

## “I LIVE MY DAYS!” ANALYSIS OF AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON THE FEMALES’ SYMBIOSIS IN THE SAUDI SOCIETY

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### Abstract

This article forms a part of a longitudinal research that deals with the Saudi females’ changing social roles during the latest transition period. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has undergone numerous sociocultural changes in an effort, to fulfil its Vision 2030. There was always an underground lifestyle element to the younger generation, even though older generations of Saudis were not open to change at first. Changing happened with gender social roles in private life as people always found a way to mingle. Seeing the immediate acceptance of the recent changes from the younger generations is not surprising, especially having had an up and close preview to those changes. The research aimed to provide an etic cultural perspective with the focus on the altering social roles of the Saudi females in the society. Therefore, the research questions revolved around whether the last twenty years’ gains in women’s education have led into a broader social change, translating into widespread labour market and societal participation of Saudi females; and how these changes influence the modernization process of Saudi Arabia fostering and providing equal human rights and closing the gender gap. To achieve these goals, the research employed a quantitative survey and qualitative deep interviews. The research findings of the “shock generation” of highly educated working women show that Saudi women are as bridging the gap between tradition and modernity in the Saudi society which undeniably fosters women’s empowerment and emancipation.

**Keywords:** etic and socio-cultural perspective, transition of Gen Y, highly educated women, labour market and societal participation, empowerment of women

### 1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia has often been characterized and criticized in the West – and in many parts of the Arab world – as one of the world’s most repressive countries toward women. But this supposition suggests that matters are more complex than they appear, and social reality roots in the deep internal socio-cultural values (Hall, 1984) of the Saudi society. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been undergoing significant sociocultural transformations for the last ten years and the nation looks to modernize and to adapt to the rapidly changing global landscape. The government has played a key role in driving these changes, as they strive to balance their traditional values and the Saudi national identity with the demands of a globalized society. This is a significant shift, away from traditional conservative values towards a more diversified and open image of the country. The expectation of this research is to explore certain attitudes and feelings of the young females in

Saudi Arabia towards the changing socio-culture in the country, particularly those in the Gen Y demographic.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES

In the media, Saudi culture is often portrayed as traditional and conservative, what is more monocultural (Alfalih, 2016) though the country is swiftly becoming more varied and contemporary. Having a theoretical historical look at the Saudi cultural characteristics, Islamic faith and the Bedouin roots have been essential cultural value elements for long (Saleh, 1998). Islam has been a defining feature since the religion was founded in the 7th century, thus Saudi Arabia is the home to some of the most important sites in Islam, including the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and adherence to Islamic customs and traditions is central to Saudi culture. On the social scale the Saudi society was organized around Bedouin tribal lines with loyalty to one's tribe being a primary identity marker. Though the Kingdom has been urbanized and improved throughout history, tribalism still is an important cultural characteristic in many parts of the country, therefore family is highly valued in Saudi culture, and strong family ties are an important aspect of daily life. Families often live together in large, extended households, and there is a strong emphasis on respect for elders and the importance of keeping family honour. (Aksoy, 2017) Traditional gender roles have been a crucial part, with men serving as the head of the household and women handling domestic duties. However, in the last decade, there has been some progress towards greater gender equality, with women gaining more opportunities especially in education and the workforce. Though traditional gender roles are still prevalent in the Saudi society, the latest progress in gender equality is visible, particularly among Generation Y and Z. Young women are increasingly pursuing higher education and entering the workforce, and there is a growing push for greater gender representation in politics, in society and other leadership roles (Hamdan, 2005).

These cultural characteristics have evolved over centuries, shaped by a variety of historical, religious, and social factors. While Saudi Arabia has modernized significantly in recent years, many of these cultural characteristics still are deeply ingrained in the society. Approximately, 84% of the population urbanized, with the largest cities being Riyadh, Jeddah, and Mecca. In terms of demography, the estimated population of Saudi Arabia is approximately 36.33 million people with the median age of 29.8 against a global value of 30.3 years (World Economics, 2023). 24.10% of the population under the age of 15, 51.45% between the ages of 25 and 54, and 3.98% over the age of 65. The gender ratio in the Kingdom is skewed towards males, with approximately 57.64 % of the population being male and 42.36 % being female. Due to the demographic boom of the median age, Saudi Arabia has a large portion of the young people. (**Saudi Population 2023 – Key Statistics**) This leads us to understand that there is a strong emphasis on education, – there are many universities and colleges throughout the country –, and labour market policy.

