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**Women in Saudi Arabia
Status, Rights, and Limitations**

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This study is dedicated to every hopeful and courageous Saudi woman who dreams of
a free society

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Safaa

EXECUTIVE SUMMERY

From appointing women to political positions in 2013 for the first time in Saudi Arabia's history to granting a lawyer license to the first Saudi female lawyer last January. Saudi Arabia's new policies are promising steps on the road to women's full participation in the society. However, women still make up less than 16 percent of the national workforce; this represents an enormous source of untapped potential for the Kingdom.

The ban on women's driving is one of the biggest obstacles women still face and deal with every day. Legislative, social, educational, and occupational constraints prevent women from fully participating in the development process of their country. Overcoming these constraints will be essential if the Kingdom is to introduce sweeping reforms that would enable Saudi women to take a serious part of developing their country.

Labor market, political and law reforms—including legislation promoting gender equality—should be seriously considered. This study presents a socioeconomic profile of women in Saudi Arabia. Based on the data analysis policy recommendations will be offered

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CHAPTER I

THE BASIC LAW OF GOVERNANCE

Introduction to the Basic Law of Governance:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by the Al Saud family. The population is approximately 28.5 million, including 5.8 million foreigners. Since 2005, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud has ruled under the title “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques”, a reference to his responsibility for Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina. The government bases its legitimacy on its interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law) and the 1992 Basic Law.

The Basic Law sets out the system of governance, rights of citizens, and powers and duties of the government in 83 articles. The beginning article of Saudi Arabia's Basic Law of Governance raises the Quran (Muslims Holy Book) and Sunna (Prophet Muhammad's sayings and traditions) to the status of the constitution. As a result, the religious institution plays a crucial role in the kingdom's governance and has widespread influence over numerous prospects of the citizen's everyday lives. Moreover, the religious institutions are majorly in control of all the affairs concerning the Kingdom, as well as the exclusively male judiciary and the policing of public morality. Notwithstanding the multifariousness of its views in other fields, the religious

organization in the Kingdom has on the whole opposed the conferring legality of Saudi women¹.

Women between the basic law of governance and reality

The kingdom's government is deemed to advocate for and impose sex segregation in its totality. Even though the policy might not be discriminatory when assessed from its face value since it is targeting both women and men, in reality, it hinders the Saudi women from practicing any significant public life. The government introduced a commission (that is run by the religious police), which is solely responsible for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice to keenly monitor and implement sex segregation in all the workplaces excluding hospitals and few other places. In addition to that, the religious police are mandated with the power to apprehend those people who violate the rules that are not approved by the laws of the land (which mainly are tribal laws). This goes against Article 8 in the basic law of governance which states that, "*The system of governance in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is based on justice, consultation and equality according to the Islamic Sharia (the law of Islam)*"²". Following is a discussion on how there are contradictions between the basic law that is promoting gender equality in all of its articles and what really happens in real life.

Cases of clear gender disparity in education and literacy are substantially high in the Kingdom. Article 13 of the basic law of governance states that, "*The goal of*

¹ As'ad Abukhalil, *the battle for Saudi Arabia royalty, fundamentalism, and global power*, (Unabridged. ed. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2014), 126

² Frank Vogel, *Islamic law in the modern world: the legal system of Saudi Arabia*, (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

*education is to instill the Islamic faith in the brains of the young generation and to impart them with knowledge and skills so that they become useful members in building their society, who love their homeland and be proud of its history*³”. Even though the government has made substantial progress on female literacy and education in the previous 50 years, there is still much to do. The general model of education preserves the discriminative gender roles in which women are given class status, which is below that of men⁴. The Kingdom’s policy on education stresses that a girl’s education target to give her the appropriate Islamic education that will equip her with the necessary set of skills to become a good wife and an excellent mother.

Based on economic principles in the Kingdom, Article 22 states that, “*Economic and social development shall be achieved in accordance with a systematic and fair plan.*” Over the years, Saudi women have continued to be the victims of marginalization to a point where they are almost being faced with total expulsion from the workforce in Saudi Arabia⁵. Saudi Arabia is considered to have one of the lowest female employment rates in the whole region of the Middle East. It is often purported that courtesy of the proceeding importance of values such as family modesty and honor, a woman’s involvement in paid labor is a social stigma and gainful employment is solely the responsibility of men. Although this is changing, especially in the big cities in Saudi Arabia, it is still a problem and the numbers show that change is taking a slow pace, as we will see in the data analysis section later.

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Immanuel Wallerstein, *the Modern World System*, (San Diego: Academic Press, 2009).

⁵ Frank Vogel, *Islamic law in the modern world: the legal system of Saudi Arabia*, (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

Article 28 in the basic law of governance states that, “*The state shall provide job opportunities to all able-bodied people and shall enact laws to protect both the employee and the employer*”⁶. Of the approximate population of 8.4 million women who are of working age, only about 15% are employed⁷. This is a pointer that the kingdom has not tapped the full potential of its human resource. To some extent, the high level of unemployment of adult males in the Kingdom has had an effect on women employment. These unemployed males maintain a perception of viewing their unemployed female counterparts as rivals in employment opportunities. In spite of all these, Saudi women remain confidently optimistic that, at some point, they will be accorded equal opportunities as their male counterparts.

