



EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S ROLE IN SAUDI ARABIA: FROM TRADITION TO MODERN PUBLIC LIFE

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to exploring the evolving role of women in Saudi Arabia amid the country's comprehensive reforms and Vision 2030 initiatives. It analyzes significant progress in expanding women's access to education, science, and participation in public and economic life. The study highlights how these changes reflect a broader cultural and institutional transformation aimed at enhancing gender inclusion and empowering Saudi women as active contributors to the Kingdom's modernization and development.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, «Vision 2030», Saudi education system, women's participation, unemployment rate, Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan.

Introduction

Historically, the status of women in Saudi Arabia has been determined by strict sociocultural norms based on a conservative interpretation of Islamic law. For a long time, women faced restrictions on education, employment, movement, and participation in public life. The guardianship system (wilaya) required women to obtain permission from male guardians (father, husband, brother) to make important decisions such as travelling, marriage, or obtaining medical services. Since the late 1950s, members of the Al Saud royal family have played an important role in initiating social changes aimed at empowering women, especially in the field of education. These steps were not the result of external



pressure, but reflected an internal need to modernise society while preserving religious and cultural foundations.

It is evident that Iffat al-Sunayyan, the wife of King Faisal, played a pivotal role in this process. As early as the 1950s, she recognised the necessity for female education and thus established the first school for girls in Saudi Arabia outside the royal family. Having herself sent her sons to study abroad, Iffat became an active proponent of girls' education, convinced that the state should provide equal educational opportunities for women. She established a women's teacher training college with her own financial resources, and its graduates became the first female teachers in the kingdom.¹

The initiatives were continued by King Abdullah, who focused on structural modernisation of the education system. His reforms included the development of a strategic plan with international consultants, the expansion of universities and the creation of new educational institutions. Despite opposition, Saudi women have also been given educational opportunities and have shown considerable success in various fields. Abdullah's most ambitious project was the Princess Noura Women's University in Riyadh and the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) on the Red Sea coast north of Jeddah. King Abdullah realised that reforming the Saudi education system and creating world-class schools and universities would take time. As a short-term solution, he launched a scholarship programme for Saudi students abroad. This programme, which began in 2005, provided full funding for tuition, accommodation, food, as well as health insurance and a stipend to study science and engineering subjects at foreign universities.²

As a result of this programme, Saudi students have had the opportunity to study abroad in the US, UK, Canada, Australia and other countries. The programme became very popular, with 68,000 students already enrolled by 2017. Scholarships were competitive and 20 per cent were allocated to women, allowing them to study abroad with government support, as well as being able to take a male relative as a chaperone. By 2020, more than 200,000 young Saudis

¹ Wald E. "Saudi Inc.: The Story of How Saudi Arabia Became One of the World's Most Influential States on the Geopolitical Map" Transl. by P. Mironov. — Moscow: Alpina Publisher, 2022. P.-154

² King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). URL:- <https://www.kaust.edu.sa/en/>



had benefited from the programme, studying in various countries around the world.

The most dramatic changes occurred under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who, as part of his «Vision 2030» strategy, emphasised the full integration of women into the public, economic and political life of the country. Women have been given the right to drive, to work without a man's permission, to travel independently, to hold positions in government, diplomacy, business and even to serve in the armed forces. These changes not only expanded women's personal freedoms, but also made them an important part of the national development process.

One of the most ambitious goals of Vision 2030 is to reduce the overall unemployment rate from 12 per cent in 2015 to 10.5 per cent by 2022 by creating jobs in the private sector. Part of the solution is to develop the country's retail sector. In 2015, Saudi Arabia's retail sector provided 1.5 million jobs, but 80 per cent of those jobs were held by foreigners. The government intends to close foreign-controlled corner shops and is encouraging the development of large shops with Saudi staff. In some areas, such as women's clothing and electronics, the transition is already well underway. Other retail sectors are introducing rules requiring 70 per cent Saudis among staff.

«Vision 2030» includes many commitments, goals and initiatives that support and empower women. These include increasing women's participation in the labour market from 22% to 30%, women in managerial positions, developing opportunities to support women's work, and empowering women to participate in sports. Women play a key role in the implementation of Vision 2030.³

As a result of these initiatives, the Saudi labour market is slowly changing. The male unemployment rate, which stood at 7.5% in 2018, fell to 6% the following year; the youth unemployment rate fell from 42% to 30% in the same period. Female unemployment remains at 32%, but as more women enter the labour force, the female labour force participation rate rose slightly from 20 to 23%. Meanwhile, the share of private sector jobs held by Saudis rose from 20 per cent

³ Рў'ят ус-саудия 2030 [رؤية السعودية 2030 Саудовское Видение 2030]. URL: <https://vision2030.gov.sa/download/file/fid/422>



to 22 per cent⁴ - partly because more than 2 million foreign workers left Saudi Arabia between 2017 and 2020.

