



Women's Empowerment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Legal and Social Transformations in Light of Vision 2030

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Introduction

Women's empowerment has evolved into a central objective in global development agendas. The 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women marked a pivotal moment, with 189 countries committing to gender equality through the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Despite these commitments, recent evaluations highlight significant challenges. On the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Conference, leaders expressed concern over slow progress, citing legislative rollbacks, the resurgence of misogyny, and the exacerbation of gender inequalities by technological developments¹.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), established in 2015, aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030. This goal encompasses targets such as ending all forms of discrimination and violence against women, ensuring equal participation in leadership roles, and addressing unpaid care work².

Economically, the failure to invest in gender equality has substantial costs. A UN report estimates that the global economy loses \$10 trillion annually due to gender disparities in education, employment, and access to resources³.

In the Arab region, women's empowerment has seen varied progress. Countries like Tunisia and the UAE have implemented legal reforms promoting gender equality, such as equal pay legislation and increased female representation in political offices.

However, challenges persist, including limited political participation and gender-based violence.

The concept of "state feminism" has been observed in some Arab nations, where governments have proactively introduced policies to advance women's rights. This top-down approach includes gender quotas in parliaments and the establishment of national women's machinery to align with international agreements like the Beijing Platform for Action.

Despite these efforts, the region faces obstacles such as patriarchal norms, legal limitations, and socio-economic barriers that hinder the full realization of women's empowerment. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition of the importance of gender equality for sustainable development and social progress.

Women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia has become a cornerstone of the Kingdom's social and economic transformation, particularly under the Vision 2030 framework. Historically, cultural

¹ Reuters. (2025, September 22). Leaders lament slow progress on women's rights 30 years after Beijing milestone. <https://www.reuters.com/world/leaders-lament-slow-progress-womens-rights-30-years-after-beijing-milestone-2025-09-22/>

² UN Women. (2024, September 16). Global cost of failing to invest in women and gender equality is \$10tn a year. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/sep/16/un-women-gender-snapshot-2024-equality>

³ Arab Center Washington DC. (2023, June 16). Women's Rights and "State Feminism" in the Arab World. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/womens-rights-and-state-feminism-in-the-arab-world/>

norms and legal restrictions limited women's participation in public life, employment, and decision-making. However, the Saudi government has implemented extensive reforms to expand opportunities for women in various sectors, recognizing that empowering women is essential for sustainable development and societal progress⁴

Economically, the participation of women in the workforce enhances national productivity and diversification. Studies indicate that increasing female labor participation contributes significantly to GDP growth, reduces dependency ratios, and fosters innovation in sectors such as education, healthcare, technology, and entrepreneurship (Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2022). Women-led businesses and startups are increasingly supported through government initiatives, providing employment opportunities and stimulating economic growth.

Socially, empowering women promotes inclusivity, strengthens families, and enhances community resilience. Expanding access to education, healthcare, and professional training equips women with the skills needed to participate actively in public and economic life. Furthermore, increasing female representation in leadership positions fosters diverse perspectives in policymaking and enhances institutional effectiveness⁵

The Vision 2030 initiative explicitly emphasizes the role of women in achieving the Kingdom's long-term development objectives. By promoting gender equality and removing barriers to participation, the Kingdom aims to harness the full potential of half of its population, aligning social modernization with economic ambitions⁶

Vision 2030 as a Comprehensive Framework for Social and Economic Development

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 represents a strategic blueprint designed to transform the Kingdom's economic and social landscape. Launched in 2016, the initiative seeks to reduce the country's dependency on oil revenues, diversify the economy, and enhance the quality of life for citizens⁷. One of the pivotal aspects of Vision 2030 is the empowerment of women, which is recognized as essential for achieving inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Vision 2030 integrates social and economic development through multiple programs that facilitate women's participation in education, workforce, leadership, and entrepreneurship. For example, initiatives such as the National Transformation Program and the Human Capability Development Program aim to equip women with skills and opportunities to contribute actively to the economy⁸. These programs are complemented by legislative reforms, including the easing of restrictions on women's mobility, the right to drive, and access to government services, all of which collectively enhance women's social and economic agency.

The framework of Vision 2030 emphasizes that social modernization and economic diversification are interdependent. Empowering women not only boosts labor market participation but also encourages innovation, entrepreneurship, and leadership diversity. Moreover, increased female engagement in the economy strengthens community resilience and contributes to broader societal well-being, reflecting a holistic approach to development that aligns economic ambitions with social progress⁹.

By positioning women's empowerment as a central pillar, Vision 2030 serves as a comprehensive framework that unites legal reforms, social initiatives, and economic strategies. This alignment

⁴ Al-Zahrani, M. (2023). Labour law reforms and vocational training outcomes in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh: King Saud University Press.

