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## **Women Empowerment in Saudi Arabia: An Analysis from Education Policy Perspective**

**Waseem Ahmed**

**Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University Aligarh.**

[Email- waseemhmedamu@gmail.com](mailto:waseemhmedamu@gmail.com)

### **ABSTRACT**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia witnessed a great revival in many different aspects, such as health, education, buildings and business. Women education in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an area in which women have experienced significant progress. The Saudi government has gone to considerable efforts to increase girls' access to education and reduce the gender gap at different educational levels. Today, reforms in the education system for girls have become a priority as well as an excellent challenge for the Saudi government. In 1953 The Ministry of Education was established, and public schools for boys were open the same year. Girls were still confined to their homes by the traditional norms of gender segregation. Their education was restricted to the house, where a sheikh would teach them how to read the Holy Qur'an and the basics of writing. It was only in the late 1950s and early 1960s that significant steps were taken to open the first schools for girls in Saudi Arabia. By the mid-1970s, about half of all Saudi girls attended school. In the early 1980s, education was available to all Saudi girls, and young women were already enrolled in and graduating from the universities. The public system of women's education in Saudi Arabia is segregated and is supported by the Saudi government.

This paper will analyse women empowerment in Saudi Arabia through the framework of educational development. The objective of the paper is to highlight the current status of women in Saudi society in general and education in particular.

**Keywords :** Women, Education, Empowerment, Saudi Arabia

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932 by the King Abdul Aziz ibn Abdul Rehman al Saud. Arabic is the official language of the kingdom. Saudi Arabia is often characterized in the West—and in many parts of the Arab world—as one of the world's most repressive countries toward women, this contradiction suggests that matters are more complex than they appear. One explanation for education as a bright spot on an otherwise dark human rights record is its traditionally high value in both Islamic and Arab culture. "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" and "Seek learning even if it is as far away as China" are among the

Prophet's oft-quoted sayings (Drury, 2015). Islam is the official religion of Saudi Arabia, and all Saudi people are Arab Muslims. Education is supposed to be given to all Muslims, as [Prophet] Muhammad says: "Every Muslim male and female, are requested to seek for knowledge", so both sexes are equal in search for education (AL-HARIRI, 1987). Today, Saudi Arabia reforming its educational system for girls at priority level, because Islam emphasises both men and women to obtain an education for passing a good life. According to the Prophet of Islam, by proclaiming that "Seeking of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim man and woman," all avenues of knowledge are offered to both men and women. The interest and keenness of the Prophet for female education are manifested in the fact that, in order to impart lessons of religion and morality, he himself used to hold classes for women. The Prophet of Islam also says "God commands us to treat women nobly" (AL-HARIRI, 1987). The Government of Saudi Arabia has gone to considerable effort to increase girls' access to education and reduce the gender gap at different educational levels. Women's education has brought about a number of social developments in the country, such as a reduction in fertility and mortality rates, an improvement in health and nutrition, and an increase in female participation in the labour force. However, lingering social norms, local traditions, and the structure of the system of public education have been constraints on women's realization of their equal opportunities in society and their full participation in the labour market (AlMunajjed, -)

