

**The impact of women's empowerment policies on the rate of
Saudi women's participation in the labour force from 2016-
2020**

By

Ahlam Alrashdi

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ABSTRACT

The marginalization of women remains one of the key issues facing modern society. The disempowerment of women and girls has been observable in social, political, economic, and health aspects. This paper discusses women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, an Islamic country ranked among the top twenty economies in the world. Saudi women are facing a number of obstacles, including discrimination based on gender and a lack of employment opportunities. The aim of this thesis is to determine whether the Saudi government's plan for economic growth and social transformation (Saudi Vision 2030) empowered Saudi women by increasing their employment opportunities. The main focus is how is the empowerment of Saudi women expressed in Saudi Vision 2030 and determine the effect of women empowerment policies on the rate of participation of Saudi women in the labour force from the year of implement the Saudi Vision 2030 (2016) until the year 2020. The neoliberal feminist framework of empowerment was used to understand women's empowerment and its relationship to increasing employment opportunities for women. To achieve the aim of this thesis, the data from the Saudi labour market statistics related to the participation of Saudi women in the workforce were analysed and discussed. Based on available statistics, Saudi women have more jobs now than before 2016, which means that they are more empowered. The women's empowerment policies under the light of Saudi Vision 2030 showed positive progress in favour of women empowerment through the increasing of women's participation in the labour force from 19 per cent in 2016 to 33 per cent in 2020. Although these efforts are commendable, the other kinds of feminists' perspectives acknowledge that the neoliberal feminist approach has certain limitations. One of the limitations is that current empowerment initiatives don't pay enough attention to women's role in the family, resulting in a complex social issue. Further research to monitor and evaluate the impact of current empowerment initiatives on women's roles in the family would be helpful.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed.....

Date.....

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1. Chapter One: Introduction

1.1.Introduction and background

During the last three decades, conversations about women's empowerment have been among the core themes in national and global debates in pursuit of human development. The prevailing gender inequalities in human development are so huge that the awareness initiatives and international programs fighting against women's discrimination continue to expand. Disempowerment of women and girls have been observed socially, politically, economically, and in health, such that women's marginalisation stands as one of the most challenging issues in modern society (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2015).

This thesis focuses on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) which is an Islamic country and among the world's twenty largest economies (Naseem & Dhruva, 2017). The country's policies on gender equality have gained global attention. A number of issues prevented Saudi women from reaching their full potential, such as gender discrimination and a lack of work and education opportunities. Saudi women's lives have traditionally revolved around unpaid work such as household chores and other household affairs, while Saudi men have been the breadwinners (Hamdan, 2005). The introduction of primary education for women in 1960 began to open the path for women's labour-force involvement. Women's contributions to the country's economic activity however remain far below their potential. In subsequent decades, urbanisation, industrialisation, and modernisation in Saudi Arabia ushered in a new era of women's empowerment (AlMunajjed, 1997, p.83; Pharaon, 2004).

In April 2016, the KSA government announced the Saudi Vision 2030, a transformative economic and social reform blueprint for better outcomes. More importantly, it created a premise for women's empowerment policies and other transformative undertakings. As part of this agenda, the government has taken steps to boost women's labour-force involvement from 22 to 30 per cent by 2030 (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016). To accomplish this, the KSA enacted a plethora of laws and regulations aimed at removing the barriers that hinder Saudi women from obtaining employment prospects. Specific steps in this regard include permitting women to drive, eliminating the need for women to seek permission from a guardian to study or take a job, and giving them the opportunity to work alongside men (Saudi Unified National Platform, 2021).

This thesis sets out to find out whether the Saudi Vision 2030 has empowered Saudi women through greater access to employment. The key focus is how the Saudi Vision 2030 and related policies envisage the empowerment of Saudi women and what is the relationship between empowering Saudi women and the rate of female labour force participation from 2016 to 2020. To understand why and how attention has been directed to women's economic empowerment, the thesis will analyse Vision 2030 and related policies. This analysis is framed by a neoliberal feminist understanding of women's empowerment.

The term "empowerment" has many meanings, but in the context of addressing gender inequalities in human development it has been recognised in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and is most clearly articulated in the documents produced at the 1995 World Conference of Women (Topal, 2019). Empowerment entails improving women's political participation, bridging education and wage gaps (Kabeer, 2005), and nurturing gender equality (United Nations Women,

2015). This thesis is guided by the neoliberal feminist perspective, which considers economic empowerment as the main path to women's empowerment. If women are able to participate in the market economy, they gain a stronger economic position, which in turn will expand their agency and decision-making power and effect a more equal distribution of power in the household as well. From the neoliberal feminist point of view, mere participating in the labour force is empowerment. Liberal feminism also highlights the significance of government policies and laws in altering women's status and paving the way for economic participation (Coleman, 2010; Revenga & Shetty, 2012).

Although many Saudi and non-Saudi researchers have addressed empowering Saudi women in various fields (e.g., Quamar, 2013; Rizvi & Hussain, 2021; Topal, 2019; Varshney, 2019), no research has been devoted to studying how the Saudi Vision 2030 and related policies conceptualise empowerment, how it would be achieved and therefore understand the relationship between empowering Saudi women and the rate of female labour force participation. Thus, this thesis aims to do that. The scope of this study will be to evaluate the rate of Saudi female participation in the labour force in the period 2011-2020; non-Saudi women living and working in KSA are beyond the scope of the thesis.

1.2. Significance of the study

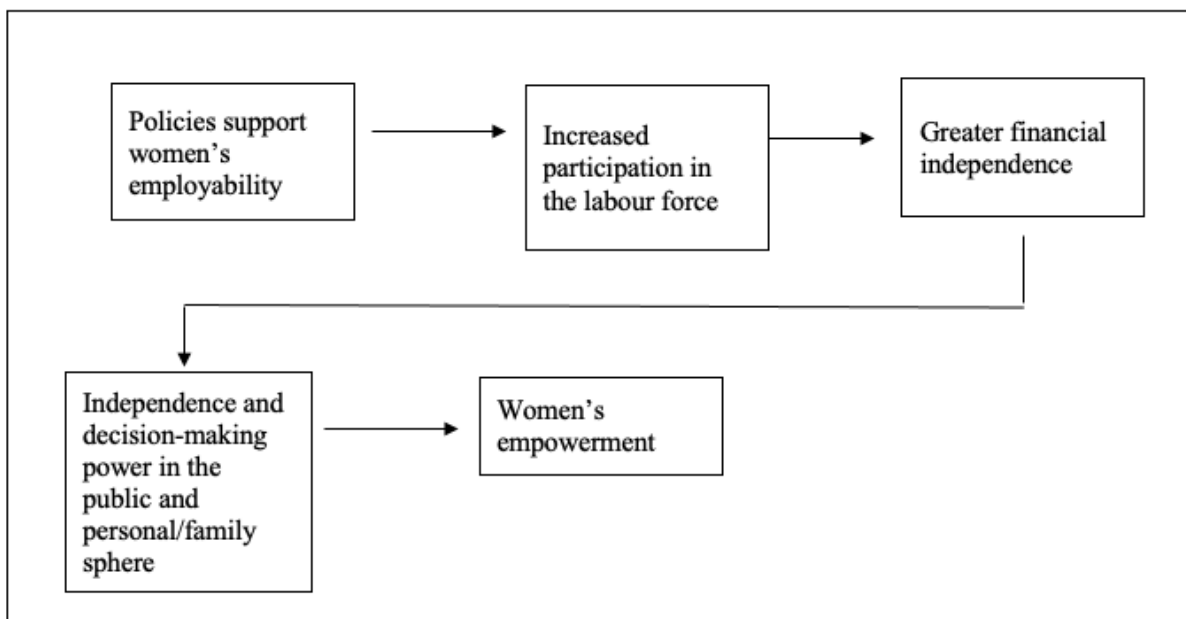
This thesis aims to inform policy makers and stakeholders about the impacts of new policies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on women's empowerment, particularly in terms of female participation in the labour force. This study will also fill a research gap by analysing policies that have been adopted to implement the Saudi Vision 2030 in regard to the participation rate of Saudi women in the workforce. Findings from this study will help

contribute to the body of knowledge on Saudi women's empowerment, as well as offer guidance for future women's empowerment programs.

1.3. Methodology

Based on the neoliberal feminist perspective, this study will explore women's empowerment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia using an analytical framework that links better economic standing for women to increased agency and decision-making power in both the public and the private sphere (Coleman, 2010; Revenga and Shetty, 2012). Figure 1.1 shows a framework of the employment status of Saudi women and the policies of the Saudi government that aim to empower this population through employment opportunities. Furthermore, the study employs the Policy Analysis Triangle to analyse key policies that have been formulated to implement the Saudi Vision 2030 targets regarding women's empowerment.

Figure 1.1: Neoliberal feminist framework of empowerment



1.4. Thesis questions and aim

The aim of this thesis is to find out whether the Saudi Vision 2030 has empowered Saudi women through greater access to employment. It addresses the following specific questions:

1. How does the Saudi Vision 2030 and related policies envisage the empowerment of Saudi women?
2. What is the impact of women's empowerment policies on the rate of female participation in the labour force from 2016-2020?

1.5. Thesis objectives

- To explore the history of women's empowerment policies in Saudi Arabia.
- To determine how the Saudi Vision 2030 policy expresses and addresses women's empowerment.
- Map the different steps of implementation of women's empowerment in the light of the Saudi Vision 2030.
- To evaluate the impact of women's empowerment policies on the rate of female participation in the labour force from 2016-2020.

1.6. Methods

To achieve the objectives of this study, a desktop literature review was conducted. The desktop analysis is appropriate for this research because it is less time-consuming and less expensive than other methods. Coverage extended to secondary data from peer-reviewed articles, books, and grey literature in English language regarding women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia. The research databases ProQuest, Taylor and Francis Online, Wiley Online Library and Google Scholar were used to retrieve articles related to the topic. The time frame

for publications was set from 1987 to 2021 to provide a sufficient explanation of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia. Boolean operators AND, OR, NOT and research keywords Saudi*, Women*, gender*, equality*, empowerment* inequality were used to retrieve relevant works of literature. Primary data, such as Saudi government reports, national plans, official statistics, and United Nations data were evaluated. The policy documents were examined through content analysis using NVivo 12 software to identify and explain women's empowerment in the Saudi context. The official statistics were analysed to ascertain and explain the similarities and differences in the rate of female participation in the labour force during the years 2016 to 2020.

1.7. Thesis structure

The body of the thesis is structured in four chapters as follows. **Chapter two** is a literature review on women's empowerment in international policies and the connection between women's empowerment and economic growth. this chapter also contains literature about the neoliberal feminist perspective which has been adopted to develop the conceptual framework of defining women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia. **Chapter three** discusses the beginning of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia; thus, this chapter provides a historical background of the education of Saudi women and the early stage of joining the labour force. **Chapter four** provides a deep analysis of the Saudi Vision 2030 targets related to women's empowerment. This chapter also explains the policies and the laws that have been changed in order for Saudi women to be empowered. **Chapter five** contains two sections, firstly, an evaluation of the data of the Saudi labour market in regard to women's participation in the labour force, employment data, and the unemployment rate. The second section discusses these results from a neoliberal feminist perspective, to answer the question whether Saudi women have been economically empowered particularly during the period 2016 to 2020.

2. Chapter Two: Gender equality and women's empowerment from a neoliberal feminist perspective

2.1. Introduction

Gender and women's empowerment has become an important topic over recent decades, especially in countries' development plans where empowering women is linked to the progress and development of the country. Economic empowerment is a significant part of this process, and employment is the key portal on that path. Although the word "empowerment" is considered a subject of controversy and a great deal of scholarly literature (Gram, Morrison, & Skordis-Worrall, 2019), the focus in this thesis, and specifically in this chapter, is on economic empowerment translated through employment.

This chapter explains in the first section how empowerment is conceptualised and used in international policies for women; how international bodies and policies have linked economic empowerment, development, and poverty reduction with gender equality. The second section explains how neoliberal feminist theory supports this argument by presenting women's participation in the market economy as key to their economic empowerment, and how economic empowerment also leads to women's empowerment in other fields such as family and household.

2.2. Empowerment of women in international policies

The term "women's empowerment" entered international politics in the 1990s but the issue of equality of rights between women and men was raised by the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1945, where it emphasised that all family members are equal in rights and dignity, which is the basis of freedom and peace in the world (Topal, 2019). After that, the international conventions were based on the UDHR, which enshrines the right of each person to life, liberty, and security of person; therefore, women have equal rights with men. For example, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil Political Rights and the 1976 International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights are two of the key international bill of rights which uphold and safeguard the rights of every human being to fair and equal treatment regardless of their colour, sex, or race (Topal, 2019; United Nations, 2010).

However, it was not until the 1970s that gender issues rose to prominence in the United Nations (UN) conferences through the First World Conference on Women in 1975. The UN has adopted and endorsed numerous global pacts to promote non-discrimination principles and equality to reduce women's relegation. For example, in the wake of the First World Conference, the UN created the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, an intercontinental pact directly addressing women's rights that has been ratified by most nation-states. CEDAW offers international frameworks for conceptualising gender equality in social, political, and financial opportunities within society (United Nations Women, n.d.). Notably, the issue of gender equality was not limited to international conferences on women, but rather became one of the most prominent agenda items of United Nations World Conferences. During the Third United Nations World Conference in 1987, gender equality was associated with social and economic development, unlike the previous UN World's Conferences which limited gender equality to civil and political aspects (United Nations Women, n.d.).

In the early 1990s, in conjunction with the emergence of many interpretations of the term empowerment by prominent authors on the topic of gender equality, the UN adopted the word “empowerment” into its vocabulary, associating the term with poverty. At the 1995 World Conference of Women, social issues and economic struggles, underdevelopment and poverty were identified as hindrances to women’s empowerment (Topal, 2019; United Nations Women, n.d.). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that emanated from the 1995 Conference became an important milestone document on women’s empowerment. As Kabeer (2012) observes, these documents play an essential role in advocating for women's rights, gender equality, and women’s empowerment globally. Thus, women’s empowerment became more prominent when the UN and international institutions started to focus more on poverty reduction and the feminisation of poverty.

Addressing the "feminisation of poverty" issue, Narayan (2002, p.13) from the World Bank suggests that empowerment is "the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives". This can be achieved, according to Narayan (2002), by reducing inequality by investing in the capabilities of the poor through education and access to basic health care, as well as by increasing their access to land, financial capital and markets. For the World Bank, women’s empowerment was an essential aspect of sustainable development and poverty reduction. Lopez-Claros and Perotti (2014) report that nations that fail in capitalising on the full potential of 50 per cent of their society misallocate human resources and undermine their competitive potential.

