social and economic reforms in Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

It's important to note that the imposition of restrictive laws on women in Saudi Arabia has not been uniform and has varied across regions and families. Some more progressive changes have been introduced in recent years, but there are still ongoing challenges and limitations that women face in various aspects of their lives in Saudi Arabia. The social and legal status of women in Saudi Arabia has been shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, religious, social, and political factors over time.

This study is about the future vision, the reforms that have been implemented so far and their impact especially on women. However, misinformation and stereotypes persist even in some of the recent studies, due to the fast pace of change and implementing reforms. Many people around the world find it hard to believe that these reforms are true. In a span of less than 10 years, Saudi women went from not being able to vote<sup>57</sup>, drive or access the government<sup>58</sup> to becoming decision-makers.

There are recent studies which presented a more nuanced and diverse picture of Saudi women's experiences. These studies acknowledge the progress that has been made in recent years towards women's empowerment, as well as the challenges that remain. They also highlight the diversity of Saudi women's experiences, and the ways in which factors such as socio-economic status, education, and geographic location shape their opportunities and constraints.

Examples of recent studies on Saudi women by Saudi women include Liela A. Jamjoom's book - "Women Business Leaders, Identity, Resistance, and Alternative Forms of Knowledge in Saudi Arabia", which explores Saudi women's attitudes towards women's rights and empowerment, and "Modern Woman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Rights, Challenges and Achievements" by Hend T. Al-Sudairy, which examines the ways in which Saudi women have been portrayed and shows the challenges and achievements of women in Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>56</sup> IBRAHIM, Arwa. What is Sahwa, the awakening movement under pressure in Saudi? *Religion | Al Jazeera* [online]. 5 June 2019. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/6/5/what-is-sahwa-the-awakening-movement-under-pressure-in-saudi>

<sup>57</sup> Saudi Arabia king swears in first women on Shura Council. *BBC News* [online]. 20 February 2013. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-21516955>

<sup>58</sup> Meaning that women in Saudi needed a male guardian to perform the simplest tasks such as renewing an ID.

It is worth noting that the portrayal of Saudi women in Western media can also be highly stereotypical and simplistic, often reinforcing negative stereotypes and ignoring the diversity of Saudi women's experiences. This can be seen in depictions of them as oppressed and voiceless victims, or as exotic and wealthy princesses. It is important to avoid such stereotypes and to seek out diverse perspectives when studying Saudi women. Such depictions in earlier studies are commonly criticized, this binary representation ignores the diversity and complexity of Saudi women's experiences and overlooks the significant social and cultural changes that have taken place in the country in recent years. Multiple studies conducted by Saudi women have criticized this such as:

Madawi Al-Rasheed in her book: "A Most Masculine State Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia": *"They (Saudi Women) are either excluded, heavily veiled victims of their own religion and society, or wealthy, glamorous, cosmopolitan entrepreneurs benefiting from inherited wealth and state education"* - Introduction<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, Liela A. Jamjoom expresses in her book: "Women Business Leaders Identity, Resistance, and Alternative Forms of Knowledge in Saudi Arabia":

*"I felt hurt by the "sampling and literature manipulation" that only perpetuated the idea that Saudi women were victims in need of saving. I wanted to peel back those layers to explore an alternative and provide empirical insight from marginalized women. The women have been painted in a linear and reductionist way, and what if, just what if, we ask different questions, can we understand the women through a different lens. This is what has brought me to write about these women – to change the lens by which we view Othered women."*<sup>60</sup>

The final example I am using but certainly not the last found in literature is by Hend T. Al-Sudairy in her book "Modern woman in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia: rights, challenges and achievements" from her insider perspective, Al-Sudairy addresses the alienation of Saudi women, even from other Arabs, as a result of social, cultural, and patriarchal factors, including primarily male writers, Saudi or Western, supportive or hostile, who have incorrectly portrayed them as ignorant and oppressed or extravagant and luxurious.

Saudi women have been actively involved in shaping the country's future and pushing for reforms that promote their rights and empowerment. They are working in

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<sup>59</sup>AL-RASHEED, Madawi. *A most masculine state gender, politics and religion in Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. [ISBN: 9781139015363](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139015363).

various fields, from business and technology to sports and entertainment, and are contributing to the country's development and progress. Moreover, they are not a monolithic group, and their experiences and perspectives are shaped by factors such as their socio-economic background, education level, and geographic location. It is essential to acknowledge and address the diversity and complexity of Saudi women's experiences and to avoid stereotyping or oversimplifying their stories.

Looking at Saudi women through a new lens involves acknowledging the progress that has been made toward their empowerment in recent years while also recognizing the challenges that remain. It means moving away from simplistic and stereotypical depictions of Saudi women as either oppressed victims or as exotic and wealthy princesses and instead focusing on the diversity and complexity of their experiences. This includes acknowledging the role that Saudi women have played in shaping the country's future and pushing for reforms that promote their rights and empowerment. It also involves understanding the cultural and historical context in which they live. Saudi Arabia has a unique cultural and religious heritage, and this shapes the ways in which gender roles and norms are constructed and understood. It is important to acknowledge this context when studying Saudi women, while also recognizing that culture and tradition are not static and can change over time. This means being open to exploring the ways in which Saudi women are challenging and redefining traditional gender roles and norms, while also acknowledging the ways in which cultural and religious values continue to shape their lives.

Normative feminism provides useful insights for looking at Saudi women through a new lens, as it emphasizes the importance of challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender equality. It further asserts that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men, and that gender should not be a barrier to full participation in society. Applying these principles to the context of Saudi Arabia means advocating for women's rights and empowerment and working on challenging patriarchal norms and practices that limit their opportunities and autonomy.

It additionally provides a framework for understanding the ways in which gender intersects with other forms of oppression, such as race, class, and sexuality. This intersectional approach can help to reveal the ways in which multiple forms of

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<sup>60</sup> JAMJOOM, Liela A. *Women Business Leaders: Identity, resistance, and alternative forms of knowledge in Saudi Arabia*. New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023. [ISBN - 9781003203643](https://doi.org/10.1080/9781003203643)

oppression can impact women's lives and can inform strategies for promoting gender equality that consider the diverse experiences and perspectives of different groups of women.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, an intersectional feminist approach can highlight the ways in which factors such as socio-economic status, education level, and geographic location can shape women's experiences and opportunities. For example, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds may face greater barriers to accessing education and employment opportunities, while women in rural areas may face greater restrictions on their mobility and autonomy. By considering these intersecting factors, feminist activism can be better targeted to address the specific needs and challenges faced by different groups of women in Saudi Arabia.

This is not to ignore the fact that there is still work to be done of course as in every country, but to encourage the reader to look at this case in a new lens, to be open to support the changes and reforms despite the overpowering and overshadowing popular opinion of the oppressed image. To treat Saudi women as their own individual entity rather than put them in one box or the other. Outstanding work has been done using Postcolonial feminism by Liela A. Jamjoom to show how white women could not really see women for who they were because of all other factors, she argues that she uses postcolonial feminism as a theory that allows for various interpretations and applications, she then presents her theoretical positioning while opening a space for comprehending the world beyond Western configurations.

This thesis focuses on current women's roles rather than analyzing how they have been viewed, which is why normative feminism is a more fitting lens for such cases, whereas postcolonial feminism, as Leila writes: "offers a sensitive analysis and critique to the Othering of people, societies, and minorities. It seeks to resist the bifurcation of the world into distinct stereotypical categories". Many other writers introduced and used Islamic Feminism(s), arguing that 'Western feminist framework for understanding Muslim women is inadequate'<sup>61</sup> and adding that Islamic feminists believe that the current practices against women are the result of a corrupt patriarchal interpretation of the Quran (the Islamic holy book scripture), and societal practices and customs<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> MUSTAFA, Rami F. and TROUDI, Salah. Saudi Arabia and Saudi women in research literature: A critical look. *Asian Social Science*. 2019. Vol. 15, no. 2p. 133. [DOI 10.5539/ass.v15n2p133](https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v15n2p133)

<sup>62</sup> *ibid*

From an international relations perspective, I still chose to use the normative feminism lens as it “recognizes that there is no feminist ‘high ground’ from which to theorize about international relations”<sup>63</sup> and Sylvester adds that “All forms of feminist theorizing are normative, in the sense that they help us to question certain meanings and interpretations in IR theory<sup>64</sup>”. The next section discusses the 2030 vision and recent reforms in Saudi Arabia pertaining to women.

### ***Vision 2030 and Reforms in Saudi Arabia***

The 2030 Vision is a long-term strategic plan introduced by the Saudi Arabian government in 2016. It aims to diversify the Saudi economy, privatize state-owned companies and sectors, reduce dependence on oil revenues, empower Saudi citizens, and improve social services such as healthcare and housing. The goal of the plan is to transform Saudi Arabia into a modern, diversified, and sustainable economy by 2030.<sup>65</sup> One of the key aspects of this plan is women empowerment, which can be seen as a response to various economic, social, and political factors.

“The vision includes a series of societal goals and reformations set to strengthen the Saudi society and its economy. It consists of 96 strategic objectives, managed by a number of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), aimed at modernizing the country.”<sup>66</sup> A well-known Saudi social commentator states that 2030 is merely a target date. However, what is significant is that the concept of the Vision has become deep-rooted, is ongoing, and will last long after 2030 as Saudi Arabia continues its transformation.<sup>67</sup>

When talking about the comprehensive development that the Kingdom is witnessing, the role of Saudi women and their participation in the development process cannot be overlooked or ignored, as they have been able to take honorable historical steps commensurate with the culture of society and the variables of the era and its outputs and various stages.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> TRUE, Jacqui. Feminism. In: *Theories of international relations*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. p. 213–234. [ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-4865-6](#)

<sup>64</sup> SYLVESTER, Christine. *Feminist International Relations: An unfinished journey*. Cambridge University Press, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491719>

<sup>65</sup> Creating a vision for all. Overview of *Vision 2030* [online]. Available from: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/creating-a-vision-for-all/>

<sup>66</sup> JAMJOOM, Liela A. *Women Business Leaders: Identity, resistance, and alternative forms of knowledge in Saudi Arabia*. New York : Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023. [ISBN - 9781003203643](#)

<sup>67</sup> THOMPSON, Mark C. The impact of Vision 2030 on Saudi youth mindsets. *Asian Affairs*. 2021. Vol. 52, no. 4p. 805–825. [DOI 10.1080/03068374.2021.1992202](https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2021.1992202).