## **EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA**

In 1930, the government had introduced the primary education, and establish schools through an extensive programme in the kingdom. Free Education in Saudi Arabia is provided by the government, to all Saudis and children of Arabic-speaking residents who want it, from kindergarten up to and including secondary school. The elementary school caters for children from 6-12 years, the intermediate school from 12-15 and secondary, or high school, from 15-18. An elementary school certificate is necessary in order to enter intermediate school and an intermediate school certificate is required to enter secondary (SIMMONS, 1991). The decade of 1930s became a witness to many changes in education: the first religious science school (1933); the issuance of rules for private school (1934); and the first secondary school, Tahdeer Al – Baathat school, to prepare graduates for a university education (1935). In 1938, the General Directorate of Education was given full control over all education except for the military. Saudi Arabia's first technical secondary school and school of higher learning, the college of sharia (now, Umm Al Qura University), were founded in 1949. During the decade of the 1950s, three more colleges were granted charters, the Teachers' College (1952), the college of Sharia in Riyadh (1953), and the college of Arabic Language in Riyadh (1954). In 1952 the United Nations reported that Saudi Arabia had 306 elementary schools, but illiteracy was between 92 and 95 per cent (Rather, 2012). One result of increasing wealth, the Saudi Government was the establishment in 1954 the Ministry of Education; however, its concern at that time was not with education for all but with the education of boys alone. Indeed, it was not until 1959 that the Saudi government formally addressed, for the first time, the question of girls' education (SIMMONS, 1991). In the last 50 years, the government is succeeded in building an educational infrastructure that has to lead to an increase in the number of schools and universities enrolment as well as a reduction in illiteracy rates. It has provided basic education for children (boys and girls) by enrolling in primary school and offering literacy classes for adults (men and women). Achieving universal primary education covers not only full enrolment but also high-quality education—i.e., all children who are attending school regularly should learn basic literacy and numeracy skills and complete primary school on time. According to UNESCO 2008 projections, Saudi Arabia was moving toward the goal of achieving universal primary education with rapid progress but still has further to go (AlMunajjed, -) The evolution of education in Saudi Arabia, the structure of the educational apparatus, and the content of teachings in Saudi schools, in Saudi-financed schools abroad and in the books widely distributed throughout the world, have been circumscribed by the concern to preserve the religious foundations of the regime (PROKOP, 2003). Since 1956, women in the kingdom were not allowed to get an education. Although the king made efforts to extend education for women, schools for women were built into the kingdom's educational foundation. Women's education was completely different from that of men. According to Sharia law and the Holy Quran, education was meant to prepare them to become good wives. A woman's primary role is that of a nurturing mother and housewife. One of the most amazing realities is that even when Saudi Arabia locked women out of educational opportunities, international and intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations (UN) advocated for gender equality. The UN has established equality for

women as one of its major objectives. Gender equality in education means to understand differences in learning as they arise and to focus on learning content, teaching methods and processes, subject matter, modes of assessment, the sustainability of peer relationships, and learning inputs and outcomes (Alsuwaida, 2016). The establishing of girls' schools in 1960s, and increasing the demand for girls' education at all levels. In 1964 the first four government intermediate schools for girls were opened, with goals very similar to those of the elementary school. But in the same year, the first secondary school was opened with the goal of preparing girls for domestic roles and also for university studies. But the real significance of the growth of secondary schools is that they represented for the first time an acknowledgement of a wider role for girls than that of domestic duties. It can be said of the three groupings of opinion concerning girls' education described above, that the elementary and intermediate schools catered for those parents who wanted only that their daughters become better wives and housekeepers but that the secondary schools served the purposes of that small group of parents who wanted their daughters to be able to study up to and including college level. Indeed, the founding of secondary schools for girls opened up the definite possibility of university education for women, because the secondary schools themselves needed university trained teachers and because many of the students who attended them wanted to continue their education at a higher level. Over 25 years from 1963-64 to 1988s, there was a drastic increase in the development of secondary schools opened from 1 to 415 respectively, and the intermediate schools for girls' established from 5 to 958 (SIMMONS, 1991). The ministry of higher education in Saudi Arabia was established in 1975 to assist the higher education for all students, but in 1962, women's higher education was established in Riyadh with a special programme is known as INTSAB which aims was to provide education off-campus without exams. A historical change came in Saudi Arabia in 1967, when the king Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, allowed women for campus education and the girls' education college also started in Makah.

