

Is the Saudi Gender Gap Narrowing?

by Ahmed H. Alrefai

Saudi Arabia has enthusiastically endorsed the United Nations' "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,"¹ adopted by the General Assembly in September 2015, but in general, the agenda's ambitious goals have not been met in the kingdom. In particular, the goals for gender equality lag behind, and Saudi women's rights are still severely limited. In the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, Riyadh ranked 146th of 153 countries in overall gender equality, 148th in gender economic participation and opportunity, and 136th in political empowerment.² And while a recent survey reveals that Saudi men are amenable to their wives entering the labor market, they are reluctant to voice openly this view for fear of social stigmatization given Saudi society's highly conservative perception of male-female relations in general, and women's role in the public space in particular. In the words of analyst Daniel Pipes, anxiety has long existed in Muslim society "that women would break loose of their restrictions and bring perdition to the community."³



Princess Reema bint Bandar (right) meets with President Trump at the White House, July 9, 2019. Female participation in Saudi political life is increasing. Bint Bandar is the first woman ever to be appointed Saudi ambassador to the United States.

¹ "Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," U.N. General Assembly, New York, Sept. 25, 2015, res. 70/1.

² *Global Gender Gap Report 2020* (World Economic Forum, Geneva, 2019), pp. 9, 12, 13.

³ Daniel Pipes, "Female Desire and Islamic Trauma," *The New York Sun*, May 25, 2004.

Such reticence indicates the obstacles that have yet to be surmounted in order to fulfill Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS)'s assertion that women "make up half of society, and we want it to be a productive half."⁴

Since 2017, women can receive an education and healthcare without the need for male guardian consent.

Women's Growing Empowerment

In fairness to the crown prince, women's conditions in Saudi Arabia have been improving for some time, even before his April 2016 announcement of the Vision 2030 plan, which pledged to "raise Saudi women's economic participation from 17% to 25%" within the framework of revolutionizing the kingdom's socioeconomic life.⁵ Traditionally excluded from political participation, unable to vote or be elected to public office, in 2011 Saudi women were given the right to cast their votes in the forthcoming local elections and be elected to the national parliament (or Shura Council). This right was further institutionalized by a royal decree reserving 20 percent of the council's seats for female members.⁶

The launch of Vision 2030 gave the process of women reforms a major boost with MbS applauding women's prospective contribution toward a future of unprece-

dent prosperity in the kingdom whether by availing their previously untapped economic potential or assuming public and government positions. Within this framework, in 2017, King Salman de-

creed that women could receive government services such as education and healthcare without the need for male guardian consent. As a result, the ratio of female enrollment in Saudi institutions of higher learning grew rapidly, overtaking that of their male counterparts (69.9 percent women vs. 66.3 percent men in 2020) and substantially narrowing the gender gap in educational attainment: ranking 92nd in the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*—just below Japan and several places above China and Korea.⁷

This had a stimulating effect on women's participation in the labor market: With access to a widening field of studies, female graduates have steadily entered traditionally male professions and occupations, from law and architecture to retail and hospitality. This process was boosted by some seventy initiatives, launched by the Ministry of Labor and Social Development in 2018, to stimulate the "Saudiization" of the private sector with special quotas in several sectors reserved for women. "There are now 600,000 Saudi women working for the private sector, 30,000 of whom joined the market last September and October," the ministry's spokesman stated. "This figure stood at 90,000 Saudi women only back in 2011."⁸

4 "[Toward Saudi Arabia's Sustainable Tomorrow](#). First Voluntary National Review 2018/1439. Vision 2030," U.N. High-Level Political Forum 2018, July 9-18, 2018, New York, p. 61.

5 "[Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Vision 2030: National Transformation Program: 2020 Commitments](#)," Sept. 2020; "[Great plan, say experts, analysts](#)," *Saudi Gazette* (Riyadh), Apr. 27, 2016.

6 "[Toward Saudi Arabia's Sustainable Tomorrow](#)," p. 62.

7 *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, pp. 9, 12, 13, 301.