<sup>68</sup> SHALHOUB, Haifa. Saudi Women in the Era of Empowerment: Future Visions, 2021- Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University Available from: <https://www.pnu.edu.sa/ar/Departments/GDM/articles/NewsActivities/Pages/article19.aspx>

The progress of Saudi women empowerment continues, especially in the field of education, where we witness the achievements of women. Regular schools for girls' education were established in 1959, then the first college for girls, was established in 1970, until the establishment of the first women's university in the Kingdom called Princess Noura Bint Abdul Rahman University in 2008 which is the biggest women's university in the world.<sup>69</sup>

The World Bank report "Women, Business, and the Law 2020" recognized Saudi Arabia as the top reformer globally in 2019/20. Saudi Arabia implemented historic reforms to advance women's economic participation. The measures introduced freedom of travel and movement for women over the age of 21.

The government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia believes that women are an important component of society's strength, the laws and regulations in the Kingdom provide a firm guarantee for their rights. The state is keen to enhance the status of women in all fields and to take all measures to ensure the protection of their rights<sup>70</sup>. The Kingdom's constitution states the general and basic framework that regulates the various aspects of political, social, and economic life. The system also guarantees human rights in Article 26<sup>71</sup>, which stipulates that "the state shall protect human rights in accordance with the provisions of Islamic Sharia"

It is essential to note that Sharia is not a monolithic legal system, and interpretations can vary significantly across different Islamic countries and communities. In some instances, Islamic countries have made efforts to align their legal systems with international human rights norms, including women's rights, by reinterpreting or reevaluating traditional Islamic principles. While there are similarities between human rights in Sharia and Western human rights, particularly in terms of justice, dignity, and equal treatment, the compatibility of the two systems depends on the interpretation and implementation of Sharia law<sup>72</sup>.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been keen to protect the rights of its individuals and to provide a decent life for both sexes in accordance with internal laws and regulations, as well as regional and international agreements and treaties. The

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid*

<sup>70</sup> Sustainable Development Goals. *Ministry of Justice* [online]. December 2022. Available from:

<https://www.moj.gov.sa/english/Ministry/SustainableDevelopment/Pages/SustainableDevelopmentGoals.aspx>

<sup>71</sup> Saudi Arabia Constitution. [online]. Available from: [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Saudi\\_Arabia\\_2013?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Saudi_Arabia_2013?lang=en)

<sup>72</sup> POWELL, Emilia Justyna. *Islamic Law and International Law: Similarities and Differences*. In: *Islamic law and international law: Peaceful resolution of disputes*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780190064631

Kingdom has joined many of them that deal with human rights in line with the Kingdom's directions in empowering and advancing women. One of the most important of these agreements is the Kingdom's accession to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women by virtue of the Royal Decree issued in 2002. The Kingdom has also become a party to 16 agreements of the International Labor Organization concerned with empowering working women, preserving their rights, preventing discrimination, and forced labor, and promoting equal wages between males and females.<sup>73</sup>

In recent years, there have been significant strides made in women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia. The country's Vision 2030 plan, launched in 2016, includes a commitment to increasing women's participation in the workforce, promoting gender equality, and empowering women to be active participants in the country's economic and social development. The following are some notable progresses made towards achieving these goals, analyzed in four categories.

### **1. Increased access to education**

Education is one of the essential constituent systems of contemporary society for multiple reasons. Most importantly, it is the only means to enable individuals to acquire abilities and skills in an organized manner to use them effectively in professional and social activities; the education system is viewed as an economic, social, and technically complex component. It is one of the most essential tools of the state to empower a class of society; through education, it is possible to develop the capabilities and skills of women in a way that helps them to contribute to building community, and the concept of empowerment is linked to social movements calling for human, civil and social rights for citizens.

Even though efforts to increase access to education for women started long before 2016<sup>74</sup>, the government has invested heavily in expanding educational opportunities for women and access to vocational training, as well as improving primary and secondary education for girls. This includes increasing the number of schools

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<sup>73</sup> Saudi's Family Affairs council - Report on progress and challenges in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action – 2019, Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Saudi-Arabia-ar.pdf>

<sup>74</sup> ALHAWSAWI, Sajjadllah and JAWHAR, Sabria Salama. Education, employment, and empowerment among Saudi women. *Gender and Education*. 2023. Vol. 35, no. 4p. 401–419. DOI 10.1080/09540253.2023.2189917.



available to girls, hiring more female teachers, and implementing policies aimed at ensuring gender equality in the classroom.

The impact of these reforms has been significant. According to data from the World Bank, the female literacy rate in Saudi Arabia has increased from just 47% in 1990 to over 96% in 2020<sup>75</sup>. The number of women pursuing higher education has also risen sharply, with women now accounting for more than half of all university graduates in the country.<sup>76</sup>

Increased access to education has not only benefited individual women but has also had broader social and economic impacts. Educated women are more likely to enter the workforce, earn higher salaries, and contribute more to the country's economy. They are also more likely to be active participants in civic and political life, and to advocate for women's rights and gender equality.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, the Saudi government is pursuing fundamental education reforms, including modernized school curriculums and introduction of new subjects such as philosophy, critical thinking, digital skills, and music<sup>78</sup>. All these reforms reflect positively in the workforce for both women and men. The great number of recently enrolled Saudi women and men will be graduating in the upcoming years and entering the job market in the kingdom, where the government is also opening in a large scale many new vacancies (See Appendix 4)<sup>79</sup>. I will explain more in the next part on greater participation in the workforce.

## 2. Greater Participation in the Workforce

The government has taken steps to remove barriers to women's employment, including lifting the ban on women driving, opening previously male-only professions to women, and offering flexible work arrangements. As a result, more women are entering the workforce and contributing to the country's economy.

Greater participation of women in the workforce has been a crucial driver of progress towards women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia. For many years, women faced significant barriers to entering the workforce, including legal restrictions, cultural

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<sup>75</sup> [Literacy rate, adult female \(% of females ages 15 and above\) - Saudi Arabia | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

<sup>76</sup> ALSUBAIE, Azzah and JONES, Karen. An overview of the current state of women's leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia and a proposal for future research directions. *Administrative Sciences*. 2017. Vol. 7, no. 4p. 36. [DOI 10.3390/admsci7040036](#).

<sup>77</sup> Saudi's Family Affairs council - Report on progress and challenges in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action – 2019, Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Saudi-Arabia-ar.pdf>

<sup>78</sup> [Education at the heart of Saudi Arabia's progress | Arab News](#)

<sup>79</sup> Appendix 4 – list of government initiatives to empower women in education and training



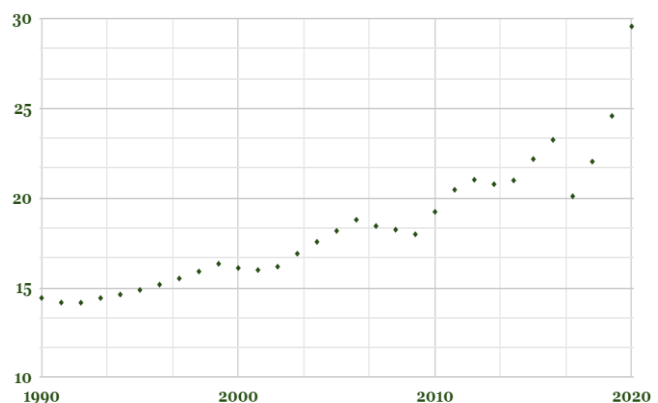
norms, and limited opportunities. However, in recent years, the government has taken steps to address these barriers and increase women's participation in the labor force.

One of the most important changes has been the expansion of job opportunities for women. This has been achieved through several measures, including the creation of new jobs in fields like healthcare and education, the expansion of the private sector, and efforts to increase women's participation in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Alsubaie in an article called “An overview of the current state of women’s leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia and a proposal for future research directions” writes that higher education is one area of work where women have made significant success in Saudi Arabia. The number of female lecturers grew from 4700 in 2003/2004 to roughly 19,600 in 2008/2009”<sup>80</sup>. In addition to creating new job opportunities, the government has also implemented policies aimed at encouraging more women to enter the workforce.

These include initiatives to provide women with the necessary skills and training, as well as policies aimed at improving work-life balance and addressing gender discrimination in the workplace. The impact of these efforts has been significant. According to data from the World Bank, the female labor force participation rate in Saudi Arabia has risen from just 14.4% in 1990 to over 29.5% in 2020<sup>81</sup>

Female labor force participation rate  
(% of female populations ages 15+) vs. Year



Data from the World Bank – Available from:  
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TL.FE.CACT.FE.NE.ZS?end=2021&locations=SA&start=1990&view=chart>  
 See Appendix 7 for details

While this is still low compared to many other countries, it represents a significant increase and signals a willingness on the part of the government to address some of the longstanding gender inequalities that have existed in the country. In an article titled “Evidence of the characteristics of women entrepreneurs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”, the author writes that Saudi women entrepreneurs believe that education

<sup>80</sup> ALSUBAIE, Azzah and JONES, Karen. An overview of the current state of women’s leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia and a proposal for future research directions. *Administrative Sciences*. 2017. Vol. 7, no. 4p. [DOI 10.3390/admsci7040036](https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci7040036).

can play a role in instilling the beliefs, values and competences that will support entrepreneurship.<sup>82</sup>

In addition, the government launched the Saudization quotas, which refer to the policies and initiatives implemented to increase the employment of Saudi nationals in the private sector. The quotas require private companies to hire a certain percentage of Saudi nationals, and penalties are imposed on companies that fail to meet these requirements. The purpose of Saudization quotas is to reduce unemployment among Saudi citizens and promote economic growth and development in the country. A study shows that “an increase in the hiring of Saudi women over the past several years was a result of the women’s increased education and the need to meet Saudization quotas”<sup>83</sup>.