⁵ Al-Khudair, R. (2021). Women in leadership and workforce development in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 15(2), 45–67.

⁶ Council of Economic and Development Affairs. (2020). Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: National transformation program 2020. Riyadh: Government of Saudi Arabia.

⁷ Council of Economic and Development Affairs. (2020). Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: National transformation program 2020. Riyadh: Government of Saudi Arabia.

⁸ Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. (2022). Annual labor market report 2022. Riyadh: Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development.

⁹ Al-Zahrani, M. (2023). Labour law reforms and vocational training outcomes in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh: King Saud University Press.

underscores the Kingdom's commitment to transforming traditional social structures while promoting sustainable economic growth.

Legal Framework for Women's Empowerment in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has undertaken significant legal reforms to facilitate the empowerment of women, reflecting both domestic priorities and international commitments. Over the past decade, the Kingdom has amended key legislation to enhance women's participation in public and economic life, improve personal freedoms, and provide protection against discrimination and abuse.

One of the most notable reforms was the amendment of the Saudi Labor Law, which strengthened women's rights in the workplace, including protection against discrimination, access to flexible work arrangements, and equitable pay structures¹⁰. Additionally, the Protection from Domestic Violence Law (2013, amended 2021) provides women with legal recourse against abuse, ensuring safety and social security. In terms of mobility and civic participation, reforms granting women the right to drive (2018) and to travel without male guardian permission have expanded women's autonomy and access to public and professional opportunities¹¹.

These legal reforms have also facilitated women's access to leadership positions in government, education, and various professional sectors. Women now hold senior roles in ministries, business councils, and educational institutions, reflecting a growing institutional recognition of their capabilities. Higher education reforms have led to increased female enrollment in universities and technical training programs, thereby equipping women with skills needed for competitive labor markets¹².

The impact of these legal reforms extends beyond individual empowerment to societal and economic benefits. Empowering women through legal rights has enhanced workforce participation, promoted entrepreneurship, and contributed to economic diversification aligned with Vision 2030 goals. Moreover, the legal recognition of women's rights fosters social inclusion, reduces inequalities, and strengthens institutional governance by encouraging diverse perspectives in decision-making processes¹³.

Overall, the legal framework for women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia demonstrates a comprehensive approach that combines protection, opportunity, and social reform, providing the necessary foundation for sustained societal transformation.

Socio-Cultural Transformations

The empowerment of women in Saudi Arabia is not solely a legal or economic issue; it reflects profound socio-cultural transformations that have reshaped public perceptions and societal norms. Over the past decade, there has been a noticeable shift in how Saudi society views the role of women, influenced by government policies, educational reforms, and global trends. Traditional patriarchal norms, while still influential, are increasingly complemented by recognition of women's capabilities in professional, social, and public spheres¹⁴.

Women's participation in the labor market has expanded significantly, with the female labor force participation rate rising from approximately 19% in 2016 to over 33% in 2023¹⁵. Government initiatives, such as the Misk Foundation and the Small and Medium Enterprises Authority (Monsha'at), have promoted female entrepreneurship, providing training, funding, and mentorship

¹⁰ Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. (2022). Annual labor market report 2022. Riyadh: Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development.

¹¹ Al-Zahrani, M. (2023). Labour law reforms and vocational training outcomes in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh: King Saud University Press.

¹² Al-Khudair, R. (2021). Women in leadership and workforce development in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 15(2), 45–67.

¹³ Council of Economic and Development Affairs. (2020). Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: National transformation program 2020. Riyadh: Government of Saudi Arabia.

¹⁴ Al-Zahrani, M. (2023). Labour law reforms and vocational training outcomes in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh: King Saud University Press.

¹⁵ Saudi General Authority for Statistics. (2023). Labour market indicators 2023. Riyadh: Government of Saudi Arabia.

programs to support women-led businesses. These measures have not only created employment opportunities but also fostered economic diversification in line with Vision 2030 objectives.

Education and vocational training have been pivotal in equipping women with skills needed for professional and entrepreneurial success. Female enrollment in higher education now surpasses that of males in many fields, including medicine, engineering, and business¹⁶. Technical and professional training programs further prepare women for emerging sectors such as technology, finance, and renewable energy, bridging the gap between academic achievement and market demands.

The representation of women in Saudi media and culture has also evolved. Television, social media, and cultural campaigns increasingly highlight women in leadership roles, entrepreneurship, sports, and other public domains. This visibility challenges traditional stereotypes and normalizes women's participation in diverse societal roles, fostering wider acceptance of gender equality.