Since the announcement of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has seen a string of high-profile headlines and quick wins in the social sphere. Some of these changes, especially for women have been implemented as part of the Quality of Life programme, and most have come from the Crown Prince himself. Removing social and labour restrictions for women has the potential to increase the workforce and create a more welcoming environment for tourists, who are seen as a new sector for development; and encouraging concerts, cinema, sports and other entertainment also creates an opportunity to create new sectors for Saudi audiences.

One of the first and most significant steps taken by the Crown Prince was to limit the enforcement powers of the religious police (mutawwa'in), an institution with an 80-year history that is responsible for combating gender segregation in public spaces, enforcing dress codes. As of April 2016, this religious police was stripped of its powers to 'harass, arrest or detain' members of the public, to treat people rudely or abusively, or to work outside of working hours.⁵

In June 2018, the first Saudi women received their driving licences. The ban on women driving was officially lifted on 24 June, after the change was announced in September 2017⁶. In August 2019, the Crown Prince announced that a set of restrictions for women, mainly the ban on obtaining a passport or travelling without the permission of a male guardian, would be lifted⁷. Women can now report the birth of a newborn child, the death of a family member, and marriage

⁴ Rundell D. H. «Vision or Mirage Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads», I.B. Tauris, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021. P.216.

⁵ Sewell Chan, "Saudi Arabia Moves to Curb Its Feared Religious Police," New York Times, April 15, 2016, URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/16/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-moves-to-curb-its-feared-religious-police.html>.

⁶ Ellyatt H. "No More a Passenger": Driving Schools for Women Take Off in Saudi Arabia," CNBC, March 8, 2018, URL: <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/08/saudi-arabia-driving-schools-for-women.html>; URL: <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/17/women-in-saudi-arabia-preparing-to-drive-and-to-make-money-from-it.html>; Sarah Aziza, "Saudi Arabia's Ban on Woman Drivers Comes to an End," Atlantic, June 23, 2018, URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/saudi-arabia-women-driving-salman-crackdown-activists/563579/>.

⁷ Stephen Kalin, "Cleared for Takeoff: Saudi Women Start Exercising Their Newest Right," Reuters, August 22, 2019, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-women/cleared-for-takeoff-saudi-women-start-exercising-their-newest-right-idUSKCN1VC1XI>.



or divorce; previously, only men could officially report these family events⁸. However, restrictions remain on a woman's ability to sue, marry, live independently, open a bank account, leave prison or a state care facility, or freely act in 'filial disobedience' against her guardian⁹.

There are significant opportunities for Saudi women to enter the active labour force. While the majority of them remain unemployed (estimated by the General Authority for Statistics at the end of 2016 to be around 5.8 million women out of the kingdom's total population of nearly 32 million), they have been increasingly empowered in recent years.

One of the key historical changes was the acquisition by women in 2011 of the right to be members of the Advisory Council - Majlis al-Shura (the equivalent of parliament), and then the appointment in 2013 of 30 female members of the Council, which was already 20 per cent of the total membership. In the same year, women were also given the right to participate in elections and be elected to Municipal Councils, which they successfully used in 2015.

Women are now also being actively included in the leadership structures of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry in Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam and other cities. Since the beginning of 2017, women have been appointed for the first time to senior management positions at the Saudi Stock Exchange (Tadawul), Samba Financial Group and Arab National Bank (ANB). Previously, the leadership of these financial institutions was entirely male.

The integration of Saudi women into the workforce is a phenomenon that is unfolding at an accelerating rate. A survey undertaken in Spring 2022 by the KSA Human Resources Development Foundation and Uber revealed that the Kingdom has surpassed its own targets in this area by a decade. The study indicates that by 2021, women constituted 36 per cent of the kingdom's working population, representing an increase from 22 per cent just three years prior. Moreover, a report published in Saudi media in April 2022 by Endeavour Insight demonstrates that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a higher rate of female start-ups in the

⁸ Anas al-Yusuf, "Saudi Women Can Obtain Passports without Male Guardians' Permission," Saudi Gazette, August 1, 2019, URL: <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/573746/SAUDI-ARABIA/Saudi-women-can-obtain-passports-without-male-guardians-permission>.

⁹ Marwa Rashad, "Saudi Arabia Women's Rights Reforms May Still Be Thwarted by Custom," Reuters, August 5, 2019, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-women-guardianship/saudi-arabia-womens-rights>



technology sector than men. In the third quarter of 2021, the female participation rate in the sector was 28 per cent, which is more than 10 per cent higher than the European average of 17.5 per cent recorded in the same period.¹⁰

According to information provided by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the number of commercial licences issued to women in 2021 amounted to 139,754, representing one of the highest growth rates on a global scale. The ministry observed that this represented an increase of 112% in comparison with 2015, during which a total of 65,912 licences were issued to female entrepreneurs. According to data published by Endeavor Insight in Saudi media, the participation rate of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in Saudi Arabia and the US is 28%. This figure is higher than in the UK, where it is only 22 per cent.¹¹ In the contemporary era, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a remarkable transformation with regard to the empowerment of women. Women within the kingdom have demonstrated remarkable aptitude in a range of pivotal domains, including science, medicine, diplomacy, entrepreneurship, culture, and sports. The following section presents a selection of the most distinguished female representatives in each field.

