

Pioneering Change: Women's Economic Empowerment under Saudi Vision 2030

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Abstract: Women's empowerment efforts always encounter obstacles and challenges. This paper explores the economic empowerment of women in Saudi Arabia within the context of Saudi Vision 2030, a plan aimed at enhancing women's roles in various sectors. Although existing research has addressed women's empowerment under this vision, a comprehensive evaluation of the government's initiatives is still lacking. The study evaluates policies designed to economically empower women, guided by a theoretical framework based on key empowerment elements: agency, access to resources, opportunity structure, and achievement, inspired by the perspectives of Evelyn Derera and Amartya Sen. A qualitative, descriptive approach is used, incorporating secondary data analysis from literature reviews and government reports on Vision 2030. Findings reveal that reforms have increased women's participation in economic and educational sectors, including partial removal of the male guardianship system. However, challenges such as cultural norms, nepotism, and gender discrimination continue to limit women's access to higher leadership roles. Despite significant progress, more efforts are required to address these persistent barriers and fully empower women in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: employment; gender equality; leadership; Saudi Vision; women empowerment

Abstrak: Pemberdayaan perempuan senantiasa menemui hambatan dan tantangan. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi pemberdayaan ekonomi perempuan di Arab Saudi dalam konteks Visi Saudi 2030, sebuah rencana yang bertujuan untuk meningkatkan peran perempuan di berbagai sektor. Meskipun penelitian yang ada telah membahas pemberdayaan perempuan di bawah visi ini, evaluasi komprehensif terhadap inisiatif pemerintah masih kurang. Penelitian ini mengevaluasi kebijakan yang dirancang untuk memberdayakan perempuan secara ekonomi, dipandu oleh kerangka teori yang didasarkan pada elemen-elemen pemberdayaan utama: agensi, akses terhadap sumber daya, struktur peluang, dan pencapaian, yang terinspirasi oleh perspektif Evelyn Derera dan Amartya Sen. Pendekatan kualitatif dan deskriptif digunakan dengan menggabungkan analisis data sekunder dari tinjauan literatur dan laporan pemerintah tentang Visi 2030. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa reformasi telah meningkatkan partisipasi perempuan di sektor ekonomi dan pendidikan, termasuk penghapusan sebagian sistem perwalian laki-laki. Namun, tantangan seperti norma budaya, nepotisme, dan dis-

kriminasi gender masih terus membatasi akses perempuan untuk menduduki posisi kepemimpinan yang lebih tinggi. Meskipun ada kemajuan yang signifikan, masih diperlukan lebih banyak upaya untuk mengatasi hambatan-hambatan yang masih ada dan memberdayakan perempuan sepenuhnya di Arab Saudi.

Kata Kunci: dunia kerja; kesetaraan gender; kepemimpinan; Visi Saudi; pemberdayaan perempuan

A. Introduction

Saudi Arabia continues to struggle with a significant issue of gender inequality, even though there have been significant legal reforms and increased opportunities for women in the areas of education, employment, and political participation. During the period beginning in 2005, Saudi Arabia has been in the process of modernizing its regulations and policies to give women expanded chances for active involvement in the community on economic, social, and civil levels.¹ Despite this, there are several challenges that must be overcome in order to achieve gender equality in Saudi Arabia. These challenges include personal, cultural, and structural limitations.² In light of this, the issue of persistent efforts and specific tactics to overcome long-standing impediments and advance the cause of an inclusive society is questioned once again.

The government of Saudi Arabia has recognized the relevance of women's engagement in the process of contributing to the realization of national development.³ According to the findings of a number of studies, there is a significant correlation between the economic well-being of a nation and the increase in women's contribution to the economy.⁴ Taking this into consideration, the significance of empowering women economically in the context of Saudi Vision 2030 is highlighted. Additionally, the Saudi vision calls for the promotion of gender equality; hence, it will become a reality if women and men in society are

¹ Dania Arayssi, "The Socio-economic Development of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Gender Inequality Index and Policy Recommendation," *SSRN Electronic Journal* 3726774 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3726774>.

² Hanan al-Ahmadi, "Challenges Facing Women Leaders in Saudi Arabia," *Human Resource Development International* 14, no. 2 (2011): 149-66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2011.558311>.

³ Razan Baker, "Saudi Businesswomen Seek Greater Participation," *Arab News*, March 20, 2007, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/296138>.

⁴ Dilek Kutluay Şahin, "The Impact of Women's Employment on Economic Growth: An Empirical Analysis," *Uluslararası Ekonomi ve Yenilik Dergisi* 8, no. 2 (2022): 277-88, <https://doi.org/10.20979/ueyd.1135131>.

provided with equal chances that would allow them to contribute to the betterment of the nation. According to the Saudi Vision, Saudi women are the country's most valuable asset, and more than fifty percent of men and women who graduate from universities are female. The vision aims to raise the percentage of working women from 22 percent to 30 percent.⁵

To achieve the goals defined in Saudi Vision 2030, the government has developed several projects that aim to improve the position and capacities of women. The government has taken several steps to increase the number of women participating in the labor market and positions of authority. In addition, it is of the utmost importance to furnish women with authority and influence in various domains, such as information and communications technology (ICT), the military, business, education, sports, and health, while ensuring that they receive sufficient social aid.⁶ Reforms have been enacted in Saudi Arabia to enhance the participation of women in economic development. These reforms include the establishment of equal age criteria for men and women, the prohibition of gender discrimination in regard to salary, employment, occupational fields, and working hours, and the authorization of women to establish and manage commercial enterprises without prior authorization.⁷ The implementation of government measures has been a significant contributor to the rise in the participation of women in the workforce, which has climbed from 21% in 2017 to a predicted 35% by 2022. In addition, it is anticipated that by the year 2023, the percentage of women majoring in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) will surpass the average for all universities throughout the world, reaching 39%.⁸ Saudi Arabia has enacted reforms to enhance women's involvement in economic development by establishing equal age criteria for men and women, prohibiting

⁵ Saudi Arabia Government, "Vision 2030, Saudi Government," 2016, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en>.

⁶ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Finance, "Women Empowerment Initiative within the Saudi Annual Budget" (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Finance, 2023), [https://www.mof.gov.sa/en/budget/2023/Documents/Women Empowerment.pdf](https://www.mof.gov.sa/en/budget/2023/Documents/Women%20Empowerment.pdf).

⁷ Government of Saudi Arabia, "Women Empowerment," GOV.SA, n.d., https://www.my.gov.sa/wps/portal/snp/careaboutyou/womenempowering!/ut/p/z0/04_Sj9CPy kssy0xPLMnMz0vMAfjo8zjQx93d0NDYz8LYIMLA0CQ4xCTZwN_Ay8Tlz0g1Pz9AuyHRUBwQYLN Q!!/.