A study that focused on interviewing Saudi Human Resources managers says, "Saudi HR managers, of both genders, shared a feeling of pride with Vision 2030 and the objectives it extended, including those related to empowering women and increasing their participation in the workforce, they also expressed positive attitudes toward the recent women-focused legislative changes and their importance in terms of reducing the negative international perception of Saudi Arabia as an anti-women state, including allowing women to drive and obtain a passport without the approval of a male guardian."<sup>84</sup>

Increased participation of women in the workforce has numerous benefits, both for individual women and for society as a whole. For women, it provides opportunities for economic independence and self-determination, as well as the chance to develop skills and pursue their passions. For society, it helps to drive economic growth and development, and promotes greater gender equality and social cohesion. There is still much work to be done to ensure that women have equal access to job opportunities and are protected from discrimination, the progress that has been made is a significant achievement and provides a strong foundation for further progress in the future. According to the ministry of human resources report 2021, the number of Saudis employed in the private sector until the end of the fourth quarter of 2021 reached

<sup>81</sup> World Bank. Saudi Arabia. *World Bank Gender Data Portal* [online]. 2023. Available from: <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/saudi-arabia/>

<sup>82</sup> ZAMBERI AHMAD, Syed. Evidence of the characteristics of women entrepreneurs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*. 2011. Vol. 3, no. 2p. 123–143. DOI 10.1108/17566261111140206.

<sup>83</sup> TLAISS, Hayfaa A. and AL WAQFI, Mohammed. Human resource managers advancing the careers of women in Saudi Arabia: Caught between a rock and a hard place. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*. 2020. Vol. 33, no. 9p. 1812–1847. DOI 10.1080/09585192.2020.1783342.

<sup>84</sup> TLAISS, Hayfaa A. and AL WAQFI, Mohammed. Human resource managers advancing the careers of women in Saudi Arabia: Caught between a rock and a hard place. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*. 2020. Vol. 33, no. 9p. 1812–1847. DOI 10.1080/09585192.2020.1783342.

1,918,940 employees, 64,1% males, and 35,9% females.<sup>85</sup> Finally, the Saudi government has launched and funded many programs to empower working women, a list of these programs is attached to the appendix (See Appendix 5). The following section focuses on the legal reforms.

### 3. Expanded Legal Rights

In recent years, women have gained several legal rights, including the right to vote, and run for public office, the right to obtain a passport and travel without the permission of a male guardian, and the right to attend sporting events and concerts.<sup>86</sup> Stated by the official Saudi report: “Vision 2030 recognizes that a successful, modern nation must encourage and empower all members of society, including women. To that end, women’s rights have grown and expanded under the current leadership, and Saudi women are more engaged than ever in society, government, and business”<sup>87</sup>

According to Article 3 of the Saudi Constitution in the Shura Council Law:

*“The Shura Council shall consist of a Speaker and One hundred and fifty members chosen by the King from amongst scholars, those of knowledge, expertise and specialists, provided that women representation shall not be less than (20%) of members number. Their rights, duties and affairs shall be determined by a Royal Order.”<sup>88</sup>*

When visiting the website of the council committees, a list of members of each committee shows that women are represented in almost all specialized committees of the council<sup>89</sup>. The Ministry of Justice has employed women in six fields at the ministry<sup>90</sup>. Women have been able to vote and compete in municipal elections since 2015, and they have had posts in the Shura council since 2013 due to reforms during the era of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud; in her article “The march of female empowerment in Saudi Arabia” Maha Akeel writes that this is when significant changes first began.

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<sup>85</sup> The annual report of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development 2021- [link](#)

<sup>86</sup> [Factsheet on Progress for Women in Saudi Arabia.pdf \(saudiembassy.net\)](#)

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Saudi Arabia Constitution. [online]. Available from: [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Saudi\\_Arabia\\_2013?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Saudi_Arabia_2013?lang=en)

<sup>89</sup> [Majlis Ash-Shura - Committees](#)

<sup>90</sup> Sustainable Development Goals. *Ministry of Justice* [online]. December 2022. Available from: <https://www.moj.gov.sa/english/Ministry/SustainableDevelopment/Pages/SustainableDevelopmentGoals.aspx>

Additional changes came in 2018, “with the lifting of the ban on women driving, and in 2019, when it became legal for women to obtain passports or travel without the permission of a male guardian”<sup>91</sup>.

These reforms and commitment to empowering women are shared publicly, on the official Saudi government website, it is made very clear that they have a section titled: “Women Rights Guaranteed by Saudi Regulations” (See Appendix 6)<sup>92</sup> available both in English and Arabic<sup>93</sup>. In many cases, the Saudi government websites made this information about the reforms available in English and Arabic; so, they are easily accessible and public. This serves Saudi women and provides them with the sense of security and safety, the government now supports Saudi women in overcoming obstacles when attempting to achieve their goals.

Expanded legal rights for women in Saudi Arabia have been a key driver of progress towards women's empowerment in the country. For many years, Saudi women faced numerous legal restrictions, including restrictions on their ability to travel, work, and participate in public life. However, as mentioned earlier in recent years, the government has taken significant steps to remove these barriers and expand women's legal rights.

One of the most significant changes has been the lifting of the ban on women driving in 2018. Prior to this, Saudi Arabia was the only country in the world where women were not allowed to drive, and the ban had been a major symbol of the country's strict gender norms. The lifting of the ban was a major victory for women's rights activists and has allowed women to have greater mobility and independence.

Lifting the ban on driving changed the course of many Saudi families, it gave both men and women more freedom, in the sense that some families could not afford a driver and the males in the household had to take the females where they needed to go every time for shopping, groceries, school, hospital etc. Moreover, it helped families financially not having to hire a driver since it was discovered that transportation consumes a large amount of household income for both private drivers and transport companies.

Finally, driving gave freedom to a lot of women who did not have the presence of a male in their household to be able to freely go anywhere. In a study aimed to

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<sup>91</sup> AKEEL, Maha. International Women's Day: The March of female empowerment in Saudi Arabia. *Arab News* [online]. 8 March 2022. Available from: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2038036/saudi-arabia>

<sup>92</sup> Appendix 6 -List of Women Rights Guaranteed by Saudi Regulations

analyze the economic and social dimensions of Saudi Women's driving, it portrays that the majority who participated in this study were in support of women driving in the context of Saudi Arabia<sup>94</sup> - "Many were confident that the decision will positively affect the society and economy. An electronic questionnaire survey was carried out on 516 samples to shed light on this matter. The results show that the women driving strongly and positively correlates with the economic dimension."<sup>95</sup>

Other legal changes have included the right for women to obtain a passport and travel without the permission of a male guardian, the right to attend sporting events and concerts, and the right to vote and run for public office. These changes have helped to dismantle some of the legal barriers that have prevented women from fully participating in public life. Which was mentioned by the majority of the women I have interviewed of how important these legal changes were for their daily lives in Saudi Arabia, more is explained in detail in the analysis section of this thesis.

While these legal changes are important steps forward, there is still work to be done to ensure that women's rights are fully protected and enforced. For example, there are still restrictions on women's ability to marry and divorce, and women can face discrimination in the workplace and in other areas of society just like in many places around the world today. Addressing these issues will require continued advocacy and engagement from women's rights activists and the wider society.

#### **4. Increased Representation in Leadership Positions**

Women are now being appointed to leadership positions in various sectors, including government, business, and sports. For example, in 2019, the country appointed Princess Reema bint Bandar to become the first female envoy in the country's history. Today in 2023, the number of female Saudi Ambassadors rises to five<sup>96</sup>. In an interview with Princess Reema bint Bandar, she says "Women rights are at the forefront, women inclusion is at the forefront, and we are not done yet."<sup>97</sup> Moreover, in a podcast with Reema, when asked how she feels about her public appointment changing the landscape for females in Saudi, she answered saying: "You cannot be what you cannot see; it makes every young girl in the kingdom say that could be me, it

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<sup>93</sup> [Women Empowerment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia \(my.gov.sa\)](https://my.gov.sa)

<sup>94</sup> AMIRAT et al. Analysis of The Economic and Social Dimensions of Saudi Women's Driving. 2021, Vol 20 (Issue 6) pp. 1413-1427. DOI: [10.17051/ilkonline.2021.06.143](https://doi.org/10.17051/ilkonline.2021.06.143).

<sup>95</sup> ibid

<sup>96</sup> [Encouraging female leaders in peace and politics | Arab News](#)

promotes dreams and inspires young women to go that path. She continued to advise young women to not be stubborn, and to be flexible.”<sup>98</sup>

Increased representation of women in leadership positions is an important indicator of progress towards women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia. Historically, women have been severely underrepresented in positions of power and influence in the country, and this has been a major barrier to women's empowerment and gender equality.

However, in recent years, there have been several efforts to increase women's representation in leadership positions. This has included the appointment of women to high-profile government roles, as well as efforts to increase women's representation in the private sector and civil society.

One example of this is the establishment of the Qiyadiyat initiative<sup>99</sup>, which aims to increase the number of women in leadership positions across the public and private sectors. Through this initiative, women are provided with leadership training and mentorship opportunities, as well as access to networking and job opportunities. There are additional other initiatives that were implemented both by government and private sectors to help women reach higher positions are listed on the government website<sup>100</sup>.

Overall, according to the Women, Business, and the Law 2023 (WBL2023)<sup>101</sup> which presented a 190-economy index structured around the life cycle of a working woman. In total, 35 questions spanning eight indicators are assessed. The average of each indication is then used to determine the scores, with 100 indicating the maximum possible score. Saudi Arabia receives a score of 71.3 out of 100 using this method. Saudi Arabia's total score is better than the regional average for the Middle East and North Africa (53.2). The highest observed score in the Middle East and North Africa area is 91.3 in Malta (See Appendix 3)<sup>102</sup>. The following section discusses women empowerment in relation to sustainable development.

