

Research Article

Legal Reforms of Saudi Women's Right to Work in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: This study investigates the evolution of legal reforms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and their implications for women's employment rights from the early 2000s to the 2020s. It situates these developments within the wider framework of the Vision 2030 economic and social transformation agenda, while systematically outlining key legislative and administrative adjustments. In addition, the analysis measures the effects of these reforms on female labour force participation and employment patterns, alongside examining the enduring obstacles that continue to limit women's full economic integration. The paper contends that although these legal changes have significantly enhanced women's inclusion in the workforce, deficiencies persist in terms of enforcement mechanisms, legal safeguards, and the elimination of deep-rooted structural barriers. Accordingly, it advances policy-oriented recommendations aimed at reinforcing existing progress and ensuring sustained, inclusive participation of Saudi women in the labour market.

Keywords: Women's Right to Work, Legal Reform, Saudi Arabia, Female Labour-Force Participation, Vision 2030m Women's Economic Empowerment, Saudi Labour Law.

1. Introduction

Over the past ten years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has experienced significant legal changes to extend access of women to jobs. One of the key changes has been the slow loosening and partial erosion of the elements of the male guardianship (Wilaya) system. It is worth noting that in 2017, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud issued Supreme Order No. 33322 that instructed the public authorities to abrogate, in many areas, the necessity of male guardian consent to adult women, especially in areas that are related to employment and access to public services [1]. In 2018, Saudi women were granted the legal ability to drive, eliminating one of the key mobility limitations, which hitherto restricted their access to different types of paid labor [2]. Moreover, the Kingdom experienced important reforms in labour law in 2015-2019, reforming the Saudi Labour Law to grant equal employment rights to all citizens, forbidding the termination of women because of pregnancy or pregnancy-related absence and introducing the statutory protection of maternity leave [3].

Therefore, the discrimination of employees based on sex, age, disability and other personal traits in the hiring process and salary increments is explicitly forbidden. These laws have significantly led to an upsurge in the female labour-force participation which rose by about 5% in the period between 2016 and 2021 [4]. Despite these formal legal developments though, there are still many barriers there. The fixed social norms, unequal application, and structural constraints and inadequate safeguards in some areas of employment remain significant problems. In general, reforms in the Saudi Arabian legislation have made significant progress on the way to the right of women to work by introducing changes in the guardianship laws, amendments in the labour law, and eliminating the barriers to movements.

1.1 The Legal and Social Context Prior to Reform

The legal and social framework that denied Saudi women their freedom to engage in the labor market has been experienced prior to the significant changes in the 2010s. The most important of these was the male guardianship system [5]. Women were not allowed to take part in a lot of activities in the society without the approval of a male guardian under the male guardianship system. These activities included travelling to a foreign country, obtaining a certain health-care service, applying a passport, joining an educational programme, and finding a job [6]. These requirements were not directly written into law, but practiced through

customary and administrative law through many institutions in the state, both public and private. This consequently limited the employment opportunities of women greatly both legally and socially [7]. However, with the vision 2030, the Saudi Arabian country has implemented sweeping changes in the law which have brought new opportunities to women.

In the past, gender segments had established expectations that demanded in many workplaces the provision of special facilities to women or even absence of women in the work place. As a result, employers usually declined to employ women in places that could not be separated strictly [7]. The legal abilities of women were harshly limited, because the constraints of guardianship often overlapped with rules of conduct in the community, the legislation of personal status, and the current religious rules [9]. The majority of the laws placed women in a subordinate position over most family law issues restricting their economic autonomy. Practically, where the law did not expressly insist on the consent of the guardians, many administrative bodies proceeded to seek consent or assumed that they had to seek consent [8]. In regards to the labour law, Article 149 of the Saudi Labour Law provided that the employment of women should be appropriate to their nature, a broad requirement, which in reality limited access to a variety of employment opportunities [9].

Women were not allowed to perform in different types of work which were deemed to be inappropriate or dangerous. Their involvement in business was also limited by the public policies and regulations, such as that many women had to hire a male agent (Wakil) to start a business, and representatives of the male gender were usually demanded even in the transactions related to the businesses owned by women [10]. Regardless of these challenges, the level of education among women had improved tremendously in the late 20th and early 21st centuries [11]. In the nation, more and more women were attaining secondary and tertiary education [12].

Nevertheless, these educational returns were not matched by the corresponding increases in labour-force participation, which is mainly attributed to the institutional and social factors mentioned above. Legal restrictions were enforced by social and cultural norms and gender segregation in the life of the population was often considered a societal expectation [7]. In these settings, social conventions related to family, modesty and honour did not allow women to seek jobs in workplaces with mixed-gender, or jobs that demanded late working hours [13]. These social norms were even stricter in less liberal rural areas [8]. These combined forces have led to the lack of rapid and equal conversion of education attainments into jobs by women.

