

Emerging Pattern of Women Empowerment in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia is complicated for historical, cultural, and religious reasons. For many years asserts, Saudi Arabia has been considered one of the most 'restrictive countries in the world. Recent years, however, have witnessed an increasing interest on the part of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdul Aziz, in women's issues due to his belief in the leading and historic role of Saudi women in the progress and advancement of the Kingdom. Since he came to the throne in 2015, King Salman has stressed the importance of addressing the needs and rights of Saudi women, which have long been disregarded. In this regard, many commentators have noted that Saudi women have received great attention over the last five years and that there is unprecedented interest in women's rights in Saudi Arabia today.

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1. Introduction

According to the Global Gender Gap Index Report of 2020, it is apparent that no Arab country is among the top 10 in terms of gender equality. On the contrary, we can see that there is a high level of gender inequality in the Arab world in general and in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in particular. The index is concerned with measuring gender inequality in terms of four main areas: (1) economic participation and opportunity, (2) educational attainment, (3) health and survival, and (4) political empowerment. It is based on calculating the gender-based gaps between men and women in all the countries of the world, whether developed or developing. By region, the Arab world comes at the bottom of the ranking. This indicates that Arab countries have made the least progress on gender equality. According to the figures in the report, which benchmarks 153 countries, Saudi Arabia is ranked 146, putting it among the lowest 10 countries along with Oman, Lebanon, Chad, Iran, Congo, Syria, Pakistan, Iraq, and Yemen in terms of gender performance¹. As an example, women make up only 16% of the labor force in Saudi Arabia, which is considered the lowest in the world. The deteriorating picture reflected in the report, which definitely has negative impacts on development plans in Arab countries, highlights the importance of the role of policymakers in the Arab world in supporting women's issues, considering their challenges, and devising strategies to ensure women's empowerment, autonomy, and equal political representation.

The purpose of this study is thus to propose an integrated model for the empowerment of women in Saudi Arabia that can be adopted by decision-makers and policymakers in the Kingdom. The model is based on the analysis of the current position of women in Saudi society, gender equality, and women's empowerment. The ultimate goal is to provide a coherent system that defines the policies and procedures that should be adopted to achieve sustainable development goals and objectives. The rationale for focusing on Saudi Arabia is that the recent years have witnessed the development of new changes in the Saudi policies towards women's rights and their

¹https://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2020/?doing_wp_cron=1607845267.3387029170989990234375

involvement in society. These changes, Hamdan (2005) argues, can clearly be seen in different sectors, including education, health, law, and even politics². It is thus important to evaluate the Saudi experience or pattern of women's empowerment.

2. Statement of problem

Women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia is complicated for historical, cultural, and religious reasons. For many years, Alsharif (2019) asserts, Saudi Arabia has been considered one of the most 'restrictive countries in the world'³. Recent years, however, have witnessed an increasing interest on the part of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdul Aziz, in women's issues due to his belief in the leading and historic role of Saudi women in the progress and advancement of the Kingdom. Since he came to the throne in 2015, King Salman has stressed the importance of addressing the needs and rights of Saudi women, which have long been disregarded. In this regard, many commentators have noted that Saudi women have received great attention over the last five years and that there is unprecedented interest in women's rights in Saudi Arabia today.

In his review of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, Khalid (2018) stresses that the recent years have witnessed a flourishing in promoting and enhancing women's opportunities for success at all levels. This is clearly reflected in the government's decision to allow women to lead, in order to enhance their value and ensure their empowerment. Such a decision definitely has positive implications for the economy and social life in the Kingdom⁴. Likewise, Alharbi (2018) indicates that recent years have witnessed drastic changes in relation to women's rights in Saudi Arabia. He adds that these major shifts in the Saudi perspective on women's rights have contributed greatly to addressing the obstacles faced by women in several sectors, such as transport and work. Women have been more involved in society, and their participation in productive and leadership programs has increased in an unprecedented manner⁵.