The World Bank's approach to empowerment for economic growth and poverty reduction was in line with the Millennium Development Goals which were a result of the

United Nations Millennium Declaration signed by 191 United Nations member states (United Nations, 2015). The women's empowerment concept was adopted in the Third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) "to promote gender equality and empower women" (United Nations, 2015). According to Kabeer (2005), the three important agendas under the MDG were eliminating the gender disparity in education; eliminating the wage gap; and improving women's political representation. Women's empowerment has been linked to women's access to education, because this is essential to achieving economic empowerment. Education opens up opportunities for women to become key players in the labour market, which drives economic growth. Signing and adopting the Millennium Development Goals in the Saudi development plans was an important point for enhancing the education level of Saudi women, – more on this point will be clarified in the third chapter of this thesis. United Nations Women (2018) posit that strengthening the different spheres of women is a promising way to nurture gender equality while boosting global prosperity. Thus, the approach to women's empowerment in international policies is focused on education, employment, and political representation. By expanding women's opportunities in these areas, empowerment is achieved.

2.3. Neoliberal feminist perspective

Different models for gender equality and empowerment have emerged recently to transform or actualise international rights instruments and individual countries' transformative commitments. The literature from the neoliberal feminists and the non-neoliberal feminists about the critical role of the state are pertinent. to understand the

argument about gender equality and economic participation and empowerment. This literature is discussed in the following section.

To understand the neoliberal feminist approach to gender equality and empowerment, Wilson (2015) suggests that scholars must acknowledge the liberal roots of neoliberal feminism. According to Wilson (2015), the traditional genealogies of gender and women's empowerment occurred in two main stages: first the Women in Development approach identified and responded to unequal gender ties, and second there was a move toward mandates for women's inclusion in development policies propagated by liberal feminists.

Neoliberal feminists argue that gender equality policies are vital to women's economic empowerment, which plays a crucial role in economic growth, as well as a key role in women's empowerment in many aspects of their lives, both at the private and public levels. The neoliberal feminist perspective represented by Coleman (2010) and Revenga & Shetty (2012) makes a case for women's empowerment models, education, and economic opportunities as a way to positively impact on economic growth. This model of empowerment is similar to the approach to women's empowerment taken by international institutions such as the UN and the World Bank.

Furthermore, neoliberal feminists criticise the existing structural gender inequalities, especially regarding economic opportunities and labour markets, and argue that states have a role in making changes through policies and legislation (Tyler, 2015). Thus, neoliberal feminists see equality policies as a way to achieve women's empowerment and argue that the state has a very important role as a policy maker in order to push the agendas of women's empowerment. According to Lopez-Claros and Perotti (2014), equality and women's

empowerment can be achieved by prioritising concepts of equality, justice, and opportunities. This includes providing education opportunities which are fundamental to participation in the economy. Feminist neoliberal perspectives uphold empowerment and equality in line with equality policies that focus on enhancing women's equal opportunities, especially in the economic field. According to Koggel (2003), empowerment and equality outcomes can be measured by women's economic independence which involves participation in labour markets. The following paragraphs provide more details about the neoliberal feminist arguments about the importance of empowering women on economic development and also about how economic empowerment may lead to women's overall empowerment.

2.3.1. The connection between women's economic empowerment and economic growth

Neoliberal feminists maintain that the economic empowerment of women is good for a nation's economy. The World Bank's notion of Smart Economics connects an increase in women's labour-force participation with gender equality and with economic growth. The neoliberal feminist perspective resonates with the World Bank's observations that gender equality will boost growth, improve the development outcomes of future generations, and strengthen institutions (World Bank 2012, p.3). This framework for equality and empowerment views women as entrepreneurs because women are a fundamental source of growth. The World Bank is linked to feminist neoliberal perspectives in two ways. Firstly, the World Bank attempts to ensure women's empowerment by enhancing their access to education, employment opportunities, land rights, financial services, and agricultural infrastructures (Roberts and Soederberg, 2012; Wilson, 2015). The second way links gender equality and women's empowerment with economic growth. Here, Roberts and Soederberg

(2012) and the World Bank Report (2012) indicate that the purpose of women's economic employment is to create avenues for equality and empowerment with governments, multilateral corporations, civil society, and private companies. Three arguments drive the neoliberal feminist connection between women's empowerment and economic growth.

Firstly, the women's inclusion narrative appeals to basic production economics that men alone are insufficient to spin the economic wheel due to labour shortages and demand for production. In this regard women's empowerment is not viewed from a social perspective; instead, as a key factor of production in a state. Women's economic empowerment enhances growth, diversifies the economy, and promotes income equality (Kabeer, 2012). According to the United Nations, increasing women's job opportunities in OECD countries to equal Sweden's could boost GDP by more than \$6 trillion (Cuberes & Teignier, 2016). Here, enhancing women's employment is not seen as the precursor for achieving gender equality; instead, as a necessary tool for economic development in OECD countries. Furthermore, the lack of women in economic institutions costs the economy 15 per cent of GDP (Cuberes & Teignier, 2016). According to Elborgh-Woytek et al (2013), increasing the female labour force participation rate to male levels in various countries would increase GDP, for example, 5 per cent in the United States, 9 per cent in Japan, 12 per cent in the UAE, and 34 per cent in Egypt. Therefore, the United Nations often proposes that women's economic empowerment increases the likelihood of a country to attain the prescribed development and sustainability objectives; empowerment also improves society's overall quality of life (Wejnert, 2019).

Secondly, women's empowerment literature has advanced the perspective that women's involvement in leadership positions, especially economic institutions (companies), leads to better outcomes. Interestingly, these inclusion narratives are premised on a

performance narrative as opposed to inclusivity or gender equality. Many studies have established that companies with the highest women representation in top management reported better performance than those with low representation (Layton & Prince, 2015). Shetty and Hans (2019) propose that gender equality enhances financial throughput, advances generational development outcomes, and progresses the modern organisation's gender representativeness. Skill efficiency is increased when women are employed, given that women constitute more than 50 per cent of university students (Revenga & Shetty, 2012). Moreover, the United Nations proposes that companies greatly benefit from increased employment and leadership opportunities (UN Women, 2015). From the UN's perspective, women's employment propels economic growth in two ways. Firstly, by being part of labour markets, whether in leadership or employee level, they directly contribute to economic growth by adding value on labour outputs. Secondly, they influence economic 'machinery', the companies responsible for propelling economic growth through production, creating employment opportunities, foreign exchange, and tax remission, among others. Moreover, neoliberal feminists see women's political representation in government as a critical determinant to women's economic outcomes and defeating the discriminative social norms. From a neoliberal feminist perspective, Sandberg (2013) suggests that true equality will be achieved only when more women rise to the top of every government and every industry.

Thirdly, and most important, women's economic inclusion reduces poverty. The nexus between reducing poverty levels as a precursor for economic growth is not farfetched. From an economic perspective, poverty can introduce economic growth market imperfections such as non-competitive markets and the lack of investment (Wejnert, 2019; Kabeer, 2012) because the poor have difficulty saving, investing, and consuming due to their lack the cash. Therefore, reducing poverty levels increases individuals' purchasing power and savings,

enhancing consumption, increasing demand for goods and services, and thus for their production, and making people less dependent on the government. Thus, it is logical that improving women's economic capabilities in growing markets can lower the poverty levels (United Nations Women, 2018).

Thus, women's economic empowerment and economic growth are closely connected. When women have access to education opportunities, they become critical contributors to the labour market, which in turn drives economic growth. The pivotal role of education in women's economic empowerment will be highlighted in Chapter three. Women's academic success and high employment rates significantly reduce the probability of household poverty, while human capital improves as women's accessibility to resources rises. When more women work, economies grow because women boost productivity, enhance economic diversification, and, more importantly, strive for income equality. Studies also found that women's involvement in key economic institutions, especially companies' economic growth, is due to their decision-making and organisational capabilities. The link between poverty reduction and economic growth justifies women's economic empowerment, elevating them from dependents to having spending power and consumption.

2.3.2. The link between economic participation and women's overall empowerment

There is evidence that empowerment of women in the public sphere of work and employment also trickles into the private sphere and enhances their standing in society. For example, the capacity to support themselves financially has enabled women to leave unhappy relationships, as Syed (2010) points out, and adds that employment gives women increased

leverage in their families since they contribute to the family income. Kabeer's (1997) study reports that women in Bangladesh urban regions managed to leave husbands who had previously humiliated, deceived, or beaten them as new waged opportunities emerged. In particular, women's participation in the economy improves their families' economic status and crucially promotes their children's social mobility (Coleman, 2004). Women's labour force participation also has positive impacts on health, by reducing new-born mortality rates, diminishing household violence, better nourishing family diets, and subsequent lowering of birth rates (Coleman, 2010). Kabeer (1997) highlights that resource exchange and use among women, resource possession, and decision-making are some of the crucial indicators to assess women's status, again highlighting how important economic and political factors are in empowering women. Thus, economic empowerment presents women with resources at their command, consequently elevating their social status.

However, neoliberal feminists' focus on employment and the public sphere leaves questions about women's empowerment in the household and family. "Professional and economic success but not at the expense of family" is a key point in the neoliberal feminist perspective (Sandberg, 2013). According to this view, the self-care and well-being of working women depends on their ability to develop an effective work-family balance. This balance can be achieved by delaying motherhood and childbearing until women have established their professional portfolios and mastered their professional skills, or by outsourcing household chores and raising children, which often means providing a job for other women. According to Rottenberg (2014), who is a critic of neoliberal feminist theory, the neoliberal feminist theory concept of a work-family balance has contributed immensely to making feminist agendas of gender equality more acceptable. However, Rottenberg (2019), Wilson (2015), McRobbie (2013), Gregor and Grzebalska (2016) and Tyler (2015) question

the compatibility of women's gender roles and empowerment initiatives. Their concerns are whether economic empowerment propagated by the feminist neoliberal perspective ignores the dual roles of women as producers and mothers. This makes the separation between the public and private sphere increasingly incomprehensible.

Rottenberg (2014) acknowledges the complex burden women bear compared to men (apropos social and family responsibilities) especially given that women remain largely responsible for domestic tasks. Women's empowerment through greater participation in the public domain has been a focus of feminist neoliberalism. However, McRobbie (2013) and Rottenberg (2014) raised the question of how social reproduction and care work fits when women fully participate in the same activities as men. This means that the feminist neoliberal approach focuses only on empowering women by participating in the public sphere without really addressing what's happening in the private sphere of the household and family. As Rottenberg (2014) points out, in order to achieve that "balance" between paid work and family/household work, another person, usually a woman, is often required to perform household labour for a low wage. The neoliberal feminist model of women's empowerment is therefore partial, as it contributes to the (re)production and legitimisation of exploitation, especially when women of colour, poor and immigrant women serve as caregivers that enable professional women to work. Hence, low wages for housework and care work serve to further expand and entrench market rationality while concurrently creating new, and reinforcing old, class-based and racialised gender stratification.

From Tyler's perspective, the neoliberal feminist perspective struggles over 'value' instead of the 'political struggle' that dominates the neoliberal feminist ideology because it transformed the gender inequality issue from a structural matter into an individual one (Tyler,

2015). Gregor and Grzebalska (2016) argue that feminists should not fall for it because the neoliberal thesis legitimises social inequality to divert from feminism for a better economic outcome. Thus, the feminist neoliberal perspective of empowerment and equality is more complex and is centred on the profit motive and individual benefits rather than the lifting of gendered constraints on women's time and mobility and the unequal division of household labour which actually helps in achieving gender equality. While recognising these limitations of feminist neoliberal theory, especially regarding the argument for a balance between work and family, this lies beyond the scope of this thesis and will not be further explored but only touched upon in the discussion in Chapter five.

2.4. Conclusion

To conclude, women are recognised under international and national legal instruments as having equal rights with men. The feminist neoliberal perspective makes a strong case for equality before the law and, more importantly, safeguarding women's rights directly or indirectly. The perspective considers women diligent, sociable, and essential individuals whose empowerment can revitalise the family system and society as a whole. Thus, from both the human rights issue and development perspectives, addressing inequality and empowering women positively impacts on development, societal welfare, family outcomes, political reforms, and individual fulfilment.

In this thesis the neoliberal feminist approach has been adopted; therefore, there are main points that are taken from this chapter to be used, applied, discussed, and critically examined for their relevance in the Saudi Arabian context in terms of women's empowerment. Thus, the next chapter is about how these debates about women's

empowerment happen or how the neoliberal feminist approach influences discussions in Saudi Arabia?

3. Chapter Three: The route to women's empowerment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

3.1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is an Islamic state established in 1932 by King Abdulaziz Ibn Abdul Rahman Al Saud (Hamdan, 2005). The KSA is a sovereign country with a monarchical structure, and Islam is the country's predominant religion. The Saudi government has a lot of power in all aspects of life, the economy is largely state-owned, and government policymaking is made centrally and according to a top-down model.

The Saudi economy is oil-based, with the government controlling major economic activities. The KSA holds 18 per cent of the world's confirmed petroleum reserves, making it the world's largest petroleum exporter (Naseem & Dhruva, 2017). The KSA experienced an economic boom from 1969 to 1980 due to increased oil sales, which directly affected the Kingdom's population; there was a population boom and subsequent rise in the working-age population. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's population is currently about 34 million people including non-citizens such as foreign workers who are predominantly men; therefore, women account for only 43 per cent of the population (World Bank, 2021b, 2021c). However, women's contribution to the formal economy has been very limited. The importance of women's roles in upholding the family and societal structures is widely acknowledged. Saudi women's lives have traditionally revolved around household chores and family, while Saudi men have been the breadwinners.

This chapter discusses the emergence of women's empowerment in the KSA from the early 1990s until the first decade of the 2000s. The first section will be a brief background on

the traditional role of Saudi women in the pre-1990s era. The second section describes how women have started to become more educated and analyses the Saudi government policies that encouraged families to send girls to school and universities. The third section explains the participation of Saudi women in the workforce and entrepreneurship and how it relates to education empowerment.

3.2. Background about the traditional role of Saudi women

The primary role of most Saudi women before the 1990s was focused on the home and child-rearing, with very limited access to the public sphere. Women were expected to seek permission from male guardians to undertake activities outside their home, such as study, work, and travel, both locally and internationally. This traditional role still persists but not nearly to the same extent.

Prior to the 1990s, Saudi women were subjected to customs and traditions that restricted their rights and imposed many prohibitions. The Saudi woman was under the umbrella of patriarchal authority and male domination, and this gendered culture created a clear distinction between women's and men's roles and prevented women from enjoying basic human rights and freedoms. Women could do limited jobs, if necessary, such as embroidery, sewing, sheep herding, and farming (Al-Khateeb, 1998). Schooling was mostly for boys as the Saudi government did not officially address girls' education until 1959, and most families at the time were not interested in pursuing girls' education (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991).

Saudi women were often busy and had little spare time while working inside the home. Their duties primarily include caring for their husbands, children, and household; some also had other obligations, including supporting their husbands' careers or caring for

their elderly or sick parents (Varshney, 2019). These jobs were unpaid and expected of women, and there were no alternative life choices available. In this era, male dominance led to women being perceived as the "weaker link" in society, unable to care for themselves, particularly outside the home (Hamdan, 2005).