⁸ Lynn Monzer and Nibras Basitkey, "Empowering the Future: The Rising Women Workforce in Saudi Arabia's Private Sector," Atlantic Council, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/event-recap/empowering-the-future-the-rising-women-workforce-in-saudi-arabias-private-sector/>.

gender discrimination regarding salary, employment, occupational fields, and working hours, and permitting women to establish and manage commercial enterprises without prior authorization.⁹

Although the Saudi government has achieved some progress regarding women's liberation, several challenges still need to be considered. The study of al-Asfour et al. highlights the limited employment and career growth opportunities that are available to Saudi women, the overwhelming workload that is a result of the imbalance between family and work responsibilities, the difficulties that are associated with pregnancy and mobility, and the gender discrimination that occurs in the workplace.¹⁰ Several other difficulties are stressed in the events and festivals industry. These concerns include barriers to career advancement caused by social, cultural, and institutional factors, inadequate training and education, and regulatory issues.¹¹ The system of patriarchy, which was established on the misunderstanding of Islamic ideas and was then adopted into legislation, hurts the day-to-day lives of Saudi Arabian women and makes it more difficult for them to develop in their careers.¹² When it comes to the nursing profession, socio-cultural difficulties, such as mixed-gender workplaces, delayed marriages for female nurses, and negative consequences on social life, hurt public perception and make it more difficult to recruit Saudi nationals.¹³ Furthermore, the research on Saudi women's economic empowerment in the context of Saudi Vision 2030 revealed that a significant issue persists in the insufficient understanding of the significance of women's contribution to the economy.¹⁴

⁹ GOV.SA, "Women Empowerment."

¹⁰ Ahmed al-Asfour et al, "Saudi Women's Work Challenges and Barriers to Career Advancement," *Career Development International* 22, no. 2 (2017): 184–99, <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-11-2016-0200>.

¹¹ Rafiah Almatham and Judith Mair, "Socio-cultural Barriers to Saudi Womens Participation in the Tourism Industry: A Systematic Literature Review," in *A Research Agenda for Gender and Tourism* (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 91–112, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789902532.00011>.

¹² S. Sian et al, "Negotiating Constraints in International Audit Firms in Saudi Arabia: Exploring the Interaction of Gender, Politics and Religion," *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 84 (2020): 101103, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aos.2020.101103>.

¹³ Nourah Alsadaan et al, "Challenges Facing the Nursing Profession in Saudi Arabia: An Integrative Review," *Nursing Reports* 11, no. 2 (2021): 395–403, <https://doi.org/10.3390/nursrep11020038>.

¹⁴ Noha A Alessa, Hebah S Shalhoob, and Haya A Almugarry, "Saudi Women's Economic Empowerment in Light of Saudi Vision 2030: Perception, Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2022): 316, <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2022-0025>.

An investigation of women's empowerment following Saudi Vision 2030 has been carried out from the beginning. Through an investigation that Aylan Topa carried out, it was discovered that the economic empowerment programs that are part of Saudi Vision primarily focus on enhancing Saudi Arabia's economic competitiveness and promoting economic integration.¹⁵ An additional body of research is being conducted to explore the opinions and attitudes of the Saudi Arabian populace about the empowerment programs that the Saudi government has undertaken.¹⁶

According to several studies, the general population has shown a positive reaction to the efforts the government has implemented in accordance with the Saudi Vision.¹⁷ Some studies examine the structural and cultural factors that influence the phenomenon of disempowerment in Saudi women.¹⁸ Other studies examine the negative impact of Saudi Vision 2030 on Saudi women's mental health, which increases their potential for stress.¹⁹

However, there is a lack of research that particularly investigates the challenges and obstacles women face when attempting to achieve the goals described in Saudi Vision 2030. Several studies have shed light on the Saudi Vision's effects on women's lives, particularly about the greater engagement of women in the labor market.²⁰ To the best of our knowledge, there is not yet a comprehensive evaluation of the Saudi Arabian government's activities as part of Saudi Vision 2030 to encourage women's economic empowerment.

¹⁵ Aylan Topal, "Economic Reforms and Women's Empowerment in Saudi Arabia," *Women's Studies International Forum* 76 (2019): 102253, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2019.102253>.

¹⁶ Mai Mohammed H Alharbi, "Kingdom Vision 2030 and the Women's Empowerment in Saudi Arabia: An Empirical Investigation," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 6 (2022): 62–73, <https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.21.2022.226>.

¹⁷ Raja al-Qahtani, "Empowering Saudi Women: Resources, Agencies and Achievements in the Light of Vision 2030," *Journal of Umm al-Qura University for Social Sciences* 14, no. 3 (2022): 88–99, <https://doi.org/10.54940/ss42598499>.

¹⁸ Sajjadllah Alhawsawi and Sabria Salama Jawhar, "Education, Employment, and Empowerment among Saudi Women," *Gender and Education* 35, no. 4 (2023): 401–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2023.2189917>.

¹⁹ Noura Abdulla Almadani and Mai B. Alwesmi, "The Relationship between Happiness and Mental Health among Saudi Women," *Brain Sciences* 13, no. 4 (2023): 526, <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci13040526>.

²⁰ al-Qahtani, "Empowering Saudi Women: Resources, Agencies and Achievements in the Light of Vision 2030."

B. Method

The researcher employed qualitative research methodology to address the research topic, focusing on descriptive analysis rather than numerical data.²¹ This approach adopts a comprehensive viewpoint in which researchers aim to comprehend phenomena in their authentic environments, prioritizing interpreting meanings and experiences rather than relying on statistical analysis.²² Utilizing a descriptive analysis approach, the researcher scrutinized qualitative data to uncover patterns, themes, and insights. This approach improves understanding of complex phenomena and human processes in several academic disciplines.²³ Implementing this descriptive-analytic approach seeks to achieve the research goal of revealing the fundamental importance of the Saudi government's efforts to empower women as a component of the Saudi Vision 2030 program.

As this research is library research, it employs a journal article about a similar topic, Saudi Vision 2030, and some relevant Saudi government documents. A literature review is conducted initially to find the main gap in this topic. Then, it was found that, from a political point of view, there is still a lack of assessment of how the government in typical countries like Saudi Arabia could employ more women in various sectors based on its recent policy. Then, a second assessment was conducted to answer this research question. Content analysis, which systematically examines the themes of documents that have been collected, is used to do data analysis. It allows researchers to categorize what challenges have been addressed in the policy and what is undone. Then, it use objective interpretation to conclude. Triangulation is done by cross-referencing its hypothesis with other published articles and government reports to emphasize findings. Then, a conclusion is drawn.

Women's economic empowerment includes enabling women to gain greater access to, control over, and benefit from resources by encouraging changes in discriminatory behaviors in both the private and public realms. It also entails enhancing women's ability to actively engage in and contribute to economic

²¹ Patrick X. W. Zou and Xiaoxiao Xu, *Research Methodology and Strategy: Theory and Practice* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2023), 5.

