Shift in Gender Roles in Saudi Arabia as Part of the Vision 2030 Strategy

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ABSTRACT:
This study examines the evolution of gender roles in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia within the context of Saudi Vision 2030, with a particular focus on the increasing participation of women in the labor market and the socio-cultural reforms that accompany this transformation. Vision 2030 seeks to establish a vibrant, diversified economy and an inclusive society by fostering human capital development, economic diversification, and social progress, with gender equality positioned as a central pillar of the national modernization agenda.

The research adopts a qualitative document analysis methodology, supplemented by quantitative data from governmental reports, policy documents, and academic literature published between 2016 and 2025. The analysis specifically explores the evolving roles of women in key sectors such as education, tourism and hospitality, management, as well as broader socio-cultural developments.

The findings indicate a significant increase in women's participation in the workforce, with female labor market engagement reaching 36% in 2024—well ahead of the original 30% target for 2030. Additionally, the female unemployment rate declined between 2022 and 2024. Education has played a critical role in this shift, with women comprising 53.9% of higher education students and 28% of university department heads. In the rapidly growing tourism and hospitality sector, women now account for 45% of employees and own nearly half of the accommodation and food-service businesses. Parallel advancements are also evident in healthcare and entrepreneurship.

Legal reforms, including the lifting of the driving ban, revisions to guardianship laws, and the introduction of anti-discrimination measures, have further institutionalized gender inclusivity. These findings suggest that Vision 2030 has initiated a profound redefinition of women's roles, both economically and socially, positioning gender empowerment as both a key driver and an outcome of Saudi Arabia's broader modernization strategy.

Keywords: Saudi Vision 2030, women's empowerment, gender role transformation, women, education, management, hospitality, cultural and social transformations, economic diversification.

Introduction:

Saudi Vision 2030 is a government program launched by Saudi Arabia and announced on 25th of April 2016 [1]. The Vision was developed by the Council of Economic and Development Affairs and chaired by HRH Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Kingdom's Crown Prince and Prime Minister [2]. The Saudi Vision 2030 can be divided into three main parts, called "the Vision Themes": A Vibrant Society, A Thriving Economy, An Ambitious Nation [3]. To summarize the Vision is few words, one could say that the Saudi authorities decided to build a happy and modern society, ready for the 21st-century challenges and based on traditional rules, roots and religion - a society full of economic prosperity, sustainable living, efficient health and social care systems, but at the same time having access to, or even creating, world-class entertainment.

Saudi Vision 2030 promises equal economic opportunities for men and women and call even Saudi women "another great asset" [4]. The authorities promise to develop their productive capabilities and enable them to contribute to the development of society and economy. Among its goals for 2030, Saudi government aims to increase women's participation to 30% [5].

Methods and Methodology:

In this study, we examine the transformation of gender roles in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030, with particular attention to women's participation in the labour market and the wider socio-cultural changes accompanying policy reform.

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, combining a review of documentary sources—including policy texts, governmental reports, and scholarly articles—with an interpretive analysis of the mechanisms driving the reconfiguration of gender roles. All sources used by us were published between 2016 and 2025 to capture the launch of Saudi Vision 2030 and to include the most recent data.

The study adopts a qualitative document analysis approach, supported by quantitative indicators derived from secondary data to highlight key trends. The objective is not to produce new primary survey data but rather to synthesise existing evidence and interpret the ongoing transformation of gender roles within the policy context of Saudi Vision 2030.

Our focus was mainly on women's roles indicated in Vision 2030, women's workforce participation in general, and their presence in sectors such as education, tourism and hospitality, management, and social and cultural transformations.

Results

Saudi women are increasingly encouraged to be an active part of the Saudi labour market. The changes mentioned in the introduction are not only words sent viral; they are real-life changes that have been modifying the lives of almost 40% of society—women, Saudis, and non-Saudis. The Saudi population has exceeded 35 million people [6]. Many media sources have mentioned significant changes such as allowing women to drive [7], offering physical education classes to both boys and girls [8], or allowing women to attend sports events with men [9], but these are not the only ones worth noting. They are important to mention because strict gender segregation has started to change—step by step—toward cooperation and collaboration in terms of the country's success. Moreover, women play a vital role in the Vision 2030 strategy through, among other factors, the expansion of women's economic participation and increased employment rates across various fields.

The Saudi General Authority for Statistics published, in August 2025, the results of the Saudi Women's Statistics Report 2024, noting that almost 10 million Saudis are women, among whom 35.7% are aged 15–37 [10]. As we can see, the Saudi population is young, with a large representation of young people ready to work. The report:

highlighted the efforts made to empower Saudi women in the labor market, with women's unemployment rates declining. This resulted in a significant decline in the unemployment rate among Saudi women in 2024, reaching 13%

compared to 19% in 2022. Meanwhile, the quarterly unemployment rate for the fourth quarter of 2024 reached 11.9%, compared to the same quarter in 2023, which recorded 13.9% [11].