### ***Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development***

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<sup>97</sup>Minute 10 in: [HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar Al Saud's Interview With CNN - YouTube](#)

<sup>98</sup> [The Mo Show: HRH Princess Reema Bandar Al Saud | The Mo Show 70 | Advocating for Women, Financial Self Sufficiency & Saudi-U.S Relations on Apple Podcasts](#)

<sup>99</sup> [Women Empowerment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia \(my.gov.sa\)](#)

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*

<sup>101</sup> [Women, Business, and the Law 2023 \(worldbank.org\)](#)

<sup>102</sup> Appendix 3 –the Women, Business, and the Law 2023 report on Saudi Arabia by the World Bank

Women empowerment has a clear link and impact on sustainable development, the biggest and most obvious impact is the economic one; when women were included as a functioning part of society; they contributed positively to the economy and a sustainable development in the kingdom. Once the barriers have been removed, Saudi women are now able to dream bigger and achieve a lot more. Meaning, that women do not have to fight and struggle for their basic given rights which were taken away from them for a long time. Now they can pursue more and achieve a lot more with the freedom they finally have.

Findings from a study conducted by Julie Hodges provide support for the desire and readiness for change among professional women in Saudi. “This was summed up by one participant who said, "Women in Saudi don't want to be left in the dark. They want to have the same opportunities as male leaders.”<sup>103</sup> Women empowerment is a key driver of sustainable development, as it contributes to economic growth, poverty reduction, improved education and health, environmental sustainability, social cohesion, and enhanced decision-making.

Achieving gender equality and empowering women are essential for realizing the full potential of sustainable development and creating a more just and prosperous world. As noted in the introduction, The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly recognize gender equality (Goal 5) as an essential component of sustainable development. The Vision 2030 as we have seen so far includes measures to increase women's participation in the workforce and decision-making processes, which aligns with SDG 5's objective to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. There are many other goals of the Vision 2030 which align with the Global SDGs. It can be interpreted due to timing and similar approaches that Saudi Arabia has been influenced by the SDGs launched by the United Nations. Saudi Arabia has been an active member of the United Nations (UN) since its admission on October 24, 1945. Over the years, the country has participated in various UN initiatives and played a significant role in several areas. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has engaged with the UN's SDG agenda and has incorporated the goals into its Vision 2030 national development plan. The country has submitted Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the UN, reporting on its progress towards achieving the SDGs.

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<sup>103</sup> HODGES, Julie. Cracking the walls of leadership: Women in Saudi Arabia. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*. 2017. Vol. 32, no. 1p. 34–46. [DOI 10.1108/gm-11-2015-0106](https://doi.org/10.1108/gm-11-2015-0106).



This is not to say that the SDGs led to Saudi Arabia creating the 2030 vision, as Mohamad Bin Salman says “*With this Vision, We will destroy extremism, we were never like this before 1979, we just go back to what we were, to Islam that is open to all religions, traditions and peoples*”<sup>104</sup> but rather see how the influence of global norms and standards impacts domestic policies from an International Relations research perspective. From a liberal International Relations perspective, International Organizations (IOs) play a significant role in shaping and maintaining the international system. IOs are seen as important actors in promoting and protecting the liberal values of democracy, human rights, and free trade. The impact of IOs can be seen in their ability to influence state behavior, encourage cooperation and coordination, and facilitate the creation of international norms and rules. For example, the United Nations (UN) has been instrumental in promoting global human rights standards through its declarations, treaties, and resolutions<sup>105</sup>.

Mohamad Bin Salman adds in his interview: “We want to live a normal life that reflects the principles of our tolerant religion and our good customs and traditions, coexist with the world and contribute to the development of our country and the world.” He added, “We have taken clear steps in the recent years in this regard, and we will eliminate the remnants of extremism very soon, and I do not think that this constitutes a challenge, as we represent tolerant, moderate, and correct values, and the right is with us in everything we face.”<sup>106</sup>

The Saudi General Authority for Statistics prepares an annual report to review the progress made in the Sustainable Development Goals, which shows the commitment and engagement of Saudi Arabia on a global level and the importance of IOs in international relations. The numbers that Saudi Arabia managed to achieve in such a short time are impressive in all the fields of the different goals, and that on its own could make up for a whole research, but my research is more focused on Goal number 5, on Gender Equality and how that has been reforming in the kingdom ever since the implementation of the 2030 vision and most importantly, the impact on Saudi women and hearing from their experience.

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<sup>104</sup> Mohammed bin Salman: *We will destroy extremism and live a normal life* [online]. Al-Arabiya English, 24 October 2017. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChAqsVBazMw>

<sup>105</sup> KEOHANE, Robert O. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press, 1984. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7sq9s>.

<sup>106</sup> Mohammed bin Salman: *We will destroy extremism and live a normal life* [online]. Al-Arabiya English, 24 October 2017. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChAqsVBazMw>



In the report<sup>107</sup>, on the progress in SDG 5, it is written that “Islamic Sharia laws acknowledge the right of equality among all people regardless of their different races, ethnicities, and human values. People are differentiated only by their righteousness, and Sharia laws secured the rights of each human without discrimination to ensure solidarity among individuals. Article (8) stipulates that (reign in Saudi Arabia is based on the principles of justice, consultation, and equality in accordance with Islamic sharia laws). Article 26 stipulates that (the State shall protect the human rights according to Islamic Sharia laws), including the prevention of discrimination against women.”<sup>108</sup>

The following section shows in more detail the role of women in the economy, more specifically in Saudi Arabia.

### **Role of women in the economy**

This part portrays the benefits of women’s contribution to the economy in general and then dives in specifics in the case of Saudi Arabia. There is a significant amount of research that highlights the numerous benefits of women's contribution to the economy.

First, when it comes to economic growth, women bring new skills and perspectives that help drive innovation and growth. Studies have shown that increasing women's labor force participation can boost GDP growth and improve overall economic performance<sup>109</sup>. Second, studies found that companies with more women in leadership positions tend to be more productive and profitable<sup>110</sup>. Women's diverse perspectives and management styles can lead to more effective decision-making and problem-solving. Third, improving financial stability overall, women's participation in the economy can help stabilize families and communities by providing additional income and resources. Women's economic empowerment can also help reduce poverty and improve social outcomes. Finally, women's economic participation contributes to the development of more equitable and inclusive societies and promoting social progress. By investing in women's education, training, and economic empowerment, societies can unlock new sources of growth and development that benefit everyone.

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<sup>107</sup> [Sustainable Development Indicators | General Authority for Statistics \(stats.gov.sa\)](https://stats.gov.sa)

<sup>108</sup> Ministry of Justice: [Sustainable development goals \(moj.gov.sa\)](https://www.moj.gov.sa)

<sup>109</sup> WARING, Marilyn. Counting for something! recognising women's contribution to the global economy through Alternative Accounting Systems. *Gender & Development*. 2003. Vol. 11, no. 1p. 35–43. [DOI 10.1080/741954251](https://doi.org/10.1080/741954251).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

Saudi Arabia has achieved notable progress in removing the barriers for women entering the labor market in terms of employment and entrepreneurship, such as allowing women to drive cars which is vital for being able to commute to work, to changes in the guardianship law, in the labor law, and in family law, among many others. These achievements were represented in the doubling of the number of women in the labor market. Both in the public and private sectors.

In just two years, the labor force participation rate of Saudi women increased from 20 percent in late 2018 to 33 percent by the end of 2020<sup>111</sup>. Saudi Arabia is a top performer in the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law Report. The reforms are really creating an impact when examining all the impressive data and statistics. In the beginning, the Vision had a clear goal to increase the Saudi female labor force participation rate to over 30% by 2030; however, this goal was achieved 10 years earlier, just less than 5 years after launching the reforms. The World Bank reports 13 reforms, out of which 11 of them are marked as positive reforms for women<sup>112</sup>.

The following section presents the analysis of the research findings which have been categorized, the analysis is based on the author's observation, interviews, and data analysis.

### **Analysis and Reflections**

While conducting my research to answer the question starting with reviewing academic published papers and studies, I have found several sources supporting that the role of women in the transformation vision of Saudi Arabia is a limited one, that the motives for these reforms, especially on women, are rather a political move from the Saudi government to enhance the public and international image of Saudi Arabia, that these modernization reforms come from international pressure and do not really reflect the reality in Saudi Arabia for Saudi women.

However, what I found common for majority of the studies that were affirming these perspectives is that they were conducted by foreigners (non-Saudi) researchers and analysts. Then I started looking for sources written by Saudis, especially Saudi

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<sup>111</sup> TAMAYO, Sofia Gomez, KOETTL, Johannes and RIVERA, Nayib. The spectacular surge of the Saudi female labor force. *Brookings* [online]. 9 March 2022. Available from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2021/04/21/the-spectacular-surge-of-the-saudi-female-labor-force/>

<sup>112</sup> The World Bank – Women, Business and the Law -List of 13 reforms pertaining to women in Saudi Arabia . Available from: <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/reforms>

women and what I have found is remarkable, as they all rejected the stereotypes mentioned in most other studies.

I am a firm believer of the famous quote by Albert Einstein: “The only source of knowledge is experience.” I lived and witnessed how foreign sources can write about political issues and use certain aspects to their advantage not representing the society, or the real voices of the people experiencing these changes. That was my main motivation to include the diverse voices of Saudi women, because they are the only ones who can speak up and share their knowledge which I consider to be the most valid and representative data this study has. I will now categorize the findings and quote the women I have interviewed to support the research findings.

### ***2030 Vision – Achievements, Obstacles and Challenges***

My research findings show that Saudi women have a developmental role in the 2030 vision to achieve great success at the regional and global levels.

From the interviews I conducted, all the women have expressed their positive intake and hope for a better future following the 2030 vision. They mentioned that its focus is on improving the quality of life for all and that they have undoubtedly experienced these changes and reforms and can confirm that an evident change is happening. Even though it is a rapid one, it is happening, and it is for the benefit of Saudi citizens. In an interview with Sara, a 29 young Saudi professional in the technology sector with eight years of working experiences, she said that the “2030 vision has truly impacted everyone here, it is an amazing vision and the great thing about it is that it is becoming super emotional to all Saudis and even to people who live in Saudi”<sup>113</sup> adding that the majority of the population in Saudi Arabia is under the age of 30<sup>114</sup> (see Appendix 8) which Sara believes that it pushed to be able adapt faster and become more involved in the vision.