Saudi writers, such as Al-Khateeb (1998), Hamdan (2005), and Pharaon (2004), described this culture of discrimination by gender as having four primary characteristics: (a) the centrality of the family rather than the centrality of the individual; (b) the centrality of the man's role as the sole breadwinner for the family; (c) the prevalence of an unequal balance of power between men and women in the private sphere, negatively affecting the entry of women into the public sphere; and (d) prohibiting mixing between the genders, where the dignity and honour family is linked to a woman's reputation and prevented women from working alongside men or in public. Women's rights were not an acceptable issue to discuss because it was taken for granted that the right place for women is home, and the wrong thing was to let women have opportunities to appear and participate in public and private life or give them the right to choose education and work. According to Coleman (2004), the idea that women have rights was seen as a subversive proposition due to dominant the conservative patriarchal practices that led to significant gender disparities and the imposition of many restrictions on Saudi women. She also pointed out that the issue of women's rights was at the 'front line' of a long-running battle between religious extremists and those with moderate views.

Although this was the common situation for the majority of Saudi women before the 1990s, some families, especially the upper classes and city elite, encouraged women to study and work (Al-Khateeb, 1998). Although education and employment opportunities existed for women, they were limited. Women were only deemed fit to join the teaching, social work,

and nursing professions. More details about these limitations will be provided in section three of this chapter.

In essence, gender discrimination has long been a key feature of Saudi society. Nonetheless, since the early 1990s, there have been attempts by the Saudi government to change this, in line with other social transformations (Hamdan, 2005). The idea of the need to improve women's status and their importance in development progress has spread throughout the country, partly due to the Saudi government's discussion of it. This move arose as a result of United Nations (UN) processes that designated the years 1976 to 1985 as the UN Decade of Women, and the UN's goal was to achieve gender equality in order to encourage development. Even though Saudi Arabia did not sign the UN Women's Charter, the country adopted the UN policy regarding women's rights, especially in education (Pharaon, 2004). This action triggered the opening of many schools for girls, which was the first step for Saudi women to be empowered. The following section will provide more detail about empowering Saudi women through education.

3.3. Empowering Saudi women through education

3.3.1. Saudi women's education before 1990

Education before 1953 was available in urban areas and set aside for boys who were schooled in religious schools named *Kuttaab* (religious man teaches Islamic studies). Islamic studies, the Quran, was taught, and students were awarded certificates to go and teach. Although the Saudi government established a General Directorate of Education for Boys in 1926, the provision of education was realised only after oil revenues were boosted with necessary capital in the 1950s. In 1954, the Ministry of Education (for boys) was established (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991). Girls' education was deemed unimportant, and men were the

ones who had the right to education because they were considered breadwinners. The majority of the population believed that girls needed no formal education because they were destined to be housewives and mothers (Hamdan, 2005). Wealthy families had the option of educating their daughters through private tutors, or through *Kuttaab* informal schools which offered girls the ability to read the Quran, and no other education was offered (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991).

Initiatives from the bottom up have had a role in establishing formal schools for girls, for example, the demand by educated middle-class men to establish formal schools for their daughters comparable to those available to boys. Also, there was support from Prince Faisal and his wife, Princess Effat Al-Thunayan, who established the first private school for girls called the Dar Al Hanan in 1955. Moreover, stories about Saudi men marrying foreign-educated women citing inadequate education of the Saudi women gained public attention (El-Sanabary, 1994; Hamdan, 2005). King Saud, in a formal speech (1959) addressed the subject of girl's education that was published in the newspaper and broadcast on the radio (El-Sanabary, 1994). This speech was followed by the foundation of philanthropic and private girls' schools. The King's speech marked the inception of education for women and the recognition of its importance in development. To enact the proposed education for girls, a committee set up by the King, the General Presidency of Girls Education, took charge of girl's education across all levels (Hamdan, 2005). Conservative parents were hostile to girl's education. Despite the negative reception, the government opened schools, however without demanding compulsory attendance; instead it offered financial rewards for families who sent their daughters to school (El-Sanabary, 1994). This was enabled by the significant government budget derived from oil wealth.

The oil discovery prompted the Saudi government to implement a sequence of five-year development plans aimed at increasing women's education and employment chances. King Faisal and Queen 'Iffat Al Thunayan created the first five-year development plan (1970-1975) which include an educational policy directive for women for the first time. This also was because of what Pharaon (2004, p. 352) called "the Saudi awakening" in reference to the growing gender awareness that had gained momentum in the last quarter of the 20th century following the 1975 International Women's Year.

The first girl's college was established in Riyadh in 1970 with a subsequent opening in different regions of Saudi between 1970-1980 (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). Subjects taught include Psychology, Arabic, English, History, Geography, and Home Economics which comprised a 4-year study program. Girls were exempted from studying engineering, architecture, and planning topics, but boys were taught in these fields. However, male teachers were only able to teach women on campuses through closed-circuit television (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). By the mid-1980s over fifteen junior colleges had opened aimed at training women to teach the elementary girls and re-train other teachers to reduce dependence on foreign female teachers. It should be noted that education has been provided free of charge. With the increase in oil revenues, the government's spending on education increased which made the financial reward for students still a common method of the government (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). However, traditional attitudes on women's place in society persisted, coupled with the fear that over Westernised education was giving women the freedom to think and choose in ways that were not acceptable to the patriarchal society. In this period, the Department of Religious Guidance was maintaining customary laws that were ostensibly essential to the Islamic religion but were in fact social practices and traditions aimed at denying basic human rights to women (Hamdan, 2005, p. 50).

Despite these difficulties, the General Presidency of Girls Education in the 1970s contributed to the emergence of a new generation of educated women with a greater desire for their children's education. According to El-Sanabary (1994), this resulted in the change in the literacy rate among women rising from 4 per cent in the 1960s to 43 per cent in the 1990s. Thus, the journey to empower Saudi women in education began with the support of Queen Iffat and the international conversation about women's rights. Although the Saudi government did not sign the UN's treaties regarding women until 2000, their impact was still felt. The sections below will explain how education for girls has changed in the KSA after it signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).¹

3.3.2. The education policies in the Saudi development plan 2001-2005

The first policy on education for girls and women after ratifying CEDAW and MDGs was the Seventh Five-Year Development Plan (2001-2005) issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE). This policy mandated primary and secondary school attendance for both boys and girls in order to eliminate gender disparity in primary education in KSA which was one of the targets of the third goal of MDGs (AlMunajjed, 2009). As the first and fundamental policy since the Educational Policy Document, the Seventh Five-Year Development plan had three main objectives. At the outset, by making education compulsory, the number of enrolments of male and female students in the school-age (6-15) would rise

¹ The CEDAW was ratified by Saudi Arabia on 7th September 2000. Saudi Arabia took part in the United Nations Millennium Summit of September 2000, which resulted in the MDGs (AlMunajjed, 2009). Saudi Arabia's commitment to policies that enhance women's education is anchored on MDG 3 stating that women's empowerment and gender equality are paramount in building a society and sustainable economic development.

from 3.99 million in 1999 to 5.1 million by 2005 (AlMunajjed, 2009; Quamar, 2013).

Secondly, the government began to increase the money sent on expanding and improving education to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education. The budget of the education sector was increased from 19 per cent of the total state budget to be 25 per cent in the year 2005. Moreover, almost equal funding was allocated to boys and girls in 1999–2000, but the percentage of funds allocated for girls' education began to outpace that of boys from the year 2003 as shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Education budget allocations (in million Saudi Riyal) 1999-2005

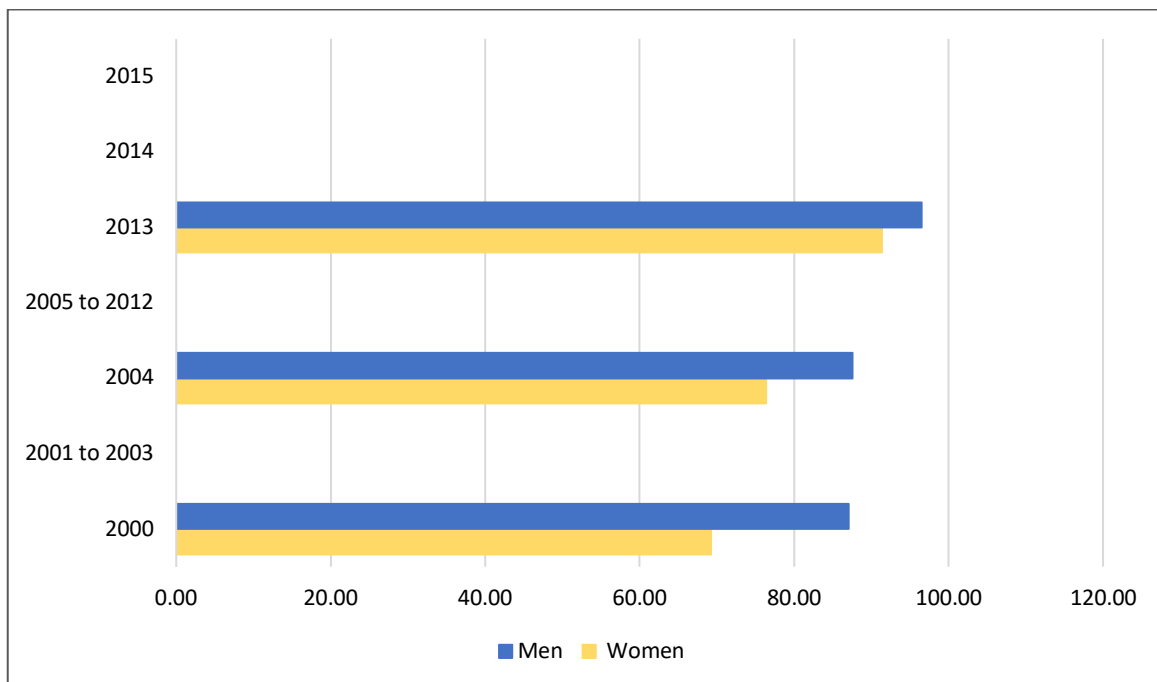
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Source: AlMunajjed, 2009, p. 5.

The equal increases of the budget for both groups, as Figure 3.1 illustrates, was to build more schools in every region, village, and nomadic areas in KSA, and also to provide a financial bonus to parents who enrol their daughters in schools. This was one of the solutions proposed in the policy to reduce the drop-out rate from schools (Quamar, 2013). Thirdly, establishing literacy programs in schools with financial rewards to educate illiterate people from the age of 15 and above. As a result of these efforts, the gap in the literacy rate for women and men aged 15 narrowed over the 2000s, as shown in Figure 3.2. The results of this

process were that by the end of the Seventh Development Plan, in general education, there were approximately 4.6 million students at various levels equal to roughly 30 per cent of the total population, and girls accounted for 48.6 per cent of all students (Quamar, 2013).

Figure 3.2: Literacy rates (as a % of all people 15 and above) from 2000-2013



Source: The World Bank Group, 2021a.

3.3.3. The education policies in the Saudi Development Plans 2005-2014 and the scholarship program

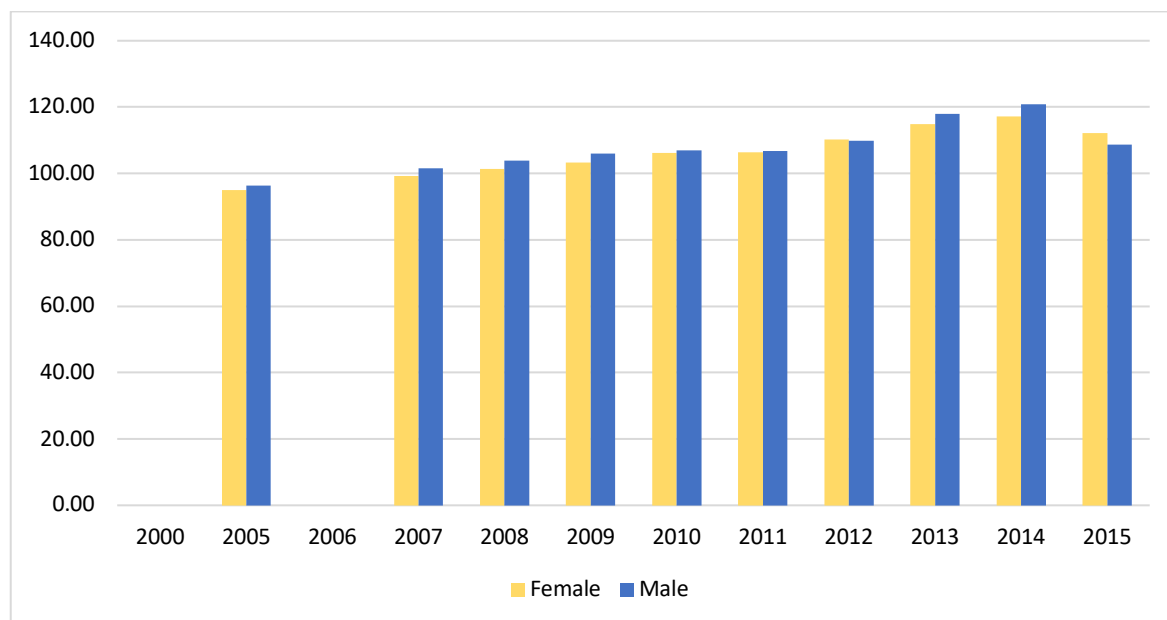
The Eighth and Ninth Five-Year Development Plans (2005-2014) and King Abdullah Scholarship Program significantly improved women's education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at all levels. One of the aims of the Eighth Five-Year Development Plan was:

“Empowering women in education, health and employment; increasing their participation in

various fields, both within the family and at the workplace; and providing better opportunities to enable them to occupy decision-making positions" (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2005, p.46). The Saudi government has recognised the importance of education for women as a basis for employment and economic empowerment of women, which in turn helps improve the role of women in society.

Therefore, to achieve education empowerment and the second goal of MDGs (Achieve universal primary education), the Eighth Five-Year Development Plan sought to attain a primary gross enrolment ratio of 100 per cent in the year 2015 (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2005, p.196). The gross enrolment ratio (GER) is "the number of students enrolled in a given level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education" (UNESCO, 2021). If a country scores near or higher than 100 per cent in GER, it is capable of accommodating its entire school-age population. As shown in Figure 3.3, data from the World Bank (2021a) shows that Saudis had reached this goal by 2015. Moreover, the education empowerment policies in the Eighth and Ninth Five-Year Development Plans did not focus only on the younger generation but also targeted illiterate adults. Many initiatives were launched to reduce female illiteracy, such as temporary summer programs in rural areas. These programs provide financial rewards and free transportation to the beneficiaries (Saudi Unified National Platform, 2021). As a result of these interventions the literacy rates of women aged 15 and above increased sharply from 76 per cent in the year 2004 to 91.3 per cent in 2013 as shown Figure 3.2. Thus, the gap between Saudi women and men in education narrowed, especially at primary level.