## **CHANGING TRENDS TOWARDS WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA**

However, despite all the efforts being made, women who live in the Northern and Southern regions still continue to have less opportunity to access higher education than those who live in the other areas because of the distribution of universities and their branches between areas and provinces, and the barriers of traditional culture. Because of the increasing number of secondary school graduates year-on-year, there is also a rise in the demand for higher education places (Yahya Al Alhareth, 2015). The number of schools in the kingdom reached 31,399 in 2005–06, an increase of 808 schools or 2.6 per cent from the previous year 2004–05. Also, the total number of enrolled students, both boys and girls, reached 4,746,579 in 2005–06, an increase of 103,410 students or 2.2 per cent from the previous year. The particular emphasis given by the Saudi government to achieving its objectives in universal education has led to an increase in the allocation for education and human resource development, from Saudi Riyal (SR) 47 billion (US\$12.5 billion) in 2002, to SR96.7 billion (US\$25.7 billion) in 2007, to SR105 billion (US\$28 billion) in 2008, to SR122 billion (\$32.5 billion) in 2009. The Saudi government has made considerable efforts to promote gender equality, per the third Millennium Development Goal, and to ensure girls' equal access to primary education. On 7 September 2000, Saudi Arabia signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) with some reservations. The term "discrimination against women" refers to "any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex." Both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education are responsible for male and female education; the latter is segregated from boys' education, in accordance with the Shari'a law. (AlMunajjed, -, pp. 2-3) Saudi men have long benefited from governments study abroad schemes, but when King Abdullah came to power in 2005, he implemented an overseas scholarship program that for the first time, included women. Women are said to make up at least 20 per cent of scholarship recipients. Critics point to barriers for women in the program, as female students not only require permission from their family but also the presence of a male guardian during their studies; in practice, this could lead to a 30-year-old female student living in the United States having an 18-year-old male "guardian" (Drury, 2015). King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud laid the foundation stone for the new infrastructure of Princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman University for women in October 2008. The university is designed to become one of the largest centres of higher education for Saudi women, presenting them with new educational opportunities to enter the labour market. It will include an academic area of 15 colleges, including the College of Medicine, College of Nursing, College of Pharmacology, College of Physiotherapy, College of Dentistry, and a number of other colleges such as the

College of Administrative Sciences, the Computer and Technology College, the Kindergarten College, the College of Science, and the College of Languages and Translation (AlMunajjed, -, p. 19). The government launched the King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz Project for Developing Public Education (Tatweer) in 2007, with a budget of SAR 11.8 billion, to modernise the educational system and introduce modern technologies such as the internet and computer applications starting at the secondary level where students will adapt more efficiently, but also to develop teachers' skills and enhance and improve school activities (Yahya Al Alhareth, 2015). The new transportation project launched by the Ministry of Education in October 2008 for female general students has been implemented in the regions of Makah, Al Medina Al Munawwarah, Qassim, the Eastern part, Riyadh, and the Northern Frontiers. About 500,000 female students are transported on 3,823 buses and 2,678 vehicles. The cost of the project is more than SR3 billion (US\$801 million)(AlMunajjed, -, p. 20). The situation regarding women's higher education opportunities has continued to improve. Women can now study abroad, and the numbers have increased from roughly 3,879 in 2004/2005 to approximately 35,700 in 2011/ 2012(Yahya Al Alhareth, 2015).

Training of Teachers and the Women's Golden Era, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz established 24 public universities, 8 private universities, and a total of 494 colleges in 76 cities within Saudi Arabia. Some students have even been sent to universities abroad through the King Abdullah Sponsorship Program (KASP), which was launched in 2005. The program is available to all Saudi students, regardless of gender, and enables them to travel overseas for higher education opportunities and experiences. Opponents of equal educational opportunity maintain that women should not complete their education abroad. These opponents fail to recognize that study abroad programs harbour great opportunities that can help students to raise the standards within Saudi universities when they return home. Study abroad programs like KASP spark interest in international opportunities and prepare and qualify [Saudi] students to compete in a global labor market. After coming back home, those students, especially females, can be assets to Saudi universities as well as to the government and private sectors. Female scholars might then more easily act as educational decision-makers and leaders of government institutions and elections. (Alsuwaida, Women's Education In Saudi Arabia, 2016) Empowering Women Notwithstanding, Saudi women's status and role have increased in recent years. Late honourable Saudi King King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud granted women the right to vote in 2011. Following this, on 12 December 2015, women voted for the first time in the history of Saudi Municipal elections with Safinaz Abu al-Shamat and Jamal al-Saadi, who became first women to register to vote. Approximately, 130,000-thousand women registered to vote as against 1.35 million men. Although the Kingdom as a whole has cast their votes for the third time, as there were no elections between 1965-2005, this historical election was contested by 978 women and 5,938 men. That said women's right to vote implies at least a symbolic change in their decision-making status. The Global Gender Gap 2013 reports that with respect to political empowerment, Saudi Arabia ranks 105 (0.078), in health and survival, it lists 52 (0.98), occupies 90 positions (0.98) in educational attainment but 127 positions (0.588) in economic participation and opportunity, clearly indicating, and as already stated above that women's participation in the labour market is extremely low. Nonetheless, keeping at par with the Shariah (Islamic law), Ministry of Higher Education, the Saudi Government have been continuously developing women's access to education. Princess Noura Bint Abdul Rahman University is the largest women-only university in the world embracing colleges of humanities (Education, Arts, Social Services, Languages and Translation) through to Colleges of Sciences (Computer and Information, Business Administration, Arts and Design) to Colleges of Medicine (Nursing, Pharmacy, Health and Rehabilitation, Dentistry and Medicine). Currently, there are more than 300 women-only colleges in Saudi Arabia, where women constitute 56.6%, out of which more than 20% benefit from overseas scholarships. All these positive transformations have obviously empowered Saudi women in terms of increased participation of women in decision-making, including political empowerment and improved self-esteem. These observations bear resonance to a number of studies conducted elsewhere (Biswas, nd; Cheston and Kuhn, nd; Sharma, 2006). Yet, women's employment outside the home remains limited. Hence, this research is an attempt to propose strategies in social welfare policies to empower women in work outside the home.