It is also worth mentioning that the ratio of employed Saudi women to the total population rose to 31.8%, while the rate of women's participation in the labour market reached 36% [12].

As we can see, the expected 30% target was reached before 2030. The governmental document "Saudi Arabia: The Story of Transformation" mentions that a new goal has been set—40% [13].

Decisions made by the Saudi government allowing women to work alongside male citizens have enabled women to participate in many more sectors than before. Prior to the launch of Saudi Vision 2030, women were restricted to workplaces where they did not need to mix with men—for example, education (schools and universities were separated for males and females), banking (women's branches were accessible only for women), and nursing. Other sectors were dominated by men. Nowadays, Saudi women are seen almost everywhere: at airports, as cashiers, waitresses, and managers, among others.

It is worth analysing a few sectors where women have started to play a more important role. The tourism sector is one of the most significant for the Saudi authorities, as evidenced by the fact that it has been receiving extensive government support [14]. Before presenting any numbers concerning women and men in this sector, it is worth noting that a woman represents tourism in the Saudi government—HRH Princess Haifa Mohammed Al Saud, the Vice Minister of Tourism [15]. In March 2024, she declared that there were 925,000 employees in the tourism sector, 45% of whom were women [16]. Data from 2025 show that 111,000 Saudis joined the tourism sector [17]. According to the Saudi Women's Statistics Report 2024, 25.2% of Saudi females employed in tourism work in food and beverage services, 8.3% in accommodation for visitors, and 5.4% in retail of tourism-related goods in the country [18]. Huda Ata from Gulf News notes that "nearly half of all establishments in Saudi Arabia's accommodation and food service sector" are now owned by women [19].

As mentioned earlier, the health sector was one of those where women were traditionally able to find their vocation, but it is important to note that the total number of Saudi females employed in the health sector reached 137,943, accounting for 45.6% of the total 302,771 Saudi health workers [20]. Most of them (almost 19%) are nurses, 6% are medical doctors, and 16.1% are allied health professionals [21].

Education stands as a foundational mechanism for changing gender roles in Saudi Arabia. Under Vision 2030, the Saudi government has prioritised human capital development, with women's education a key component of this strategy [22]. Recent data show that women now constitute a majority of students in higher education. For example, female enrolment in tertiary education has surpassed that of males, and women represented approximately 53.9% of students in higher education in 2023 [23]. Moreover, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes for women have expanded markedly: women are increasingly entering fields such as cybersecurity, renewable energy, and aircraft maintenance, which were historically male-dominated [24].

This expansion of educational access and diversification of fields allows Saudi women to gain skills relevant to modern labour markets, thereby enabling them to assume roles beyond traditional expectations. As a result, women's education is no longer simply a matter of expanding access but of equipping women for active participation in the economy and society at large [25]. In short, education has become a powerful driver of gender-role transformation within Saudi Arabia.

While Vision 2030 has produced visible improvements in women's access to education, its deeper impact lies in how education is changing social expectations and reshaping family and professional dynamics. Studies by the World Bank [26] emphasise that Saudi women's

participation in STEM and vocational fields is not merely an outcome of state policy but a cultural transformation in valuing women's intellectual and economic contributions. The shift from segregated educational paths toward inclusive, skill-oriented learning reflects the government's strategic goal of building a knowledge-based economy.

In addition, female faculty and researchers are increasingly influencing university governance and innovation ecosystems, challenging earlier assumptions that leadership roles belong exclusively to men. For instance, in 2024, more than 28% of Saudi university department heads were women, compared to less than 10% in 2015 [27]. This progression suggests that education is acting as a bridge between gender equality and economic modernisation. Yet, scholars such as Alshehry caution that achieving sustainable equity requires continuous policy monitoring, as access alone does not ensure parity in research funding, promotions, or visibility in academic networks [28].

Women are entering sectors once considered male-only, including aviation, technology, manufacturing, and tourism. Additionally, female entrepreneurship is on the rise: over 550,000 women registered businesses in 2023 in Saudi Arabia [29]. These developments are changing societal perceptions of what roles women may hold and demonstrating that women can contribute substantively to economic growth and national development. The participation of Saudi women in the workforce goes beyond numerical inclusion; it has generated structural economic effects. The World Economic Forum in 2025 ranked Saudi Arabia among the top five countries globally for improvements in women's economic participation [30]. Female entrepreneurship has become particularly transformative, with women leading small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that cater to the digital economy, e-commerce, and sustainable tourism. These ventures not only generate employment but also redefine women's identities as active economic agents.

Moreover, Vision 2030 emphasises labour market flexibility, remote work, and family-friendly policies—strategies designed to balance professional engagement with cultural values. By institutionalising maternity protection, equal pay, and workplace safety standards, Saudi Arabia is aligning with international gender-equality frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5). However, experts note that sectoral clustering remains a challenge: women are still concentrated in education, health, and administration while underrepresented in energy and heavy industry [31]. Overcoming this imbalance will require continued investment in STEM education and mentorship for women entering emerging sectors.