2030 opened a lot more opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia, Sara added that she even feels more empowered than men when pursuing jobs. During my interview with Amal, a portfolio manager with over 10 years of professional working experience in Saudi Arabia, she noted that companies receive higher points and benefits from the Saudization program when they hire Saudi females, and now there is a sense of

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<sup>113</sup> AL-ABDULLATIF Sara, interview by author, Zoom Online, April 30, 2023

competition to hire women which benefits and encourages more women to enter the workforce. Amal also mentioned that the government has implemented equal pay for women and men in the government sector, and the gender pay-gap only exists in the private sector<sup>115</sup>.

Legal reforms such as the lifting of the ban on driving has changed the lives of many women in Saudi Arabia, majority of the women I have interviewed mentioned that it gave them more freedom that they do not have to schedule ahead of time with the driver and coordinate with the rest of the family members. In one of my interviews with Njoud, a young Saudi female said that “allowing women to drive was a shock, I didn’t even dream of driving in Saudi Arabia, my friends have driving license in the USA but I did not care about driving, however when they allowed it, I think it’s really amazing because it changed everything”<sup>116</sup> When asked to explain how it changed everything she said: “I am more independent, can support myself, I can support my family and not be dependent on them”<sup>117</sup> Moreover, Njoud notes that in terms of women employment with 2030 vision, women have no limits.

Magdoline Boukhary is an inspiring woman who I had the chance to speak to about the reforms; she was the first official HR Saudi female hire in the National Commercial Bank in Saudi Arabia (mentions that it took ten months to process her hiring). Boukhary had struggled to get where she is today and to go after what she wanted because of starting early (before the reforms). Boukhary wished to pave the way for other girls and women, even if that meant doing things she did not agree with; where Boukhary recalls an incident during her work in the bank, back in the days of the Saudi Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) better known as the “religious police” had come to the bank and ordered to either close down the women’s section or have the women cover; and that is when Boukhary said: “I am willing to cover my face if that’s what it takes to continue working in the bank.” I quote Bokhary saying, “It is wonderful where we were and where we are today,” adding that she had not had the struggle since 2016<sup>118</sup>.

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<sup>114</sup> Appendix 8 - Population by Nationality, Gender, and Age groups in Saudi Arabia by Saudi Stats

<sup>115</sup> KHUNJI Amal, interview by author, Zoom Online, April 15, 2023.

<sup>116</sup> ALESSA Njoud, interview by author, Zoom Online, April 13, 2023.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid

<sup>118</sup>BOUKHARY Magdolin, interview by author, Zoom Online, April 15, 2023.

When asked about her inspiration and role model, she answered by saying it is every single mother that was able to empower her daughter to move forward. As well as mentioned, two inspiring Saudi women:

**Thoraya Obaid** - was the first woman to be awarded a Saudi state grant to study in the United States, and she earned a BA in English literature from Mills College in 1966, as well as an MA (1968) and a PhD (1970) from Wayne State University. She is a politician and diplomat who worked as the executive director of the United Nations Population Fund from 2000 to 2010, and she was a member of the Saudi Shura council from 2013 to 2016.<sup>119</sup>

**Lubna Al-Olaayan** - first Saudi businesswoman to head a publicly traded bank, Lubna has significantly contributed to shattering stereotypes of Saudi women and was the former chief executive officer of the Olayan Financing Company (OFC).

Sara added the names of **Adah Almutairi**, a scientist and professor who was described as one of the top ten most influential female engineers in the world<sup>120</sup>. As well as **Mishaal Ashemimry**, who is an Aerospace Engineer, Aerospace Entrepreneur, commercial pilot, speaker, and influencer, the first Saudi woman to hold the position of vice president of the International Astronautical Federation, and the First Saudi Woman to Join NASA<sup>121</sup>. Sara continues to say “Each of these women had a different impact, to see the stories of how they started and that they had more difficult challenges because they started earlier; I feel blessed and lucky to have these women initiate these things for us”<sup>122</sup>

Finally, when asked the Saudi women I interviewed about the obstacles and challenges that remain; all of them answered that the remaining obstacles were societal not governmental ones, they feel supported by the government and eventually the rest of society will accept and respect these reforms. As Boukhary said: “We are getting there, it is a journey, it is usually us who stop ourselves”<sup>123</sup>. It is also worth noting that majority of women interviewed stressed that their Islamic religion is not a barrier for them, it was more historical traditional obstacles, and extremist interpretations which they do not agree with and the government now is trying to eliminate all extremist interpretation and go back to moderate Islamic teachings. I also personally agree as a

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<sup>119</sup> [Thoraya Obaid - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>120</sup> [Adah Almutairi - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>121</sup> [Mishaal Ashemimry: The First Saudi Woman to Join NASA | About Her](#)

<sup>122</sup> AL-ABDULLATIF Sara, interview by author, Zoom Online, April 30, 2023

<sup>123</sup> BOUKHARY Magdolin, interview by author, Zoom Online, April 15, 2023.

Muslim female researcher, religion was never the obstacle for me to achieve what I wanted. Boukhary further adds that religion actually protected them from the struggle similar to the western women struggle: “We (Saudi women) did not struggle as much as the western women did, we have our religion and culture that protected us from a lot of things”<sup>124</sup>.

### *Motives for Women’s Empowerment in Saudi Arabia*

Conducting this research has shown various motives for launching the 2030 vision especially when it comes to women empowerment. Some of these motives include as we have seen already, economic diversification and internal demand for change. I asked every woman I have interviewed about what they think were the motives behind launching women empowerment programs in the kingdom. It was a consensus from the interviews that it was time to change, and it was not only about women, but concerned all Saudi citizens in general, they all mentioned “quality of life” and how it is one of the top priorities of the 2030 vision is to ensure a decent good quality of life for every Saudi citizen.

I have interviewed Maha Akeel who is the former director of the information department at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). She is an author and a former journalist. In the interview, she said “women's quality of life means accessing resources, having more freedom of movement, and having more rights, so that is definitely within the sphere of quality of life”<sup>125</sup>

In other interviews the economic motive was mentioned but again said that it was not just a pure economic motive rather it was a focus on improving the quality of life. Akeel further added in the interview to reject the claim that the reforms are seen or reported in some studies with skepticism that the “decisions that come from top down, if the society is not acceptable of it, would not have been implemented, but if we see the Saudi society, it was ready and it accepted all these reforms because they knew that this is the real Islam. This is the real society of Saudi Arabia, and if we go back in history before 1979, the women were working, women were driving. Things were progressing just like in any other country. But what happened in 1979, completely shifted and

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<sup>124</sup> BOUKHARY Magdolin, interview by author, Zoom Online, April 15, 2023.

<sup>125</sup> AKEEL Maha, interview by author, Zoom Online, April 18, 2023.

diverted the path for progress, especially for the women, so now it's like going back and correcting.”<sup>126</sup>

In another interview with Magdolin Bukhary, when asked about the bettering of international image claim as the motive for launching 2030 vision, she said “the government wanted to improve the image of Saudi but not for anybody else, for us”<sup>127</sup>. She quoted Mohamad Bin Salman saying: “I have boys and girls that can build mountains and move mountains, and these are the ones who are going to help me achieve these dreams and build the country”, Boukhary counties to say that Mohamad Bin Salman has brought the world to Saudi Arabia for the Saudi people. She further added that the opportunities that they're opening with international investments is not because they want to bring the Americans and the Europeans to come in and live in their country, it's to build opportunities for the boys and girls through these investments that come in”.<sup>128</sup>

Finally I would reflect on Amal's perspective when she mentioned that she is talking as a Saudi citizen, she is the one who experienced the changes, she said that the quality of life has changed drastically and went along to share all the changes that she has witness to better the lives of Saudi citizens and that the reforms are not an “international branding” of Saudi Arabia, they are real effective reforms that enhanced the lives of the Saudi citizens majorly in such a short time<sup>129</sup>. One additional observation is that in all the interviews, women mentioned the safety in Saudi Arabia, saying that they are in a very safe place to pursue what they want.

In other sources, I came across studies that showed the importance of social media especially the platform of Twitter to push for these reforms, such platforms gave women the opportunity to voice their demands and engendered an alternative online space where women and men engaged and communicated with each other<sup>130</sup>. Some of the successful social media campaigns were under the hashtags of #Women2Drive and #EndMaleGuardianship.

Another perspective to add is by Madawi Al-Rasheed in her book; *A Most Masculine State*, she explores the complex relationship between gender, politics, and religion in Saudi Arabia. The book is based on extensive research and interviews with

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid

<sup>127</sup> BOUKHARY Magdolin, interview by author, Zoom Online, April 15, 2023.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid

<sup>129</sup> KHUNJI Amal, interview by author, Zoom Online, April 15, 2023.

Saudi men and women, and provides an in-depth analysis of the social, cultural, and political factors that shape gender relations in the country. Al-Rasheed argues that the Saudi government's decision to empower women was driven by a combination of internal and external factors. On the one hand, there was growing recognition within the Saudi government that the exclusion of women from the workforce and public life was holding back the country's economic development and hindering its international standing. Additionally, the government was facing pressure from international human rights organizations and Western governments to improve the status of women in the country. To address these challenges, the Saudi government launched a series of reforms aimed at empowering women, including granting them the right to vote and run for office, increasing their access to education and employment, and loosening restrictions on their mobility and dress. These reforms were framed as part of a broader modernization agenda and were intended to present Saudi Arabia as a more progressive and open society.

However, Al-Rasheed also argues that these reforms were limited in scope and driven by a desire to maintain the existing power structures in the country. The government continued to enforce strict gender segregation and maintain a highly patriarchal society, and women who challenged these norms were often met with harsh repression. Additionally, the reforms were largely focused on improving the status of elite women and did not address the needs of women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds<sup>131</sup>. I have not heard this argument in any of my interviews, this is to say that there is multiple narratives to every situation, the book was written in 2013 before the new reforms, however, Al-Rasheed wrote another book in 2018 and still had the same criticism that women reforms were more driven by economic considerations than a commitment to gender equality, as it was seen as a way to increase women's participation in the workforce and reduce the country's reliance on foreign labor<sup>132</sup>.