Figure 3.3: Female vs. male primary school enrolment in the KSA (as % of gross enrolment rate, 2005-2015)



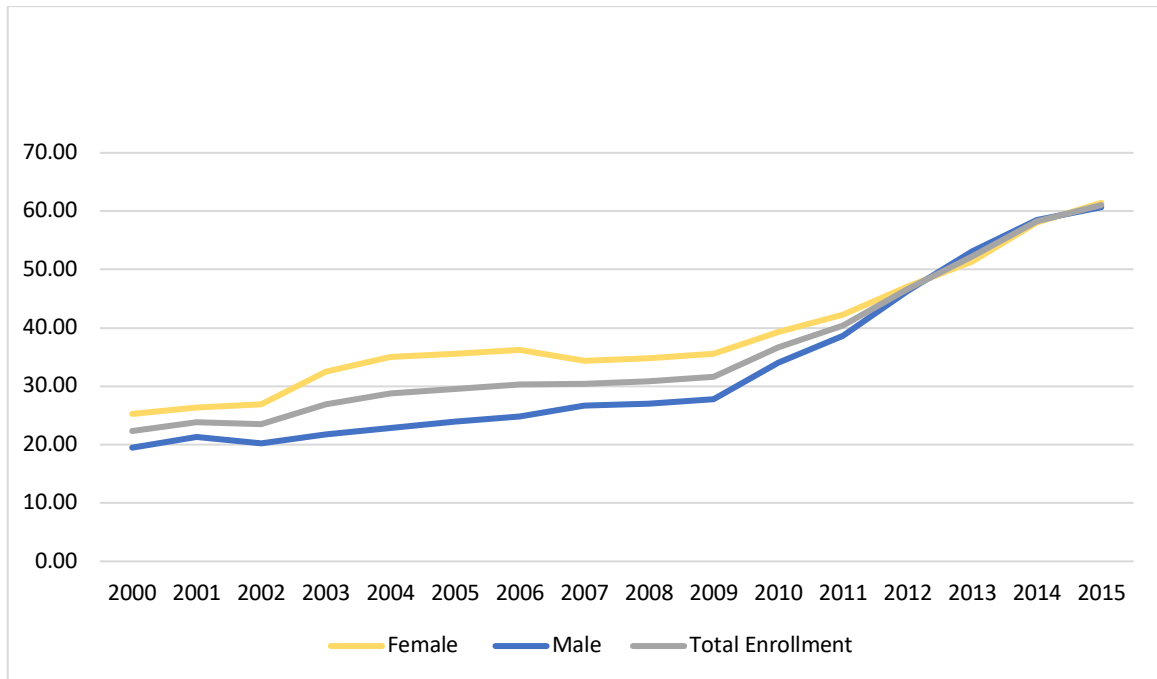
Source: The World Bank, 2021a.

In terms of tertiary level, the government-appointed Supreme Council of Education sought three main objectives; to improve education standards in Saudi Arabia, improve access to tertiary education for women and expand vocational training for women so they can enter the labour force (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). This period also saw the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) introduction, which radically changed women's education, sponsoring Saudi citizens regardless of gender to study abroad in the best universities, and having a domestic scholarship to study in private Saudi universities. One of the aims of KASP was preparing national cadres with advanced sciences and modern curricula and methods, which contributes to a radical shift in the organisational environment and professional culture in various sectors and in specific disciplines reflecting Saudi needs in the labour market (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013). Thus, the KASP gave a chance for Saudi women to study new specializations that contribute to building an economy in order to make them ready

to enter the labour market. According to Alsharif (2019), Saudi women received 40 per cent of KASP awards at the graduate-level, compared with 22 per cent for men. However, there was a big gap between the graduate students in KASP where the percentage of graduated women was only 30 per cent versus 70 per cent for their male peers. According to Alsharif (2019) and Jamjoom and Kelly (2013), this was because of three reasons: (a) guardianship system where a woman must get permission from their male guardian to complete her study; (b) by law women could not travel alone; and (c) one of the conditions for obtaining a scholarship was a male must be present with the woman.

As for the local universities, between 2003 and 2007, the number of the main universities increased from eight to 24, including the first coeducational institution and more than 400 colleges were opened (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). According to The Saudi General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT) (2020b), within a decade of increasing the number of universities, the number of female graduates had overtaken males (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4: Female and male enrolment in Higher Education (% of relevant age group)



Source: The World Bank, 2021a.

The previous statistics relating to the progress made in the education of Saudi women from 2000 to 2015 can be interpreted through Subrahmanian’s conceptualisation of gender equality in education. She distinguishes rights to education, rights within education and rights through education (Subrahmanian, 2005). These rights identify various aspects of the quality of the education experience, in terms of entering, participating in, and benefiting from education.

To begin with, rights to education which means gender parity that is achieved by the equal participation in all education aspects for both girls and boys. Gender parity is expressed in statistical figures for the level of students of both genders who enrolled in school stages, the literacy rate, the number of female teachers versus the number of male teachers, and others quantity data. Applying this to the case of the KSA, we see that by the end of 2015, there is gender parity with an increase in the number of women graduates from public education.

However, when it comes to rights within education represented by learning content, subject choice and learning outcomes, this was not met in the Saudi Arabia's education reforms in the 2000-2015 period. Not all subjects offered in the education system were available to women, such as architecture, civil engineering, media, advertising, agriculture, and environmental protection. Also, a guardianship system existed in which the woman must get the permission of the male guardian to complete her study, especially when studying abroad, and the woman was not allowed to go abroad alone to study (Alsharif, 2019; Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013). Moreover, the third aspect of measuring gender equality in education according to Subramanian (2005, p. 404) is rights through education which is "gender differentials in political participation and male/female employment across different levels of education by gender". This aspect will be addressed in the next section.

Arguably, with increased government policy and administrative actions on women's education, the idea that women can work outside the home has increasingly been accepted. For Saudi Arabia, women's education serves as a source of empowerment and economic prosperity since educated women contribute to the labour market. The next section therefore will be about the beginning of participation of Saudi women in the workforce and Saudi women entrepreneurship.

3.4. Saudi women's workforce participation and entrepreneurship

3.4.1. The status of Saudi women's labour force participation

Saudi women's participation in the workforce has been a gradual process started since the first implementation of five-year development plans in the 1970s. Despite being marred by conservative undertones, the early process of women's integration in the job market

reflected two central realities in the 1980s Saudi Arabia community. First, Saudi Arabia's population and workforce size were insufficient to meet the Saudi Arabian economy's requirements (AlMunajjed, 1997, p.81). The government opted to import foreign labour to accommodate the shortages. Even so, this method was not optimal in the 1970s, due to many reasons including (a) the foreign labour made up two-thirds of the Saudi workforce; and (b) the foreign remittances of billions of dollars by foreign workers were removed from the local economy, amounting to a loss of around 10 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Furthermore, unemployment was widespread among Saudis (Koyame-Marsh, 2016; Ramady, 2010, p.14).

Therefore, there was a need for the expansion of the education system to increase qualified Saudi workers. In 1985, the government developed a policy (Saudization) to develop the Saudi workforce by encouraging all Saudi citizens to participate in all facets of the economy. This marked a non-discriminatory approach for employment, encouraging men and women to seek job opportunities (Koyame-Marsh, 2016). However, due to conservative views and resistance from a significant segment of society (mainly from religious fanatics), opportunities for women were limited to teaching, nursing, and welfare roles (AlMunajjed, 1997, p.83). The restriction that women could only be employed in teaching and nursing institutions was anchored on conservative beliefs that women should not interact with men (Al-Khateeb, 1998).

Thus, while Saudi Arabian legislation did not prevent females from working in government employment, it did not allow females and males to work together. Article 160 of the Labour and Workman Law stipulated that teenagers and women should not be hired in risky businesses, and males and females should not work alongside each other (AlMunajjed,

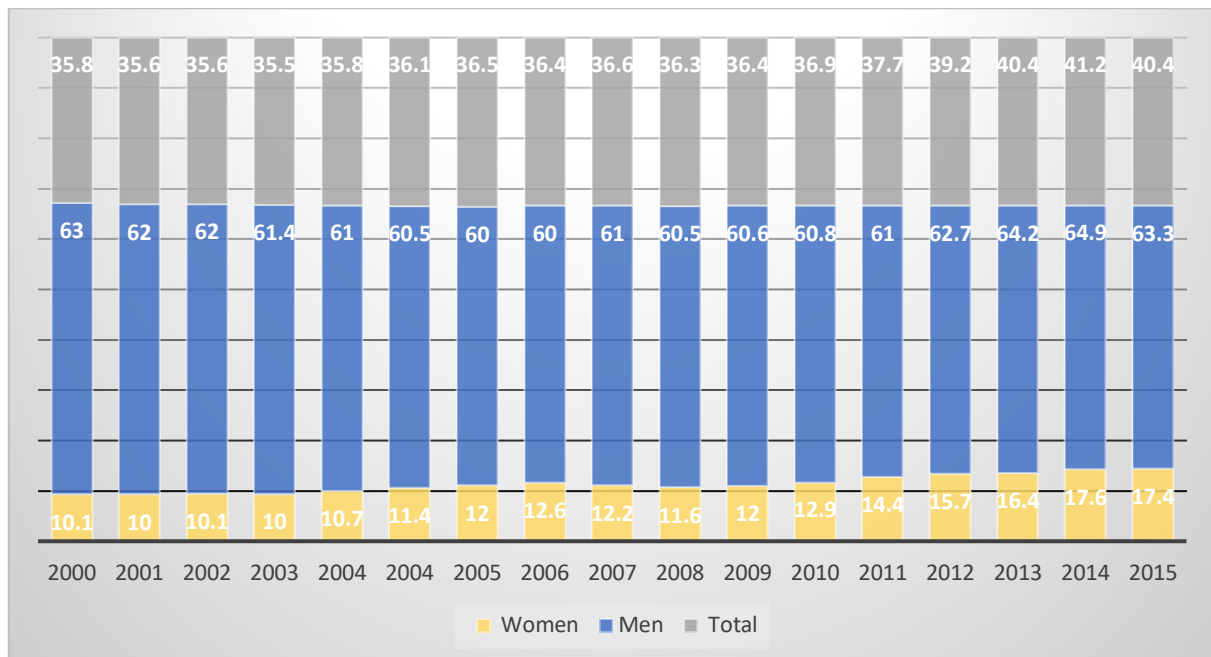
1997, p.83). To this extent, the opportunities for women were limited to just education, nursing, and medicine sectors. According to AlMunajjed (1997, p.85), in the beginning, a woman was allowed to work based on three conditions; (a) that she would prioritise care for her husband and children; (b) she works in only specified conditions permitted by tradition (for example, she may not come into contact with males); and (c) she is limited to labour that is compatible with her feminine nature, such as care giving and teaching. With that in mind, women could only get employed in the General Presidency for Girls Education, tertiary education institutions, and the women's divisions of the Ministries of Health and Labour and Social Affairs. The first condition was from the woman's family, not the state but the other two conditions were imposed by the government.

However, under the Fourth Five Year Development Plan, 50,000, educated women joined the labour market between 1989 and 1990 (Koyame-Marsh, 2016). In the 2000s, the Eighth Five-Year Development Plan (2005–2009) upheld the need to integrate women into employment, stressing their role in economic growth. The legal reforms saw the Human Resource Development Fund (HADAF) established to create job opportunities for women through agreements with the private sector (Quamar, 2013). The first intervention was to allow only female salespersons to work in shops selling women's supplies such as cosmetics and lingerie (Corcoran-Nantes, 2013). However, these efforts over a decade did not result in a significant improvement in the rate of Saudi women's participation in the labour market, as it increased by only 2.9 percentage points, as shown in Figure 3.5.

To address this issue, the government introduced the *Nitaqat* (Ranges) program in 2011 (the upgraded version of Saudization). It had a primary objective requiring private-sector employers to hire women on a priority basis. To achieve this objective, there were two

means, firstly, providing requirements and motivation, and the second was enforcing sanctions for violations (Koyame-Marsh, 2016). The introduction of the Nitaqat program prompted the female rate of workforce participation increase from 12.9 per cent in 2010 to 14.4 per cent in 2011 as Figure 3.5 shows. In one year, the rate of increase was approximately equal to the increase in the decade before the introduction of the Nitaqat program. The Saudi General Authority for statistics (GASTAT) (2015) indicated that the number of women working in the private sector rose from 50,000 in 2011 to 400,000 in 2015, and the female rate of workforce participation rose from 14.4 per cent in 2011 to 17.4 per cent in 2015 (Figure 3.5). While the government had made significant steps towards integrating women into the workforce by 2015, there was still a major significant problem; Saudi women employees constituted only 816,361 of the 12 million employees in Saudi Arabia (GASTAT, 2015).

Figure 3.5: Saudi labour force participation rate (15-65 years) 2000-2015 (%)



Source: GASTAT, 2015.

Returning to Subramanian's (2005, p. 404) point regarding gender equality through education, we can see that there are gender differentials in employment. Despite the good results of women's education seen previously, this did not help women to obtain more employment opportunities but rather increased the unemployment rate, which rose from 17.7 in 2000 to 33.8 in 2015 (GASTAT, 2015). This is evidence that Saudi women wanted to get a job, but the opportunities were not available. According to Naseem and Dhruva, (2017), and Varshney (2019) this is attributed to social and cultural constraints, economic and legal considerations, and views on women's participation in the workforce. Women's integration into employment was limited by strict rules such as a ban on driving cars, limited travelling, and the guardianship system.

3.4.2. Saudi Women Entrepreneurship

While women form a significant part of the university population, education does not translate to integration into the labour market, and therefore, many women have resorted to entrepreneurship (Welsh, Memili, Kaciak, & Al Sadoon, 2014). However, one of the most prominent obstacles faced by women entrepreneurs until 2005 was that they could not legally obtain a commercial licence for business without proving they would hire a male manager. Furthermore, until 2008, travel outside the local area required women to be accompanied by a male guardian, and Saudi women had to provide their husband's approval to work, apply for an ID card, and borrow from a financial institution (Ahmad, 2011; Corcoran-Nantes, 2013).

Despite these obstacles, by 2005, there were 23,000 businesswomen in Saudi Arabia (Ahmad, 2011). According to Pharaon (2004), the advent of the internet allowed Saudi women to venture into business without contravening the religious and cultural custom of non-interaction between men and women. Therefore, some Saudi women began their

business at home, then operating even in the male-only public places but as family, businesses to avoid issues of gender separation.

In 2007, Saudi women owned over 20,000 business firms not only in feminised fields such as cosmetics and fashion but also in sectors like industrial processing and public relations that are typically dominated by men (Welsh et al., 2014). According to Ahmad (2011), in 2011 Saudi women owned more than 40 per cent of real estate assets in Saudi Arabia and were increasingly becoming more powerful. Despite these numbers, the Female Entrepreneurship Index report (2015), produced by the Global Institute for Entrepreneurship and Development, which examines a country's strengths and weaknesses in relation to the conditions that could promote female entrepreneurship growth, found that some of the largest gender inequalities in entrepreneurship occur in Taiwan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. According to the report, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ranked 49 out of 70 countries. According to a Systematic Review of Women Entrepreneurs Opportunities and Challenges in Saudi Arabia by Abou-Moghli and Al-Abdallah (2019), the most prominent obstacles that prevent Saudi women entrepreneurs from progressing are the financial, social and legal obstacles. These include, high location/rent, difficulty finding local employees, difficulty finding and retaining trained staff, and having to make the husband a trustee of the business and give him ownership, and dealing with government agencies.