2. Drivers of Reform

2.1 Economic Strategy (Vision 2030)

Economic diversification and the development of human capital are two of the main areas of transformation mentioned as pillars of transformation in Saudi Arabia, defined in Vision 2030. Based on this, in order to reduce the reliance on oil revenues and develop a more sustainable and competitive economy, the Vision would encourage greater involvement of women into labour force [14]. The plan sets some quantifiable goals such as an initial 30 percent female labour-force participation target, which can be used to make policy changes, social reforms, and legal revisions [15]. Vision 2030 has spawned various programmes and regulatory changes such as women-leadership-training schemes, entrepreneurship, financial subsidies and platforms which curb non-wage barriers to employment [16].

In addition, the labour law has been amended, making remote and flexible work arrangements and women friendly through these programmes [15]. Moreover, reforms also aim to quota and appointments of women in the senior and leadership positions in the public sector [17]. The statistics show that the plan is yielding real results and the participation of the labour force by women is rising to about 17 percent when Vision 2030 was launched to about 35 percent in 2024 [13]. Women now hold a considerable share of the leadership positions and about 45 percent of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) have been noted to have women at the helm [18]. Based on this some of the targets have been revised by the authorities with a target of 40 percent female participation in the workforce by 2030. The Vision, however, acknowledges that the legal changes should be supported by social, institutional and infrastructural changes. Vision 2030 makes the growth of women labour-force participation as a strategic goal in economic growth, productivity and competitiveness. The established targets, programmes, and legal measures reflect an understanding that harnessing the skills and talents of Saudi women can generate both social and fiscal benefits.

2.2 International and Domestic Pressure

In 2017-2019, a set of historic legal changes was introduced in Saudi Arabia that significantly changed the system of male guardianship (Wilaya) [5]. In particular, the government focused on such reforms as the freedom of movement of women, the civil registration, and legal capacity [19]. Consequently, these reforms relaxed some of the procedural and administrative barriers to women in the workforce and in society. These actions concur with the targets of Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action that do reflect 30 years of achievements in empowering women [20]. One of these reforms was that of Royal Decree No. M/134 that changed the Royal Decree M/24 (2000) on passport regulations [21]. Under these amendments, Saudi women aged 21 years and above no longer need a male guardian permission to request, renew or possess a passport. Such freedom of control over the travel documents did away with one of the more obvious limitations of the guardianship system. Parallel to passport reforms, the civil status law (Royal Decree M/7) was changed, which gave women more rights to legal issues, such as registration of a birth, marriage, and divorce [15]. Indicatively, according to the new civil status laws, Saudi women will be able to report the birth of their children directly and receive birth certificates without any male relations. Similarly, adjustments on residence registration were done to eliminate the need to have the address of a woman to be attached to that of her husband. Although this was improved, the reforms had a narrow scope. The legal principle of full guardianship was not eliminated, so that there still were areas in which the supervision of guardians was necessary, or even possible. As a result, the guardianship system was not fully abolished, with the remaining legal and social restrictions remaining.

3. Key Legal and Policy Reforms

3.1 Vision 2030 and Related Policy Platforms (2016 onward)

Saudi Vision 2030 was a turning point in the socio-economic transformation of the Kingdom, as it offers a guide to diversify the economy, improve productivity, and develop social inclusion [14]. The Vision was specifically to bring female labour-force participation to 30, and the initial target was set at 30 by 2030, which was surpassed and the participation in 2024 was 34% [13; 22]. This was a strategic inclusion of women as one of the key aspects of the economic modernization agenda because it was realised that accessing the talents of women was

crucial to curbing dependence on expatriate labour and ensure future economic development [14]. Vision 2030 framework was introduced at the policy platforms and programmes by the platforms such as National Transformation Program (NTP), Human Capability Development Program, and Quality-of-Life Program [23]. All these were meant to improve education and vocational training of women, to encourage women entrepreneurship and to influence employers in the private sector to hire and keep women in their workforce with incentives in the form of financial rewards as well as recognition programmes [16]. In addition, the reforms in Vision 2030 enhanced diversification of women in their employment in areas like information technology, retail, finance and tourism.

Notably, the political and institutional framework that was created by Vision 2030 helped in later legal reforms [17]. The Vision facilitated integrated inter-ministerial collaboration between the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD), the Ministry of Commerce, the Saudi Central and positioning women as a priority in the economic sector [24]. Vision 2030, in its essence, was a paradigm shift whereby the policy environment shifted towards one where there was constraint and protectionism; to an environment where empowerment and integration is the order of the day [18]. The Vision provided a path towards diversification of the economy and facilitated a national story where women were at the center stage.