In the field of Science and Technology (STEM), Mishal Ashemimri attained the distinction of becoming the first female rocket scientist in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries¹². Her journey commenced at the age of six, when an evening excursion in the Unaiza Desert ignited her fascination with celestial bodies and the universe. In the absence of satisfactory responses from adults, the girl concluded that she would have to construct her own rocket in order to ascertain the nature of the phenomenon. Subsequent to this, she obtained a degree in rocket science, participated in the research of nuclear engines for NASA's mission to Mars, and, at the age of 26, founded her own aerospace company. In 2018, she

¹⁰ Dudarev, K.P. Saudi Arabia in the 21st Century: The Revolution of the 30-Year-Olds or the Tsunami of Modernization. Moscow, 2022, p. 51.

¹¹ Dudarev, K.P. Saudi Arabia in the 21st Century: The Revolution of the 30-Year-Olds or the Tsunami of Modernization. Moscow, 2022, p. 51.

¹² Gems of Arabia. In conversation with: Mishaal Ashemimry, the first aerospace engineer in the GCC. URL:- <https://authenticite.me/gems-of-arabia/gems-of-arabia-mishaal-ashemimry-the-first-aerospace-engineer-in-the-gcc/>



was honoured by King Salman in recognition of her scientific achievements¹³. In addition to her engineering work, Ashemimri actively promotes science among Arab youth, runs educational channels on social media and advocates for STEM education for girls.

Furthermore, Saudi women are also excelling in the field of medical science. For instance, Dr Wafa Audeh Altani was the recipient of the L'Oréal-UNESCO Women in Science Award in recognition of her research on donorless organ transplantation¹⁴. Her research is centred on the development of bioengineered tissues and organs tailored to individual patients. She received her education at Umm Al-Qura University and subsequently pursued further studies and professional practice in Canada and the USA.

Asma Al Amoudi, a PhD student at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), has succeeded in employing the use of stem cells in treating blood diseases and in researching the effects on stem cells to enhance bone marrow transplantation.¹⁵ Upon receiving the award in 2019, she stated that it served as a symbol of her triumph over the limitations she encountered on her journey towards a scientific career.

Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan has become a symbol of a new phase of women's political participation. In 2019, she was appointed as Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States, a position that made her the first woman in the kingdom's history to hold such a high diplomatic post¹⁶. The princess has been active in representing the country's interests on the international stage and is known for her work in defending women's rights, promoting their economic and social roles, and participating in «Vision 2030» programmes. Her appointment is

¹³ Arabisk London. Mishaal Ashemimri is the Gulf's First Female Missile Engineer. URL:- <https://www.arabisklondon.com/12093#:~:text=She%20was%20named%20the%202015,Salman%20bin%20Abdulaziz%20Al%20Saud>.

¹⁴ Arab News. November 12, 2019. Saudi scientists win major award for groundbreaking studies. URL:- <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1582986/%7B%7B>

¹⁵ KAUST researcher using stem cells in treatment of blood diseases. (May 07, 2021). URL:- <https://www.saudigazette.com.sa/article/606406>

¹⁶ Aljazeera news (24 Feb 2019). Saudi Arabia replaces ambassador to US with first female envoy. URL:- <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/24/saudi-arabia-replaces-ambassador-to-us-with-first-female-envoy>



a significant development that signifies the emergence of new opportunities for women in the field of foreign policy.

The transformation of women's roles in Saudi Arabia reflects the profound social, cultural and political changes that have taken place in the kingdom over the past decades. Support from key figures in the royal family - from King Faisal to King Abdullah to Prince Mohammed bin Salman - has created the conditions for the gradual empowerment of women, especially in education, science and public life. Despite considerable conservatism and religious resistance, Saudi women have been able to become active participants in the country's modernisation and development. Women's achievements in STEM, diplomacy, entrepreneurship, sports and culture demonstrate a shift in traditional roles and the formation of a new social contract in which women are not only guardians of family values, but also full-fledged subjects of social and economic transformation. The evolution of the status of women in Saudi Arabia is thus an integral part of the national strategy for sustainable development and social harmony.

The enhancement of women's rights and opportunities has been demonstrated to have a dual benefit: the improvement of the quality of human capital, and the strengthening of the kingdom's international image as a progressive and modern state. This, in turn, will engender favourable conditions for Saudi Arabia's integration into global processes and the achievement of the ambitious goals of the national Vision 2030 programme.

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