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Deepanjana Varshney

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The Strides of the Saudi Female Workforce: Overcoming Constraints and Contradictions in Transition

By Deepanjana Varshney¹

Abstract

For years Saudi Arabia has been engulfed by a widespread gender gap, discrimination and inequality; however, the new era has ushered a paradigm shift that has beckoned a rising women's empowerment process. Today, Saudi women are better educated, more well-informed, and more financially independent as a result of a plethora of changes. Furthermore, their presence in various public spheres and social media is highly visible today. The government's recent reforms have undisputedly catalyzed their foray into the workforce; however, effective integration is still a significant challenge. Nevertheless, Saudi women have consistently shown grit toward their employment and career amidst various challenges such as limiting culture, deeply embedded traditions, and related obstacles. This paper discusses the emerging trends, issues of the gender gap, the impact of policy imperatives and future research implications.

Keywords: Discrimination, Employment, Gender Gap, Inequality, Saudi Women, Saudi Arabian Workforce

Introduction

Saudi Arabia's radical initiative to proliferate from a solely petroleum-based economy has asked for the varied skills, involvement, and commitment of the Saudi citizens. In doing so, the government has emphasized the paramount importance of women's role in the nation-building process. The present scenario in the labor market of the kingdom is the outcome of the progress over the decades (Varshney, 2017). In contemporary times, the country has witnessed reforms in education and labor laws to encourage the participation of Saudi women. The introduction of sweeping reforms in the national education system is a major step in preparing Saudi women for competitive jobs. In fact, this gendering of employment in Saudi Arabia has cascaded in importance over the past few years, and the Saudi government has been applying focused and overt efforts to introduce Saudi women in the workforce. The situation of Saudi Arabia, is distinct from other nations in the region, in the manner in which the localization issue is handled. The stringent policies and measures are changed continuously. A sense of volatility persists among the divergent forces of orthodox religious undercurrents and the driving forces of change (Varshney, 2017).

¹ Dr. Deepanjana Varshney is Professor in the School of Commerce & Management Studies, Dayananda Sagar University, India. She has 16 years of academic experience in India and overseas universities. She has published her research in ISI and Scopus-indexed international journals. Dr. Varshney has been extensively involved in research publications focusing on employee dysfunctional behaviour, gender issues, employee migration, and employee attitudinal dimensions. Besides, she has written book chapters and is also involved in consultancy assignments and conducting workshops.

The country has been steadily moving up the United Nations' Development Program's Gender Empowerment Measure Index, and the Saudi government has enacted laws to support working women through provisions relating to maternity leave, vacation time, and nurseries, among other things (Lippman, 2012). The government has also sought to increase the number of women working in its administrations (Le Renard, 2008). Nevertheless, in doing so the country is facing several challenges, namely socio-cultural, religious, and policy issues that have been continuously creating hindrances in the process. Despite these challenges, over the last two years, Saudization (or job localization) has taken on an increasingly gendered dimension in what is often referred to as the feminization of the labor force (Eldemerdash, 2014). The main purpose of this job localization process is to facilitate Saudi women's addition to the workforce and facilitate their economic participation. In Saudization, the primary thrust has been to remove foreign workers and subsequently fill the positions by Saudi males and females. This process is synonymously referred to as job localization, whereby the residents of the country are given sole preference in the public as well as private sectors.

This paper aims to highlight the variables and the contextual aspects affecting Saudi women's lives and the recent thrust of career orientation (employment or business) amidst pervading constraints. The paper also gives an exposition on the policy implications of the government on empowering Saudi women not only in the workforce but all spheres of life and the existing contradictions.