Believing in the pivotal role of women, and as a cornerstone in the process of social and economic development, 'the Saudi Vision 2030'⁶ has given Saudi women a great opportunity to participate and prove their value, keeping pace with the aspirations of Saudi society and thus contributing to the process of economic and social development (Naseem & Dhruva, 2017)⁷. The empowerment of Saudi women is one of the pillars of the Saudi Vision 2030. One of its strategic objectives is to increase the participation of Saudi women in the labor market to 30%. The emerging pattern of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia aims to include all women in rural, tribal, and urban areas (Alshuwaikhat & Mohammed, 2017)⁸. It also extends to the educational, economic, occupational, legal, and political fields (Moshashai, Leber, & Savage, 2018)⁹.

These changes in Saudi policies and practices, Al-Rasheed (2013) explain, frame what can be considered an emerging pattern towards women's empowerment in a country that has been well known for male dominance and the marginalization of women for decades. Saudi women have long been subjected to different forms of submissiveness and restrictions in terms of clothing and movement on the basis of maintaining and protecting the morals of Saudi women and society¹⁰.

In spite of the recent changes and legislative reforms in Saudi Arabia reflecting the government's commitment to reducing the gender gap and protecting women's rights, women's autonomy and full participation in political life have not yet been achieved. It is true that the Kingdom now believes in women as an important element of society's strength, and that their social, economic, and political empowerment, and the provision of a secure environment and services that facilitate their national duties while ensuring that they enjoy their full rights in all fields, will contribute to the development of the Kingdom and achieve the vision of sustainable development. In this regard, the Kingdom has issued a number of resolutions and legislative measures that limit women's vulnerability to exploitation, violence, and discrimination, as well as reducing the numbers of early marriages. The Kingdom has expressed its

² Hamdan, Amani. 2005. "Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and achievements." *International Education Journal* 6 (1):42-64.

³ Alsharif, Fahad Alghalib. 2019. "Empowering women: Educational Programs and Reforms in a Diversified Saudi Economy." *Dirasat: King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies* 49 (September).

⁴ Khalid, Ammarah. 2018. "Are The Male Guardianship Laws In Saudi Arabia, A Challenge To Human Rights Of Women As Advocated In Islam?" *Journal of Human Rights Law and Practice* 1 (1):1-11.

⁵ Alharbi, Hani Abdulghani. 2018. "Examining obstacles to Saudi women's right to work in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." PhD, Brunel University London.

⁶ <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en>

⁷ Naseem, Sana, and Kamini Dhruva. 2017. "Issues and Challenges of Saudi Female Labor Force and the Role of Vision 2030." *International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues* 7 (4):23-27.

⁸ Alshuwaikhat, Habib, and Ishak Mohammed. 2017. "Sustainability matters in national development visions—Evidence from Saudi Arabia's Vision for 2030." *Sustainability* 9 (3):408.

⁹ Moshashai, Daniel, Andrew M Leber, and James D Savage. 2018. "Saudi Arabia plans for its economic future: Vision 2030, the National Transformation Plan and Saudi fiscal reform." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*:1-21.

¹⁰ Al-Rasheed, Madawi. 2013. *A most masculine state: Gender, politics and religion in Saudi Arabia*: Cambridge University Press.

commitment to working to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women, and upgrading their cultural, economic, and health levels in accordance with the principles and values of 'Islamic Sharia' (Kucinskas, 2010)¹¹.

The Kingdom is also seeking to increase the participation of Saudi women in the labor market, in addition to occupying political, economic, social, and educational positions as is currently the case. In addition, the Kingdom aims to enable active participation in the Shura Council and representation of the Kingdom in diplomatic work, breaking the monopoly of men over leadership positions in the sector. Saudi women have recently entered the security field for the first time after the activation of a women's section in the unified security operations center in the Kingdom.