Finally, Article 26 of the basic law of governance in the Kingdom states that, “*The state shall protect human rights in accordance with Islamic Shari'a*”⁸. From the previous examples we can tell how many human rights are violated.

Nonetheless, there is a very strong likelihood that the status of women in the Kingdom is going to change due to the frequent variations in demographic and economic necessities within the Kingdom⁹.

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ Ruth Leger Sivard, *Women...A World Survey*, (Washington DC: University Press, 2011).

⁸ Frank Vogel, *Islamic law in the modern world: the legal system of Saudi Arabia*, (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

⁹ Abu Nasr, N Julinda, Khoury, and H. Azzam, *Women Employment and Development in the Arab World*, (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 2012).

CHAPTER 2

A HISTORIC OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S STATUS IN THE KINGDOM

The fast economic development in the 1970s, brought attention to women's issues in Saudi Arabia in a way that could not be ignored, especially with dramatic social change that is still ongoing right now due to the Arab uprising. Issues regarding women's rights and responsibilities in the development process have been equally controversial among both conservatives and progressives in Saudi society.

The historical socioeconomic and political conditions of Saudi Arabia are an essential aspect of understanding a woman's position in the Saudi society. The persistence of women's exclusion from public life is one of the biggest problems the country is facing. Before exploring women's status in Saudi Arabia, it is important to review some of the political and social events that have contributed to shape the status of women in the Saudi society.

A Historical Overview: Major political events and religious identity

In the past 50 years, the Middle East region has endured some major challenges that have affected all Middle Eastern nations and the Gulf States were no exception. Saudi Arabia, like other Gulf States, both directly and indirectly, has experienced some major social changes. First and foremost, the discovery and production of oil in 1930s was a major occurrence in the country. The oil-generated revenue in the early 1970s

introduced major changes; economically, politically and socially. The economic upheaval arising from the increased income from oil gave rise to a trend towards education abroad, and a change in lifestyle, and these two changes affected the whole structure of society¹⁰. Oil and its resulting wealth had an unimaginable impact on Saudi Arabia in an extremely compressed period of time.

The Iranian revolution in January 1979 that overthrew the Shah and the newly established Islamic government in Iran strengthened Saudi Arabian religious leadership¹¹. In addition, the Mecca uprising on November 20, 1979 was inspired as many analysts allege, as a result of Khomeini's example in Iran and the successful defeat of Iranian royals by religious clerics.

Shortly after that, the first Gulf War took place, which involved Iran and Iraq, and the second Gulf War in which Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. Each of the incidents mentioned has affected women and challenged Saudi society, a society that until then had experienced very little change in its policies towards women.

The American presence in Saudi Arabia began with the production of oil in 1970's and the establishment of ARAMCO (Arabian American Oil Company) in Dhahran, a city on the east coast of Saudi Arabia where most American companies are located. American engineers and oil executives brought their families and built many companies and Western-style houses, schools and compounds. Foreign migrant labor accounted for 43 per cent of total workforce in oil companies in the mid-1970s. American

¹⁰ Mai Yamani, *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (New York: New York Press, 1996).

¹¹ Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom: Arabia and the House of Sa'ud* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

women were shopping, unveiled, in malls and driving cars, something Saudi women were forbidden to do. Saudi women soon began asking for some of the same rights as their American counterparts. Some discussions took place on a formal level. However, with the Mecca uprising of 1979 such discussions came to a halt. Saudi Arabia arrived in the 1980s with a more complex society, eager to enjoy the fruits of advancement on all social and economic levels. At the same time there was a determination to preserve the country's religious identity and its social traditions¹². This balance between the two has been difficult to maintain, especially with regards to women's professional space. All three Wars affected the whole region in different aspects.

Women's schooling at all levels – elementary, secondary, high school and university – remained under the Department of Religious Guidance until 2002, while the Ministry of Education oversaw the education of boys. This was to ensure that women's education did not deviate from the original purpose of female education, which was to make women good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for 'acceptable' jobs such as teaching and nursing that were believed to suit their nature. The General Presidency for Girls' Education, which has not enjoyed the same prestige as the Ministry of Education, was heavily influenced by religious conservative scholars. Many Saudi women and men consider women's nature to be different from that of men; therefore, they are not allowed to work in the same jobs as men. That is why only certain jobs (i.e., teaching and nursing as opposed to engineering) are open to women.

The notion that women are only able to work in segregated spheres where they cannot be seen by strange men is still dominant. This paper is not about stressing the

¹² Summer Scott Huyette, *Political Adaptation in Saudi Arabia: A Study of the Council of Ministers* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1985).

patriarchal nature of Arab society in general and Saudi society in particular; rather, it is about explaining the consequence of excluding women from public life and constraining their educational, political, and career choices.

Women's issues in Saudi society are often mistakenly connected to Islamic teachings. The gender inequalities that are obvious in different aspects of Saudi life are institutionalized and difficult to dislodge through individual action. Women's inequality is traditionally structured in the society. "The rationale for a need to focus on women's achievements in higher education is considered a key social development indicator measuring women's status and conditions in any country"¹³. This suggests that Saudi women devise their own strategies to challenge gender inequality and achieve social justice not only in education but also in all life matters, especially given the complexity of women's issues and concerns in religious patriarchal societies.