8 CNN, [Feb. 7, 2018](#).

Female entry into the labor market was further facilitated by a string of social reforms:

- King Salman's 2018 decree allowing women to drive (and to travel domestically and internationally without guardian supervision), which removed a major obstacle to women's employability by slashing transportation costs.
- Shortening working hours in the public sector to suit working mothers and increasing paid maternity leave.
- Establishing 233 child-care centers while providing a monthly childcare subsidy for working mothers.

No less importantly, the government opened previously, exclusively-male sectors and jobs to women, such as police and customs and border officers. Women were also increasingly appointed to senior positions in the civil service and elected to public offices including city councils and boards. In April 2018, for example, three women were appointed to the new board of directors for the General Authority for Culture that manages and oversees all cultural activities in the kingdom.⁹ Two years later, ten women were appointed to senior leadership positions in the Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina while another three were appointed as cultural attachés in Saudi embassies abroad—the first such appointments in Saudi diplomatic history—two of which are in Western countries (Britain and Ireland).¹⁰

⁹ *Saudi Gazette*, [Apr. 6, 2018](#).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, [Aug. 2, 2020](#), [Aug. 15, 2020](#).



Women have been increasingly assigned to senior positions in the civil service and elected to public offices. For the first time in history, fifty Saudi women were appointed as public prosecutors, Riyadh, June 2020.

And by way of protecting women's rights and safety both at home and in a mixed working environment, a royal decree put into effect a law on protection from all forms of sexual harassment and abuse.¹¹

In a 2018 progress report to the U.N.'s "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," the Saudi minister of economy and planning stated that the kingdom

dedicates the necessary efforts for enablement of women in community and economic development, as well as in raising women's stature as an effective player at all levels. ... through capacity development and harnessing of women's capabilities in

¹¹ Omar al-Ubaydli, "[How Saudi Arabia has increased female employment](#) and why the country benefits," *al-Arabiya* (Dubai), Aug. 12, 2019.

order to leverage their local and international roles.¹²

To back his assertion, he enumerated a string of achievements as well as existing and future programs for the promotion of gender equality. These included,

- Growing female participation in all walks of political life, from parliamentary representation (where women occupy 20 percent of the seats), to headship of local councils, to the appointment of a female deputy minister.
- Deepening integration in the higher education system where a first-ever female dean of student affairs had been recently appointed at Taif University.
- Extensive participation in the private sector with women accounting for 20 percent of the investments in 2017 and holding chief executive officer positions in leading banks and in several companies. Also, during 2017, some 127,000 new commercial licenses were issued for women with over 450,000 new jobs to be created.
- Expansion of female participation in the labor market from 12 percent in 2009 to 18 percent in 2017 with a view to raising this share to 25 percent by 2020.
- The launch of several initiatives for female empowerment, gender equality promotion, and betterment of women's status and condition, most notably the setup of the Family Council where women occupy half of its sixteen government-appointed senior posts. Chaired by the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, this new body is financially and admin-



Vision 2030 encourages Saudi women to move into the business world. In 2019, Esraa Albuti became the first Saudi female to be promoted to partner at the Saudi offices of the Ernst and Young tax firm.

istratively autonomous, which allows it freely and effectively to pursue its broadly defined mandate for promoting the family's role in society and for ensuring that family rights are observed both as a whole and for its members.¹³

Lingering Problems

These notable achievements notwithstanding, Saudi Arabia still lags in terms of gender equality behind most of its Middle Eastern peers, ranking 15th of the 19 surveyed Middle East states in the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*. Thus, for example, though effectively reaching the 25 percent labor-participation

¹² "Toward Saudi Arabia's Sustainable Tomorrow," p. 62.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 62-3.

target five years earlier than promised (24.6% in 2020)—a higher ratio than Iraq (13%), Jordan (15.1%), or Iran (17.9%), among others—Riyadh still lags way behind its Gulf counterparts: Oman (32.4%), United Arab Emirates (52%), Kuwait (58.8%), and Qatar (59%). Likewise, while Saudi female representation in parliament and senior public positions is at a similar level to the rest of the Gulf states, there are no women ministers in the Saudi cabinet (only one deputy minister) as opposed to female ministers in all other Gulf states.¹⁴