²² Suada A. Dzugovic and Vedat Bajrami, "Qualitative Research Methods in Science and Higher Education," *Journal Human Research in Rehabilitation* 13, no. 1 (2023): 156–66, <https://doi.org/10.21554/hrr:042318>.

²³ Zou and Xu, *Research Methodology and Strategy: Theory and Practice*, 5.

development, allowing them to reap the benefits. In economic empowerment for women, society recognizes the value of their contributions, respects their dignity, and pushes for equitable growth advantages through negotiation.²⁴

This study employs Evelyn Derera's framework of women's economic empowerment, comprising four elements: agency, resources, opportunity structures, and achievement.²⁵ Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act and achieve objectives that hold significance or value.²⁶ Agency refers to an individual's capacity to establish goals and actively pursue their attainment.²⁷ Agency denotes the capacity of women to autonomously exercise their abilities, free from the constraints of societal gender bias.

A resource is a means that women can employ to achieve economic success or exert authority and control.²⁸ Resources encompass not just tangible assets but also intangible ones such as human and social capital. Additionally, resources extend to encompass future entitlements and anticipated outcomes.²⁹ Resources are financial and other resources that enable women's economic advancement, such as education, skills, training, financial models (such as loans and savings), networks, and physical capital in the form of land and machinery.³⁰ Resources depend not only on external factors but also on individuals' internal capabilities for empowerment. Therefore, allocating resources to persons who lack internal

²⁴ Evelyn Derera, *Women's Economic Empowerment and Entrepreneurship in Agriculture: A Case of Mashonaland West Province in Zimbabwe* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College, 2015), 58–60.

²⁵ Derera, 60.

²⁶ Amartya Sen, "Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984," *The Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 4 (1985): 169–221, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026184>.

²⁷ Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 435–64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>.

²⁸ Margo Thomas et al., "Women's Economic Empowerment: Strengthening Public and Private Sector Impact through Accountability and Measurement (SDG 5): 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," *G20 - 2019 Japan - T-20 Japan*, 2019, https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/jica-ri/publication/booksandreports/l75nbg000017waxu-att/TF1_web_0603_0014.pdf.

²⁹ Shelly Grabe, "An Empirical Examination of Women's Empowerment and Transformative Change in the Context of International Development," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 49, no. 1–2 (2012): 233–45, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-011-9453-y>.

³⁰ Erin Markel, *Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment in Private Sector Development: Guidelines for Practitioners* (London: The Donor Committee for Enterprise Development (DCED), 2014), [/https://www.enterprise-development.org/wp-content/uploads/Measuring_Womens_Economic_Empowerment_Guidance.pdf](https://www.enterprise-development.org/wp-content/uploads/Measuring_Womens_Economic_Empowerment_Guidance.pdf).

competence will hinder the empowerment process.³¹ According to certain researchers, the empowerment process not only grants individuals access to resources but also enables those who efficiently utilize these resources to acquire additional authority.³² In this context, two distinct forms of power are recognized: the power to instigate profound transformation and the power associated with an individual's capacity to manage resources.³³

In addition to agency, resources, and achievement, the opportunity structure influences empowerment by shaping the range of opportunities accessible to individuals. Opportunity structure encompasses the broader framework of formal and informal rules and norms, both institutional and social, that shape women's pursuit of their interests. It also includes the organizations and social systems that regulate activities and facilitate relationships between individuals and the social and economic environment.³⁴ Norms, conventions, and formal and informal standards play a crucial role in determining individuals' access to resources and ability to use them to achieve desired objectives.³⁵ Opportunity structures refer to the social and political systems of which women are a part. These structures include gender roles, taboos, prohibitions, and societal expectations regarding women's involvement in public life, as well as the types of jobs considered appropriate for women and how money is managed for women.³⁶

The fourth component is achievement, which is the outcome of agency.³⁷ Women's conviction in their potential to control circumstances that affect their

³¹ Grabe, "An Empirical Examination of Women's Empowerment and Transformative Change in the Context of International Development."

³² Norman Uphoff, "Analytical Issues in Measuring Empowerment at the Community and Local Levels," in *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspective*, ed. Deepa Narayan (Washington, DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2005), 219–46; Grabe, "An Empirical Examination of Women's Empowerment and Transformative Change in the Context of International Development."

³³ Uphoff, "Analytical Issues in Measuring Empowerment at the Community and Local Levels."

³⁴ Markel, *Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment in Private Sector Development: Guidelines for Practitioners*.

³⁵ Ruth Alsop and Nina Heinsohn, *Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators*, *The World Bank, Policy Research Working Papers* (The World Bank, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-3510>.

³⁶ Markel, *Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment in Private Sector Development: Guidelines for Practitioners*.

³⁷ Grabe, "An Empirical Examination of Women's Empowerment and Transformative Change in the Context of International Development"; Kabear, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment."

lives is linked to human success.³⁸ This achievement component is crucial because, throughout the empowerment process, women may be empowered yet choose not to participate in domains considered empowerment results, such as politics.³⁹ But when women feel like they have a mandate and can make an important difference, it changes the game by creating behaviors much more likely to lead to empowerment.⁴⁰ Some possibilities are campaigning, petition-signing, and running for office to bring about social change. In the end, therefore, what is required for empowering women to make choices is an opportunity provided and a sense of empowerment that will allow them to actively work towards their goals and contribute something meaningful to society.

C. Discussion

Saudi Women on Saudi Vision 2030

The Saudi Vision 2030 National Transformation Program has three pillars: A Dynamic Society, a Flourishing Economy, and an Aspiring Nation. A Vibrant Society aims to augment the human resources of Saudi Arabia, emphasizing that the actual value of a nation lies not only in its natural resources but also in its people's capital. Saudi Arabia, as the focal point of the Arab and Islamic world, is committed to enhancing its Islamic principles that influence its national identity.⁴¹ The government's objective is to enhance productivity and foster the growth of human resources, with a particular focus on the importance of human capital alongside natural resources.

The primary objective of the Thriving Economy program is to promote long-term and sustainable economic growth by reducing dependence on oil and gas and diversifying the economy to encourage greater investments in alternative sectors. A nation with ambitious objectives acknowledges the significance of effective government defined by robust transparency and accountability.⁴² It entails stringent

³⁸ Grabe, "An Empirical Examination of Women's Empowerment and Transformative Change in the Context of International Development."

³⁹ Grabe.

⁴⁰ Jacquelynne S Eccles, "Gender Roles and Women's Achievement-Related Decisions," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1987): 135-72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1987.tb00781.x>.

⁴¹ Bassam Abdullah Albassam, "Political Reform in Saudi Arabia: Necessity or Luxury?," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 3 (2012): 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsa.2012.0008>.