The uniqueness of Saudi women's situation comes from their presence and yet non-presence in the public sphere. For instance, Smith, a Western feminist, suggests that gender inequality appeared to be rooted in women's traditional absence and silencing in public life. This comes from the normalization of gender differences in the curriculum content at all school ages for both boys and girls. Gender ideologies that can be attributed to traditional and socioeconomic values gained legal force in Saudi society by being associated with Islamic teaching. Until 2001, Saudi women were considered an extension of their male guardians. A woman's identity first appears in relation to her father family's identity card. Later, if she marries, she will be added to her husband's card or, in the case of her father's death, to that of her nearest male relative.

¹³ Rezai-rashti et al, "Women and Education in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *A paper presented for the International Political Science Association Congress, Canada* (2003)

In Saudi society in general, it is believed that the role of women was basic to maintaining the structure of the family and therefore of society¹⁴. The deeply embedded and complex nature of gender inequality in the society should be taken into account. Additionally, the practice of seclusion of Arab Muslim women is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Historically, Muslim Arab women participated in all aspects of life politically, socially, and economically. Since Saudi women, as all women in any given society, differ in their class, race, and cultural background for them to challenge gender inequalities there is an urgent need to cross borders and ignore their cultural and class differences. These women unite and collaborate with each other to overcome male dominance in their society.

The use and the acceptance of only a sole religious interpretation of Qur'an (Wahhabism), to promote the authority of men is a pressing and a very problematic issue. In some cases Islamic and religious texts are being interpreted literally, which provide some conservative religious scholars to silence women's voices in the name of Islam. However, recently religious ideology has become a tool for Saudi Muslim women who are learning how to study Islamic ideology in depth and to apply it to women's issues. Women are learning to use the so-called, 'legitimate language', religious language, a language that cannot be challenged by their male peers to attain their goals. Saudi women are also directed towards studying Islamic law and Shar'ia so they can speak in the name of Islam, which is a powerful way to confront the status quo.

¹⁴ Marianne Alireza, *Women of Saudi Arabia* (National Geographic, 1987), 423-453.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on women's status not only as human rights, but also as a pathway to improving socioeconomic development in Saudi Arabia. Based on this proposed research, the study will examine the issues in relation to the status of Saudi women by trying to give answers to the following questions:

The Research Question

How have different policies/ social norms affected the status of women since 2000?

Their role in politics, workforce and public life in general?

Secondary questions

- What is the level of women participation in politics, economy, and public life in general?
- What are the policies that directly affected women in Saudi Arabia?
- What policies should be implemented to ensure the status of women in Saudi Arabia is improved?

Research Design

This is a descriptive statistics research study. It is essential to use descriptive research design for this study to answer the “what is going on” question or “what is the status of women”. Accurate descriptions of the level of phenomena have historically played a key role in social policy reforms¹⁵. By demonstrating the existence of social problems, competent description can challenge accepted assumptions about the way things are and can provoke action¹⁶.

Data Sources:

The study used a quantitative method after collecting raw data from various governmental statistical reports and data sets. The data sets used were:

- The Central Department of Statistics and Information, Ministry of Economy and Planning
- Ministry of Labor statistics report, 2012
- Ministry of Commerce and Industry statistics reports
- Ministry of Education statistics data sets
- Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA, 2011)
- Al-Arabiya News survey on women driving

¹⁵ Catherine Marsh, *The Survey Method: The contribution of surveys to sociological explanation* (London: Allen And Unwin, 1982).

¹⁶ De Vaus, D. A, *Surveys in social research. 5th ed.* (London: Routledge, 2002).

The Study's Time Frame:

The data collected covered the period from 2000 to 2013. The main reason for choosing the year 2000 as the starting point of collecting data is the incredible growth of internet usage throughout the entire Middle East region. The use of this form of technology has made access to information outside one's community easy and at very low cost, if any. The introduction of internet to the Saudi society has made people more open "culturally" where they are free to exchange and share ideas with the rest of the world.

CHAPTER 4

THE STATE OF WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA

In this chapter, I will present the data collected and its analysis. The areas covered in this study are: women and politics, women and the economy, and women and the driving ban.

1. Women and Politics

Women's inclusion in political and civic life would release a wealth of talent that could increase domestic economic activity, empower competition, reduce unnecessary costs of social segregation, enrich cultural and civic development, and help foster democratic institutions, thereby weakening extremist influences in the country. With Saudi Arabia's significant religious and economic influence regionally and globally, empowering women in Saudi Arabia will radically increase chances for democratic reforms. Empowering women is a moral imperative and a powerful path to promoting progress, tolerance and equality in the society as well as the benefits they will add to the overall development of the country.

How oil production can affect women's political participation?

In Professor Michael Ross's study titled "Oil, Islam and Women"¹⁷, he argued that there is an inverse relationship between oil and women's social and political opportunities. The Middle East's dire record in women's rights and equality, he argued, was not due to the legacy of Islamic culture, but is rather attributable to oil. He concluded that the idea that "development leads to equality" was not valid in all cases, but depended on the type of development. Development that was dependent on oil and mineral revenues allowed for the preservation of patriarchal norms, laws and institutions in a society.