These differences reflect the more conservative nature of Saudi society with its ultra-traditional religious and sociocultural values and beliefs translated to discriminatory norms, rules, and practices governing women's working lives. As a result, Saudi women find themselves trapped by what several analysts describe as

a complex web of stressors at both home and at work, including limited job and career-advancement opportunities, excessive workload caused by a lack of family-work balance, challenges related to pregnancy and mobility, a lack of equity, and gender discrimination in the workplace.¹⁵

Equally important, these norms and values have had major, self-inhibitory psychological effects on Saudi society, which

Saudi women still find themselves trapped by ultra-traditional religious and sociocultural values.

go beyond the objective problems and obstacles that may impede MbS's modernizing vision. Thus, for example, a study comparing female health-

care workers in the Riyadh metropolitan area and the conservative province of Najran found significant differences in the social obstacles confronting each group yet remarkable similarity in the psychological problems that hampered their integration in the working place.¹⁶

Interestingly, this self-inhibition is not confined to women but is also shared by those men who constrain female workplace integration. This is so because the yearning for belonging and conformity and the fear of overstepping society's normative boundaries and risking retribution act as powerful impediments to showing one's true colors in public. Thus, an anonymous nationwide online survey of some 1,500 married Saudi men aged 18-35 found that 82 percent of participants (87 percent in a smaller survey in Riyadh) agreed that "women should be allowed to work outside the home" while grossly underestimating support for this idea among their peers: 92 percent of participants in the national survey underestimated the support, as did about 75 percent in the Riyadh survey. Those participants who were made aware of the true level of support for female integration proved more willing to allow their wives to join the labor force (as measured by their sign-up for a job-matching service for their wives) than those who remained entrenched in their misperception, thus showing the substantial impact of

14 *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, pp. 26, 81-2, 149-50, 189-92, 203-4, 210-11, 275-6, 293-4, 301-2, 349-50.

15 Ahmed al-Asfour et al., "Saudi Women's Work Challenges and Barriers to Career Advancement," *Career Development International*, 2 (2017), pp. 186, 193.

16 Mohammad Abdullah al-Hazmi et al., "Obstacles of Saudi Woman Work in the Mixed Environment: A Field Survey," *International Education Studies*, 8 (2017), pp. 128-44.

perceptions (and mis-perceptions) of existing social norms on one's actual behavior.¹⁷

Survey responses showed overwhelming support for female labor force participation.

Openness to Female Labor Force Participation

To explore prevailing views, attitudes, and stereotypes among younger Saudis toward female labor force participation, this author held an online survey of 1,000 people (690 working men and 310 working women) in November 2018 in the conservative Tabuk province and the more liberal Riyadh province. Participants were recruited from public and/or government institutions that employed both men and women, including media outlets, the court system, military hospitals, Riyadh's Medical City Hospital, and Tabuk's health center. The premise was that the views of this younger, educated group (69 percent of participants aged 35 and under, and 73 percent holding at least a college degree) in two, very different parts of the kingdom, would be emblematic of the wider outlook of the new, upcoming Saudi generation, thus indicative of the likely direction of gender equality in the coming decade.

Participants were asked to respond affirmatively or negatively to the following six assertions on female labor force participation and were encouraged to elaborate on a voluntary question regarding the extent of women's adaptability to the working place:

- Saudi women bring a significant added value to the workforce.