⁴² Daniel Moshashai, Andrew M. Leber, and James D. Savage, "Saudi Arabia Plans for Its Economic Future: Vision 2030, the National Transformation Plan and Saudi Fiscal Reform," *British*

supervision of significant endeavors that wield substantial influence on the economy, guaranteeing their management with integrity and strict adherence to ethical principles. The main goal of Saudi Vision 2030 is to stimulate economic growth and progress through comprehensive efforts.⁴³

Saudi Vision 2030 empowers women economically to participate more in the public sphere, including education and the workforce.⁴⁴ However, the Saudi Vision 2030 document does not discuss women's empowerment. The government only outlines the agenda for increasing women's education and workforce participation. Here are some discussions about women in the Saudi Vision document: a) Equality for Women and Men in Social and Economic Development, b) Equal opportunities for men and women in accessing education and the workforce, and c) Women as competitive workers.⁴⁵

The independence and Self-reliance of Saudi women in Saudi Vision 2030

The legislative amendments resulting from the goal of gender equality signify a paradigm shift for women. Since August 2019, significant legal advancements have promoted women's rights, leading to greater gender equality and empowerment. The law reforms grant women freedom in various aspects, including mobility, employment, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, and retirement.⁴⁶ The recent changes in Saudi Arabia demonstrate a forward-thinking approach to women's rights and represent a significant advancement towards achieving gender equality in the country. With increased opportunities for women to pursue their ambitions and contribute to the workforce, our society becomes more inclusive and diverse. The legislative amendments reflect the changing attitudes towards gender equality in the Kingdom, indicating a promising future for women's rights in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁷

Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 47, no. 3 (2020): 381–401, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2018.1500269>.

⁴³ Moshashai, Leber, and Savage.

⁴⁴ Moshashai, Leber, and Savage.

⁴⁵ Marten Swaantje, "Saudi Women and Their Role in the Labour Market under Vision 2030," 2018.

⁴⁶ The Embassy Saudi Arabia Washington. DC, "Saudi Arabia's Reforms and Programs to Empower Women" (Washington, DC, 2019), <https://www.saudiembassy.net/sites/default/files/Factsheet on Progress for Women in Saudi Arabia.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Srirupa Mukherjee, "Women Empowerment in Saudi Arabia: Substance and Contradiction," [Master Thesis] [Jadavpur University. India, 2019], 94.

King Salman bin Abdul Aziz abolished the prohibition on women driving on September 26, 2017, granting women newly acquired autonomy in their mobility.⁴⁸ The rule change was widely embraced by Saudi women, who regarded it as a momentous triumph in their demand for unrestricted freedom of mobility. It has significantly affected the mobility of Saudi women, particularly those who are considered financially affluent. Previously, they depended on private drivers or shared means of transportation with other family members. Nevertheless, current legislation grants women the autonomy to drive their vehicles.⁴⁹ Historically, Saudi women have predominantly depended on domestic drivers and family members for transportation, continuously hindering their ability to move freely within Saudi Arabia.⁵⁰

A symbolic manifestation of Saudi women's defiance against the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia, which greatly restricts women's autonomy and freedom, is their aspiration to exercise their right to drive.⁵¹ The male guardianship system observed in Arabia significantly affects women's lives in many dimensions, including mobility, educational access, employment prospects, health maintenance, and household management.⁵² The system limits women's autonomy in making significant life choices, requiring the consent of a male guardian, typically a spouse or a close male relative such as a brother or son.⁵³ It perpetuates the reliance of women on male relatives in their lives.

According to the findings of a Human Rights Watch study, the guardianship system in Saudi Arabia significantly hinders the rights of women in the country.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Firqah Annajiyah Mansyuroh, "Analysis of Legal Change for Women Traveling Without Mahram: A Case Study of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Royal Decree No. M/134 of 2019," *Al-Ihkam: Jurnal Hukum & Pranata Sosial* 14, no. 2 (2019): 201–20, <https://doi.org/10.19105/al-ihkam.v14i2.2785>.

⁴⁹ Wafaa Saleh and Areej Malibari, "Saudi Women and Vision 2030: Bridging the Gap?," *Behavioral Sciences* 11, no. 10 (2021): 132, <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs11100132>.

⁵⁰ Majid Aldalbahi and Guy Walker, "Riyadh Transportation History and Developing Vision," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 216 (2016): 163–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.12.024>.

⁵¹ Rebekah Bunch, "Shackled by Shari'a: Saudi Women Still Controlled by Male Guardianship System Despite Present (Cosmetic) Reforms," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3800435>.

⁵² Mona Kareem, "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia," *Choice Reviews Online* 51, no. 4 (2013): 51-2258-51–2258, <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.51-2258>.

⁵³ Nora Doajji, "Saudi Women's Online Activism: One Year of the 'I Am My Own Guardian' Campaign," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2017, <https://agsiw.org/saudi-womens-online-activism-one-year-guardian-campaign/>.

⁵⁴ Kristine Beckerle and Adam Coogole, "Boxed in: Women and Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System," Human Rights Watch, 2016,

The report emerged from a year-long research effort undertaken by HRW and other activists championing women's rights in Saudi Arabia. The #TogetherToEndMaleGuardianship campaign was initiated in reaction to the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report published in mid-July 2016. The campaign's objective was to encourage the dissemination of the HRW research findings and strive towards eradicating the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabian society.⁵⁵ This grassroots movement gathered considerable traction and received extensive domestic and international backing. A significant number of Saudi women have fearlessly expressed their resistance against repressive legislation that curtails their independence. Activists and human rights organizations emphasized the necessity of legislative reform in Saudi Arabia. The emerging cohort of women in Saudi Arabia actively promoting women's rights and questioning established social conventions signifies significant advancements in pursuing gender equality.⁵⁶

The Saudi government has undertaken measures to tackle the male guardianship system for women through the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030. This is apparent from the issuance of Royal Decree No. M/134 on July 30, 2019, which included amendments to Royal Decree M/24, hitherto issued on August 28, 2000. This amended legislation governs the issuance of passports, enabling women aged 21 and above to acquire passports for overseas travel without requiring consent from a male family member. Furthermore, there is a requirement for a male guardian to accompany them on international travel.⁵⁷ Under the recently implemented regulations, Saudi women who possess advanced education but are now jobless can now investigate job prospects in neighboring Gulf countries or other foreign nations. Consequently, many Saudi women have chosen to work as professors at universities in the UK, researchers in the US, journalists in France, and designers and artists in Dubai. It has created prospects for highly educated women to secure employment in various industries worldwide. Given the circumstances faced by women in Saudi Arabia, a

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/17/boxed/women-and-saudi-arabias-male-guardianship-system>.

⁵⁵ Huda Alsahi, "The Twitter Campaign to End the Male Guardianship System in Saudi Arabia," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2018): 298–318, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2018.1556871>.

⁵⁶ Mukherjee, "Women Empowerment in Saudi Arabia: Substance and Contradiction," 94.