Although these changes and reforms are unprecedented in the history of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there are some challenges and obstacles that stand against this emerging pattern of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, women still make up the majority of the nation's low-paid workers and are concentrated in non-leadership positions. This can be attributed to different reasons, including the lack of public awareness of the importance of women's participation, gender bias, and misconceptions about Islam. Failure to implement policies aimed at women's empowerment will have drastic consequences for the Kingdom and may even lead to division in the nation (Zoepf, 2010)¹². The aim of this study is thus to evaluate the effectiveness of the emerging pattern of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, and to identify its strengths and weaknesses with the purpose of proposing realistic and reliable strategies for women's empowerment that leads to the autonomy of women at all levels.

While the problem of achieving development in economic terms represents one of the important problems facing the nation state in developing world countries, achieving development in the social dimension remains an urgent and important requirement, especially concerning issues such as women's rights, despite the multiple political roles pledged to a woman in today's world; she is a head of state, a minister, a judge, a party leader, and a member of parliament. However, the focus is still far from her, despite the spread of democracy in a large number of countries in the developing world in what is known as the third wave. It has been noticed that women are still suffering in large numbers from these countries, and many of demands have not been met.

In spite of the passage of more than half a century since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which emphasized gender equality between men and women, inequality is still the dominant feature in the developing world. In the last and most important international forum in this century, the Fourth Women's Conference in Beijing¹³, a number of issues related to the status of women, such as work and education, were discussed in response to this situation, and from this standpoint the Beijing Conference represented a considerable advance in supporting women's rights as human rights. Indeed, the final document was an important step on the road to eliminating the imbalance between men and women.

The endeavor to support and enhance the participation of women in decision-making is an important aspect of the global concern with women's issues and work to ensure their active participation in community issues. This derives from the close interconnection between the development of women and success in achieving human development, given that human beings (men or women) are the main elements and pillars of development efforts. In addition, paying attention to the role of women in development is the best way of making good development decisions, as they comprise half of human resources.

Over recent years, Saudi Arabia has succeeded in achieving some progress in the field of equality for women and girls, especially with regard to bridging the gender gap in the fields of education and health care, but there are still many obstacles and challenges that prevent them from achieving critical successes in these contexts. In light of the low levels of political and economic participation of Saudi women, and in view of the fact that women's issues are necessarily intertwined with all development issues, achieving the goals of sustainable development will be subject to the inclusion of women's issues in the development plans of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The relationship between women and development, however, remains unclear in developing societies in general—and in Saudi society in particular—in terms of the extent and implications. It is thus likely that this is one of the issues that women's issues have been given priority in the strategies and plans of each of these countries. In Saudi Arabia, the empowerment of women and integrating them in development policies have been the focus of national development plans over the last 10 years. Nevertheless, the level of empowerment of women is still weak, confined to narrow circles outside of which women are so far unable to progress.

This can be attributed to various obstacles, including cultural, social, and religious challenges, as well as organizational challenges. These challenges have negative implications in terms of the limited powers given to women, their weak participation in the decision-making process, and the shaping of future directions of the organizations to which they belong (Rajkhan, 2014)¹⁴. In other

¹¹ Kucinskas, Jaime. 2010. "A research note on Islam and gender egalitarianism: An examination of Egyptian and Saudi Arabian youth attitudes." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49 (4):761-770.

¹² Zoepf, Katherine. 2010. "Talk of Women's Rights Divides Saudi Arabia." *The New York Times*.

¹³ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women>

¹⁴ Rajkhan, Safaa. 2014. "Women in Saudi Arabia: Status, rights, and limitations."

words, the cultural challenges, represented by a set of beliefs and practices associated with community culture—such as the views of colleagues, presidents, and subordinates—negatively affect the effectiveness of leaders in exercising their leadership role (Al-Rasheed, 2013)¹⁵. The organization itself can pose a challenge to the involvement of women in Saudi society. The nature of the organization, its policies, organizational environment and management practices, organizational relationships, clarity of roles, powers, responsibilities, and degree of participation in decision-making, as well as other factors, are frequently obstacles to support for the rights of women in holding or being appointed to senior management leadership positions (Baki, 2004)¹⁶.