Literature Review

Traditionally, Saudi women's lives have centred on their chores and household affairs, whereas Saudi men have been the breadwinners. The last few years have witnessed the emergence of Saudi women who are entering paid employment and consequently facing challenges related to the existing traditional, cultural and religious values (Bahkali, 2012). The contemporary Saudi Arabian society is open about women's education, but in sharp contrast, women are viewed from a different perspective in the work sphere. The primary focus of the Saudi culture is 'family', where the most vital priority of a woman is to be a wife and a mother. Hence, if a woman desires to work, she has to maintain a balance between work and family responsibilities efficiently, most importantly to focus more on family life. Therefore, a Saudi woman's decision to join the workforce is more of a joint decision in the family and not a personal one. It is usual for the females to leave jobs and take care of the family because the family bonds are highly cohesive and considered more important than individual interests for them. There are cases where some females prefer to remain at home even after completing university education as they regard work as less important than family (Al-Harthi, 2000). A recurring problem in the Saudi labor force is the low female participation in all fiscal sectors as stated by Fakeeh (2009). Although the government has catalyzed various sectors to employ women, there is still a low percentage participating in employment (Alsulami, 2014). The majority of Saudi women are in the public sector organizations, namely, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Social Affairs (Fakeeh, 2009). Saudi women's participation in the private sector is quite limited due to social and cultural restrictions that prevent women from working in the same place as men (Achoui, 2009). In 2012, the Ministry of Labor restricted specific occupations in the retail sector to be for women only, such as women's apparel and beauty (Fakeih, 2012).

However, with time, there has been development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that in turn has ushered immense scope for women in various disciplines (Alsaleh, 2012). Research shows that Saudi females possess the ambition to have accomplishments in their careers in entrepreneurship (Al-Ahmadi, 2005; 2011; Abdalla, 2015). Simultaneously, they look forward to working in positions of direction and control in different sectors (Gazzaz, 2017). Previous research has been conducted on the females of the Arab world (AlHalawani, 2002; Al-Lamki, 2007; Abdalla, 2015). However, there has been a paradigm shift, and the policy-makers have started advocating gender equality in some ways like participation in municipal elections. In contrast, still, Saudi women are denied a broader, inclusive role in the different spheres (Tucker, 2015).

Islam has a pervasive influence in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. According to van Geel (2016), the influence of Islam on gender is deep-rooted and covers occupations, academics, socio-cultural aspects and standards of the Saudi context. Nevertheless, King Abdullah's decree has been a blessing for the Saudi women as it facilitated the pursuit of higher education from the Western world and imbibed the distinctive cultural and social dimensions of the West (Taylor and Albasri, 2014). Though religion has been attributed as the essential cause of the orthodox and rigid framework of the Saudi society, it is a more widely accepted notion that culture is the key reason (Agarwal, et al., 2012).

There have been noteworthy strides taken in recent times as the government announced the famous Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to shake up the status quo of the cultural and socio-economic fabric of the country (Spitler, 2017). Byrne (1979) had argued that girls have always been encouraged to study languages, secretarial skills, and arts as compared to boys. She had further pointed that different qualifications imply different opportunities in work, which leads to pressure or, by the system, to gender inequality. Naturally, such deep-rooted discrimination produces income differences between adult females and adult males (Sowell, 2011). The government's policy to implement sex segregation has prevented Saudi women from engaging in any significant public life that is essential for their career growth and exposure (Rajkhan, 2014). This practice is by the Saudi laws and regulations based on the Islamic principles, which restrict women to work in a limited environment devoid of gender mixing or incurred harassment. Women are directed to certain professions that are considered as feminine and continue to work in less strong or authoritative positions than men. So, despite some Saudi women having been found to have achieved a right amount of recognition in the field of academics, literature, business, and other areas, their achievements are not appropriately highlighted, and they are kept out from the public life (Cole, 2006). In the whole of the MENA region, Saudi Arabia has one of the lowest female employment rates. This aspect draws attention to the serious fact that there is inadequate utilisation of its human resource. Saudi women are nevertheless confident and self-assured that at some point in time they will be given equal opportunities as their male counterparts (Rajkhan, 2014).