3.2 Guardianship and Mobility-Related Changes (2017–2019)

The 2017-2019 period was a decisive period in the reforms of Saudi Arabia on the autonomy of women and their role in the labor force. The most important among these changes was Royal Decree No. M/134 of 2019 that repealed some of the key limitations provided by the male guardianship system a long-standing system that obliged women to seek the consent of a male guardian when making many personal and administrative decisions [21]. Particularly, the order allowed women of 21 and above to request passports and travel to foreign countries on their own which was a tangible step towards legal equality and personal freedom [18]. Other administrative changes later increased the powers of women in matters relating to civil registration where they were now allowed to be officially recognised as heads of household in government records [9].

The practical effect of these reforms was great though these reforms did not completely abolish the system of guardianship. Women had been directly hindered in their employment opportunities, in training programmes, or business travel due to mobility constraints [25]. The decree eliminated these obstacles and, therefore, enabled more women to become more involved in the private and the public sector. Besides, these reforms were complemented by the 2017 royal order that allowed women to drive, thus enhancing physical mobility. All these changes of policy marked the transition to individual legal agency instead of paternalistic control.

3.3 Anti-Discrimination and Employment Policy Changes

Saudi Arabia has continued to strengthen the legal and policy framework in an attempt to minimise gender-based discrimination in the hiring, employment and workplace conditions. Therefore, the MHRSD along with other state institutions has developed regulatory policies to foster a more fair treatment of women.

3.4 Legal Prohibitions Against Discrimination

The Saudi labour system has expressly prohibited discrimination in jobs based on gender, age, nationality, disability or any other grounds. These are echoed in the amendments of the Saudi Labour Law, especially in Royal Decree No. 684 of 27/11/1440 H which states that all citizens are equal before the right to work [19]. The law focuses on the equal pay of work of equal value and the law forbids dismissal of women during pregnancy or maternity leave.

3.5 Maternity and Family-Friendly Leave Provisions

Maternity protections have also been enhanced through policy reforms. In the present laws, women have a three months maternity leave including ten weeks of fully paid leave under certain service requirements [26]. Moreover, there is also guarantee of additional leave in special situations. Employers are not allowed to fire a woman in the course of pregnancy or post child birth leave or illnesses [27]. As well, nursing breaks can be taken when one is back to work. Women workers also have the right to nursing their babies during rest periods not less than an hour a day.

3.6 Flexible Work Arrangements and Incentives

Although flexible work regulations are not extensively documented in public legal texts, there is increasing policy emphasis on facilitating work arrangements compatible with family responsibilities. Women's empowerment initiatives and other government-led programmes are designed to broaden women's access to employment and remove secondary barriers [28].

3.7 Recent Amendments (2024-2025)

Recently, labour law amendments, particularly those enacted in 2025, have expanded leave entitlements, introduced paternity and bereavement leave, and reinforced equal opportunity and anti-discrimination provisions [29]. Employers are now legally required to review and update their human resource policies to ensure compliance with these amendments.

3.8 Labour Market and Administrative Measures

The government programmes have been boosted to enable women to access employment. Interestingly, much of such activities has been directed towards traditionally male dominated areas, including retail and hospitality where gender-separated spaces could be operationally regulated [30]. These plans are a part of the Vision 2030 strategy by Saudi Arabia to increase female labour-force participation to 30 percent in promoting an inclusive economic growth. The MHRSD has also launched vocational programmes that are women-oriented such as the Wusool and Qurrah programmes [31].

Moreover, the introduction of gender quota in top management and on boards of directors is slowly changing the dynamics at work places where more women are now able to occupy decision making positions [23]. As an example, the Tamheer programme offers an on-the-job training to Saudi graduates, including women [9]. Online job-matching platforms, including Taqat will also increase the visibility and accessibility of women in the labour market [32]. The Nitaqat programme has also been used to encourage the private sector by giving incentives to any firm that employs Saudi nationals especially the women [26]. Through these efforts, the prevalence of women in the labour-force has greatly improved, with its level rising by over 36% in 2023, as compared to 19% in 2016 [33]. The changes in the labour market and administrative reforms are indications of the strategic change by the government towards institutionalizing gender inclusion by means of skill development, technological platforms and regulatory incentives.

3.9 Measured Impact: Employment Trends and Statistics

Empirical data including both national and international sources has shown that there has been a significant change in the participation of Saudi women in the labour-market due to significant legal and policy changes. The percentage of female participation in the labour-force rose to 33.6% in 2022, compared to 2016 (approximately 20%), and has already met the target of 30% of female participation in the labour-force nearly 10 years earlier than planned in Vision 2030. These findings are also backed by data on the MHRSD and the General Authority on Statistics (GASTAT). This increase in participation has been observed to be associated with a reduction in the rate of female unemployment, which went down to 15.7% in 2022 compared to more than 33% in 2016 [33]. Women have ventured in various sectors of the economy, especially the services sector, retail, health, education and in the administration. This tendency shows the efficiency of the targeted employment programmes and incentives of the private sector.