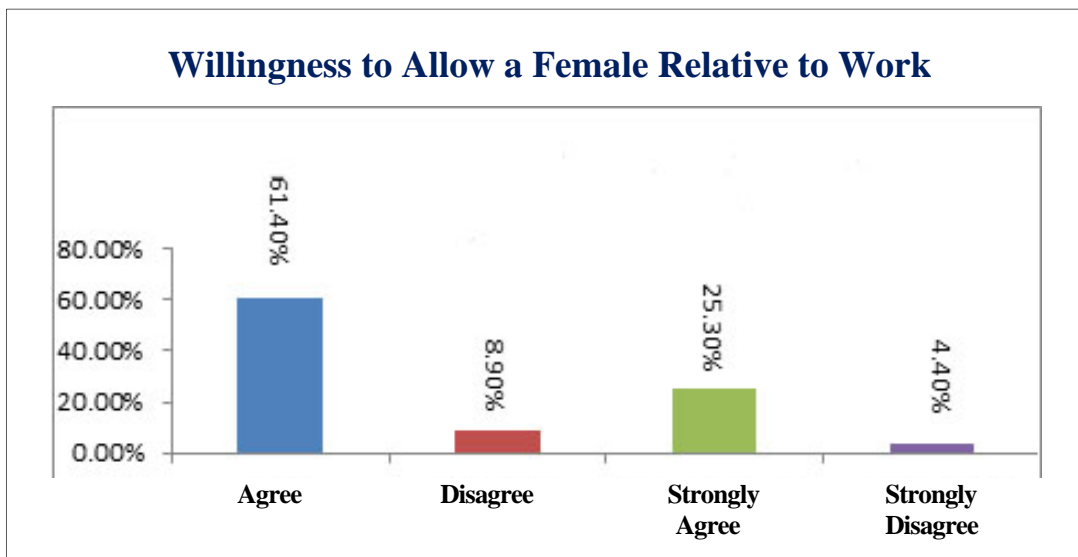
- Saudi women have the willingness to work hard.

- As a man, will you accept a female relative joining the workforce?

- Having a career will not adversely affect women's roles as mothers.
- Saudi women adapt quickly to work environments.
- Saudi women have the same skills as foreign women.
- Voluntary question: "What's your view about women's participation and roles in the workforce?"

Broadly speaking, responses showed overwhelming support for female labor force participation, with 86 percent of men having no objection to female family members joining the workforce, and 69 percent of respondents believing that working mothers could accommodate both roles. A whopping 84 percent of respondents thought that women were eager to work hard while 79 percent believed that they could quickly adapt to the work environment, and 74 percent maintained that Saudi women had no lesser skills than foreign women and could readily replace them in the workforce. Responses to the open question, where participants were free to express their views at some length, were similarly favorable and forthcoming with many respondents thinking that there was no fundamental difference between men and women at the workforce and that women could readily adjust and successfully fulfill any job if given the right training and the opportunity to use their skills.

¹⁷ Leonardo Burszty, Alessandra L. Gonzolez, and David Yanagizawa-Drott, "Misperceived Social Norms: Female Labor Force Participation in Saudi Arabia," National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper, Cambridge, Mass., June 2018.



The only response that clouded this overall enthusiasm with female workforce participation related to their potential contribution, whereby only 43 percent of respondents thought that women bring a significant added value to the workforce whereas 57 percent thought they do not.

Yet even this skeptical view does not necessarily imply outright opposition to female participation in the workforce. Rather it reflects the difficulty in discarding the lingering norms, prejudices, stereotypes, and patriarchal superiority feelings of the traditionally male-dominated Saudi society in order to adjust to the conditions of the twenty-first century, even if one is open to these new circumstances.

Conclusion

While Saudi Arabia has made major strides in narrowing the gender gap over the past decade, and younger Saudis seem to be broadly amenable to female workforce participation, there is still a glaring dis-

sonance between these modernizing trends and the kingdom's indigenous religious, social, and cultural values. As a result, many husbands are reluctant to allow their spouses to join the labor market despite their amenability to this move for fear of negative stigmatization. In addition, there exist lingering undercurrents of male supremacism despite positive attitudes toward female labor participation. This in turn means that to meet the ambitious goals set by its Vision 2030 program, Riyadh will need not only to modernize its administration and governing institutions but to undergo a sociocultural revolution that will transform its patriarchal structure and adjust deeply rooted values and norms to the necessities of the twenty-first century.

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