Gender Gap, Segregation and Women's Empowerment

An in-depth discussion of female employment in Saudi Arabia would be incomplete without a detailed overview of the variables that hinder the progress of Saudi women in career and employment. Ironically, the Saudi Arabian context deters their development immensely despite introducing good reforms. According to Altorki and El-Solh (1988), there are two essential dimensions in analyzing the dynamics of women employment in Saudi Arabia: that of

being a woman in Saudi Arabia and also of being homegrown in the Arab society. Although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia signed and ratified the “United Nations Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women” in 2000, women are still treated as second-class citizens. They are not allowed to travel, work, study, or even open a bank account without written permission from a male guardian. Despite significant progress made regarding the status of women, gender inequality remains prevalent in most Middle Eastern countries (Bahkali, 2012).

There is also deep-rooted gender segregation. Saudi females do not have the authority in any position in the real sense of the term and are put in lower positions in both public and private sectors as compared to men (Hamdan, 2005). In the private sector too, Saudi women work in a narrow range of jobs such as private businesses and banking. In a way, Saudi women, whether at home or the workplace, are dominated and overpowered by men. They firmly believe that obtaining equality in all spheres such as the home, workplace and other designations is still a tremendous challenge (Inglehart and Norris, 2004). Thus, gender inequalities are prevalent in various walks of the Saudi life and are deeply ingrained, institutionalized, and structured in the society.

Gender segregation has been associated with Islamic principles for a long time. There have been many studies that concentrated on how religion, especially Islam, had resulted in gender inequality in the MENA region (Schmitt-Thiel, 2003).

Women’s rights advocates and analysts pointed out that the current status of women in the Middle East has been primarily determined by religious misinterpretation of Islam (Mir-Hosseini, 2006) and legal and political discrimination (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). In reality, Islam treats men and women equally in many things. In fact, a fair reading of the Quran and Hadith proves that the problem is not with Islam, but in the cultural stereotypes that have dominated the Saudi society for decades.

The absence of a clear boundary between religious and secular thinking has led to the exploitation of wrong habits and traditions by men and, by extension, the entire society. Although purporting to be based on Islam, men have used Islam as a tool to belittle the role of women in the Saudi society. Even though women work, they are still isolated and controlled in all their actions and behavior by men, and the Saudi society remains divided into two categories, male and female, in sharp contrast to all other societies in the world, although Islam has neither excluded nor restricted women from work.

According to Doumato (2010), “[...] gender inequality is built into Saudi Arabia’s governmental and social structures and is integral to the country’s state-supported interpretation of Islam, which is derived from a literal reading of the Quran and Sunna”.

Even in the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index of 2009, Saudi Arabia ranks 130th out of 134 countries regarding gender inequality (Hausmann, Tyson and Zahidi, 2009). All of this information indicates that the situation of women in Saudi Arabia is relatively dismal. Moreover, it can be deduced that since gender inequality is written into the law and the law is based on the understanding of the Islamic law, the status of the Saudi women can be associated with religion (Byran, 2012). Ridgeway (2011), aptly remarks that gender inequality is prevalent in many countries, including Saudi Arabia, where gender is still connected intricately with economic and social organizations. Nonetheless, there is an extreme likelihood that the status of women in the Kingdom is going to change due to the periodic variations in demographic and economic necessities within the Kingdom (Nasr, 2012). As per the Global Gender Gap report,

2017, Saudi Arabia ranks 138th out of 144 countries. The scores are severely low in the areas of economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment.

Table 1: Gender Gap Report Parameter for Saudi Arabia

Parameters	2006	2017
	(out of 115 countries)	(out of 144 countries)
	Rank	Rank
Global Gender Gap Score	114	138
Economic participation and opportunity	115	142
Educational attainment	93	96
Health and survival	54	130
Political empowerment	115	124

Source: The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017

In the field of Economic Participation and Opportunity, there is the gap suggesting participation, the pay gap, and the progress gap between the males and females employed in different sectors. It is seen that in the year 2006, based on these criteria, Saudi Arabia ranked lowest at 115th out of 115 studied. However, there is a slight rise in two places in 2017. The country was ranked 142nd out of 144 countries. Even after spending a considerable amount on the upliftment of the Saudi females and their respective participation in the jobs market, there is no significant change over the last ten years.