Finally, according to Hend T. Al-Sudairy in her book “Modern woman in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia: rights, challenges and achievements”, the government recognizes that empowering women is crucial to the country's economic development as

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<sup>130</sup> THORSEN, Einar and SREEDHARAN, Chindu. #endmaleguardianship: Women's rights, social media and the Arab Public Sphere. *New Media & Society*. 2019. Vol. 21, no. 5p. 1121–1140. DOI [10.1177/1461444818821376](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818821376).

<sup>131</sup> AL-RASHEED, Madawi. *A most masculine state gender, politics and religion in Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. ISBN: [9781139015363](https://www.isbn-international.org/number/9781139015363).

<sup>132</sup> AL-RASHEED, Madawi. *Salman's legacy: The dilemmas of a new era in Saudi Arabia*. Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780190050269



well as to the country's social development<sup>133</sup>. As shown previously, the economic driver is a strong factor in these reforms.

## ***Conclusion***

The investigation into this compelling case has been an enlightening experience, as it has provided valuable insights through engaging with Saudi citizens and delving into the extensive literature on the subject. Based on the empirical evidence and findings, it can be concluded that women's role in the transformation of Saudi Arabia has been of substantial importance. Their augmented participation across diverse facets of society has instigated a paradigm shift in the country's cultural and social norms. In recent years, the government has demonstrated commendable endeavors in advocating for women's rights and generating increased employment opportunities for this demographic.

Incorporating the modernization theory into the analysis, this thesis has also considered the role of women in the 2030 reforms in Saudi Arabia within the broader context of the nation's development and modernization process. Modernization theory posits that societies progress through a series of stages, eventually leading to increased economic growth, political stability, and social development. The inclusion of women as active agents of change in this process is essential, as their empowerment and participation contribute to the overall development and modernization of the society.

The Vision 2030 reforms, as seen through the lens of modernization theory, represent a concerted effort by the Saudi government to transition from a traditional, oil-dependent economy to a more diversified, knowledge-based economy. The active involvement of women in this transition, as evidenced by their increased access to education, entry into the workforce, and participation in political decision-making, has not only accelerated the modernization process but also contributed to the formation of a more inclusive and equitable society.

Utilizing the theoretical perspective of normative feminism and gender mainstreaming, this thesis has provided a comprehensive analysis of the role of women in the 2030 reforms in Saudi Arabia. By focusing on the key tenets of these theories,

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<sup>133</sup> AL-SUDAIRY, HEND T. *Modern woman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Rights, challenges and achievements*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017. ISBN: [1-4438-7281-4](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107314438)

such as gender equality, social transformation, and the integration of a gender perspective in all policies and practices, the study has critically examined the multidimensional aspects of women's experiences and their contributions to various domains, including education, the workforce, political participation, and social norms.

The findings of this thesis demonstrate that the Vision 2030 reforms, influenced by normative feminist principles, have significantly contributed to the advancement of women's rights and gender equality in Saudi Arabia. The expansion of women's access to education and their integration into the labor market have led to a shift in societal perceptions, fostering a more inclusive and egalitarian society. This transformation is in line with the objectives of gender mainstreaming, which aims to challenge and change the structural and systemic barriers that perpetuate gender inequality.

In addition, this study has highlighted the increasing political participation and representation of women as a crucial component of the 2030 reforms. The adoption of gender mainstreaming strategies within the political realm has enabled the formulation of more gender-sensitive policies, promoting the inclusion of women's perspectives and experiences in decision-making processes.

However, despite the remarkable progress made, the study acknowledges the persistence of certain challenges that must be addressed to ensure the full realization of gender equality within the context of the reforms. Cultural barriers, gender stereotypes, and the uneven distribution of opportunities between urban and rural areas continue to hinder women's full participation and empowerment. Considering these findings, the thesis emphasizes the importance of a multi-pronged approach that encompasses the continued promotion of gender-responsive policies, the engagement of civil society, and the implementation of awareness campaigns to challenge and change prevailing norms.

By linking the principles of normative feminism, gender mainstreaming, and modernization theory, this thesis has highlighted the interconnected nature of gender equality, social transformation, and national development, underscoring the importance of a multi-dimensional approach to promote sustainable progress for all members of society.

In conclusion, by adopting the theoretical perspectives of normative feminism and gender mainstreaming, this thesis has provided a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the role of women in the 2030 reforms in Saudi Arabia. It has shed

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light on the interplay between structural, cultural, and individual factors in shaping women's experiences and emphasized the importance of a context-specific approach to promote gender equality and sustainable development.

As Saudi Arabia continues its transformative journey, the insights gained from this study can serve as valuable lessons for other nations embarking on similar paths toward inclusive and equitable progress. Future research should explore the long-term impact of these reforms on gender relations, as well as the effectiveness of different strategies in addressing the remaining challenges and barriers to gender equality. By building on the foundation laid by this thesis, scholars and policymakers alike can contribute to the ongoing global effort to promote gender justice and create a more just and equal world for all. I would like to end by quoting Maha Akeel on the reforms in Saudi Arabia:

*“Change does not happen easily. However, with a clear vision, plan, and steps for implementation, and with joint efforts and coordination under a strong, confident leadership, we will be on track for the future.”<sup>134</sup>*

### ***Strengths and Limitations***

The strengths of this study lie in the richness of the primary data collected through interviews with Saudi women citizens, providing valuable first-hand insights into their experiences and perspectives on the ongoing reforms. This direct engagement allows for a deeper understanding of the reforms' nuances, complexities, and implications as they relate to women's roles. Furthermore, collecting various data sources strengthens the study by facilitating a comprehensive and multifaceted analysis, enabling a more accurate and robust portrayal of the evolving landscape for women in Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, since this is a current study that examines recent and ongoing reforms at the time of conducting this research in 2023, the results vary every month due to the nature of the fast pace of these reforms; the analysis done in this thesis captures only a snapshot of women's roles at the time being. Moreover, the uniqueness

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<sup>134</sup> AKEEL, Maha. Education at the heart of Saudi Arabia's progress. *Arab News* [online]. 23 September 2022. Available from: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2167211>

and complexity of this case study of Saudi Arabia may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions. Additionally, the integration of modernization theory, normative feminism, and gender mainstreaming, while comprehensive, may not capture all aspects of the complex interplay between women's roles and the reforms. Finally, potential biases in data, sources, and researcher perspectives may impact the study's interpretations and conclusions, efforts have been made to mitigate these biases, but their potential influence cannot be eliminated.

### ***Suggested Further Research***

Further research is suggested to build upon the findings of this study and deepen the understanding of the role of women in Saudi Arabia's reforms. Since it was mentioned in one of the sources discussing the long-term effect of these reforms, perhaps a longitudinal study examining the reforms' long-term effects on women's roles, social mobility, and gender equality would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of time. Furthermore, investigating the experiences of women in other countries undergoing similar socio-political reforms can offer valuable insights into practical strategies for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Finally, incorporating intersectional perspectives by considering factors such as age, socioeconomic status, and regional differences can further enrich the analysis and offer a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences of Saudi women during this transformative period.

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## Appendices

| <b>Appendix 1: List of referenced interviews with Saudi Women</b>  |   |               |                    |                 |
|--|---|---------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Name</b>  | <b>Description</b>  | <b>Date</b>   | <b>Language</b>    | <b>Platform</b> |
| Njoud Alessa   | 26-year-old young woman who has witnessed the reforms during her university studies and talks about how they have affected her life.                                      | 13 April 2023 | English            | Online via Zoom |
| Magdolin Boukhary  | The first woman to be hired in the Human Resources in the National Commercial Bank in Saudi Arabia, she is innovative and a pioneer in women empowerment in Saudi Arabia. | 15 April 2023 | English            | Online via Zoom |
| Amal Khunji  | A portfolio manager with over 10 years of professional working experience in Saudi Arabia.  | 15 April 2023 | English and Arabic | Online via Zoom |
| Maha Akeel   | Former director of the information department at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). An author, lecturer, and a former journalist.                             | 18 April 2023 | English            | Online via Zoom |
| Sara Al-Abdullatif   | 29 young Saudi professional in the technology sector with eight years of working experience.  | 30 April 2023 | English            | Online via Zoom |
|  |   |               |                    |                 |
| <b>Summary - Interview with Maha Akeel</b>   |   |               |                    |                 |
| <p>Maha discussed her experience as a journalist and working for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation with 57 member states across the Muslim world. We talked about how Vision 2030 was a turning point for women in Saudi Arabia, addressing and reforming many laws and regulations that prevented women from playing an active role in society and the economy.</p>         |   |               |                    |                 |
| <p>Maha discussed the positive changes that have occurred in Saudi Arabia for women, including the ability to drive and access government institutions and resources. Maha believes that the role of women will continue to evolve and improve, with more opportunities for leadership roles and greater gender equality in the workforce.</p>                                     |   |               |                    |                 |
| <p>We discussed the progress of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, including the challenges and obstacles that still exist due to cultural and social barriers. Maha shared her experience of studying abroad and the misconceptions about Saudi Arabia that still exist despite the recent reforms.</p>  |   |               |                    |                 |
| <p>Maha discussed the lack of information and ignorance about successful women in Saudi Arabia from a Western perspective, despite significant progress and change achieved in the past five years. We also talked about the negative media coverage and the government's efforts to diversify the economy and reform laws to benefit all members of society, including women.</p> |   |               |                    |                 |
| <p>Maha discussed the misconceptions about Islam and women's rights, and how changes in Saudi Arabia are proving these misconceptions wrong. They also talked about the difficulty in changing people's perceptions and the importance of hearing stories from those who have experienced it firsthand.</p>  |   |               |                    |                 |

### **Summary - Interview with Amal Khunji**

Amal discussed how the role of women in Saudi Arabia has changed drastically since 2016, with the removal of restrictions on education, work, and travel, and the fight for equality in salaries and rights. These changes were initiated by King Abdullah and continued by King Salman and his Royal Highness Mohammad bin Salman.

Amal discussed the changes in Saudi Arabia, including reforms for women's rights and the increase in Saudization in the workforce.

Amal discussed the role of women in the reforms in Saudi Arabia, with a focus on the increase in female literacy and appearance in the workforce. Amal mentioned facing obstacles in the workforce due to others' mentality, but also highlighted the importance of personal motivation and government support for education and training programs.

We finally discussed a new government application and the importance of connecting the citizens with the government.