3.5. Conclusion

Since the 1960s, the position and role of women in Saudi society have been changing for the better. This chapter presented some of the changes and developments that have occurred amongst women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia until 2015. The introduction of education for all established an urban society and the quest for personal and financial

independence that paved the way for female labour-force participation. Saudi women's participation in the workforce and entrepreneurship up to 2015 has been a gradual process anchored on economic reform efforts or changes (oil exploration, Saudisation, Phased Economic Plans and appreciating women's role in development) and, equally important, legal reforms. Nonetheless, women's participation in employment and entrepreneurship was limited by many rules such as the guardianship system, bans on driving cars and limited travelling. Thus, there was an undeniable need for future reforms. The next chapter will explain how in 2016 the Saudi government addressed the limitations that prevented Saudi women from participating in the Saudi economy. The chapter therefore will be about the government policies on gender empowerment under the Saudi Vision 2030.

4. Chapter Four: The Saudi government policies on gender empowerment under the Saudi Vision 2030

4.1.Introduction

As seen in the previous chapter, the development plans implemented by the Saudi government had an important role in improving the education of Saudi women, and there were attempts to improve the participation of Saudi women in the workforce. Thus, this chapter looks in depth at the Saudi plan for the years 2016-2030 (Saudi Vision 2030, or simply Vision 2030 from here on). Vision 2030 is the overarching policy document, and several other policies, decrees, and legal changes emanate from this as the government starts to implement the vision. This chapter aims to analyse Vision 2030, then some of the other policies that seek to implement it, focusing on the aspects that specifically relate to women's empowerment, particularly their economic empowerment through participating in the workforce. To get an analytical perspective on the policy, the Policy Analysis Triangle by Buse et al (2012) has been used. This helps to identify where women's empowerment came into Vision 2030 and how, and by whom, and why.

4.2.Background about Saudi Vision 2030 and goals related to women's empowerment

In April 2016, the Saudi government published an 85-page document to mark a new dawn and a long-term commitment for a social and economic policy over the next 15 years. The publisher and main stakeholders involved in designing Vision 2030 were the leadership, primarily the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the Council of Ministers,

and the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA). These key government stakeholders were tasked with finding and monitoring approaches practical to implement "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030" with the help of private and public stakeholders. The Saudi Vision 2030 is a top-down approach undertaking to create a stable economy for future generations and enable Saudi Arabia to depart from oil dependence and open itself to modern opportunities. It is a multidimensional approach to revolutionising Saudi society through social and economic transformation. These changes are guided by Islamic values, as mentioned in the Vision document, which said "the principles of Islam will be the driving force for us to realize our Vision. The values of moderation, tolerance, excellence, discipline, equity, and transparency will be the bedrock of our success" (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 16).

While the policy is not specifically about women, it embodies three fundamental pillars which may lead to better greater gender equality. This chapter focuses on the Vision targets related to women's empowerment. Table 4.1 shows the pillars of the Vision 2030, and the main goals that must be achieved by 2030.

Table 4.1: Saudi Vision 2030 pillars and target objectives

Theme	Objectives/Targets
1. A vibrant Society	3.1. To increase KSA’s capacity to welcome Umrah visitors (pilgrims) from 8 million to 30 million every year. 3.2. To more than double the number of Saudi heritage sites registered with UNESCO. 3.3. To have three Saudi cities be recognised in the top-ranked 100 cities in the world. 3.4. To increase household spending on cultural and entertainment activities inside the Kingdom from the current level of 2.9 to 6 per cent. 3.5. To increase the ratio of individuals exercising at least once a week from 13 per cent of the population to 40 per cent.

Theme	Objectives/Targets
	3.6. To raise our position from 26 to 10 in the Social Capital Index. 3.7. To increase the average life expectancy from 74 years to 80 years.
2. A thriving Economy	3.8. To lower the rate of unemployment from 11.6 to 7 per cent. 3.9. To increase SME contribution to GDP from 20 to 35 per cent. 3.10. To increase women's participation in the workforce from 22 to 30 per cent. 3.11. To move from our current position as the 19th largest economy in the world into the top 15. 3.12. To increase the localisation of oil and gas sectors from 40 to 75 per cent. 3.13. To increase the Public Investment Fund's assets, from SAR 600 billion to over 7 trillion. 3.14. To rise from our current position of 25 to the top 10 countries on the Global Competitiveness Index. 3.15. To increase foreign direct investment from 3.8 per cent to the international level of 5.7 per cent of GDP. 3.16. To increase the private sector's contribution from 40 to 65 per cent of GDP. 3.17. To raise our global ranking in the Logistics Performance Index from 49 to 25 and ensure the Kingdom is a regional leader. 3.18. To raise the share of non-oil exports in non-oil GDP from 16 to 50 per cent.
3. Ambitious Nation	3.19. To increase non-oil government revenue from SAR 163 billion to SAR 1 trillion. 3.20. To raise our ranking in the Government Effectiveness Index, from 80 to 20. 3.21. To raise our ranking on the E-Government Survey Index from our current position of 36 to be among the top five nations. 3.22. To increase household savings from 6 to 10 per cent of total household income. 3.23. To raise the non-profit sector's contribution to GDP from less than 1 to 5 per cent. 3.24. To rally one million volunteers per year (compared to 11,000 now).

Source: Designed by author based on data from Saudi Vision 2030.

As seen in Table 4.1, the three pillars are associated with twenty-four targets.

However, the focus here will be on the measures targeted at women's participation in the economy, directly or indirectly.

Pillar 1, "a vibrant society", represents targets that are important to women's participation in the economy. These targets (1.4, 1.5, and 1.7) include raising domestic family

expenditure on cultural and leisure activities from 2.9 to 6 per cent and increasing the proportion of people who exercise at least once every week from 13 to 40 per cent of the populace. Moreover, the plan aims to boost average life expectancy from 74 to 80 (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016, pp. 25-31). These goals mean two important things, firstly enhance the quality of life for women in KSA, and secondly provide jobs for women in leisure and sports activities.

In Pillar 3, “an ambitious nation”, the key targets are essential for "being responsible to society" through collaboration with the third sector. For example, (3.6) rally one million volunteers per year, compared to what it was then, and (3.5) increase the non-profit industry's GDP contribution from less than 1 to 5 per cent which will "create stimulating opportunities for young men and women that can help them build their professional careers" (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p.75). The main point here is that by developing the Third Sector which in most countries focuses on community services staffed mainly by women, new employment opportunities will be created.

Of the three pillars, Pillar 2: "A Thriving Economy" directly mentions women in several instances. Firstly, by recognising the importance of the role of Saudi women in development, "Saudi women are yet another great asset. With over 50 percent of our university graduates being female, we will continue to develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy" (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p.37).

Secondly, the third target of Pillar (2.3) explicitly talks about women's participation in the economy by targeting an increase in women's participation in the workforce from 22 to 30 per cent (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p.39). Arguably, by targeting women in

Goal 3 of Pillar 2 (A Thriving Economy), the government underscores women's role in achieving the desired economic outcomes, and this may empower women economically. Furthermore, through the other key targets of this pillar (2.1 and 2.2): "To lower the rate of unemployment from 11.6 to 7 per cent and increase SME contribution to GDP from 20 to 35 per cent" (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p.39), women are assigned two significant roles. Firstly, the Government of Saudi Arabia aims at providing everyone, irrespective of age and gender, with the ability to ensure that their competencies and talents are utilised for economic gain. As the government aims to diversify the economy targeting key sectors for the first time such as tourism, defence, and mining, women can find new roles as employees and entrepreneurs in these sectors; as the Vision promises, "we will continue encouraging our young entrepreneurs with business-friendly regulations, easier access to funding, international partnerships and a greater share of national procurement and government bids" (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p.36). Secondly, the goal is to make Saudi women visible and boost the value of women as important partners for the development of the country and society. The direct and explicit provision for economic empowerment of women, especially under Goal 2.3, indicates that the Government of Saudi Arabia believes in the role of Saudi women in achieving Pillar 2: A Thriving Economy.

For some Saudi scholars, Vision 2030 is a catalyst for realising women's social and economic rights, and they agree that the Vision sees women as key players in an expansive economic future (Al-Qahtani et al., 2020; Aldossari, 2020; Alshuwaikhat & Mohammed, 2017; Moshashai, Leber, & Savage, 2020). According to these scholars, Saudi's Vision 2030 focuses on three main fields of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia.

Firstly, it offers opportunities for the economic empowerment of women, by seeking to provide women with equal job opportunities with men in participating in economic decision-making and enhancing their financial independence. The Saudi government also aims to provide professional training, technical and vocational education (TVET) for Saudi women which will play a significant role in developing their essential labour market skills. This aims to train women for job opportunities in the new sectors such as leisure, sports activities, and tourism. Saudi women can also create small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) specialising in these areas.

Secondly, Vision 2030 encourages socio-cultural empowerment, allowing women to participate in social life outside their families. According to Aldossari (2020), providing women with a wide range of education options enhances women's literacy and improves their images, roles, and achievement in society. Some targets in the second pillar, a vibrant society, boost the visibility of Saudi women in the public sphere and signal an end to segregation. For example, Saudi women's participation in leisure, sports activities, and tourism is a radical change compared with the past where their visibility was confined to the women's community only.

Thirdly, Vision 2030 lays out a blueprint for legal empowerment, allowing women to understand their rights and obtain support from the government, institutions, and communities that help exercise their social and economic rights. Since the launch of Vision 2030, there have been notable policies and laws that acknowledge women's equal rights. According to Rizvi and Hussain (2021), twelve substantial legislative reforms were initiated to enhance women's quality of living and encourage economic participation.

The following section is about how Vision 2030 was implemented through different policies: The National Transformation Program (NTP) and the Social-Cultural and Legal Policies Impacting Women's Empowerment: Amendment to Travel Documents Rules, Right to Drive, and Labour Laws.

4.3. Analysis of Saudi Vision 2030 (using the Policy Analysis Triangle)

This part of the chapter explores key policies and programs that have been formulated to implement the Vision targets regarding women's empowerment using the Policy Analysis Triangle. It should be noted that there are many other programs the Saudi government had created to achieve Vision 2030 goals, but these policies and programs were chosen because they are related to the goal of the thesis, which is to focus on women's participation in the labour force. Here, the term policy refers to the decision taken by those responsible for a particular policy area, such as health, economics, the environment, or education (Buse et al., 2012). Thus, the policy may be made by central or local governments in ministries. With that in mind, the Policy Analysis Triangle provides a framework for examining policies to determine its actors, content, process, and policymaking context (Buse et al., 2012, p.7). The following questions shape the policy analysis:

1. What does the policy aim to achieve?
2. Who are the actors?
3. What can we discern regarding the policy's context?

4.3.1. National Transformation Program (NTP)

The National Transformation Program (NTP) is a 111-page document launched in 2016. Created by The Council of Ministers and the Council of Economic and Development

Affairs, it aims to establish and monitor the mechanisms and measures necessary for the implementation of “Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030”. The NTP is a five-year policy plan that includes ministry-specific initiatives and annual efforts for monitoring and evaluating the national strategic Vision. The program is implemented at the level of 24 government agencies, which are 16 ministries and eight government agencies. Workshops were held that brought together ministers with various segments of Saudi society, including officials, religious bodies, dignitaries, businessmen, economists, media professionals and academics (Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MEP), 2020, p.7).

The NTP has 37 strategic goals and targets for each ministry in pursuit of achieving excellence in government performance and establishing the necessary infrastructure to improve economic enabling factors and raise the standard of living for Saudi women and men through its eight strategic dimensions: improving health care, improving living standards and safety, ensuring the sustainability of vital resources, promoting community development and developing the non-profit sector, achieving excellence in government performance, enabling segments of society to enter the labour market and raising its attractiveness, contributing to empowering the private sector, and developing the tourism sector and national heritage (MEP, 2020, p.9). In this analysis the focus will be only on the strategic goals related to women’s empowerment.

Context

Vision 2030 underscores that women are an essential part of sustainable development in Saudi Arabia. This revelation is not new for Saudi Arabia as the country has already attempted to implement gender inclusion measures for economic prosperity. Previous efforts

have been significantly limited due to the lack of a proper policy framework to propel the required change in Saudi Arabia (Alotaibi, 2021); more importantly, the previous restriction on women's participation in the labour market. For example, women who were not allowed to drive and could not participate in the taxi and public transport business were relatively immobile compared to their male counterparts, and this limited their employment opportunities. Equally important, the *Nitaqat* program had not fully addressed the gender equality issue as it prioritises the number of Saudi nationals employed by foreign companies without considering the gender of those employees. This approach has failed to integrate the progressive agenda critical to achieving Vision 2030, for example, integrating women into the labour market as vital human resources (Alotaibi, 2021) (more details about *Nitaqat* are in the Process paragraph). According to Alsharif (2019), through earlier educational policies, women from different social classes have attained skills, and their inclusion in the labour market can benefit society and families.

One of the most important ideas that influenced the revision of the *Nitaqat* policy encouraging women's integration into the Saudi labour market is their role in diversification. According to Cuberes and Teignier (2016) and Wejnert (2019) increasing women's job opportunities boosts the GDP of countries leading to economic growth. With the significant transformation in Saudi Arabia, skills and education will be vital in realising Saudi Vision 2030 objectives (Aldossari, 2020). Therefore, Vision 2030 addressed the limitations of the old policies of education of Saudi women by making all disciplines available for study, especially the disciplines targeted by the Vision, such as technology, tourism, engineering, and mining, and cancelling the need for the guardian's approval to study or travel abroad to study. Opportunities for women to advance their knowledge and skills contribute directly to

diversifying the workforce, sustainable growth, and required competence in new sectors, such as mining and technology.

Content

The first phase of the National Transformation Program (NTP) ran from the year 2016 to 2020. In realising better economic outcomes for women, the NTP embodies targets and objectives by many ministries. Among these objectives, there is an "empower women and materialise their potential" objective. Under this objective, there are several key performance indicators, for example, under the Ministry of Labour and Social Development (MLSD) the key performance indicators regarding women's empowerment are: (a) increase the baseline proportion of the female labour force from 23 to 28 per cent in the year 2020; (b) increase the percentage of female employees in the public sector from 39.8 per cent in 2016 to 42 per cent in 2020; (c) provide more top positions for women in the public sector and raise the percentage from 1.27 to be 5 per cent in 2020. (MEP, 2020, pp.54-57).

Moreover, under many ministries, there are goals not only targeting only women but all Saudis. For example, increasing the number of small and medium businesses, support productive families, and provide 1.2 million direct jobs in the tourism sector by 2020, increase the number of Saudi cadres rehabilitated and employed in the ICT sector to be 20,000 by 2020 (MEP, 2020, p.60).

According to Al-Qahtani et al. (2020), women's role in the labour market is activated by the National Transformation Program to increase women's contribution to the economy, as provided by Vision 2030. Thus, a lot has been discussed and planned to enhance women's participation in the Saudi economy.