His study showed that similar impacts of oil on the status of women in oil-rich countries applied outside the Middle East in places like Nigeria, Russia and Chile. Ross's research includes statistical data that show the existing relationship between oil and the impact on the work patterns of women and their opportunities for political representation. The data show that the emergence of the Saudi oil industry directly yielded a drop in the proportion of women in the labor force and decision-making authority, an apparent characteristic of Gulf societies.

Before the oil era, women were an essential part of agricultural production and commerce; they were not socially isolated in the stark ways we see today. Moreover, in some areas of Saudi Arabia, the covering of women's faces was not prevalent until after 1980 – after the Islamic revolution in Iran and the famous incident in the Holy Mosque in Mecca that led to increased conservatism. There can be no doubt that the reduction of

¹⁷ Michael L. Ross, "Oil, Islam, And Women," *American Political Science Review* (2008): 107--123.

women’s work opportunities reduces their influence in the family, as family income is more likely to be generated by a male member of the household and ultimately reduce women’s influence in the political sphere. The following figure illustrates this relationship using the “Dutch Disease” model¹⁸:

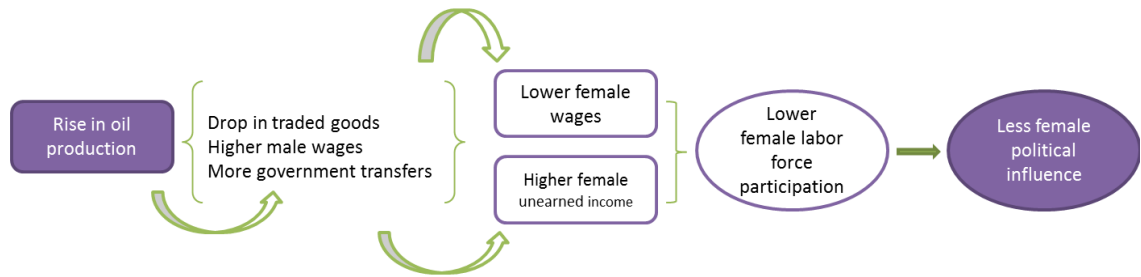


Figure 1 how oil production may reduce female political influence

The current state of women in politics

On 25th September, 2012 the King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, issued a decree that allowed Saudi women to enter the Consultative Council (*Majlis Ashura*) and be nominated for candidacy in municipal elections. This decision was consistent with a series of transformative royal decrees issued since King Abdullah’s ascendancy to the throne in 2005.

It is believed that King Abdullah has pushed to pass laws in favor of women and sometimes argued with the religious establishment to give women more rights. It was during this period that Saudi women were issued national identity cards; policy and legislation were passed in the interests of women; and jobs such as in passport administration, civil defense, the state human rights commission and the Ministry of Trade and Industry opened up to women. Women were also made eligible to run for

¹⁸ Dutch disease model: Negative consequences arising from large increases in a country's income. Dutch disease is primarily associated with a natural resource discovery.

election in the Chamber of Commerce and the engineers' and journalists' unions. In 2009, a woman was appointed deputy minister of education (becoming the first woman to hold the rank of minister), and another was appointed university director for Princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman University.

Saudi Arabia has two legislative councils that are responsible for passing laws. Those are the council of ministers and the consultative council. The figure below shows the difference in percentages of women in the two branches in 2000 and 2013:

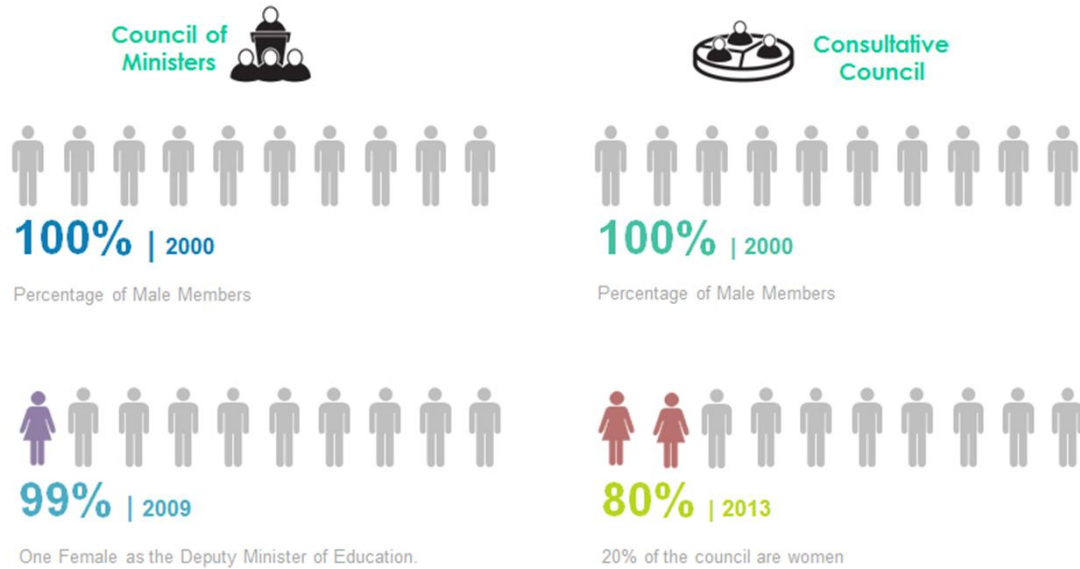


Figure 2 percentage of women in politics

In 2013, women joined the consultative council for the first time in the kingdom's history, which was a big step towards acknowledging women's rights. However, there were doubts whether their involvement would influence change. In the next section, I will review some of the laws that were passed in favor of women since they joined the council.