## **RECENT DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

The two most important announced in 2017, made a significant turning point for women's liberation in Saudi Arabia. The first to relax the country's guardianship laws. It is anticipated to come into force by the end of 2017. The second announcement was in September 2017, which reverses the driving ban placed on women. It

is expected to be implemented in June 2018. While the decision to relax guardianship laws generated positive responses, many observers remain cautious about whether the proposed changes will be implemented effectively in practice. Still, proposed changes in guardianship law offer women a ray of hope that systematic injustices pertaining to their freedom of movement will be lifted. Future research will be needed to monitor the extent to which changes in guardianship law are implemented in practice. Large scale quantitative studies would provide evidence of this and help to identify problems that may impede progress. Longitudinal research will be necessary to track change over time. In addition, understanding how changes in guardianship law impact on women qualitatively through the exploration of their lived experience may also prove fruitful for researchers and policymakers. Future research will also be needed to understand the impact of the ruling allowing women to drive, on women's lives and work, as well as the economy.

Finally, new initiatives such as 'Saudi vision 2030' and 'Saudi female leaders' announced in April 2016 by the Chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, include 'The National Transformation Plan 2020' (Saudi Vision 2017). The National Transformation Plan's goal is to increase the percentage of women in leadership positions by 2020. The plan includes a multitude of initiatives to support this goal, such as training programmes for women leaders, reforms and legislation, which can help to improve the condition of women's lives. Future research should include evaluation of the Adm. Sci. 2017, 7, 36 11 of 15 impact of the new national transformation plan on women in Saudi Arabia. Research is needed to establish if the Saudi vision for women's empowerment is being accomplished and how it can be extended. Research is also needed to understand the nature of initiatives to support women in the Saudi context, and how women experience and benefit from various kinds of interventions, such as mentoring, networking, training and so forth. Longitudinal research would track the impact on women's careers over time. Research in the region also needs to take new directions that incorporate constructivist and constructionist approaches to understand the subjective experience of women, to explore how women construct their identity, as well new novel studies into identity work and/or identify regulation, which will be particularly pertinent during these times of change.(Alsubaie & Jones, 2017)

"Saudi Arabia has decided to allow women to drive and enter the sports stadium. And Saudi Arabia lifted a decades-old ban on cinemas."

## CONCLUSIONS

Now we can say that the kingdom of Saudi not only changed its policy towards political and social aspects but also in the field of education and provided education and other rights to the women and they will be enjoyed equally as men in Saudi. The Saudi education system and curricula need to implement different strategies for the women empowerment, on a macro level and also recent changes in the international arena. Now the Saudi columnists able to constructively criticise their system performance in the field of health, education, or even in women's rights. This is also an excellent relaxation for both men and women who have long felt deprived of their freedom of speech. Both women and men are hopeful for signs of slow but steady change occurring in the country. Educated open-minded individual's demands would bring changes and progress but to what extent? Is Saudi society ready for that change? Given the apparent variability in the perspective of Educated open-minded individual's' who are seeking progress, and the attitudes of some conservative religious scholars and old traditions which resist any move forward it is difficult to predict. Until then women's issues will be at the centre of conflict between modernity and tradition.

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