The Educational Attainment aspect demonstrates the country's opportunities given to educate the male and female population of the country. Here, it is observed that in 2006, Saudi Arabia was ranked 93rd out of 115 countries in the ratios of education between women to men but has secured 96th rank out of 144 countries in 2017, which can be deemed a significant achievement of the Saudi Arabian government.

The Health and Survival dimension shows the differences between women's and men's health issues (diseases, malnutrition, and other health variables) and the years both men and women can live in good health accounting for other contingent health issues. Saudi Arabia's position was 54th out of 115 countries in 2006. This rank was appreciable as compared to the other parameters. However, in 2017, the ranking was a source of concern: it was 130th out of 144 countries. Political empowerment implies the gap between men and women at the topmost levels of political power and decision-making in political positions and ministerial positions. In 2006, the ranking was dismal; Saudi Arabia was having an alarming rank of 115th out of 115 countries assessed. In 2017, it was 124th out of 144 countries assessed. The credit for the upward rise in the ranking goes to the late King Abdullah for his pioneer declaration in the year 2011 that sought to empower women in the legislative elections of 2015. A 20 percent quota for women in the country's legislative branch, the Shura Council, was imposed in 2013.

In this regard, it is relevant to note that the Ninth Development Plan (2010–2014) published by the Ministry of Economics and Planning (MEP) has selected policies and targets to alleviate gender inequality (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Economic Planning, 2010). In 2013, the active workforce in Saudi Arabia comprised 10.6 million people, fewer than half of whom were Saudi nationals. Equally important is the fact that 85.6 percent of the nationals in the labor force

were men. Women in the labor force had an unemployment rate of 35.7 percent of the total Saudi female labor force—nearly six times that of men (Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency, SAMA, Forty-Ninth Annual Report, 2013).

The key aspects of the Tenth Development Plan also reveal two primary focus areas: diversification from the oil economy and the creation of jobs for the Saudi citizens. Although Saudi Arabia presents a highly opaque and closed, rigid context, it is a rapidly developing nation (Varshney, 2016).

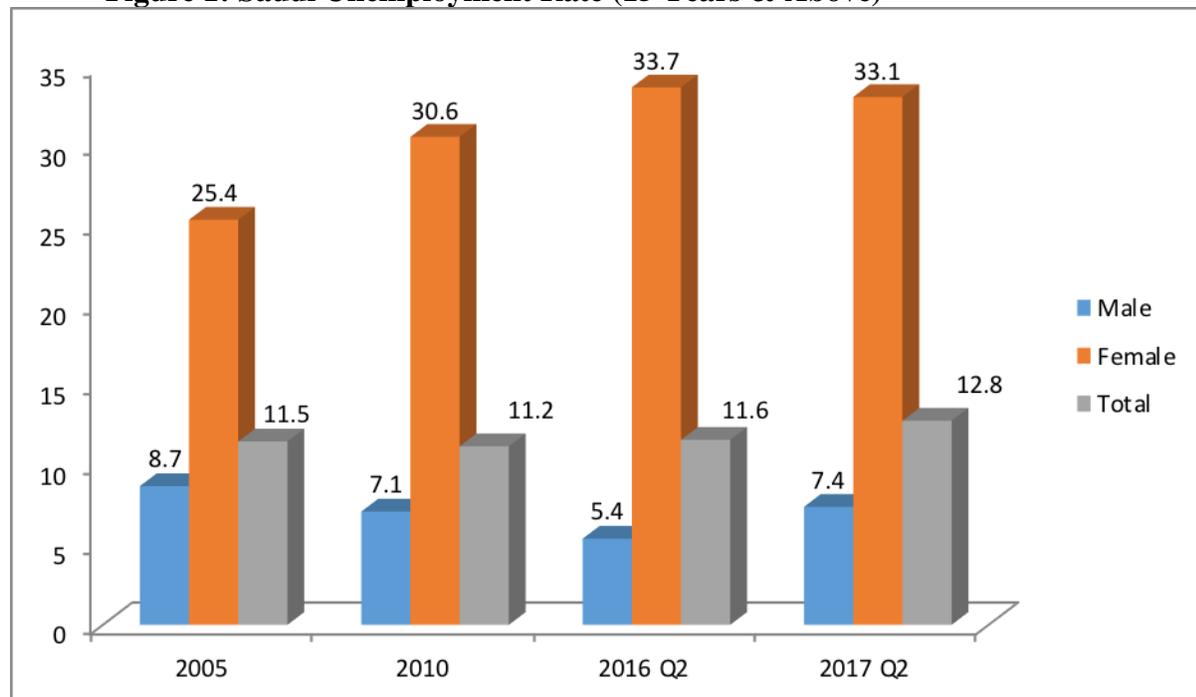
Table 2: Unemployed Saudi Population (15 Years & Above)