⁵⁷ Mansyuroh, "Analysis of Legal Change for Women Traveling Without Mahram: A Case Study of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Royal Decree No. M/134 of 2019."

significant number of Saudi women who have earned PhDs overseas face difficulties in securing employment that aligns with their qualifications in their home country. This is primarily due to the restricted prospects within the Saudi Arabian economy for women with advanced education.⁵⁸

One further indication of the elimination of male guardianship is the current capacity of Saudi women to be acknowledged as the primary decision-makers in their households on identity cards and family paperwork. It confers upon parents the legal authority to autonomously make decisions for their children.⁵⁹ Furthermore, it acknowledges women's ability to assume household leadership roles. The Saudi government has implemented more legislative reforms to enhance women's autonomy in legal affairs. In 2019, the Ministry of Interior implemented legislation that permits women to register the birth of their children formally, a privilege formerly exclusive to men.⁶⁰ Consequently, Saudi women now possess enhanced legal jurisdiction over their domestic matters. A further legislative change was to grant female relatives aged 18 and older the authority to report death instances, a task that was previously the exclusive duty of male relatives.

Furthermore, both women and men in Saudi Arabia have been granted equal authority to commence legal processes for marriage and divorce.⁶¹ These statutory reforms have enhanced women's independence and authority in making decisions. Contemporary Saudi women have acquired increased independence in civil affairs, enabling them to exercise their legal rights freely. Furthermore, the Saudi government has extended the right to women to live autonomously, a privilege that was formerly restricted to their spouses or male guardians. Following the new regulations, Saudi women are now empowered to choose their residence location autonomously.⁶² This constitutional right signifies acknowledgment and reverence for the independence and empowerment of women.

⁵⁸ Madawi al-Rasheed, "Saudi Women Can Now Travel without Consent – but This Progress Is Fragile," *The Guardian*, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/02/saudi-arabia-women-travel-consent-rights-feminist-movement>

⁵⁹ Sophia Harris, "Women's Rights as Human Rights: A Study of Muslim Women's Reproductive Justice in Contemporary Saudi Arabia and Egypt," [*Undergraduate Thesis*] (Butler University, 2020), <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1554&context=ugtheses>.

⁶⁰ The Embassy Saudi Arabia Washington. DC, "Saudi Arabia's Reforms and Programs to Empower Women."

⁶¹ The Embassy Saudi Arabia Washington. DC.

⁶² Alharbi, "Kingdom Vision 2030 and the Women's Empowerment in Saudi Arabia: An Empirical Investigation."

To enhance the overall business climate in Saudi Arabia and particularly facilitate the rise of women entrepreneurs, the Saudi government has implemented substantial revisions to the Administrative Law to enhance administrative processes' efficiency, transparency, and fairness. The measures encompass streamlining the procedure of forming new firms, safeguarding investor rights to provide a more secure ecosystem for female entrepreneurs, and enhancing financial accessibility for both male and female entrepreneurs. According to the World Bank's report "Business and the Law 2020," Saudi Arabia has been acknowledged as a nation that has achieved notable advancements in advancing gender equality within the corporate sphere.⁶³ The government's programs are widely acknowledged for their significant impact in establishing a conducive climate for women entrepreneurs. Consequently, Saudi women now have increased prospects to undertake entrepreneurial ventures that were formerly unattainable for them. This adjustment is consistent with initiatives to include women in the labor market and facilitate their entrepreneurial aspirations. From the explanation above it can be seen that there is more space and chance to women provided by Saudi Vision 2030. It started from women's daily life to its current economy. Wider mobility access could enhance women's opportunities in other areas as it will minimize their dependence even on their families.

Facilitating Resource Access for the Empowerment of Saudi Women

According to the Ministry of Education in 2022, the objective is to enhance women's empowerment by offering them complimentary and tailored educational materials that facilitate active involvement in the nation's development.⁶⁴ Enrollment in public educational institutions and colleges is a fundamental right for Saudi women. Furthermore, women seeking to study overseas are also eligible for educational subsidies. The Ministry of Education has implemented numerous measures to enhance the working conditions for women in the education sector. The primary objective of the National Education Development Program is to enhance the overall quality of education in Saudi Arabia and elevate the level of professionalism among female teachers in the

⁶³ Lubna Javed Rizvi and Zahid Hussain, "Empowering Woman through Legal Reforms-Evidence from Saudi Arabian Context," *International Journal of Law and Management* 64, no. 2 (2022): 137-49, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJLMA-03-2021-0068>.

⁶⁴ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education, "The Ministry and Women.. Rights, Empowerment and Participation for National Development," Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education, February 14, 2022, <https://moe.gov.sa/en/aboutus/nationaltransformation/Pages/WomenAndTheMinistry.aspx>.

country. Various lectures, seminars, and workshops are provided across Saudi Arabia to accomplish this.⁶⁵ Adopting these policies results in the augmentation of educational prospects for women. It enables them to obtain education, equipping them with the requisite skills and knowledge to engage in the socio-economic affairs of the nation actively.⁶⁶

The Saudi government has undertaken numerous projects and initiatives to enhance the existing resources. The government has initiated a specialized training program for female leaders and workers capable of assuming leadership positions across diverse economic sectors. The program seeks to create an ideal setting to improve Saudi women's managerial skills and knowledge, enabling them to become exemplary leaders. The Royal Saudi Arabian government is partnering with the INSEAD institute to execute this initiative. This initiative aims to provide education to 1,700 female leaders.⁶⁷ The INSEAD Institute is globally acknowledged as the foremost institution in executive education and possesses the necessary capabilities and knowledge to empower female leaders in Saudi Arabia.⁶⁸ This initiative's provision of financial resources reflects the Saudi government's commitment to advancing gender equality and empowering women to wield influence and access advantages in policy formulation. Through initiatives like this, Saudi Arabia is taking significant steps toward creating a more inclusive and diverse workforce that will benefit the country's economy and society.

Alongside leadership training, the Saudi government offers alternative training programs specifically designed for unemployed Saudi women. The program comprises internships at organizations that will hire women and training programs that focus on both technical and personal abilities delivered by specialist educational institutes. Afterward, the trainees receive a certificate authorized by the program owner. This activity aims to hire and provide training for 100,000 women.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Salam Kedan, "The Role of Women in the Reforms in Saudi Arabia," [*Master Thesis*] (Charles University, UK, 2023), 27, 30, 36.

⁶⁶ Yusra Asif, "Saudi Women a Key Priority of Vision 2030, Says Official at Human Rights Council," *Al Arabiya News - English*, July 8, 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2023/07/08/Saudi-women-a-key-priority-of-Vision-2030-says-official-at-Human-Rights-Council>.

⁶⁷ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Finance, "Women Empowerment Initiative within the Saudi Annual Budget."

⁶⁸ INSEAD, "About INSEAD - Our Mission, Values and History," INSEAD, n.d., <https://www.insead.edu/about-insead/mission-values-history>.