Process

Aiming to ensure the successful implementation of the proposed goals of "empower women and materialise their potential initiatives", many actions had been adopted by NTP. For example, (a) Resolution No. 51848/1442 of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development expanding labour mobility of labour reform initiative (LRI); (b) Royal Decree M/85 on Traffic recognising women's right to drive; (c) Amendment to Saudization ratio and Nitaqat program: Continued government support for women's recruitment in the private sector, and (d) Education reforms (creation of TVET) institutions to meet skills and knowledge needs in the labour market. The Royal Decree (a policy allowing women to drive) enables women employees mobility and opportunities to work in the expanding transport industries. Women now can drive to their place of employment, and they can also obtain employment as bus drivers, and taxi drivers.

Furthermore, the NTP adopted interventions to "Develop mechanisms to improve women's employability". For example, for women who cannot drive, notable undertakings by NTP include providing adequate transportation for working women with fair prices and developing strategic partnership programs with the private sector for women's opportunities (MEP, 2020, p.99). The Working Women Transportation (*Wusool*) by the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF) provides transportation for women in 13 regions, helping them overcome travel hurdles as they work and train. Another notable policy to improve female employability is to provide Children Day Care Programs for Working Women (*Qurrah Program*²). This program provides a communication avenue between child hospitality

² This service is for women employees of the private sector only. For women employees of the government sector the project has not yet been implemented.

institutions and markets their service to parents needing childcare assistance (Saudi Unified National Platform, 2021).

In addition, NTP focuses on professional training, technical and vocational education (TVET) which plays a significant role in developing essential labour market skills. Thus, NTP created the "*Tamheer* Program" ensuring women's empowerment by preparing them for the job market through TVET; this includes training women, helping women find work suited to their competencies, and issuing certificates (Saudi Unified National Platform, 2021). Moreover, the revision of the Nitaqat policy targeted by NTP for the most part, aims to further the Thriving Economy pillar (2) by appreciating the need to provide Saudi Arabia nationals with work opportunities. The program classifies organisations with over six employees into six ranges, "Red, Yellow, Low Green, Medium Green, High Green, and Platinum", according to the Saudization rates³(Ministry of Labor and Social Development (MLSD), 2017, p.9). The MLSD aims to increase the employability of Saudi citizens in companies stationed in Saudi and set a minimum limit for the wages of nationals in the private sector and a minimum percentage of female Saudi employees (MLSD, 2017, p.13). Platinum indicates that an organisation must have at least 7 per cent of Saudi women employees, green indicates at least 5 per cent, yellow denotes 3 per cent and red indicates no Saudi women are employed (MLSD, 2017, p.13). Entities that do not comply with the Nitaqat program will be subject to fines and pledges, and if they do not correct the situation,

³ "*Red* means lowest and worst Saudization rate, *Yellow* means have not achieved the required Saudization rate compared to the entities engaged in a similar economic activity and of a similar size, *Low Green* means Saudization Rate falls within the Low Third of the Green Range, *Medium Green* means Saudization Rate falls within the Middle Third of Green Range, *High Green* means Saudization Rate falls within the Top Third of Green Range, *Platinum* means entities falling within this range are outperformers in Saudization and deserve this range"(MLSD, 2017, p.30).

will lead to the closure of the organisation. Arguably, the revision of the Nitaqat policy may increase employment of Saudi women which directly impacts women's workforce participation from 22 to 30 per cent.

4.3.2. Socio-cultural and legal policies impacting on women's empowerment: amendments to travel documents rules, right to drive, and labour laws

Context

Before the inception of Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia upheld restrictive rules on women's ability to travel abroad in search of either employment or education. Women required approval from male counterparts to buy and own property, travel, work, or acquire loans. The Labour Law (Article 2) did not explicitly state that workers can be "male or female", leaving it open for employers and the wider public to exclude women from the workforce. Vision 2030 ushered in a new dawn for women, with the government acknowledging their social-cultural and economic rights (Rizvi & Hussain, 2021). Amendments to Articles 2, 3, and 4 of the Civil Law are seen as transformative efforts towards greater women's engagement in society, government, and business. Equally importantly, the Council of Ministers broadened the term 'worker' in Article 2 of the Labour Law to include "any person: male or female, who works for an employer and under their management and supervision for a wage" (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2018). The Article's amendment is now in line with the Saudi Vision 2030, which acknowledges women as an integral part of the workforce.

Content

Under the new amendments on Civil Law and Labour Law introduced in August 2019, women are on equal footing with men. Upon attaining 21 years of age, they can obtain a passport and travel abroad without the permission of a male relative. Any woman, even those who are married, can now register as the "head of the household", which allows them to legally act on behalf of their children (Rizvi & Hussain, 2021). Under Article 30 (amended) of the Civil Law, women can now own a place of residency. Previously women's residence could be only where their husband or guardian resided. Regarding labour Laws, the new policy identifies three critical approaches. Firstly, Article 3 of the Labour Law provides work as civil rights, for both men and women (Al-Qahtani et al., 2020). Equally importantly, the policy ensures the provision of work without gender, disability, age, and any other form of discrimination in Saudi Arabia. Article 155 of the Labour Law (Amended) safeguards women employees by prohibiting employment termination of female workers during pregnancy or during maternity leave (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2018).

Process

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has taken a systematic approach (policy initiation, development, and formulation) to ensure women's empowerment. To begin with, the top government hierarchy initiated the policy relating to travel, driving, and labour participation. His Majesty King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Council of Ministers through Royal decree and Directives have transformed the social-cultural outcomes (Rizvi & Hussain, 2021), beginning with the creation of the 2018 Anti-Harassment Law, which prevents workplace and social abuse against women. Through this law, harassment is defined as a statement, act, or gesture with a sexual connotation issued by a person towards any other person by any means, including modern technology (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2018).

Whether the Anti-Harassment Law is effective depends on many things, including the process and implementation of the law. Here, the critical consideration is that the law is only effective through a systematic approach bringing on board the state machinery (police), the company's policies, and employee cooperation (especially within the work environment). The critical efforts to realising women's rights are through proper anti-harassment policy and constant monitoring by the responsible ministry and law enforcement agencies.

Secondly, the development stage mainly brings on board the Council of Ministers and government institutions (for example, the Public Security Department of the Ministry of Interior is responsible for evaluating and issuing driving licences). On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the critical institution for providing travel documents to women. The revision to Labour and Travel Law tries to achieve three main objectives: (a) women's autonomy in social and economic decisions, (b) women's ability to seek educational and employment opportunities, and (c) equal treatment.

4.4. Conclusion

In summary, since Saudi Vision 2030 was launched, women in Saudi Arabia have seen major changes in policy favouring them. From the discussion, it can be seen that the Vision laid out a blueprint for policy development that would help the Kingdom advance its social and economic goals. Through analysis of the Vision 2030 and the policies that follow it, it is arguable that the identified policy developments have been instrumental for women's empowerment. Firstly, the policy removes the regulatory labour constraints limiting female mobility, skill and acquisition, and autonomy in making economic decisions. Regarding

employment and finance, women can now work in many economic fields, and have access to credit institutions.

Overall, Vision 2030 ignited an essential policy agenda for women's empowerment at the economic and social-cultural level in Saudi Arabia to allow women to realise that they play an equal role in the economy and society. Nevertheless, the question remains: does this encouragement, and the introduction of regulations and laws, really affect the rate of Saudi female participation in the labour force? The next chapter therefore will be a discussion of the impact of women's empowerment policies on the rate of female participation in the labour force in the period 2011-2020.

5. Chapter Five: Discussion of the impact of women's empowerment policies on the female labour force participation rate, 2016 -2020

5.1.Introduction

As discussed in previous chapters, the policy related to women's empowerment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undergone a noticeable change in the last five years. One of the most important measures for evaluating the effectiveness of these policies is the data from Saudi labour market statistics before and after applying these policies. Therefore, the first section of this chapter describes and analyses the impact of the Vision 2030 goals in relation to the women's empowerment policies on labour market statistics. The second section discusses the results of Saudi women's empowerment policies from a feminist neoliberal perspective.

The data used in this analysis was obtained from the Saudi General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT) for the years 2016 to 2020 based on the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and administrative data recorded and updated by government agencies related to the labour market since they are major sources of information on employees in Saudi Arabia. There were terms used to describe the Saudi labour market statistics and it is important for readers to know the meaning of these terms. Table 5.1 explains the meaning of these important terms; Unemployment rate, Labour Force Participation rate (LFPR) and Unemployed as defined by LFS assessment. The Labour force inclusive and exclusive criteria used by the Saudi LFS are the same as the international standards developed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Table 5.1: Terms used in Saudi labour market statistics

Terms	Description
Unemployment rate	Ratio of unemployed people to the labour force (employed + actively unemployed looking for work) at working-age population (15-65 years)
Labour Force Participation rate	Ratio of the labour force (employed and unemployed) to the working-age population (15-65 years).
Unemployed	Individuals (15-65 years) who were: 1. without a job in the week preceding the interview (phone call). 2. Seriously looking for work during the four weeks preceding the interview (and have followed at least one method to look for a job). This category also includes those who did not search for work because they were waiting to start an already agreed job or because they want to set up their own business. 3. People who are available to work and start a job in the week preceding the interview or the next two weeks.

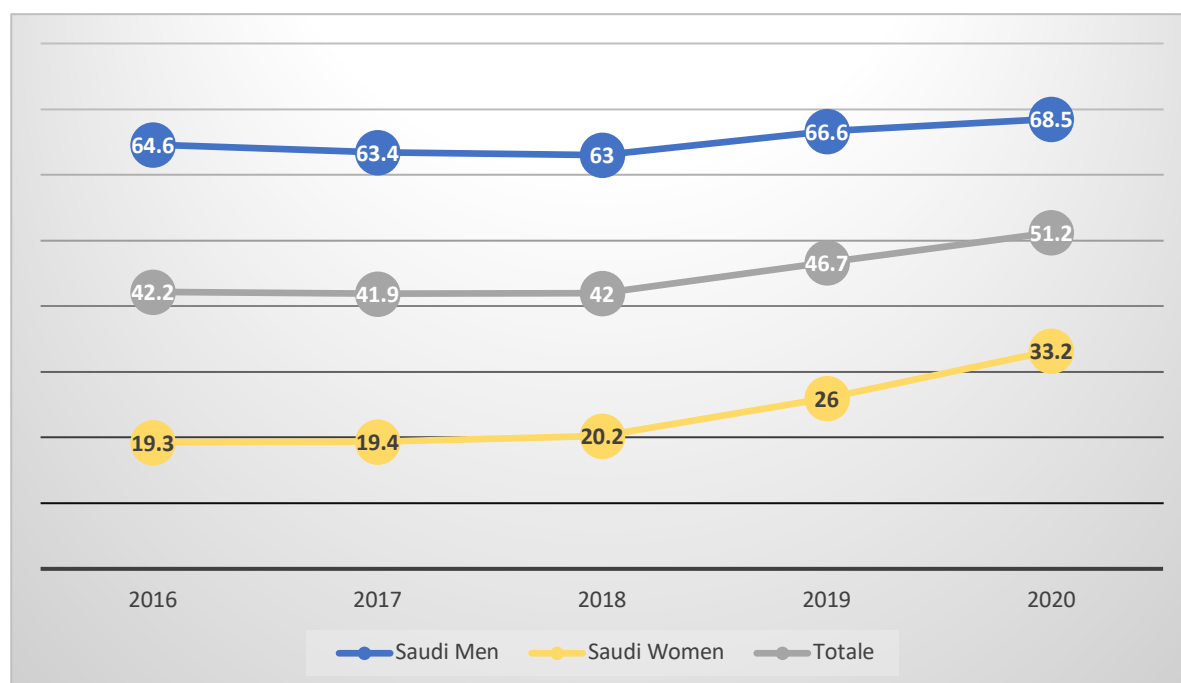
Source: GASTAT, 2020a

5.2. Description and analysis of the Saudi labour market statistics

This section aims to analyse and evaluate some of the Saudi labour market statistics such as women's participation in the labour force, employment data in both public and private sectors, and the unemployment rate. The purpose of these analyses is to discover the impact of the Vision 2030 goals in relation to the women's empowerment policies on these data.

5.2.1 The Saudi labour force participation rate (LFPR) by gender from 2016 to 2020

Figure 5.1: Saudi labour force participation rate (15-65 years) 2016 - 2020 (%)



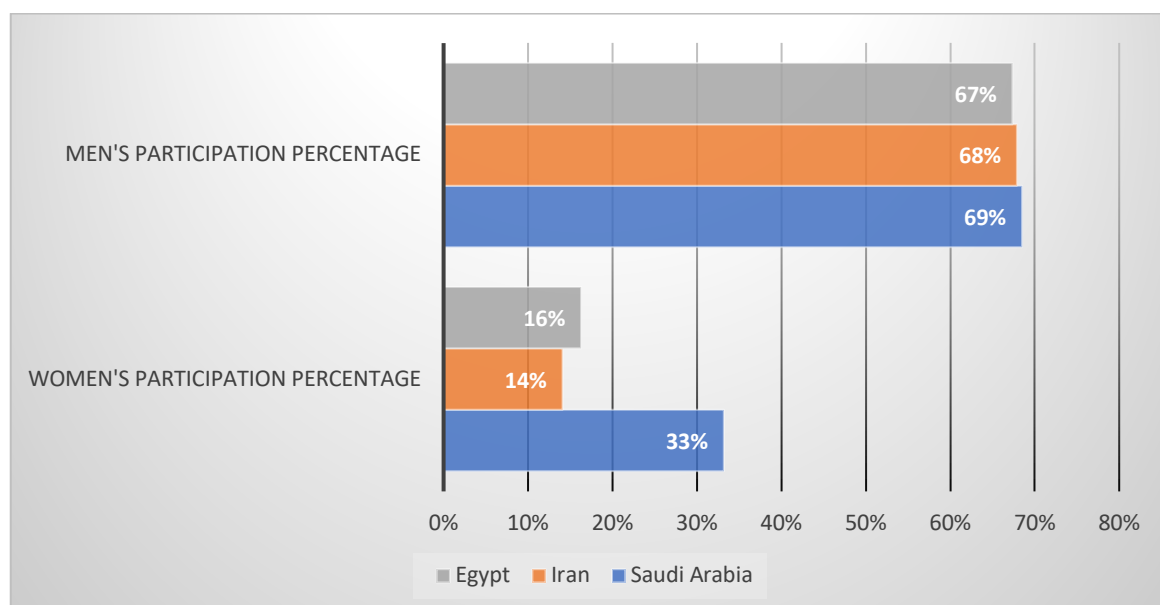
Source: GASTAT, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a

As illustrated in Figure 5.1, the average female LFPR (employed and active unemployed) increased significantly from 19 per cent in 2016 to 33 per cent in 2020 while the male LFPR changed slightly from 64 to 68 per cent. This increase among females was higher than the percentage targeted by the Vision 2030 goals. This clearly indicates the effectiveness of the new policies toward women's empowerment, one of which is to open job opportunities for women in all fields of employment. However, the LFPR gap between male (68 per cent) and female (33 per cent) is still noticeably high and further strategies from the government are required to address the gap.