Can political involvement of women influence change?

The following table will present some of the laws that were passed in favor of women since women joined the consultative council in 2013.

Table 2 Laws in favor of women

The Law	When was it passed	Explanation of the law
1. Criminalize domestic abuse against women	Was passed late 2013 and activated March 2014	This new legislation aims to protect people from all forms of abuse and offers them shelter as well as "social, psychological, and medical aid," according to its text. Those found guilty could face prison sentences of up to one year and up to 50,000 riyals (\$13,300) in fines ¹⁹ .
2. Granting a lawyer license to the first Saudi female lawyer	January 2014	Saudi Arabia's Bayan Alzahrani is the country's first female lawyer to be granted an official license from the Ministry of Justice. She also has opened her own law firm ²⁰ .
3. Accepting the driving petition for discussion	February 2014	The driving petition was rejected four times before in the Consultative Council and just last February it was accepted for discussion.

¹⁹ "Saudi Arabia Passes Law Criminalizing Domestic Abuse," August 30, 2013, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/8/30/saudi-arabia-passeslawcriminalizingdomesticabuse.html>.

²⁰ "Saudi Arabia Grants License To First Female Lawyer," , <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2013/10/07/Saudi-Arabia-grants-license-to-first-female-lawyer.html>.

As we can see from the table above, change is taking place and new laws are passing to grant women more rights. The decision to allow highly educated, influential, brilliant women to participate in *Majlis Ashura* and municipal council of Saudi Arabia is an important step forward, especially given that Saudi Arabia is in an extreme need of any movement regarding this issue. At the same time, however, such a step is still restricted and limitations as well as challenges remain.

Saudi woman whose entry into political life some may now celebrate, is still not allowed to drive her car to open the shop that she owns and operates. In a normal situation, this would be a natural right that is no less than that of her male counterpart. It can be said that more basic and fundamental rights have to be given in order to have maximum benefit from women's political participation.

2. Women and the Productive Economy

In 2013, the active workforce in Saudi Arabia comprised 10.6 million people, fewer than half of whom were Saudi nationals²¹. Equally important, 85.6 percent of the nationals in the labor force were men. Women in the labor force had an unemployment rate of 33.2 percent—nearly five times that of men²² (see chart below).

As the Kingdom promotes its Saudization policy, which seeks to increase the proportion of Saudi nationals in new competitive jobs, women must be supported and encouraged to contribute to their country's economy.

²¹ Central Department of Statistics and Information, Ministry of Economy and Planning

²² Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency, SAMA, Forty-Ninth Annual Report, 2013



Figure 3 male and female employment and unemployment rates in 2013

Women high on education, low on employment

Although female labor participation is limited in Saudi Arabia, Saudi women are getting educated as of their male counterparts in all levels of education. Over 93% of employed females hold either a secondary qualification or a university degree versus around 60% of employed men. In fact, 78.3% of the unemployed women are university graduates, while 76% of the unemployed men have a secondary education or lower²³. Social pressures and the lack of family support prevent women from entering the labor market.

Today, more than 90 percent of Saudi women actively participating in the workforce hold a secondary qualification or a university degree. In 2013, 48.3 percent of university graduates in Saudi Arabia were women²⁴, and this rising education level is a major factor in the increase of female participation in the labor force (see chart). This is not to say that simply getting a degree enables Saudi women to join the workforce, it does not. The national education system is not preparing Saudi women for competitive

²³ Mona Almunajjed, "Women's Employment In Saudi Arabia: A Major Challenge," *Booz & Company* (2010).

²⁴ Central Department of Statistics and Information, Ministry of Economy and Planning

jobs in the workforce. As a result, they have been largely limited to traditional fields of work such as teaching, service businesses, and health care services.

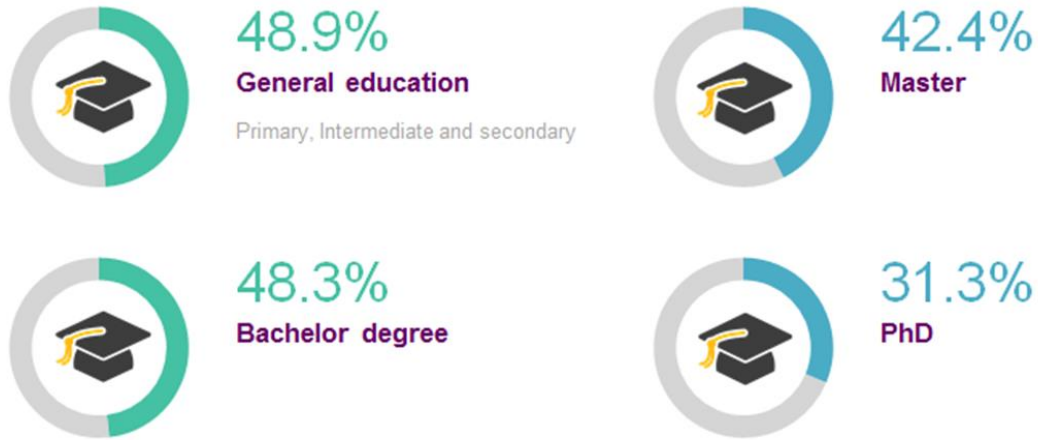


Figure 4 women graduates in all-levels of education in 2013

The high female unemployment rate, why is it increasing?