⁶⁹ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Finance, "Women Empowerment Initiative within the Saudi Annual Budget."

Time represents a significant resource for women in Saudi Arabia. The duration of women's careers in the professional realm is frequently constrained compared to their male counterparts. Hence, the Saudi government implemented a policy about the extent of flexibility in employment contracts. This legislation facilitates the implementation of flexible employment contracts, enabling business owners to remunerate workers hourly. This initiative seeks to generate novel employment formats.⁷⁰ The flexible hourly work arrangement allows women to, particularly those with childcare obligations or other commitments, to participate in the workforce without being limited by time constraints.

In addition to its policy initiatives, the Saudi government allocates financial resources through the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF). Multiple initiatives have been implemented, including the employment subsidy program. This program aims to provide financial assistance to specific groups of women, whereby a portion of the employee's salary is subsidized based on predetermined adjustments.⁷¹ Additionally, companies are eligible for subsidies if they hire women and individuals with disabilities, recruit in rural areas and small towns, recruit in small and medium-sized enterprises, and recruit for significant occupations. The second program that received funding was the Qurrah program, a comprehensive online platform facilitating communication between parents and childcare centers. Its primary objective is to promote and provide services to families seeking childcare facilities. Human Rights Development Fund (HRDF) provides financial assistance to partially cover the expenses associated with the registration fees for two children in a daycare center registered with Qurrah. The maximum monthly cost per kid is set at 800 SAR, and this coverage extends for four years. The subsequent initiative is the Wusool Program, which provides financial assistance for 80% of the transportation expenses associated with each daily trip from home to work, amounting to SAR 1,100 a month.⁷²

To prioritize the growth of women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi government has implemented various financial aid measures.⁷³ Below are several initiatives undertaken by the Saudi government to address financing challenges emerging companies face. The al-Barakah Loan Center, established by

⁷⁰ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Finance.

⁷¹ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Finance.

⁷² Arab News, "Wusool' Transport Program Benefits 60,000 Saudi Women," *Arab News*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1630511/saudi-arabia>.

⁷³ Haifa Fallatah, "Women Entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia: Investigating Strategies Used by Successful Saudi Women Entrepreneurs," [Master Thesis] (Lincoln University, New Zealand, 2012).

the King Abdulaziz Women's Charitable Association, assists Saudi women in securing venture finance for their enterprises. Furthermore, the government provides financial assistance to young female and male entrepreneurs through the Centennial Fund.⁷⁴ Additionally, the Saudi government has established the Small and Medium Enterprises General Authority (Monsha'at) to provide funding and support to small businesses, including those owned by women "The Saudi government has established the General Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises (Monsha'at) to provide continuous encouragement to entrepreneurs with business-friendly regulations, easier access to funding, international partnerships, and a greater share of national procurement and government bids.⁷⁵ This organization offers loans, grants, and training programs to help entrepreneurs develop their businesses and succeed in the competitive market. With these initiatives in place, Saudi Arabia is working towards creating a more diverse and inclusive economy that empowers women to participate in the business world and contribute to the country's overall growth and development.

Accomplishments of Women Empowerment under Saudi Vision 2030

Various policies and initiatives implemented by the Saudi government to promote women's empowerment have resulted in particular improvements in the socio-economic status of women. Within the context of the Saudi Vision, the government is endeavoring to actualize the concept of the modern Saudi lady.⁷⁶ One notable accomplishment is the empowerment of women in the workforce. Through various legislative reforms aimed at diminishing male guardianship, the percentage of employed women has risen from 19.4% in 2017 to 35.6% in 2022. The unemployment rate among Saudi women has declined from 22.3% in 2021 to 19.3% in 2022. According to the Women Empowerment Initiative in the Saudi Annual Budget for 2024, the proportion of Saudi women employed in the civil sector rose from 39.8% in 2017 to 41.15 in 2021.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Arab News, "Centennial Fund Provides 6,000 Jobs," *Arab News*, August 11, 2013, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/460894/saudi-arabia>.

⁷⁵ Thamer Saud Alkhalidi, "The Role of Formal Institutional Support on Starting a Business: Evidence from Saudi Arabia," *[Doctoral Thesis]* (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2019), 4.

⁷⁶ Fatmah T. Alotaibi, "Saudi Women and Leadership: Empowering Women as Leaders in Higher Education Institutions," *Open Journal of Leadership* 9, no. 3 (2020): 156-77, <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojl.2020.93010>.

⁷⁷ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Finance, "Women Empowerment Initiative within the Saudi Annual Budget."

Furthermore, as stated in Saudi Arabia's Reform Program to Empower Women, released by the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in America in August 2019, significant advancements have been made in the socio-economic conditions of Saudi women. Saudi women constitute over 50% of the total student population in Saudi Arabia, which stands at about 5 million individuals. The participation of women in the workforce in 2019 witnessed a notable growth of around 8.8%, marking the highest level of women's involvement in the history of the Saudi Kingdom.⁷⁸

One further societal contribution made by women following the realization of the Saudi vision is the representation of women in 20% of Saudi Arabia's Shura Council members.⁷⁹ This event signified a notable transformation in the nation's political terrain, as women were prohibited from engaging in governmental decision-making. The inclusion of women in the Shura Council has facilitated the introduction of a wide range of viewpoints and opinions, resulting in the formulation of more comprehensive and inclusive policies. Moreover, Saudi women have taken on several significant leadership positions, as demonstrated by the remarkable selection of Dr. Tamader al-Rammah as the first female Deputy Minister of Labor in 2018.⁸⁰ Princess Rima binti Bandar and Amal al-Moallimi have become the first women to hold the positions of Saudi ambassadors to the United States and Norway.⁸¹ Furthermore, Basmah al-Mayman is Regional Director at the United Nations World Tourism Organization,⁸² Princess Haifa serves as Saudi Arabia's permanent ambassador to UNESCO,⁸³ and Lubna Olayan holds the position of Chairperson at the Saudi Bank of England.⁸⁴ Below is an enumeration of

⁷⁸ The Embassy Saudi Arabia Washington. DC., "Saudi Arabia's Reforms and Programs to Empower Women."

⁷⁹ The Embassy Saudi Arabia Washington. DC.

⁸⁰ Arab News, "First Saudi Woman Appointed as Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Development," *Arab News*, February 27, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1255331/saudi-arabia>.

⁸¹ Reem Krimly, "Meet Amal al-Moallimi, Saudi Arabia's Second Female Ambassador," *Al Arabiya News - English*, October 21, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/10/21/Meet-Amal-al-Moallimi-Saudi-Arabia-second-female-ambassador>.

⁸² Jamila Gandhi, "Exclusive: Basmah al-Mayman, Regional Director at UNWTO, on the Growth of Tourism across MENA," *Forbes - Middle East*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/leadership/women-leaders/unwto-basmah-al-mayman>.