The transformation of gender roles in Saudi Arabia is also grounded in legal and policy reforms aligned with Vision 2030. Among the most visible changes—mentioned before—was the lifting of the driving ban for women in 2018, which greatly enhanced women's mobility and access to employment and education. Other reforms have included adjustments to the guardianship system, permitting women to travel, receive services, and work without male guardian consent in many cases [32].

Labour law amendments in 2020 and 2024 improved job security and market flexibility, helping women integrate more fully into the workforce [33]. The legal environment has thus shifted to create a stronger basis for gender equality in the workplace and society. These reforms reinforce and institutionalise the shifts in education and employment discussed earlier. Legal reforms under Vision 2030 have not only expanded women's rights but also reshaped the legal consciousness of Saudi society. The removal of certain guardianship restrictions represents a symbolic redefinition of citizenship, positioning women as autonomous actors within the legal system. For the first time, women can represent themselves in court, register businesses, and manage civil status documentation independently.

Furthermore, the introduction of anti-harassment laws in 2018 and anti-discrimination

regulations in 2020 has institutionalised gender protections that encourage women's full participation in public life. These policies reinforce a culture of accountability and fairness, essential for maintaining social trust in modernisation efforts. Nevertheless, social adaptation remains uneven; some conservative segments still express concerns about the pace of reform. Balancing modernisation with cultural continuity remains one of the most delicate aspects of Saudi Arabia's gender transformation.

Discussion

Generational differences are notable almost everywhere in Saudi Arabia. Younger Saudis, especially those raised during the Vision 2030 era, are more accepting of gender equality and co-education, reflecting the influence of globalisation and digital exposure. Surveys conducted by the Family Affairs Council in 2025 reveal that over 70% of Saudi youth support women's leadership roles, indicating a substantial cultural shift toward egalitarian values [34].

However, some researchers caution that modernisation must ensure cultural authenticity, preventing gender reforms from being perceived as Western impositions. One can argue for a Saudi feminism model—one that harmonises women's empowerment with Islamic and cultural ethics. This balance is crucial for maintaining social harmony while advancing reform.

The increase in women's participation in the labour market in Saudi Arabia can definitely be attributed to policy reforms that removed barriers to women's employment, such as allowing greater mobility, expanding job sectors open to women, supporting female entrepreneurship, and promoting flexible work arrangements [35].

The shift in gender roles in Saudi Arabia as part of Vision 2030 constitutes one of the most significant social transformations in the country's recent history. Through expanded educational access, increased workforce participation, comprehensive legal reforms, and evolving cultural norms, Saudi women are becoming central actors in national development. Education plays a pivotal role in this transformation, equipping women with the skills and independence to participate meaningfully in economic and social life. While challenges remain, the progress achieved thus far demonstrates the potential of policy, law, and education working together to reshape gender dynamics. Ultimately, empowering women is not only an outcome of Vision 2030; it is a fundamental pillar of the Kingdom's strategy to build a more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable future.

Conclusion

This study explores the transformation of gender roles in Saudi Arabia within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030, with particular emphasis on women's growing participation in the labour market and their expanding presence in education, tourism, hospitality, and management. Introduced in 2016, Saudi Vision 2030 represents a comprehensive national modernization strategy structured around three pillars—A Vibrant Society, A Thriving Economy, and An Ambitious Nation—with gender equality positioned as a key element of both social and economic reform.

The research employs a qualitative, document-based methodology, complemented by quantitative indicators drawn from secondary sources published between 2016 and 2025. The findings reveal measurable progress under Vision 2030: women's labour force participation reached 36% in 2024, exceeding the original 30% target well in advance of 2030, while female unemployment declined from 19% in 2022 to 13% in 2024. Legal and institutional reforms—such as the lifting of the driving ban, the expansion of educational opportunities, and strengthened labour protections—have collectively enabled greater female participation in the national economy.

Sectoral developments further underscore this progress. Tourism and hospitality have experienced particularly rapid growth, with women now comprising up to 45% of the workforce and owning nearly half of all accommodation and food service enterprises. In higher education, women constitute a majority of university students (53.9%) and hold over 28% of

department head positions as of 2024. Healthcare continues to serve as a major domain of female employment, with women representing 45.6% of the sector's workforce. Likewise, female entrepreneurship has expanded significantly, with more than 550,000 women owning businesses in 2023.

Beyond economic indicators, Vision 2030 has fostered a broader cultural and legal redefinition of women's roles within Saudi society. Generational shifts, greater educational attainment, and reforms enhancing mobility, entrepreneurship, and workplace equality have reshaped social perceptions and contributed to a more inclusive national identity. Nevertheless, challenges persist in achieving gender parity across all sectors, particularly in energy and heavy industry.

In conclusion, the study finds that Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 functions as a transformative framework for women's empowerment—recasting gender relations, enhancing national productivity, and aligning the Kingdom's social transformation with its objectives for sustainable, knowledge-based development.

Conflict of interest:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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