### **Summary - Interview with Magdolin Boukhary**

Magdolin shared her experience working in healthcare and banking industries as a female employee and the challenges she faced in getting hired and approved by the family and government agencies.

Magdolin discussed the role of women in Saudi Arabia, including the challenges they faced with the “religious police”. Magdolin shared her experience of being the first female to sit on the leadership table in the health insurance industry.

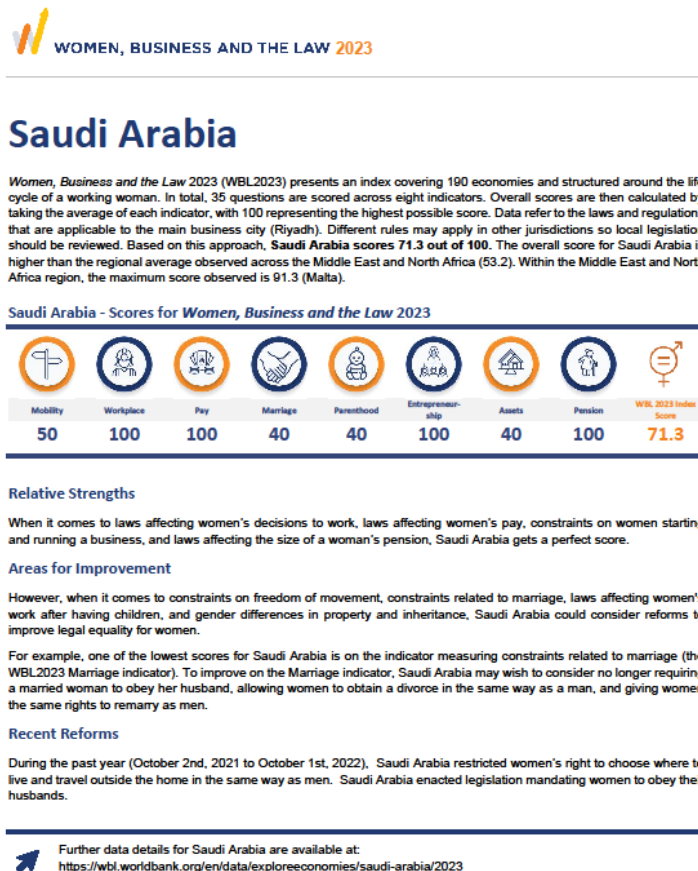
Magdolin discussed her personal and family backgrounds, as well as the progress of women in leadership roles in Saudi Arabia. We also talked about government programs aimed at developing leaders in the country.


Finally, Magdolin discussed the progress of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, highlighting the government's investment in programs and initiatives to develop and empower women in various sectors. Magdolin also expressed pride in the accomplishments of women she had helped hire in the past and emphasized the role of religion and culture in protecting Saudi women.


## Appendix 2: List of Analyzed Key Data

- 1) Saudi Ambassador Reema Bandar - talking briefly about the reforms by MBS: [حرس الأمير محمد بن سلمان على المرأة السعودية - YouTube](#)
- 2) Interview with MBS on five years after launching the vision 2030: [مقابلة ولي العهد: 2030 السعودي الأمير محمد بن سلمان لمناسبة مرور 5 سنوات على إطلاق رؤية - YouTube](#)
- 3) Report by The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - World Trade Organization [g407\\_e.pdf \(wto.org\)](#)
- 4) Saudi Labor Law - [Labor, Employment and Human Resource Development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia \(my.gov.sa\)](#)
- 5) Podcast with Reema Bandar - [The Mo Show: HRH Princess Reema Bandar Al Saud | The Mo Show 70 | Advocating for Women, Financial Self Sufficiency & Saudi-U.S Relations on Apple Podcasts](#)

## Appendix 3: Women, Business, and the Law 2023 report by the World Bank ([Click](#) to open the PDF file)



| <b>Appendix 4: Empowering Women in Education and Training</b>  |   |
|--|---|
|   |   |
| <b>Empowering Women in Education and Training <a href="#">(Copied from the gov. official website)</a></b>  |   |
| <b>The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia believed in the role of women as leaders, therefore, it has appointed an official spokesperson for the Ministry of Education for the first time in the history of education and the first woman to occupy this position in a ministry at the level of the Kingdom.</b>  |   |
| <b>Public education:</b> It is noticed that the net enrollment rates for females have increased from 2008 to 2014 at high rates compared to the rates for males during the same period.  |   |
| <b>Higher education:</b> the number of females enrolled in higher education institutions in 2015 (749,375) compared to the number of enrolled students from Males (778,394), and educational institutions continued to implement national plans aimed at preparing women's human cadres to work in universities as faculty members through academic programs inside and outside the Kingdom, to address the great shortage of women's cadre, whether from the teaching staff or from the assistance cadre.   |   |
| <b>Training programs:</b> the number of technical colleges for females has doubled in various regions of the Kingdom within ten years, as the first college was established in 2007, and in 2015 it reached (18) colleges, concerned with providing specific training for women to raise their efficiency and qualify them to enter the workplaces.  |   |
| <b>Programs for continuing education:</b> the Kingdom has paid special attention to this field, in line with its aspirations defined in successive development plans with regard to reducing the rate of illiteracy among women through legislative and non-legislative measures and activating those measures, most notably the implementation of the decision on compulsory education and the establishment of a government administration For adult education, it is concerned with preparing adult education plans and programs, and expanding the spread of general education schools in remote villages. And the opening of literacy centers in women's reformatories, girls' care homes, elderly care homes, charities and societies for Quranic education. |   |
| <b>The Ministry of Education has launched a number of flexible programs aimed at reaching the targets, such as:</b>  |   |
| 1  | Literacy Program  |
| 2  | City Without Literacy Program   |
| 3  | The "Qauafil Alnour" project, which uses mobile cars as classrooms with computers that travel in villages to eradicate illiteracy and awareness of rural women, and the Educated Neighborhood Program.                          |
| 4  | The project of summer campaigns to raise awareness and eradicate illiteracy, which provides financial rewards to the beneficiaries to encourage them, and support services, such as school supplies, transportation and others. |
| <b>The Ministry of Education also provided working women with several services, such as:</b>   |   |
| 1  | Creating jobs for women   |
| 2  | Creating a number of daycares for the children of female workers in the education sector  |
| 3  | Allowance for transportation  |
| 4  | Providing the opportunity for online education in universities to help women complete their education.  |

| <b>Appendix 5: Empowering Working Women</b>  |  |
|--|--|
|   |  |
| <b>Empowering Working Women (<a href="#">Copied from the gov. official website</a>)</b>  |  |
| The Kingdom launched the leadership training for women to develop training and orientation programs that aim to improve the skills of working women and increase the percentage of women employed in leadership positions.   |  |
| <a href="#">Qiyadyat Platform</a>  |  |
| <a href="#">Tamheer Program</a>  |  |
| <a href="#">Working women Transportation (wusool)</a>  |  |
| <a href="#">Children's Daycare Program for Working Women (Qurrah Program)</a>  |  |
| <a href="#">Freelance Financing Program</a>  |  |
| <b><u>Women Empowerment in the Business</u></b>  |  |
| Establishing <a href="#">business centers for women</a> characterized by the application of the comprehensive employee concept, within a new and developed work environment that depends on modern technologies that facilitate procedures and save time for business women. |  |
| Woman can <a href="#">start a business</a> easily after removing the requirement for guardian approval, and equality in procedures between men and women.  |  |
| Woman can <a href="#">open business</a> registrations, request registration of trademarks, reserve business names, practice freelancing, and register business agencies. All activities men can practice are permitted for women to practice, too.                           |  |

| <b>Appendix 6: Women Rights Guaranteed by Saudi Regulations</b>   |  |
|---|--|
|    |  |
| <b>Women Rights Guaranteed by Saudi Regulations (<a href="#">Copied from the gov. official website</a>)</b>   |  |
| <b>Laws and regulations issued in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia guaranteed women their rights, and took into account their status and circumstances, including:</b> |  |
| 1   | A woman has the right to cover herself or leave the house designated for inspection if she is not accused, and to be granted by the necessary facilities.  |
| 2   | If the accused woman is alone in the house designated for inspection, it is required by law to have a woman in the inspection team.  |
| 3   | Executive imprisonment is not permissible for a woman if she is pregnant or has a child under the age of two.  |
| 4   | The regulations stipulated that women must be granted their rights from inheritance and succession, especially real estate.  |
| 5   | A woman's silence about her right to inherit does not mean that her right to inheritance will be forfeited if she asks for it.   |
| 6   | The Personal Status Courts consider marriage requests for those who do not have a guardian, and for those who have guardians, but their guardians prevent her from getting married.  |
| 7   | Preventing a woman from marriage is prohibited, as well as Forcing a woman to marry someone whom she does not agree. "Alshighar", which is the agreement of two men to marry the women under their guardianship, is prohibited, too. |
| 8   | Forcing a woman to marry someone whom she does not agree to, and forbidding her from marrying someone who meets the recognized conditions, is impermissible and forbidden according to Shari'a.                                      |



|    |  |
|----|--|
| 9  | Forcing a woman to marry someone whom she does not agree to is one of the pre-Islamic customs, and whoever insists on that, he will be punished with imprisonment and a bail should be paid.   |
| 10 | The waiting period for a woman whose marriage has been annulled begins from the date of the ruling, not from the date of ratification by the Court of Cassation.                               |
| 11 | Compulsory implementation of the judgments issued related to child custody and personal status, even if this leads to the assistance of the competent force (the police).                      |
| 12 | If the defendant did not appear in marital matters, custody, alimony, visitation, and guardians who prevent the woman from marriage, the court may order to bring him compulsory.              |
| 13 | Whoever refuses to implement a ruling issued in custody, state, or visit, shall be punished by imprisonment for a period not exceeding 3 months.   |
| 14 | The judgment issued against the wife to return to the marital home shall not be enforced.  |
| 15 | Expedited implementation of judgments issued in favor of women in some cases, such as alimony, nursing or housing fees, seeing a young child, or handing him over to his incubator.            |
| 16 | In matrimonial matters, custody, alimony and prevent marriage, a woman has the right to file a lawsuit in the court where she lives, and the defendant is required to attend the court.        |
| 17 | When registering her agency, it is not necessary to be for a related man (mahram).   |
| 18 | The judiciary issues two-time orders in favor of the woman, which shall be enforceable, in cases that the court deems to urgently remove the damage from her until the conclusion of her case. |
| 19 | Giving the guardianship for a mother over her young children in the event of the death or loss of their father.  |
| 20 | Issuing two copies of the marriage contract, one for the husband and the other for the wife, in order to preserve her rights and conditions therein.   |