Since 2000, women’s participation rate in the Saudi labor force has nearly tripled, from 5.4 percent⁴ to 15.4 percent in 2013. (The labor force, or the economically active population, includes people who are currently employed and those seeking employment). However, although this latest statistic is an improvement, it represents one of the lowest levels of national female employment rates in the Gulf region. Moreover, if we look at the change in the female unemployment rate over the years, we will notice that it is increasing unlike the male unemployment rate that is decreasing until it reached its lowest point in 13 years. The graphs below show the difference:

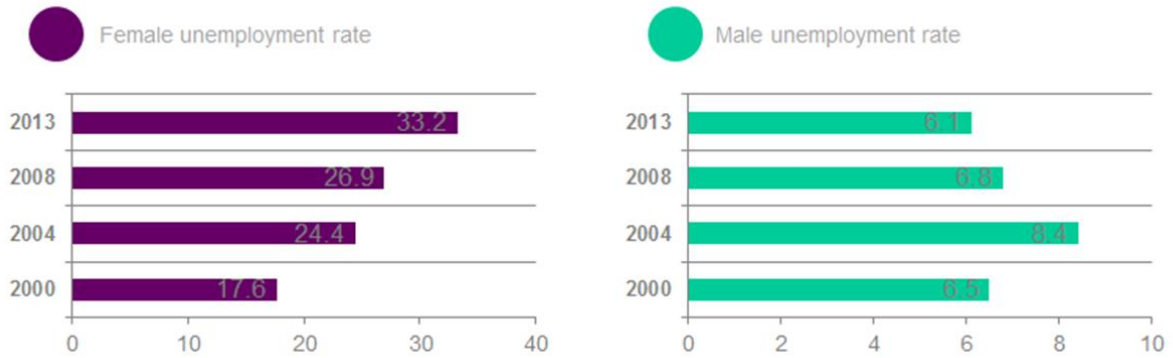


Figure 5 male and female unemployment rates over the years

There are many reasons for the increase in the female unemployment rate. Some are social, legal, and economic. The Saudi government has to consider serious solutions and reforms for these indicators in order to improve the status of women in employment.

Follow are some of the reasons why the female unemployment rate is increasing:

1. The traditional role of women in the society is more valued as a mother or a wife. Women choosing to pursue a career over building a family is not an encouraged idea among most of the Saudi families.
2. The ban on driving has not been lifted, which always has been the biggest obstacle for women's employment. By taking their right of mobility, the chances of getting into the workforce is very limited too.
3. Application of laws is not monitored by the government. An example of this is the approval that almost every employer in the country asks from women to provide from their "male guardian" before offering her a position. In the past there was a law that support this, but in 2004 it was removed. Another problem arises here is that most women do not know that they do not have to provide the approval anymore. They simply have not been educated on their rights.

4. The introduction of the unemployment benefits program “Hafiz”. This government sponsored program is aimed at helping job seekers financially until they secure a job position. The problem with this program though is that most of the citizens getting the monthly allowance are not actively seeking jobs. The pie chart below shows the percentages of men and women enrolled in Hafiz program in 2012²⁵:

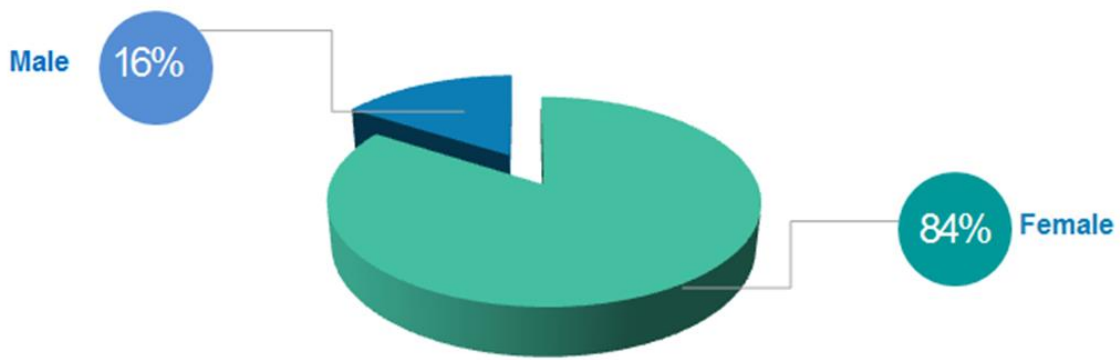


Figure 6 hafiz program beneficiaries in 2012

Women own much of the country's wealth

“Saudi Business Women are Estimated to have SAR45 billion in pure Cash” According to statistics provided by the Sayyida Khadija bint Khuwaylid Centre of the Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah. Although women in Saudi Arabia lack the opportunities and support compared to their male counterparts, their economic power cannot be underestimated. Saudi business women have cash savings of more than SAR45 billion (USD11.9 billion) in Saudi banks, and SAR8 billion (USD2.1 billion) of funds in