Year	Male	Female	Total
2005	270,468	157,327	427,795
2010	261,522	239,738	501,260
2016 Q2	236,150	421,786	657,936
2017 Q2	333,758	402,563	736,321

Source: Labor Force Survey 2016 & 2017, General Authority of Statistics

In 2005, the total Saudi population was approximately 23.91 million, whereas in 2017, it is around 33.55 million with a growth of 40 percent. Contrary to this, the unemployed female population has increased at an alarming 156 percent from 2005 to 2017. As mentioned in Table 2, the unemployed female population is 4 million as against the 3.33 million population of unemployed Saudi males.

Figure 1: Saudi Unemployment Rate (15 Years & Above)



Source: Labor Force Survey 2016 & 2017, General Authority of Statistics

As shown in Figure 1, there is a slight increase in the overall Saudi unemployment rate from 11.5 in 2005 to 12.8 in 2017. Even after so many efforts to make Saudization successful, increase in

unemployment rate is indeed a cause for concern. The most alarming situation is of female unemployment. In 2005, it was 25.4, whereas even after spending a vast sum on social reform and women's empowerment, in 2017, the Saudi female unemployment rate stands at 33.1, which reflects a 30 percent growth from 2005.

The Saudi female unemployment rate in 2017 Q2 is slightly less than 2016 Q2 from 33.7 to 33.1, but there is a considerable gap between the Saudi female and male unemployment rate. The research (Al Saleh, 2012) concluded by stating that the government of Saudi Arabia has achieved remarkable progress in the status of gender equality in education, employment, and health. The direction of the Ninth Development Plan represents the efforts made to promote improvements in the status of women and in enabling them to participate in economic, health, and social development. The brave, historic announcement of the Saudi King on September 25th, 2011, giving women the right to vote, to contest future municipal elections, and to be appointed to the all-male influential advisory Shura Council, has been seen as strong leadership to alleviate gender inequality in Saudi Arabia. These initiatives are considered to be significant advancements in the rights of women in a conservative society such as Saudi Arabia.

Recent Strides amidst Setbacks

There have been commendable cases in recent times of Saudi women making strides in several sectors as employees or business professionals. However, the restrictions are loosening gradually. The number of Saudi women employed in the Kingdom's private sector grew from just 55,000 in 2010 to 454,000 by the end of 2013, according to figures from the Saudi Ministry of Labor (Redvers, 2015). This appreciable increase is due to women's aggressive movements as well as the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz's reforms during his last years in office.

In contrast, there are areas of dissatisfaction and grievances vented by Saudi women regarding employment. Fouziyah Al-Karri has carved a name for herself in the construction industry to obtain a commercial license but has been expressing her deep dissatisfaction with the lack of support from the local Asharqia Chamber (a service driven organization that emphasizes the value added to the private sector in the country's economic progress) and she was repeatedly questioned about why she had ventured into the male domain of contracting (Al Fawaz, 2015). Moreover, there have been recurring complaints regarding other workplace-related issues, including lack of affordable transport, access to toilets and prayer rooms, and training. It is notable that Saudi women are entering the world of productive labor at a time of great transition. In her speech at the opening of the Alwaleed Philanthropies Conference, Tanguy (2017) stated that the world of work is fundamentally altered with globalization, migration, technological disruption and the emergence of the green economy.