**قرارات عدلية عززت حقوق المرأة**

- 1 إقرار صندوق النفقة لتوفير الدعم المادي اللازم للزوم و أولادها خلال فترة التقاضي.
- 2 توظيف المرأة في 6 مجالات في "العدل".
- 3 منح المرأة رخصة التوثيق التي تمنحها ملاحيات بعض مهام كتابات العدل.
- 4 زيادة نسبة المحاميات 120% حيث ارتفع عددهن إلى 244 محامية.
- 5 إطلاق بطوم المحاماة لتقديم التأهيل المنتهي بمنح رخصة مزاوله مهنة.
- 6 مراكز خاصة لتنفيذ أحكام المحاماة بجلاء عن مراكز الشرطة لتوفير بيئة نموذجية بسودها الجو الأسري و الأمل و الصحي و الترفيهي.
- 7 توجيه ماأونى الأئكة بسماع موافقة المرأة لفظيا.
- 8 تفعيل نظام البصمة في المرافق 8 العدلية ما أسهم في تسريع إنجاز المعاملات و إلقاء المعرف.
- 9 إنشاء مكاتب معالجة في المحاكم أسهمت في حل العديد من المشاكل الأسرية و غيرها.
- 10 نبذة المرأة لها أولوية على الذكور الأثيرة للإجل لضمان العيش الكريم للمرأة و أولادها.
- 11 منح المرأة حق الولاية على المحضون مما يسهل عليها مراجعة الأحوال المدنية و الجوازات و السفارات و إدارات التعليم و غيرها من الجهات.
- 12 تدشين معارض الثقافة العدلية لتوعية المرأة بحقوقها الشرعية و القانونية.
- 13 ثبات استحقاق أسرة المتفجيب أو المفقود و الأسرة المهجورة أو المعالة .لعماش الضمان الاجتماعي.
- 14 تنفيذ قضايا الحضانة أو الزيارة في بلد الحضانة أو الزيارة المنصوص عليها في السند التقدي.
- 15 تنفيذ فوري لأحكام النفقة أو رؤية الصغير أو تسليمه لحضانته.
- 16 إنشاء مكاتب نسوية في محاكم الأحوال الشخصية لخدمة المرأة مجانا.
- 17 حسم حق المرأة في حضانة أبنائها دون دعوى قضائية.
- 18 إتاحة تزويج القتيات المعزولات خارج أوقات العمل الرسمي.

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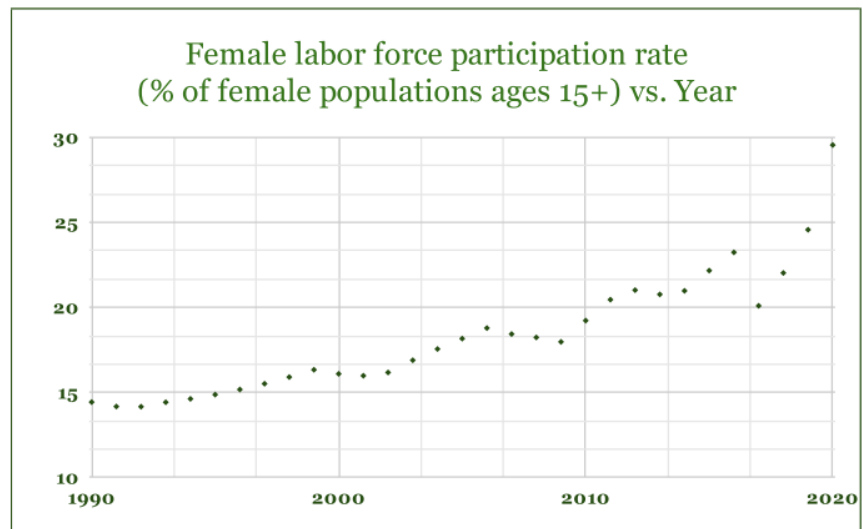
A list in Arabic “Laws that empowered women rights” taken from the Ministry of Justice of Saudi Arabia - <https://www.moj.gov.sa/ar/Ministry/WeCare/Pages/default.aspx>

## Appendix 7: Female labor force participation

Data from the World Bank – Available from:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.NE.ZS?end=2021&locations=SA&start=1990&view=chart>

| Female labor force participation rate (% of female populations ages 15+) | Year |
|--|------|
| 14.44  | 1990 |
| 14.18  | 1991 |
| 14.17  | 1992 |
| 14.43  | 1993 |
| 14.63  | 1994 |
| 14.88  | 1995 |
| 15.18  | 1996 |
| 15.52  | 1997 |
| 15.91  | 1998 |
| 16.34  | 1999 |
| 16.1   | 2000 |
| 15.99  | 2001 |
| 16.18  | 2002 |
| 16.9   | 2003 |
| 17.56  | 2004 |
| 18.17  | 2005 |
| 18.79  | 2006 |
| 18.44  | 2007 |
| 18.24  | 2008 |
| 17.98  | 2009 |
| 19.23  | 2010 |
| 20.46  | 2011 |
| 21.02  | 2012 |
| 20.77  | 2013 |
| 20.98  | 2014 |
| 22.17  | 2015 |
| 23.24  | 2016 |
| 20.1   | 2017 |
| 22.03  | 2018 |
| 24.57  | 2019 |
| 29.55  | 2020 |



## Appendix 8: Saudi Population Estimates and Distribution by Age and Gender 2021

\* Preliminary estimates are in the middle of the year 2021

| فئات العمر<br>Age group | Saudi السعودي     |                   |                   |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                         | MALE ذكور         | FEMALE اناث       | Total جملة        |
| 0 - 4                   | 1.103.151         | 1.085.223         | 2.188.374         |
| 5 - 9                   | 1.165.051         | 1.097.326         | 2.262.377         |
| 10 - 14                 | 1.043.917         | 1.032.094         | 2.076.011         |
| 15 - 19                 | 951.818           | 894.816           | 1.846.634         |
| 20 - 24                 | 1.074.376         | 998.140           | 2.072.516         |
| 25 - 29                 | 1.041.974         | 1.026.056         | 2.068.030         |
| 30 - 34                 | 936.104           | 941.473           | 1.877.577         |
| 35 - 39                 | 856.123           | 821.573           | 1.677.696         |
| 40 - 44                 | 684.143           | 673.694           | 1.357.837         |
| 45 - 49                 | 593.073           | 560.761           | 1.153.834         |
| 50 - 54                 | 474.238           | 450.961           | 925.199           |
| 55 - 59                 | 377.003           | 350.308           | 727.311           |
| 60 - 64                 | 258.833           | 245.608           | 504.441           |
| 65+                     | 468.202           | 484.609           | 952.811           |
| <b>Total جملة</b>       | <b>11.028.006</b> | <b>10.662.642</b> | <b>21.690.648</b> |

| فئات العمر<br>Age group | Non-Saudi الغير سعودي |                  |                   |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------|
|                         | MALE ذكور             | FEMALE اناث      | Total جملة        |
| 0 - 4                   | 260.073               | 240.984          | 501.057           |
| 5 - 9                   | 369.455               | 354.872          | 724.327           |
| 10 - 14                 | 321.032               | 303.024          | 624.056           |
| 15 - 19                 | 290.033               | 268.582          | 558.615           |
| 20 - 24                 | 248.511               | 230.645          | 479.156           |
| 25 - 29                 | 590.908               | 423.649          | 1.014.557         |
| 30 - 34                 | 827.188               | 451.181          | 1.278.369         |
| 35 - 39                 | 1.361.986             | 590.636          | 1.952.622         |
| 40 - 44                 | 1.366.152             | 541.376          | 1.907.528         |
| 45 - 49                 | 1.091.448             | 343.523          | 1.434.971         |
| 50 - 54                 | 735.903               | 131.909          | 867.812           |
| 55 - 59                 | 455.271               | 79.713           | 534.984           |
| 60 - 64                 | 252.924               | 52.188           | 305.112           |
| 65+                     | 164.766               | 72.241           | 237.007           |
| <b>Total جملة</b>       | <b>8.335.650</b>      | <b>4.084.523</b> | <b>12.420.173</b> |

Data is taken from <https://www.stats.gov.sa/>

Total below



| <b>Total Population</b> جملة السكان   |                   |                    |                   |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| <b>فئات العمر</b><br><b>Age group</b> | <b>MALE</b> ذكور  | <b>FEMALE</b> اناث | <b>Total</b> جملة |
| 0 - 4                                 | 1.363.224         | 1.326.207          | 2.689.431         |
| 5 - 9                                 | 1.534.506         | 1.452.198          | 2.986.704         |
| 10 - 14                               | 1.364.949         | 1.335.118          | 2.700.067         |
| 15 - 19                               | 1.241.851         | 1.163.398          | 2.405.249         |
| 20 - 24                               | 1.322.887         | 1.228.785          | 2.551.672         |
| 25 - 29                               | 1.632.882         | 1.449.705          | 3.082.587         |
| 30 - 34                               | 1.763.292         | 1.392.654          | 3.155.946         |
| 35 - 39                               | 2.218.109         | 1.412.209          | 3.630.318         |
| 40 - 44                               | 2.050.295         | 1.215.070          | 3.265.365         |
| 45 - 49                               | 1.684.521         | 904.284            | 2.588.805         |
| 50 - 54                               | 1.210.141         | 582.870            | 1.793.011         |
| 55 - 59                               | 832.274           | 430.021            | 1.262.295         |
| 60 - 64                               | 511.757           | 297.796            | 809.553           |
| 65+                                   | 632.968           | 556.850            | 1.189.818         |
| <b>جملة Total</b>                     | <b>19.363.656</b> | <b>14.747.165</b>  | <b>34.110.821</b> |