Collectively, these socio-cultural transformations illustrate that women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia is multifaceted, encompassing legal, educational, economic, and cultural dimensions. By reshaping societal attitudes and promoting active participation, these changes create an environment where women can contribute meaningfully to national development.

Vision 2030 and Its Role in Enhancing Women's Empowerment

A comprehensive and strategic framework for improving women's empowerment in the social, cultural, and economic spheres is offered by Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. The understanding that women's full participation is essential to attaining sustainable development and national prosperity is at the heart of this vision.

To encourage women's involvement in the workforce and public life, a number of government-led programs have been established. Programs like Tamkeen and Forus (Faras) give women the tools and resources they need to succeed in professional and entrepreneurial roles by offering career counselling, vocational training, and support for entrepreneurship. These initiatives also encourage mentorship and networking, creating an environment that supports the growth of women-led enterprises and leadership.

Gender equality is specifically emphasised in Vision 2030 as a fundamental component of national development. Increasing the number of women in the workforce, improving their access to leadership roles, and promoting their contributions to creative economic sectors are some of the main goals. The Kingdom hopes to foster an atmosphere where women can flourish professionally and advance society at large by incorporating these objectives into national strategies.

There are a number of quantifiable indicators that show the impact of these initiatives. Women now hold prominent positions in government, corporate boards, and entrepreneurial endeavours, and their labour force participation has risen steadily, surpassing 33% as of 2023. Furthermore, the expansion of women-owned businesses, especially in the fields of technology, education, and healthcare, shows that women's leadership is accepted in society and contributes economically. These metrics demonstrate how well Vision 2030 works to ensure measurable results for women's empowerment in addition to offering opportunities.

All things considered, Vision 2030 provides a thorough framework that unifies social, legal, and economic reforms, establishing women's empowerment as a key factor in the advancement of the country.

Challenges and Obstacles

Saudi women still face a number of obstacles that prevent them from being fully empowered, even in the face of notable advancements in legal reforms and sociocultural changes. These challenges have many facets, including administrative, legal, cultural, and social aspects.

In certain areas, conservative views and traditional norms continue to have an impact on women's career advancement, mobility, and involvement in public life. The perception of women's roles has

¹⁶ Al-Khudair, R. (2021). Women in leadership and workforce development in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 15(2), 45–67.

changed significantly in urban areas, but more slowly in rural areas, indicating a continuing disconnect between progressive policies and social acceptance.

Despite the implementation of significant legal reforms, certain limitations and administrative obstacles persist. Although women can now drive and use public services on their own, for example, in certain situations, certain administrative procedures still need the consent of a male guardian, which practically restricts their autonomy. Additionally, there are gaps between legal frameworks and practical implementation, as evidenced by the uneven enforcement of existing laws, such as those protecting against domestic violence or workplace discrimination.

There are obstacles pertaining to program implementation and institutional support in addition to social and legal limitations. However, scaling these programs across all regions and guaranteeing equitable access remains a significant challenge. Employment initiatives, entrepreneurship programs, and vocational training have all seen significant success. To close these gaps and optimise the effects of empowerment programs, ongoing observation, assessment, and policy modifications are needed.

Even though Saudi Arabia has made great progress in empowering women, these enduring issues must be addressed to guarantee that empowerment is all-encompassing, long-lasting, and inclusive of all societal groups.

Conclusion

Through a combination of targeted government initiatives, socio-cultural changes, and legal reforms, Saudi Arabia has seen impressive advancements in women's empowerment. The groundwork for women's greater involvement in public and economic life has been established by legal developments such as labour law amendments, protections against domestic abuse, and increased rights to mobility and civic engagement (Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2022; Al-Zahrani, 2023). As women actively participate in leadership, education, the workforce, and entrepreneurship, societal perceptions are progressively changing to reflect a shift towards inclusivity and social modernisation.

This change has been largely sparked by Vision 2030, which incorporates women's empowerment into the Kingdom's larger goals of social progress, economic diversification, and national prosperity. The Vision has greatly increased female labour force participation and representation in decision-making roles by facilitating skill development and economic participation as well as offering real opportunities for leadership and entrepreneurship through programs like Forus and Tamkeen.

Going forward, sustained work is necessary to build on these successes and tackle any lingering issues. The main goals of policy initiatives should be to close regional gaps, guarantee uniform application of the law, and increase access to entrepreneurial and vocational training for all societal segments. Furthermore, persistent cultural involvement and public awareness initiatives can help change societal attitudes and create an atmosphere in which women can fully participate in the economic and social advancement of the Kingdom. In summary, women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia is a transformative process and a strategic necessity that synchronises social modernisation with the country's long-term development objectives.

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