²⁵ Saudi Arabian Ministry of Labor statistical report, 2012

investments. In addition, their total real estate investments stand at around SAR120 billion (USD31.9 billion). One reason for this is that females own around 40% of the family-run companies though mostly as sleeping partners. The chart below shows the percentage of businesses owned by women since 2005²⁶:

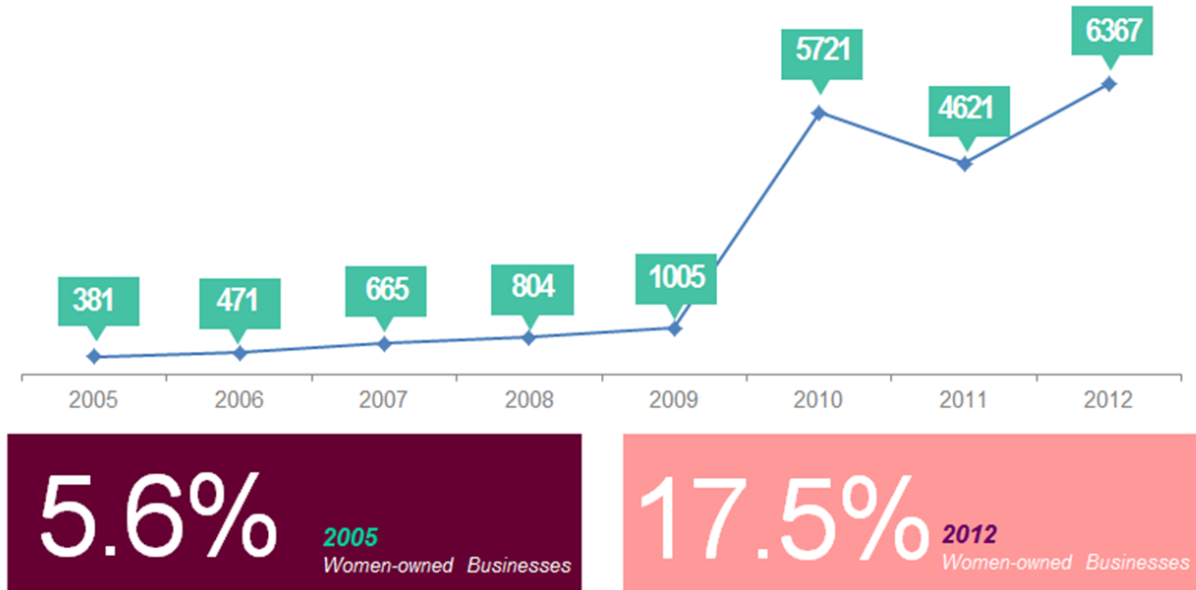


Figure 7 women-owned businesses

Although there is an increase in the number of businesses owned by women, the latest number 17.5 percent still does not represent a good number giving the fact that women do own much of the country’s wealth.

²⁶ Saudi Arabian Ministry of Commerce and Industry

3. Women and the driving ban

Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world that does not allow women to drive. It is a traditional custom and a social norm that has been passed down from generation to the other. The impact of this policy is significant, not only at the economic level, but to the simple every-day life level. My argument here is that women's driving is more than a human right, it is a religious right and a legal right as well.

1. A Human Right

In the beginning, a researcher of Islamic affairs, and a member of the Human Rights Association, "Suhaila Zein al-Abidine" says that Islam does not forbid women their rights, and driving is a right. The Kingdom has already signed the international convention of non-discrimination against women, including the right of movement. She said "There is no legitimate Islamic text that prohibits women from driving a car, we are a country that follows the teachings of Islam and knows very well that the basic principle of Islam is tolerance and permission, unless an issue is specifically deemed prohibited". She added that relying on drivers has moral, safety and economic risks that are much bigger than those posed if women were allowed to drive, so it is an issue of necessity, not a luxury, "especially in times of crisis,"²⁷.

2. A religious right

Many Sharia experts and sheikhs have declared their support for lifting the ban on women driving, especially after growing concerns regarding drivers and the consequences and problems of recruiting a man for each household. Sheikh Abdullah al

²⁷ "Women Driving: How Do We Start Application?," *Alriyadh* (Riyadh), April 1, 2010.

Mutlaq, a professor of Comparative Jurisprudence and a former judge of the Court of Hail in Saudi Arabia, made his view explicit on this subject in Okaz newspaper on June 4, 2009. He emphasized that there is no legitimate justification that prevents women from driving. He also points out the need to launch an awareness campaign for young people to respect women who drive and as such to acclimatize everyone until it becomes a normal sight.

3. A Legal right

The question is why is it illegal for women to drive if they have an international driving license?