Despite this big difference between female and male LFPRs, compared to countries in the Middle East region that have a high population growth rate and have the same social

characteristics and Islamic culture such as Iran and Egypt, it can be seen that the percentage of Saudi women in the labour force is the highest among them for the year 2020 (Figure 5.2). Moreover, the percentage of men participating in the labour force is much higher than that of women in both Egypt and Iran. It can be said that although the difference between Saudi women and Saudi men is still large, it has decreased over the years since the Vision 2030 was implemented, while those of other countries in the region has not.

Figure 5.2: The labour force participation rate for Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2020 (%)



Source: Central Agency for Public Mobilization And Statistics of Egypt, 2020; GASTAT, 2020a; Statistical Center of Iran, 2021

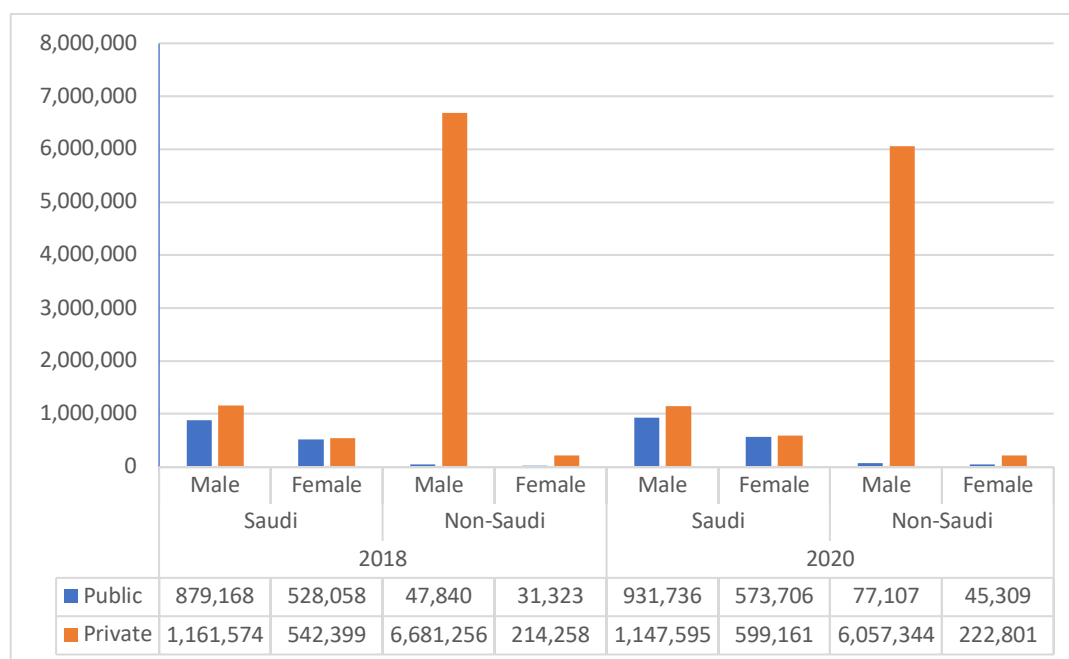
5.2.2 Employment data from 2018 to 2020

There was a positive change in the number of Saudi females employed in the Saudi labour market from 2018 to 2020 (Figure 5.3). In the government sector there was an increase in the number of Saudi female employees by 8.6 per cent (45,648) and the number of non-Saudi female employees increased by 44 per cent (13,986) in the same sector. It should be noted that the numbers for non-Saudi female employees rose from a small base in the public

sector, compared with numbers in the private sector. On the other hand, the number of Saudi female employees in the private sector increased by 10.5 per cent (56,762), while the increase among the non-Saudi females was only 4 per cent (8,543). This may reflect the success of the implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030 policies of providing job opportunities in both sectors.

It is worth noting that as indicated by Figure 5.3, there is a very clear difference between the number of non-Saudi and Saudi male employees. According to GASTAT (2020a), three and a half million non-Saudi workers are concentrated in only two sectors: construction and retail trade. There are opportunities in the Saudi economy for citizens to work, particularly in the retail sector, as the Vision encouraged the development of this sector. The question here is, why were the foreign workers not replaced by Saudis? Is it because of the low salary of foreign workers or their skills? Despite this, it can be said that the increase in the number of employed women over the two years is commendable.

Figure 5.3: Total employed persons, by nationality and type of sector⁴

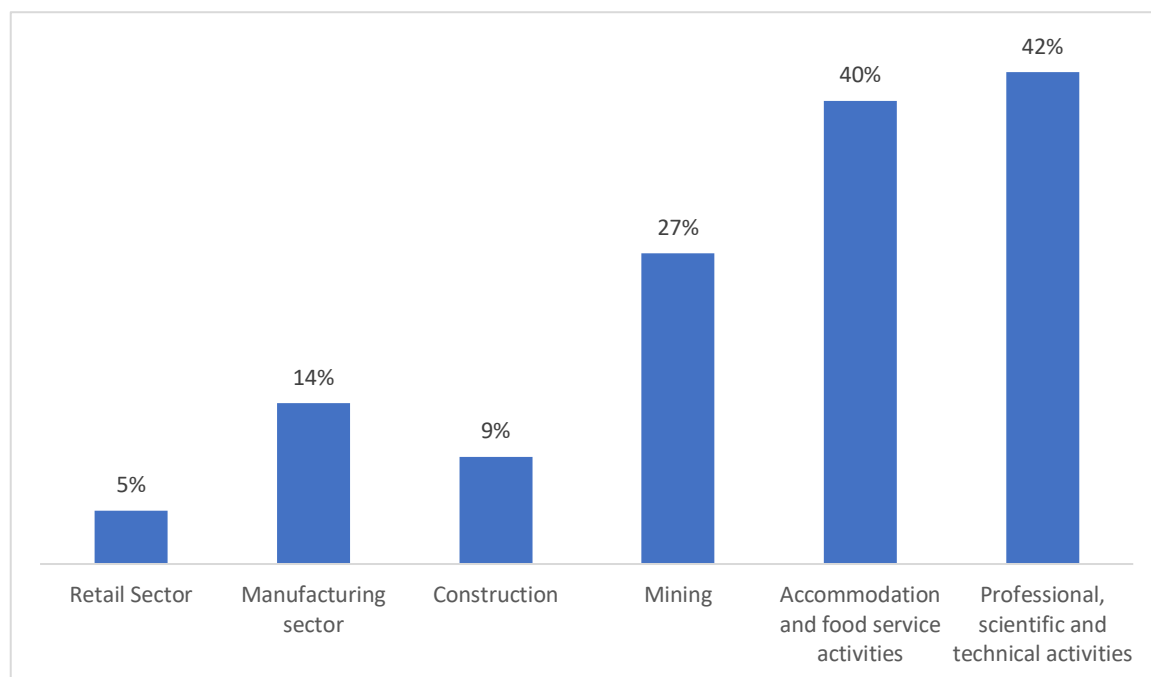


Source: GASTAT, 2018, 2020a.

The increase in the number of Saudi women employed could be due to the opening of new areas for women in sectors that the Vision is highlighting, mostly in the private sector. For example, the tourism, mining, construction and retail sectors were formerly the domain of men, or in other words, were not considered as women's jobs. Moreover, these kinds of jobs challenge gender segregation at work. Figure 5.4 shows the percentage of women's employment grew in the new economic activities sector between 2019 to 2020. These key sectors include construction, manufacturing, accommodation, and food business, in which women's employment grew by 9 per cent, 14 per cent, and 40 per cent, respectively. This could be because of the Vision 2030 policies of opening new opportunities for Saudi women in the important sectors of the economy and the review of the Nitaqat program that forced the private sector to hire Saudi women.

⁴ The data does not include workers in the security and military sectors (GASTAT, 2020).

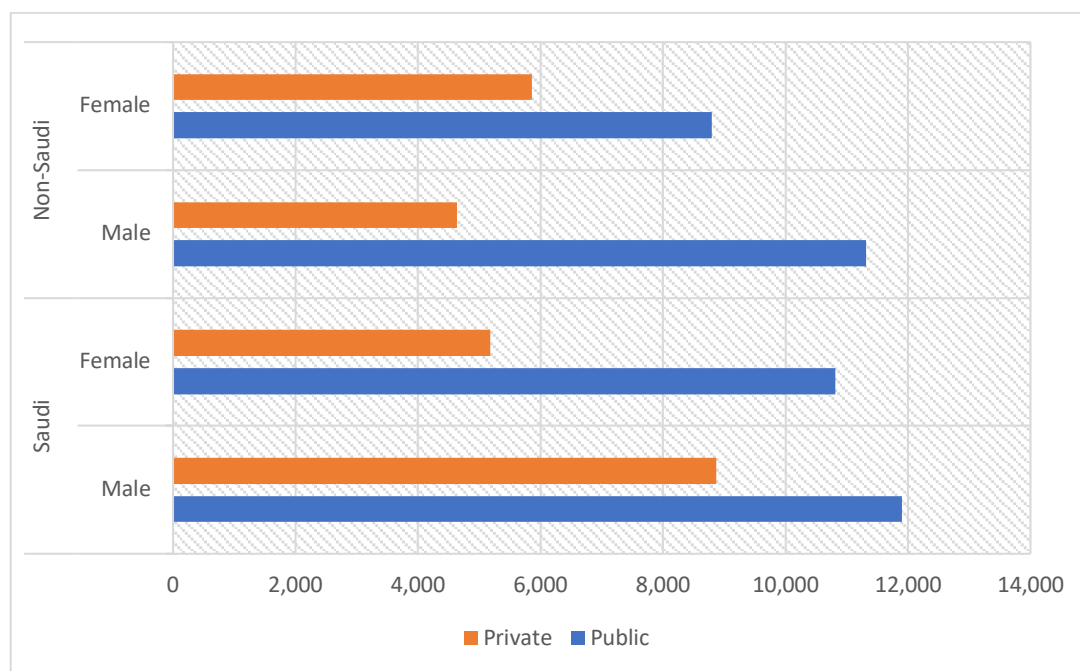
Figure 5.4: The growth of Saudi women employed in the new economic activities in the private sector for the year 2019-2020 (%)



Source: GASTAT, 2019, 2020a.

In terms of salaries, there was a significant difference between the average salary between the two sectors and as well in gender in the same sectors (Figure 5.5). According to the GASTAT (2020a), monthly salaries for Saudi women in the private sector were around half that of the government sector. Moreover, the average salaries in the private sector for Saudi women were 71 per cent lower than Saudi men's salaries. These significant differences in salaries could be due to gender discrimination in pay, or to gender segregated work, which should be more closely researched, and needs to be addressed by the government. Despite the low average wage of Saudi women employees in the private sector, there has been a positive and noticeable improvement in their participation in the Saudi labour market for the year 2020.

Figure 5.5: Average monthly wages by nationality and type of sector in Saudi Riyals for 2020



Source: GASTAT, 2020a.

Although Saudi men earn a higher salary, there was a decrease in the number of Saudi men employed in the private sector from 2018 to 2020, as opposed to the Saudi women (Figure 5.3). This indicates the success of Saudi women's empowerment policies in this sector.

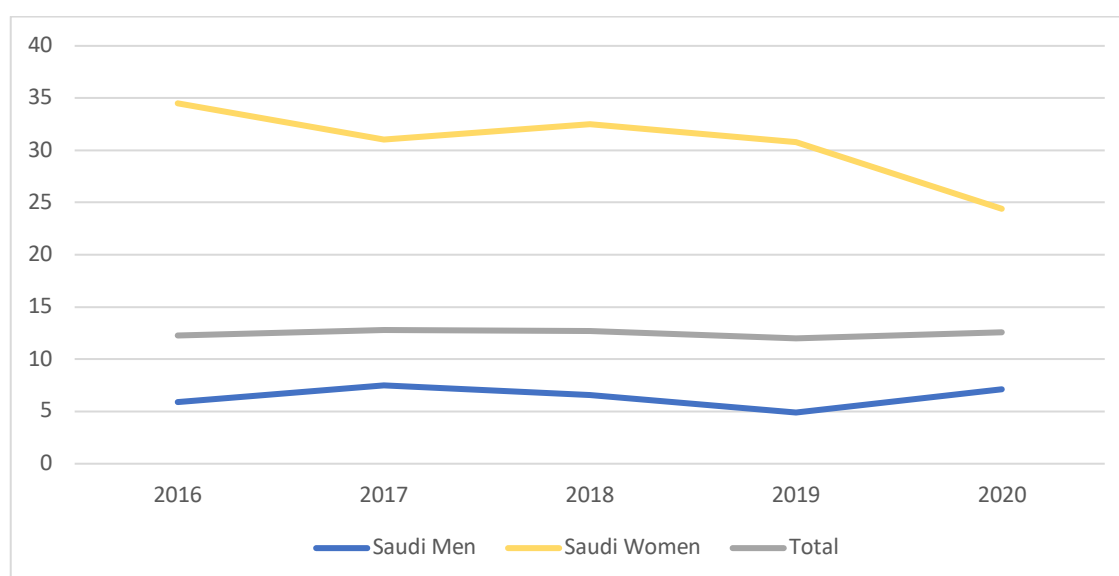
Anti-discrimination laws exist in the workplace, where the labour system established a number of rights and duties equally between men and women, such as equal pay in the event of equal value and quality of work as explained in Chapter four. The question here is has this big gap occurred between the wages of Saudi women and men because Saudi women are excluded from the higher-earning professions? Or is it because of their level within the organisation? There was no gender-disaggregated data available from GASTAT to shed light on these questions. Including more gender-disaggregated data will help to answer this and establish whether Saudi women are becoming more empowered.

Nonetheless, the problem of inequality of wages is not unique to Saudi Arabia as inequality in income remains extensive across the globe despite policy efforts towards gender equality (Cuesta, Negre, Revenga, & Silva-Jauregui, 2020). From the authors' perspective, such inequalities propagate extreme poverty, inhibit one's ability to contribute to the economy, affect a household's sustainability, and other shortcomings. The decision-makers in Saudi Arabia require equalising interventions to address the pay disparity.

5.2.3 The Saudi unemployment rate

Despite the previous good results, the unemployment rate among Saudi women is still high, at 24 per cent of all Saudi women in the labour force in the year 2020. As shown in Figure 5.6, although the unemployment rate is high, it decreased by 10 percentage points compared to the year 2016. However, there remains a large gender gap, where the unemployment rate of Saudi females (24 per cent) is almost three times higher than the unemployment rate of Saudi men (7 per cent).