Government efforts, in addition to the National Transformation Program, have played a key role in connecting women to the labour market, facilitating remote and flexible employment, and influencing companies to adopt inclusive labour policies [18]. Regardless of these accomplishments, there are still structural and distributional issues. The disparities between regions still exist, and women in big cities like Riyadh and Jeddah are more likely to be employed than rural women [34]. There is also sectoral segregation where women are still underrepresented in the leadership and technical roles [35]. In addition, endemic wage disparities and underemployment point to the fact that policy changes are still necessary to achieve fair career advancement.

4. Socio-Cultural Barriers

Also, some communities and areas are still conservative with regard to social attitudes. Though often based on cultural and historical tradition,

these perceptions have the inadvertent effect of reducing the set of opportunities available to women [36]. As a result, women can be clustered in certain occupations reinforcing the occupational segregation and, in the long run, leading to the wage gap between sectors. Meanwhile, it should be noted that development goes on. Cities have shown high levels of growth in the increased roles of women in different industries, leadership and new business enterprises [37]. The reforms of policies, education, and modernization of the economy show these developments. The development can also be observed in the rural and peripheral areas but it is much slower. The different levels of progress highlight the need to provide specific support, awareness campaigns and inclusive development policies to ensure more equal development in the region. These regions hold a lot of promise to speed up positive change and increase the economic participation of women further with a continued investment in education, infrastructure, and community participation.

5. Policy Recommendations

Though Saudi Arabian legal reforms have brought about a historic shift in women rights and the economy, to consolidate these gains needs a holistic policy machineries to guarantee inclusivity, sustainability, and equity. Liberalization of the law is not sufficient to ensure full integration of the labour-market, it should be supported by enhanced institutional capacity, socio-economic infrastructure and the long-lasting engagement of the society. The reform recommendations provided below set out a plan to sustain and speed up the reform. First of all, it is necessary to codify anti-discrimination safeguards. Although the existing labour laws are theoretically against discrimination, they need to be more specific and enforceable. The labour code is supposed to define gender-based discrimination explicitly, have mechanisms of complaints which should be accessible and sanctions of violations meaningful. Enforcement of the law will empower the employers and reaffirm the government in upholding fair employment practices.

The provision of supportive services (e.g. childcare and public transportation) is universal and important in the elimination of practical barriers to female employment. The state must increase the number of high quality childcare centers which are subsidized and enhance transport systems, especially in the rural and outskirts regions, so that people can have safe and convenient commuting. These would enable the participation of the workforce, and enhance the productivity and retention rates. Equal incentives and punishments should be used by the employers to instigate the change in behaviour. An example of that is to provide tax credits, wage subsidies, and procurement preferences to companies that show an inclusive hiring policy and at the same time impose fines on any company that shows ineffective gender balance and discriminatory behavior. Open disclosure of gender indicators would also bolster corporate responsibility and confidence.

Career-pathway programmes and upskilling should be increased to equip women to work in high growth sectors such as technology, finance and renewable energy. These programmes should incorporate mentorship and leadership development and placement services to facilitate upward mobility. Simultaneously, evidence-based policymaking would be impossible without data transparency, which would allow the publication of labour-market statistics and impact evaluations on a regular basis and make it possible to continuously improve the situation and conduct targeted interventions where necessary. Also, civic space is important in terms of reforms sustainability. By protecting the rights of the peaceful activists and the civil society actors, one can conduct a constructive monitoring, dialogue and policy development. Lastly, the involvement of the community is still a cornerstone of change in society. In-house public-awareness campaigns that are culturally sensitive, and written in cooperation with religious and community leaders, can be used to normalise female employment and alleviate residual social resistance. Collectively, such actions go beyond legal formalities to substantive equality so that the right of women to work in Saudi Arabia is not only realised on paper, but also in practice, in line with the wider vision of inclusive and sustainable development of the Kingdom.

6. Conclusion

In Saudi Arabia, most women are increasing their formal access to work through legal changes that have taken place in Saudi Arabia. The incorporation of Vision 2030 priorities, administrative changes to encourage the same, labour-regulatory changes and employer incentives have led to a dramatic rise in female labour-force participation. However, only legal changes have partly dealt with the barriers. Weakness, skew and absence of uniformity in enforcement, infrastructural limitation, and professional segregation and stifled civic space mean that these benefits remain fragile and distorted. To

guarantee that legal changes can lead to sustainable economic empowerment, Saudi policy makers ought to supplement rights based laws with strong enforcement, specific social investment, and safeguarding civic advocacy. The actions would not only enhance the opportunities of the individuals, but also empower the development of human-capital at the national scale and add to the overall economic objectives.

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