According to article sixteen of the traffic laws in Saudi Arabia: "*No driver license can be issued to any **person** until they pass the driving test. A driving test is not required if the **person** carries a valid and legal international driver license.*"²⁸ Based on this text, the word "person" contained therein is not limited to the male without the female, indicating that the fact that driving licenses are issued exclusively to males is not supported by any document from the traffic system and its laws. Even when I looked at the law in Arabic, they used the word "*shakhs*", which also a word that could be used for both genders.

²⁸ "Traffic Law In Saudi Arabia," http://www.rt.gov.sa/files/rt_policy.pdf.

What do Saudis think of women's driving?

According to a social media survey conducted by Al-Arabiya News in 2012, 57 percent supported women driving, 32 percent opposed it, and 12 percent thought it is too soon to discuss. Note that there were 1500 participants to this survey²⁹.

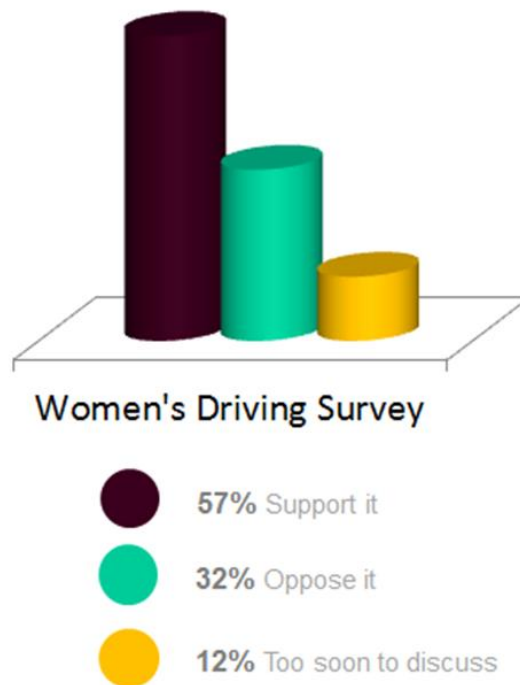


Figure 8 women's driving survey

Although the sample size is not too large, it definitely represents a good portion of young Saudis who are full of hope. At this point, the government has to take an action

²⁹ "Women's Driving Survey," , <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/04/20/146139.html>.

towards solving this issue. Conducting surveys and asking people their opinions is not enough especially with the current extreme religious opposition in the society.

CONCLUSION

Given the significant human capital they represent and the financial resources they have, Saudi women could lead Saudi Arabia's drive to diversify the economy from oil and bring changes that will develop the Saudi society. The country needs to invest in its human capital by developing the educational and training infrastructure, if it wants to emerge as a knowledge-based economy. Increasing the contribution of women in key economic and political spheres can speed up the development process. Establishing a just workplace for both men and women can generate significant economic value. Moreover, greater educational support for women to take up jobs in IT and communications can increase the government's return on investments in the country's education system.

Going forward, the Saudi government should develop a national plan of action and policy formulation in favor of women. Policies need to target women's participation in the decision-making process and workforce. These policies should be closely monitored to ensure effectiveness.

Policy recommendations

The purpose of this study was to shine a light on women in Saudi Arabia that have the power and ability to bring about significant social and economic change. However, this can only be done within the right parameters. The change will not be effective and long lasting if it is done outside the current social norms of Saudi Arabia. For this change to be an effective change, it needs to grow and develop organically within the boundaries of what is acceptable and understandable to the Saudi society.

The recommendations are as follow:

1. The Saudi government should form partnerships with civil society, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector for implementation and follow-up. This partnership is extremely important as it will provide up to date information on what needs to be done.
2. Raise awareness about the positive role that women play in the society, as well as their rights, opportunities, and successes. Women should be made aware of their legal rights so that they may properly take advantage of them, and the Saudi public should receive positive messages about the valuable role of women in the society. First, public awareness campaigns should focus on changing the traditional gender stereotypes that hamper women's ability to properly participate in the economy. Media campaigns, conferences, and public service announcements should all be effectively used to convey a fundamental message: Saudi women can and must play a critical role in the society.

3. Appointing more women to leadership decision-making position across every sector and region. Women should be encouraged and prepared to assume highly visible positions, and should be selected to represent the Kingdom at regional and international meetings. Especially that there are Saudi women that are highly eligible and capable of holding such positions.
4. The ministry of labor should create, promote, and implement a system of infrastructural support for working women. Family-friendly policies including flexible hours, parental leave, and child-care facilities are essential to ensuring that women do not avoid the workforce out of concern for their children's well-being. The lack of such policies is one of the major reasons why Saudi women decide not to join the workforce.
5. The ministry of labor should also promote the establishment of nurseries in workplaces, collaborating with local communities to match child-care providers with workplaces in need of their services.
6. The government should look for ways to facilitate the development of a system of transportation services for women that enables them to commute to work without the help of a male driver or a male family member. An employer-provided system is necessary to shuttle female employees between their homes and places of work. The current system impedes women's ability to participate in the labor force and therefore deprives Saudi Arabia of realizing its economy's and its people's full potential. If they are not allowing them to drive, they should provide them with different alternatives.
7. Or they can simply allow them to drive.

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