In the Vision 2030, this belief has been reiterated. It stressed that Saudi women were a "great asset" and the Vision will strive to "develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy." One of the key strategic goals of the Vision 2030 is to increase the Saudi female workers from 22 percent to 30 percent.

Research also suggests that Saudi women, despite advances in education and employment, have remained much below in the organizational hierarchy regarding jobs and income. There may be a host of reasons for this, namely, cultural, organizational, and personal factors, as discussed above.

Several women claimed that the problem they face is to get recognized and be respected in the workplace, which deters career advancement at senior levels. Women now want to learn and grow professionally and seek greater responsibility along with the capability to take risks.

There has been a spurt of women-led businesses now, and there is witnessed greater enthusiasm to take up entrepreneurial ventures. Studies show that most of the Saudi women backed out due to problems related to sponsorship, financing, and long-drawn formal process.

There is a great amount of payment disparity in the public and private sector for the Saudi women, too. This pay gap has created more difficulties sometimes for shouldering their professional responsibilities. Herein comes the significant responsibility of the human resource professionals in the firms to offer genuine support to the Saudi female employees to create a work-life balance through regular counselling and cooperation. It is their indomitable spirit that has made the Saudi females successful deans of colleges and universities, chief executives of banks, IT specialists and spread out as medical practitioners. Even women have been occupying some enviable decision-making designations in The Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, The Saudi Council of Engineers, The Saudi Management Society and the Saudi Lawyer's Association. Finally, some Saudi female artists, photographers, filmmakers, journalists, authors and fashion designers have been appreciated critically at both domestic and international levels (Shaikh, 2007).

In the field of entrepreneurship, Saudi women have been excelling for a long time, especially in establishing start-ups. The case of Wafaa Al-Ashwali shows the meteoric rise of the growing success in this arena. After five months of the business launch, her app Seviis has been able to connect consumers with more than 2500 service providers across the country (Cuthbert, 2017). The case of Lubna Olayan deserves special mention. Fry (2015) described the case of Lubna Olayan whose performance in the professional arena in the Gulf region and worldwide has been commendable. She has shown that women can build great economic foothold within the limited domain of the Saudi society. She focuses on the talent of the female workforce and does not hesitate to express that a meritorious female workforce also equally matters. A befitting tribute has been given to her by the CEO of Cummins: "She makes a constant push toward modernization and empowerment of women—from inside the system," he says. "She is one of the most courageous people I've ever met."

So, instead of reports and media circulation that Saudi Arabia curbs women's professional and economic potential, there is a growing list of accomplishments by Saudi women every year. The giant leap of the Saudi women has been aptly observed:

"I am optimistic about the role of Saudi women and the major social and economic contributions they will make to their country. With their education, skills, motivation, and ambition, women are today an essential element in the revitalization of Saudi Arabia." (Almunajjed, 2006)

The recent initiatives have come with assuring government measures related to the higher education and proper career scope for Saudi women. Undoubtedly, they feel more empowered and confident now (Gazzaz, 2017).

A contemporary report of Glowork, (2017) which is a Saudi organization started by young Saudi business owners, studied Saudi women at the workplace and pointed out that there is a marginal increase of 3 percent in female Saudi Economic Participation from 14.4 percent in 2011 to 17.3 percent in 2015, but as compared to male Saudi Economic participation of 64.1

percent, it is incredibly low. The report analyzed that policies and measures implemented in recent years had undoubtedly empowered women in many ways, but still a lot needs to be done. Some of the measures that can involve women in the workforce are equal pay for genders, transport support, telecommuting benefits and a schedule that creates work-life balance. Nevertheless, the policies are required to be customized as per the needs of the female employee. Glowork had been founded by Khalid Al Khudair as a startup to propel women's contribution to the Saudi workforce.