In Saudi Arabia, the young generations, Y and Z are characterized by a disparate set of traits that are shaped by the unique cultural, social, and economic context of the country. Research has shown that the young generations in Saudi Arabia are highly tech-savvy, with a strong preference for online communication and an elevated level of familiarity with digital tools and platforms. They

are also connected with a powerful sense of community, family, friends, peers and have a desire for social interactions. (Alhadlaq et al., 2019) The study of Aichner & Shaltoni (2018) found that Generation Y and Z value education and career success highly pursuing higher education and professional opportunities. These young people are extremely ambitious, with a fervent aspiration to make a positive impact on their families, their communities and society at large. (Aichner & Shaltoni, 2018) Digitalization significantly influenced the development of their behavioural and personality characters, changing the way they communicate, interact, and learn. As a result of this, they are more likely to be open to new experiences, more technophile, and often more creative and independent than other generations. Furthermore, their digital behaviour has also been associated with increased levels of risk-taking and impulsivity. The young generations in Saudi Arabia have grown up with basic public education in a digital age, with easy access to technological advancements. This contrasts with the older, more traditional generation, who may be less technology dependent and have had to adapt to these innovative technologies. However, all generations use technology extensively in their daily lives, and social media has become an important way for Saudis of all ages to connect with one another. (Hernandez-de-Menendez et al., 2020)

Both the old and young generations share a keen sense of national identity and pride in their country's history and culture. On the other hand, there are some differences in how this identity is expressed. The older generation tends to adhere more closely to traditional social norms and customs. Whereas the younger Saudis often take a more modern and global perspective on their national identity, and may be more acceptive to dating, mingling with the other sex in public, wearing more westernized clothing (Alsisy & Alsewiket, 2020). What is more, they are more likely to question and challenge the traditional norms.

In terms of cultural values, Saudi Arabians are traditional and conservative, with a strong adherence to religious and cultural customs and norms (Alhadlaq et al., 2019). They are also highly patriotic, with a powerful sense of pride in their culture but we can see a shift when it comes to religion with the younger generations (Aichner & Shaltoni, 2018). For them, there is also evidence of a growing desire for change and progress, as they are exposed to more diverse perspectives and ideas through their access to digital technologies (Alhadlaq et al., 2019). Overall, the literature suggests that the young Saudis are a diverse and dynamic group of individuals with a unique set of traits and values shaped by the country's unique cultural, social, and economic context.

The biggest push for the societal transition in Saudi Arabia has been the Vision 2030 project which is a comprehensive development plan announced by the Saudi Arabian government in 2016. The Vision 2030 aims to modernize and diversify the Saudi economy, promote sustainable development, and improve the quality of life for citizens. One of the key studies on the topic is "Transformation from an Oil-based Economy to a Knowledge-based Economy in Saudi Arabia: The Direction of Saudi Vision 2030" (Nurunnabi, 2017). This study supplies an overview of the goals and examines the potential opportunities and challenges facing the country as it looks to implement the plan. The author argues that the Vision 2030 can promote economic growth and

diverseness but also warns of defiance, such as the need to address social and political reforms to make the Vision extraordinarily successful. The study analyses the economic and social implications with a focus on the role of the private sector and the potential impact on employment and income inequality. It concludes that the Vision 2030 can promote significant changes in economy and in the society but will also require more powerful investments in education, infrastructure, and the development of a skilled workforce. (Nurunnabi, 2017) Until now the government has made expressive progress in achieving some of the goals of the Vision 2030, such as in the fields of gender roles, tourism and entertainment, but further confrontations still need to be addressed, such as the diversity of the economy and the creation of jobs for the growing population, or promote sustainable development, and improve the quality of life for citizens. Additionally, the progress of the implementation of the 2030 Vision is mixed and challenges still need to be addressed. (Rahman & Qattan, 2021)

The Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman, also known as MBS, has made a concerted effort to connect with the younger generation in Saudi Arabia through a variety of initiatives and policies. One of his most significant efforts has been working on Vision 2030 plans, which aims to redesign the Saudi economy and society. This plan includes strategies to advance entrepreneurship, encourage the development of the private sector, and increase the participation of women in the workforce. MBS has also taken steps to loosen social restrictions in the country, including lifting the ban on women driving and opening the country to more entertainment and cultural events. These changes have been particularly popular with young Saudis, who have embraced the new opportunities and freedoms. Mohammed bin Salman has developed a new type of "popular" legitimacy by focusing on a key group of Saudi youth who live in urban areas and have important levels of global technological connectivity. According to research (Dazi-Héni, 2021), this priority audience is very enthusiastic about some aspects of the MBS deals. Beyond the confines of family and tribe, MBS' priorities align with their aspirations. He looks to adapt youth to higher education, to a new work culture while compensating them with entertainment packages in a liberalized society. His governance focuses on the young generations who even give a push to MBS on primarily entailing a reconsideration of the social contract. Social contract is defined as “the sets of formal and informal agreements between societal groups and their sovereign (government or other actor in power) on rights and obligations toward each other” (Loewe et al., 2021:1). In these agreements, the Saudi government supplies social and economic benefits to different society groups in return for loyalty to the government. This social contract makes the relationship between the government and the society predictable and peaceful, and politically stable.

Young people now have a lot of opportunities thanks to the socio-cultural transition. They support the Vision 2030 program and the dissemination of the ideals of the "new Arabia," thus, oversee MBS's communication strategy. Social networks, communication channels, and research facilities are just a few of the influences and direction-giving tools that are used for this. Over the past few years, tremendous notable reforms and developments have been manifested as an initiating political will responding to anything that protects women’s rights. They are all challenging reforms to shake up the fundamentally traditional Saudi culture and society, and reshape and to transform

the Saudi political, socio-cultural, and social public opinion of the KSA. Much effort has been put into fostering equality and closing the gender gap at every level of the society. Nowadays, many observers note that the Saudi government is more progressive in favour of females’ human rights in certain sectors, and seemingly of the public opinion of the country’s population. Moreover, these endeavours meet the changing females’ education policies in the last twenty-five years, resulting the biggest impact on the present Saudi society, which is the new generation of highly educated, internationally and interculturally experienced women. In the 21st century, in our communicational technology-driven and culture-convergent world most qualified Saudi females look for their possibilities for social empowerment, active participation in the society, decision-making policy and noticeable societal participation in the labour market. (Havril, 2016, 2018)

The author’s interest in Saudi cultural transformation has developed while living and working as a professional university lecturer at Jazan University in Saudi Arabia from 2014 to 2017. So, after having real life experiences, the author went back to conduct research investigating the latest changes to focus on the realm of the empowerment of Saudi women with the aims to see the rising female consciousness among Saudi women and to show that the female emancipation has certainly started in the KSA. The research was supported by the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies Institute in Riyadh, where the author was a visiting research fellow in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Without the expectation of representative research results, the purpose of the research is to explore certain attitudes and perspectives of young females of Gen Y in Saudi Arabia towards the changing socio-economic-culture in their country. Moreover, to deconstruct negative stereotypes, and to clarify how Saudi women's active participation in the labour market raise more empowerment for them within the framework of the cultural values of the country to gain a better society.

The research questions are as follows:

- (1) How have the last 20 years’ gains in women’s education led into a broader social change, translating into widespread labour market and societal participation of Saudi females?
- (2) How do young Saudi females view the changing culture in Saudi Arabia, and the tension between traditional and modern values in Saudi Arabian culture?
- (3) What are the main factors driving their attitudes towards these changes, and what implications do these have for the country's future?
- (4) How these changes influence the “modernization” process of Saudi Arabia fostering and providing equal human rights and closing the gender gap?