⁸³ Arab News, "Princess Haifa bint Abdul Aziz al-Muqrin Presents Credentials to UNESCO Director General in Paris," *Arab News*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1639771/saudi-arabia>.

⁸⁴ BBC, "Lubna al Olayan Appointed as First Woman Saudi Bank Head," *BBC News*, October 5, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45763656>.

further Saudi women who have accomplished notable feats and made significant contributions to Saudi society.

Table 1
Saudi Women's Achievements After Saudi Vision

No	Name	Achievements
1	Yasmine al-Maimani	One of the pioneering Saudi women to pilot an aircraft and achieve the rank of captain pilot with Nesma Airlines.
2	Aseel al-Hamad	The inaugural female member of the Motor Sports Federation of Saudi Arabia
3	Nawal Bakhsh	A pioneering Saudi woman to make her debut on the television screens of the Kingdom.
4	Mishaal Ashemimry	Graduate Research Assistant specializing in the design and analysis of a novel thermal rocket engine for NASA's Mars mission.
5	Mariam Fardous	First Saudi woman to dive to the North Pole
6	Samar Saleh	The first commercial attaché at the Saudi Business Attaché office in Tokyo
7	Raha Moharraq	The first woman to climb a high-altitude mountain and reached the summit of Mount Everest in 2013
8	Kholoud Mousa	Member of the Governance Committee of the Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA), a partner in the KPMG Jeddah office, the first woman to hold this position.
9	Maram Kokandi	Has been appointed as the inaugural Saudi female General Manager of the Park Inn by Radisson in Jeddah. Having completed a hospitality management degree in the UK, Maram Kokandi subsequently returned to the Middle East region and assumed several hospitality roles in Saudi Arabia.

Source: Taha Sakr⁸⁵

Table 1 demonstrates that women in Saudi Arabia have gained the ability to participate in policy-making and have been empowered in both the public and private sectors. This progress is a significant step forward in the fight for gender equality in the country. With increased representation in decision-making roles, women can contribute their perspectives and experiences to shaping policies that affect them and their communities. As more women are allowed to participate in

⁸⁵ Taha Sakr, "Leading Saudi Women & Their Career Stories," *Leaders*, no. 47 (November 2020): 52–53, <https://www.leaders-mena.com/leader/leaders-nov-2020/>.

these processes, Saudi Arabia is moving closer to achieving true gender equality and inclusivity.

Moreover, in addition to accomplishments in terms of achieving leadership positions in several sectors, the Saudi vision has also had a positive impact on the development of female entrepreneurs. The available empirical data demonstrates an increase in the proportion of small and medium-sized firms controlled by women, rising from 21.5% in 2016 to 45% in 2022. From 2021 to 2022, Saudi Arabia made the most significant progress globally in diminishing the gender gap in the small business sector.⁸⁶ The 2021-2022 Women's Report for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, conducted by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), indicates that 95% of Saudi women consider entrepreneurship to be a desirable career choice, 93% anticipate opportunities for new businesses, and 90% recognize the simplicity of starting one.⁸⁷ One of the most accomplished Saudi women entrepreneurs in recent years is Mounira Jamjoom, who established Aanaab.com, a digital platform that collaborates with local and international institutions to provide short courses, qualifications, and licensing programs to enhance the education sector in MENA countries. In its inaugural external investment round, Aanaab.com secured 1.5 million dollars, alongside a registration of 200,000 teachers.⁸⁸ In addition, Jamjoom is a co-founder and C.E.O. at Emkan Education, an educational consultancy and development firm catering to both public and private entities, including school operators, educators, and investors.⁸⁹ Gatern, a digital platform established and operated by Saudi women, is the first licensee-based peer-to-peer accommodation Website in Saudi Arabia. It allows users to book vacation rental apartments, chalets, villas, farms, resorts, camps, and caravans. Since its establishment in 2017, the company has expanded its portfolio to include over 50,000 properties across more than 200 cities in Saudi Arabia. Latifah Attamimi serves as the Chief Executive Officer and creator of

⁸⁶ Atlantic Council, "Inaugural Discussion: The State of Women's Entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia," Atlantic Council, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/the-state-of-women-entrepreneurship-in-saudi-arabia-and-the-way-forward/>.

⁸⁷ Bloomberg, "Female Entrepreneurship: Transforming the Saudi Economy" (Bloomberg, New York, n.d.), <https://sponsored.bloomberg.com/article/Monshaat/female-entrepreneurship-transforming-the-saudi-economy>.

⁸⁸ Bloomberg.

⁸⁹ Female Founders Initiative Global, *Female Founders Initiative Global's Post* (LinkedIn, 2023), https://www.linkedin.com/posts/female-founder-initiative-middle-east-africa_femaleentrepreneurs-womeninbusiness-empowerment-activity-7251904271997124608-n0Q3.

Gatern. The company secured a further \$11.1 million in financing.⁹⁰ This additional funding will enable Gatern to expand its services and reach in Saudi Arabia and beyond. With a focus on empowering Saudi women in the hospitality industry, Gatern has become a standout success story in the country. Attamimi's vision for the platform to revolutionize the accommodations sector in Saudi Arabia is well on its way to becoming a reality, and the future looks bright for the company and its diverse team of operators, educators, and investors.

To conclude, Saudi Arabia tries to provide wider opportunities for women in its daily life, economics, law, and regulation, as well as facilities so women can access the opportunities that have been changed and given to them. It means that Saudi seriously would like their women to be more empowered by its policy, not just providing the opportunity without giving aims and facilities to access it. Indeed, several achievements can be seen from this action. However, there are still challenges to empowering more Saudi women, which will be explained in the next section.

Challenges to the Empowerment of Saudi Women

Despite the notable accomplishments and strategies the Saudi government uses, certain impediments and challenges have existed. These obstacles include cultural and sociological issues, work environment and organization challenges, and issues arising from the rule of law and the legal system.

A primary obstacle in the endeavor to empower Saudi women is the cultural and societal barrier. Cultural conventions and societal expectations in Saudi Arabia frequently prescribe specific tasks and obligations for women that tend to give precedence to traditional positions rather than professional or educational ones.⁹¹ Specific textbooks in Saudi Arabia often depict women as homemakers, highlighting their domestic responsibilities. It suggests that women's primary job is to fulfill their duties as housewives and attend to the family's needs. Men are often depicted as persons focused on their careers, with robust personalities and serving as societal leaders.⁹² It, therefore, impacts the impression of women's active participation in education and the workforce. One other phenomenon

⁹⁰ Bloomberg, "Female Entrepreneurship: Transforming the Saudi Economy."

⁹¹ Alhawsawi and Jawhar, "Education, Employment, and Empowerment among Saudi Women."