Figure 5.6: The unemployment rate of the Saudi population (15-65) (%)

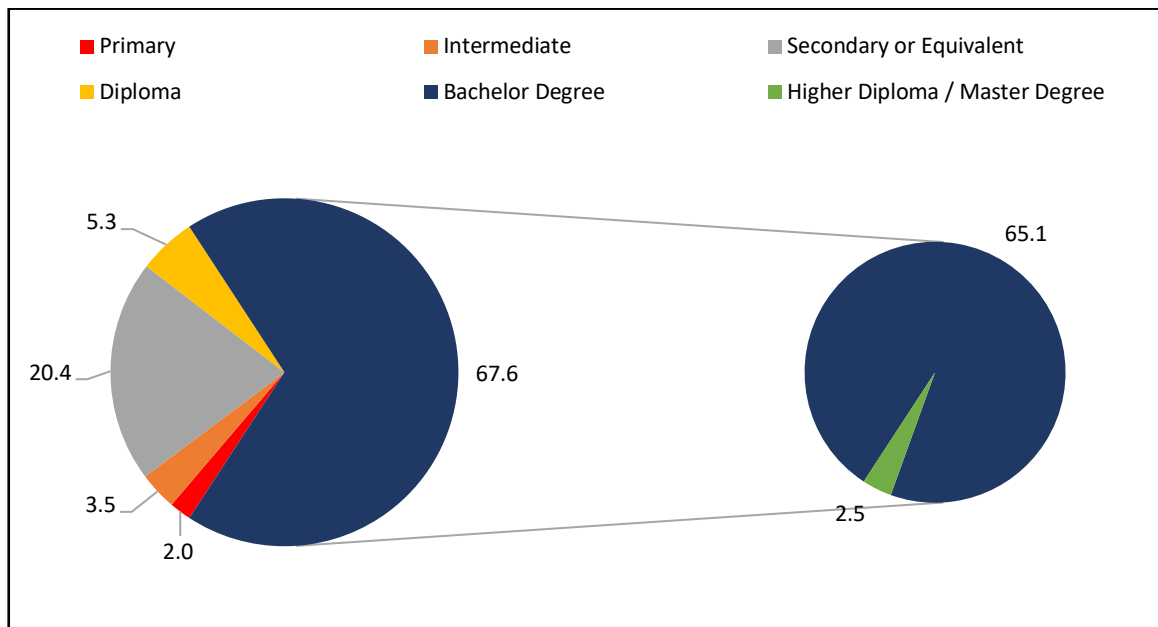


Source: GASTAT, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020a.

It can be said that the unemployment rate of Saudi women since the launch of the goals of empowering women has decreased, but the large gap between the unemployment rate for Saudi women and Saudi men should not be ignored, particularly as Saudi women graduates make up over 50 per cent of university graduates. According to the latest statistics on the demographic characteristics of the population of Saudi Arabia (2017), the number of Saudi women who have a university degree (1.5 million) is three times the number of Saudi women who have a primary degree (0.6 million).

Despite the strong effort in regard to educational empowerment of Saudi women, 65 per cent of the unemployed women in 2020 hold a university degree which is twice the proportion of unemployed men with the same education level (Figure 5.7). This may be because their degrees did not serve the needs of the Saudi labour market, which needs professionals from new economic branches such as mining, engineering, technology, and tourism which Vision 2030 highlighted. According to GASTAT (2020a), among the unemployed university-educated women, the highest percentage of the specialisations were in the field of humanities, teaching, and management at 26 per cent, 19 per cent, and 17 per cent, respectively. These include the women who graduated before the start of education reforms since the launch of Vision 2030 when women could only study specialisations that were determined to be suitable for women. Therefore, it can be argued that restructuring education and training to suit the needs of the Saudi market under Vision 2030 will bring more Saudi women into the employment field.

Figure 5.7: The percentage distribution of unemployed Saudi women aged 15-65 by educational level in 2020 ⁵



Source: GASTAT, 2020a.

⁵ The general education stages in KSA are the primary education (6 years), intermediate education (3 years) and secondary education (3 years).

5.3. Discussion of the Saudi labour force statistics from a feminist neoliberal perspective

The purpose of this section is to analyse the previous section results from a neoliberal feminist perspective. Through the thesis chapters, we saw that Saudi women faced immense barriers as they sought economic, social, and political opportunities to set themselves on equal footing with men. The inequality between men and women was visible in learning institutions, communities, government, work environments, and homes. Nonetheless, the last quarter-century has seen significant policy efforts for women's empowerment anchored on a rationale that gender equality can enhance economic output and development status, create stronger communities, and make institutions more representative (Revenga & Shetty, 2012; Kabeer, 2012). In most modern societies, every facet of gender equality—access to education and health care, economic opportunity, household empowerment, and society—has experienced a mixed pattern of changes. The international conventions and development plans informed by the feminist neoliberal perspective have been instrumental in propelling these developments. As a perspective on women's empowerment, the feminist neoliberal theory captures two main principles: women's empowerment is connected with economic development, and policies are fundamental to realising women's empowerment. For neoliberal feminists, the main pathway for women's empowerment is through economic empowerment. This means that when women are in an economically stronger position, they have more agency, more decision-making power, and they probably have more power in the household as well. Therefore, from the neo-liberal feminist perspective, participation in the labour force is already empowerment (Coleman, 2010; Revenga and Shetty, 2012).

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has been a critical policy development in that it clearly set out arguments that rationalised women's empowerment as means for economic growth. From

a feminist neoliberal perspective, one of the main objectives of Vision 2030 has been employment opportunities for historically disadvantaged women, but also the argument that bringing women into the workforce is pivotal to Saudi Arabia's development. As mentioned previously, in recent years, Saudi women's labour participation rate increased from 20 per cent in 2018 to 33 per cent by the end of 2020 (

Figure 5.1). These outcomes have surpassed the target of Vision 2030 which envisaged a 30 per cent increase by 2030.

Additionally, the last two years have witnessed the inclusion of women's names in high-ranking employment positions for the first time. The Vision not only opened the gate r to employment for women, but also to be in a role model jobs to inspire other Saudi women. In 2020, Saudi Arabia's King Salman issued a decree appointing 13 women to the Saudi Human Rights Commission (HRC), which means that 50 per cent of the HRC Council are women (Al-Moualami, 2021). Furthermore, since 2013, women's participation in the Saudi Consultative Council remained at 20 per cent. The number of women working in the diplomatic corps has increased by 150 per cent, including three ambassadors between the years 2019 and 2020. With the Kingdom appreciating the need for women's political inclusivity, steps have been taken to include women into political structures. This includes an 81 per cent increase in women's participation in municipal elections, nominations, and elections. The current policies have also seen women elevated to leadership positions in local and international corporate entities. For example, the largest financial market in the Middle East, "Tadawli", is headed by Sarah Al-Suhaimi (Al-Moualami, 2021). Other women who occupy important posts include "Rasha AlEmam, CEO of Alif Alif Radio, and Basmah Al-Mayman, the Regional Director of the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) for the Middle East" (World Bank, 2020). On the international level, Saudi women have assumed

important positions in international organisations and bodies, for example, Thoraya Obaid, the United Nations Population Fund Executive Director, and Saudi Arabia's Human Rights Commission Representative Dr Tamadrr Al-Rammah. Others have joined teaching staff at international universities such as Harvard and Johns Hopkins. Arguably, the recent policies have enhanced women's autonomy in seeking leadership and employment position in private/public international organisations (Al-Moualami, 2021).

Equally important, the feminist neoliberal perspective also regards women's education opportunities as a significant step towards empowerment, determining their employability and private businesses. Shetty and Hans (2019) note that empowerment policies have increased women's education opportunities. There are more young women in universities, where women account for 51 per cent of all students worldwide. Saudi Arabia reflects this trend, with 3.3 million females accessing primary, middle, and secondary education, while the number of males was 3.1 million in 2019 (GASTAT, 2020b).

Recent global accolades in Saudi Arabia confirm the progressive move towards women's empowerment in legal, political, economic, and social levels. For example, the Arab Women's Committee (39th Session) declared Riyadh the capital of Arab women in appreciation of the country's commitment towards women's economic empowerment, health, and development. The Committee also recognised significant steps, including lifting the ban on female drivers and loosening the restriction on guardianship laws which prevented women's mobility. The World Bank Group and International Monetary Fund equally recognised Saudi Arabia's efforts towards gender equality (World Bank, 2020). According to Revanga and Shetty (2012), gender equality is essential in its own right, allowing countries to

close the gap between males and females. This helps reduce income poverty, enhance economic efficiency and improve development outcomes.

Based on the examination of the recent empowerment of Saudi women from the neoliberal feminist's approach, we can see the progress for Saudi women in education and employment. However, this success does not erase the fact that there are limitations to this approach. As pointed out in Chapter two, one of the most important limitations of the neoliberal feminist perspective is that it focuses only on empowering women in the public sphere and neglects or ignores the private sphere of women's lives.

Many scholars such as McRobbie (2013), Rottenberg (2019), and Wilson (2015) argued that the neoliberal feminist version of women's empowerment lies in women's access to opportunities in the public sphere but does not constitute empowerment. According to the scholars views the neoliberal feminist 'empowerment' simply ignores the private sphere and its challenges. One of the most important points in the issue of ignoring the private sphere is the role and responsibilities of women in the family. McRobbie (2013) and Rottenberg (2014) claim that neoliberal feminism has not found solutions for women with regard to care and procreation and the responsibilities arising from it.

Although “balance between work and family” is claimed by feminist neoliberalists to address the issue, there are many criticisms of this. One of the solutions to achieve this balance is to employ other women to provide care work, manage home affairs, and care for children, and these services are often provided by women who receive low wages (Rottenberg, 2019). This raises the issue of inequality among women, as if neoliberal

feminism has removed the focus on poor women who came from different races and focused only on women from the middle class and above (Wilson, 2015).

Looking at the context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, challenges to entering the public sphere exist in the life of employed Saudi women. The issue of balance between family, work, and the accumulated responsibilities of Saudi women in the private sphere is one of the most troublesome problems for employed Saudi women. This is due to the patriarchal system that exempts men from participating in care and household chores. thus, the women are responsible for the public sphere (job) and private sphere duties.

Some Saudi studies which examined this issue found excessive workload resulting from the lack of balance between family and work for employed Saudi women (Al-Asfour, Tlaiss, Khan, & Rajasekar, 2017; Alfarasani & Mohammad, 2021; Allui & Kamaludin, 2017; Alsadaan, Jones, Kimpton, & DaCosta, 2021). It is well known that the recruitment of domestic workers is widespread in Saudi Arabia. According to Roumani (2005), since the beginning of the employment of Saudi women, the demand for domestic workers has increased. One of the most important solutions that Saudi female employee's resort to achieve a balance between work and family is through the recruitment of domestic workers. The increase in Saudi women's employment since 2016 has therefore also been linked with an increase in the number of domestic workers. Based on GASTAT (2016, 2020a), the number of female domestic workers at the end of 2016 was 759,241 which increased to 1,031,564 in 2020. It should be noted that this number could be more if there had been no Covid-19 pandemic which affected travel and recruitment. Although the recruitment of a domestic worker may be one of the helpful solutions for employed Saudi women, this solution may be unacceptable to some employed Saudi women due to a number of reasons,

such as the recruitment cost or size of their house. They may prefer day-care services but lack of suitable services near the workplace and high prices are a challenge (Alfarasani & Mohammad, 2021).

There is a need to enhance understanding of employment challenges faced by women in Saudi Arabia by encouraging more women-friendly work environments, policies, and procedures. For example, setting up more day-care facilities on worksites for women to allow them to perform their maternity duties more easily. It would also be beneficial to hold training sessions to improve the involvement of men with women to manage increased workloads and achieve a work-life balance.

6. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore whether the Saudi Vision 2030 has empowered Saudi women through greater access to employment. It argued that the time frame in question (2016-2020) is significant for evaluation considering the enactment of Vision 2030, a key blueprint toward economic development and social changes. One of the outstanding features of Vision 2030 is the goal to increase women's labour force participation rate from 22 per cent to 30 per cent by 2030 by enacting many laws and legislation. The underlying research question was how these efforts (Vision 2030 and related policies) have empowered Saudi women, whether providing labour translates to women's empowerment, and how the vision expresses or addresses women's empowerment. To understand the meaning of empowerment, the neoliberal feminist framework has been used. There are different ways to understand and investigate empowerment, but this framework has been chosen because it focuses on economic empowerment and enables a critical engagement with Saudi policies.

To achieve the aim of this thesis, there was a need to understand the context and the traditional role of Saudi women and recognise that there has been a process to empower Saudi women before Vision 2030 came into place. Thus, Chapter three explained when and how women's empowerment began in the context of KSA. Moreover, to answer the question of how the Vision expresses or addresses women's empowerment, Chapter four provided policy analysis, interrogating different women's empowerment initiatives as seen through the Policy Analysis Triangle lens. Finally, Chapter five provided the discussion of the impact of women's empowerment policies on the rate of female participation in the labour force through compiling, describing and analysing gender disaggregated Saudi labour market statistics from 2016-2020.

While this study did not ask any women in Saudi Arabia whether they are empowered or not, the available statistics illustrate that women have more jobs than before 2016 (post Vision 2030), which means that from the neoliberal feminist lens, the Saudi women are empowered. Facilitated by Vision 2030, the female LFPR (employed and active unemployed) increased significantly from 19 per cent in 2016 to 33 per cent in 2020. This can be interpreted to be a result of opening up new employment opportunities for women and removing the barriers that prevent Saudi women from economic empowerment, and other factors mentioned in the thesis. For feminist neoliberal theorists, the current status of women's labour participation of 33 per cent is commendable, having surpassed the Vision 2030 threshold set at 30 per cent. With close to a decade still to go for Saudi Arabia to realise its Vision, women's employment has time to improve. Women's empowerment can influence policy decisions and make organisations more representative. In addition, increased women's jobs in political institutions, for example, the Shura Council, Saudi Human Rights Commission, and leadership in corporate organisations, are fundamental steps towards

women's empowerment. From a feminist neo-liberal perspective, this is evidence that women are empowered or becoming empowered in Saudi Arabia. These policies are a significant step towards economic productivity, improved development outcomes, better communities, women's decision-making power, and more representative institutions.

While these efforts are commendable, the other kinds of feminists' perspectives do not solely view women's labour participation as "empowerment" with a recognition that there are limitations of the neo-liberal feminist approach. For example, current empowerment initiatives lose sight of the role played by women in the family, creating a complex social issue. The burden that women bear is significantly different from that of men in terms of responsibilities related to their social and family lives. As explained in Chapter Three, Saudi women were preoccupied with unpaid tasks and responsibilities. As more Saudi women are now in employment, the demand for domestic help from other countries increased. Therefore, the large number of helpers, and the cost to employ and maintain them, needs to be considered in any kind of national framework of women's empowerment or any kind of equality. Moreover, the significant wage differences between Saudi women and men could be a case of gender discrimination, and the government needs to examine and address this issue. At present, the data are inconclusive and there is a need for more fine-grained analysis. The wage gap could be due to several reasons, including women being at the lower ranks of an organisation, having less job experience, and lower education levels. Many kinds of the labour market and employment-related issues need to be addressed, but data from credible sources are currently unavailable. These issues should be pursued to inform future strategies of empowerment and gender equality in Saudi Arabia in order to improve the trajectory of employment for women.

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