Despite the various constraints in Saudi Arabia, an increasing number of Saudi women are joining the workforce. Currently, Saudi women are venturing into new occupations and previously unexplored professional domains.

Research conducted in different organizational contexts reveals that Saudi females are equally competent as the males in the high designation positions, if not slightly higher (Al-Shamrani, 2015). Nevertheless, the challenges are also great and are found in the various sectors. The prevailing issues are widespread gender stereotyping and discrimination, demotivating advancement opportunities and reduced work-life balance (Al-Asfour et al. 2017). Recent research (Abalkhail, 2017) highlights that Saudi females are not involved in higher strategy formulation and discussion phases; authority remains with the males. Additionally, Saudi women also experience deep issues of independence and financial restrictions (Abukudair, 2012; Almansour and Kempner, 2016).

Suggestions and Future Research Implications

Suggestions without scrutinizing the general citizen's feedback on the government's programs and policies would be limited. An analysis of Alsaleh's (2012) research findings is intriguing and reflects specific salient factors: respondents had stressed that Islamic principles are in favor of gender equality; they feel there are sufficient programs and policies from the government's side to reduce gender inequality in the kingdom; and finally, the findings reinforced the respondents' staunch faith in the firm leadership from all government agencies to minimize gender inequality. With the rock-solid reforms, the gender gap can be resolved by encouraging the young Saudi girls to follow a career. This process indicates that Saudi women should devise their strategies to challenge gender inequality and achieve social justice not only in education but also in all matters of life in the context of religious patriarchal societies (Rajkhan, 2014).

Suliman (2017) has rightly assessed that though the women surpass men in the University education, still the conversion to jobs is dismal. The demographic dividend factor propels economic growth, but the lack of sufficient Saudi women facilitating it proves as a significant detriment (Kalin, 2017). Despite some research being conducted, there is still a paucity of research in this domain. A summary of the past research reflects that gender equality is still an impractical proposition in Saudi Arabia, but the winds of change and reforms have been ushered. There should be more multipronged research conducted on gender segregation and discrimination in the Saudi Arabian perspective. Even previous research by Metcalfe (2006; 2007; 2008; 2011) described the growing threat that has erupted from gender segregation, that is, defined gender-based occupations. Ironically, this phenomenon has curbed the developmental support for Saudi females to a large extent.

The government's role is the most pivotal here because it has to develop hard-hitting and robust legislation that promotes equal participation in the labor market. The government should

implement policies that create employment opportunities for women and create institutional mechanisms that promote women's well-being and success in the workforce. There should be reservations about the various jobs for the Saudi women and also attractive facilities and rewards to balance work-life. There must be a suitable monitoring mechanism to ensure the appropriate functioning of the systems. In addition to cooperative regional initiatives dedicated to creating a female labor network, cross-sector partnerships should be established to leverage existing resources. There should be a thorough improvement and revision of the educational and vocational framework reinforcing the scientific and technical aspects of knowledge. Women's equal participation in employment can be professionally enforced by the continuous, combined efforts of the government, the private sector and the social and related non-government agencies. As discussed before, there should be a unit of the women's independent body that should be able to handle the female labor issues deftly and consistent training cells to groom and develop Saudi female in various sectors for higher, more significant positions of responsibility and decision-making. Research has time and again proved that the Saudi women have become more confident and assertive in the workplace. These courses of action will ensure shortly that the Saudi labor force becomes competent, dynamic and prepared to face future challenges.

Nevertheless, the barriers are found to be more profound as there are guardianship laws, rights of the Saudi woman as per law, multiple roles to fill and conflicts between them, and the restrictions of the tribal culture.

Future research should be empirically based and probe into the non-traditional sectors and positions of Saudi women employment. The government, non-government bodies, and academic researchers should introspect and examine the professional issues as well as personal issues (affordable transport, childcare) to empower and evolve the females in a short span of time. Last but not the least, there has to be a regular voicing of issues by crucial women representatives in matters of jurisdiction, employment patterns, and the psycho-social aspects that need immediate attention.

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