⁹² Aljoharah Ghazi Alrowais, "Women's Image in Saudi School Curriculum (A Comprehensive Study of English Textbooks in Public Schools)," *al-Tarbiyah al-Azhar* 42, no. 200 (2023): 619–58, <https://doi.org/10.21608/jsrep.2023.328536>.

experienced by Saudi women is the presence of The Glass Ceiling, which refers to the invisible obstacle of cultural and societal expectations that impede their progress toward higher positions despite their high qualifications and educational backgrounds, making them suitable for leadership or higher duties.⁹³ Another issue that further justifies the stereotype is the interpretation of Islamic religious teachings, which are considered to suggest that in terms of being a leader and making decisions, men are emphasized.⁹⁴ One of the most glaring examples of this stereotype is the structure of higher education in Saudi Arabia, which, due to the predominance of men, restricts the participation of women in research and decision-making processes.⁹⁵ Raja al-Qahtani's research states that although the government has made various legal reforms that provide more space for women to participate in the workforce, some communities and family members resist implementing the new rules, and the community and family environment legitimizes the stereotype.⁹⁶ In addition, family members can also be challenged by refusing to implement the new laws, making it difficult for women to access the rights they should enjoy. In addition, family members do not inform, leaving women in the family unaware of their rights, thus preventing women from empowering themselves.⁹⁷ One instance of family-derived hurdles is that Saudi women typically face constraints from their families, especially their husbands, to work owing to gender-mixed professional encounters.⁹⁸ In addition, this prohibition can be attributed to societal customs that prevent women from engaging with men who are not connected to them, which in turn hinders their opportunities for professional networking and growth in their careers.⁹⁹

⁹³ Almathami and Mair, "Socio-cultural Barriers to Saudi Womens Participation in the Tourism Industry: A Systematic Literature Review."

⁹⁴ Khadija Abdullah Nasseef, "Women's Empowerment Strategies in NGOs in the City of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia-Exploring the Complexity and Challenges of the Cultural Context," [*Doctoral Thesis*] (University of Leeds, 2015).

⁹⁵ Rafif Abdulaziz D. Hakiem, "Advancement and Subordination of Women Academics in Saudi Arabia's Higher Education," *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 5 (2022): 1528-41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1933394>.

⁹⁶ al-Qahtani, "Empowering Saudi Women: Resources, Agencies and Achievements in the Light of Vision 2030."

⁹⁷ al-Qahtani.

⁹⁸ Abeer Aldawsari et al., "Saudi Women in Mixed-Gender Workplaces: Remote Work Challenges in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic," in *Future Feminisms* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2024), 113-32, <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83797-414-620241009>.

⁹⁹ Almathami and Mair, "Socio-Cultural Barriers to Saudi Womens Participation in the Tourism Industry: A Systematic Literature Review."

The second obstacle comes from the opportunity structure in the work environment. The phenomenon of nepotism has emerged as a significant obstacle for competent women seeking to attain top occupational roles in the labor market. The organizational structure in Saudi Arabia is defined by “*wasta*” or nepotism, which plays a key role in recruitment, law enforcement, decision-making, and other related procedures.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, recruiting for leadership roles relies on professional networks and contacts, significantly influencing the result. This disadvantages Saudi women, who often choose to work in obscure roles and not achieve high performance. In addition to nepotism, seniority in employment also has a deleterious impact, as crucial positions are generally offered to people based on seniority rather than aptitude. Another reason for the centrality of men in the policy-making process is that if there are well-qualified and competent female workers for leadership positions, their male colleagues will seek to limit their authority, disempowering and obstructing them to prevent them from occupying those positions.¹⁰¹

In several sectors, such as tourism, healthcare, and education, it is difficult for women to assume leadership roles despite having the requisite qualifications and being supported by the government due to structural constraints of limited access to senior management and leadership positions. Another organizational and work environment barrier is male top management discrimination, which is the practice of biased acts that prefer male workers over women to assume leadership positions.¹⁰² This prejudice can affect policy-making as women’s contributions are typically downplayed or overlooked in favor of their male colleagues.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Ayman Adham and Anita Hammer, “Understanding Arab Capitalisms: Patrimonialism, HRM and Work in Saudi Arabia,” *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 32, no. 21 (2021): 4578–4602, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2019.1695649>.

¹⁰¹ Muhammad Abd al-Qadir Shihab al-Din, “Are Women Still Facing Challenges in Working after Empowerment? An Applied Study in Public Education in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA),” *A-Majalah al-Arabiyah al-Idarah*, 2023, 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.21608/aja.2023.203382.1421>.

¹⁰² Alotaibi, “Saudi Women and Leadership: Empowering Women as Leaders in Higher Education Institutions”; Ashwag Rafea S. Alruwaili et al., “Women Empowerment in Medical Imaging and Radiology: Status and Challenges,” *Riyadh*, January 4, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1101/2024.01.03.24300758>; Abu Elnasr E. Sobaih and Ahmed E. Abu Elnasr, “Challenges to Cracking the Glass Ceiling among Saudi Women in the Tourism Industry,” *Tourism and Hospitality* 5, no. 1 (2024): 203–24, <https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp5010014>.

¹⁰³ Sami Senyal Jrasat and Faraj Radwan Faraj Zubaidi, “Saudi Women Empowerment in Leadership Positions in Health Care Sector: Barriers to Their Success,” *International Journal of Professional Business Review* 9, no. 4 (2024): e03828, <https://doi.org/10.26668/businessreview/2024.v9i4.3828>.

An additional significant obstacle is the implementation of amendments to the regulations imposed by the Saudi government to encourage women's involvement. According to Human Rights Watch, despite widespread reports that the new law eliminates all restrictions on women's rights to leave the country, a government-run mobile app that provides access to services provided by the Ministry of Interior, such as travel documentation and visas, still gives men the option of declining travel for female dependents.

D. Conclusion

Within the context of Saudi Vision 2030, the current study provides various insightful viewpoints on improving women's economic empowerment. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the execution of legal reforms and the increasing participation of women in the economic sector has positively impacted women's social and economic position in Saudi Arabia. Increased female participation in the job market and education indicates this objective has been accomplished. This goal encompasses increased female leadership in various fields, including politics and business. Several structural adjustments that have been implemented by the government, such as eliminating certain cultural barriers and establishing a system of male guardianship, have accelerated the rise of women. However, there are still barriers of culture and beliefs held by society that limit women's roles in certain fields. The findings of this study offer policymakers a framework that may be utilized to facilitate the promotion of initiatives that promote gender equality and women's empowerment, hence enhancing economic participation and contributing to continued economic growth. The scope of the study, on the other hand, is limited to a concentration on women's economic empowerment within the context of Saudi Vision 2030, as well as some quantitative data that might not be representative of the entire population. In the future, it is advised that a more in-depth investigation be conducted into the social and cultural issues that continue to restrict the participation of women. Additionally, it is recommended that the influence of comparable changes be investigated in other fields, such as the health and technology industries.[s]

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