It should be acknowledged that all countries, including Saudi Arabia, should be committed to all international conventions and resolutions calling for an end to all forms of discrimination against women. These include the resolutions adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly concerning women, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Alexander, Bolzendahl, & Jalalzai, 2017)¹⁷. Countries that are not committed to these resolutions usually suffer economic and political sanctions, ranging from comprehensive economic and trade sanctions to more targeted measures, such as travel bans, and financial or commodity restrictions.

In the face of this problem, it is important to investigate the effectiveness of the Saudi model for the empowerment of women as an emerging pattern in order to identify the problems and challenges faced in its implementation with the aim of proposing reliable and workable solutions and strategies for eliminating all forms of gender bias and inequality in Saudi society. This study asks the following research questions:

- What are the challenges for women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia?
- Are the principles of Islam considered impediments for women's autonomy in Saudi Arabia?
- What is missing from the current measures, practices, and strategies aimed at women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia?
- How can the emerging pattern of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia be supported to achieve women's autonomy?

To answer the research questions, an open-ended interview and focus-group discussions are conducted with selected women members in the Shoura Council (which represents the Saudi Congress) and top women leaderships in the Saudi universities. They were asked to reflect on the Saudi experience with women's empowerment.

3. Analysis & Discussions

Based on the qualitative data derived from the interviews and focus-group discussions, it was obvious that there are different challenges that represent serious obstacles against the Saudi women's involvement in social and political life.

The participants stressed that the Saudi society is described as a masculine society where it is difficult for men to accept that a woman makes her own decision without the interference of the man in her life, because most of the time she is obliged to stay at home to take care of the children, even if she supports her family. Within this masculine society, it is likely that there are gender-related obstacles that are reflected in the men's underestimation of women's ability to work and the ability to negotiate and make decisions. There is an apparent lack of appreciation of the efforts of the working woman.

In this regard, it can be claimed that values and customs related to the role of women in society represent a major obstacle to improving the status of women. Examples of these values are the control of men over women, the absolute subordination of women and their absolute obedience to men, the preference for males over females and early marriage, the belief that the place of women is the home, and the failure to establish customs and traditions. The society still looks with suspicion at the ability of women to participate effectively in general social matters, and this may be due to the wrong understanding of Islamic law, that gives a higher position to men in all aspects of life.

The participants indicated that the Saudi government has made positive legislative reforms that support the economic empowerment of women. These have undoubtedly positive implications to investments and national economic developments.

, and major reforms have been made to improve the system of doing business and advancement. Women's rights in general legislation, as the government enacted several laws and amendments to existing laws in order to improve the system of doing business and attract investment, and the national measures have yielded economic results over the past five years by reducing the rates of female unemployment in Egypt from 24% in 2014 to 19.6% in 2019. In addition to the national initiatives for promoting financial

¹⁵ Al-Rasheed, 2013

¹⁶ Baki, Roula. 2004. "Gender-segregated education in Saudi Arabia: Its impact on social norms and the Saudi labor market." *education policy analysis archives* 12 (28):n28.

¹⁷ Alexander, A.C., C. Bolzendahl, and F. Jalalzai. 2017. *Measuring Women's Political Empowerment across the Globe: Strategies, Challenges and Future Research*: Springer International Publishing.

inclusion and entrepreneurship through the Small, Medium and Micro Enterprise Development Authority, and the National Council for Women initiatives and projects to empower women economically.

Different initiatives should developed to support the economic, political, and social empowerment of women through

- The inclusion of women in all the programs and projects of the plan through clarity on the quality and nature of the problems facing women and their inclusion in the goals and implementation policies.
- Supporting and developing the role of women in economic, social and political activity as producers, gainers and decision makers, which requires focusing on areas related to women's capacities for education, training and health.
- Increasing opportunities for women to participate in economic activity to achieve sustainable economic development.
- Developing mechanisms for follow-up and implementation of the women component of the plan, evaluating performance and its suitability to face discrimination and inequality.

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