The current study does not present any political justification for the Saudi government and the author distances themselves from supplying political or economic standpoint and considerations.

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### 3. Methods and research sample

The chosen research method for this research was mixed methodological approach based on the nature of the sample. For both qualitative and quantitative methods, the goal is to obtain valuable data for the purpose of analyses and drawing conclusions – however, the means are quite different. While in quantitative research the data must be quantifiable, typically focusing on numerical, statistical data to analyze, in qualitative research, the data needs to provide a background for context to obtain an understanding of human experiences by exploring subjective experiences and meanings for adequate interpretation. (Yilmaz, 2013)

To gain rich data, in-depth insight and to enable a thorough analysis of the research questions, first quantitative method, namely survey through online questionnaire was applied to gather information on the demography, behaviours, beliefs, attitudes of the Saudi females. Since the data needed to supply a background for context and for adequate interpretation, the research was supplemented by single sessions of semi-structured interviews of qualitative method. Since semi-structured interviews have certain questions and topics essential for the research goal, the answers are freely expressed, and the interviewer has an opportunity to ask more questions outside of the pre-made questions if needed (Qu & Dumay, 2011) – therefore, this was the other most useful method for the research.

The total records of the survey were 573 female answers, out of which 267 were partially filled in, and 218 were finished and useable for the analysis. The research used the Lime Survey format to supply easy data accessibility to the respondents all over Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire had an English and an Arabic language version<sup>2</sup> to reach more women. The questions ranged from Likert scale to multiple choice questions. The survey questionnaire was piloted by the author’s ex-students and little modifications were made.

To understand the distinct factors that contribute to the empowerment of Saudi women, the survey questions were structured into five major parts. The first section was about gathering Personal, Job, Education Indicators such as demographic, education, work/occupation, marital status, family-related information as well as the lifestyle patterns of the respondents. The Economic Indicators part was focusing on general but not sensitive economic issues such as females’ personal bank account and family decision making policy in monthly and health expenditure. The Social Indicator questions were seeking answers for traditional way of Saudi thinking, generational shift, social roles of males and females in the society, and women’s participation in the labour market. The Family Life section gently moved on to gathering information about the sense of marriage, family planning, child planning and divorce. Lastly, Civic Indicators part was about the women’s attitudes to job/career, feelings of self- satisfaction and female empowerment.

The supplementary semi-structured interviews were all conducted in Riyadh, the capital city and in the countryside, Jizan city in the Kingdom. The twelve interviewees were middle-class

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<sup>2</sup> The English and the Arabic versions of the survey can be provided by the author for special request.

women, between the ages of 30 and 40, married, unmarried or divorced jobholders coming from the labour sectors of education, medical care, journalism, non-governmental business, or were new start-ups. The interviews ranged in lengths from 20 minutes to sometimes more than 60 minutes. All interviewees were speaking fluent or good English. The participants of this research were collected with snowball sampling method.

When it comes to research ethics, this research was built on three ethical pillars: the relevance of the informed consent form, the confidentiality that protects the participants’ anonymity and their rights, and the clarity concerning the possible consequences of the research (Kvale, 1996). Prior to the interviews, each participant received, signed, and gave their Informed Consent Letter and Form (ISFF) before they participated in the study. The ISFF ensured the participants’ awareness of that they are participating willingly; they can withdraw from the consent at any point; there is a voice recording made of the interview and the researcher can use the information they provided in the research. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical rules and guidelines of social scientific research based on the International Sociological Association’s Code of Ethics (ISA) and the protocol was approved by the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies Institute, Riyadh. To secure anonymity, the research subjects were offered to choose a cover name (*Table 1*). *Table 1* provides a summarizing description of the participants regarding their age, marital status, number of children, occupation, and their locations.

**Table 1:** Description of the Participants

<b>Cover name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>No. of children</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Currently living in</b>
<i>Mary</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>qualified teacher working for private sector</i>	<i>Jazan region</i>
<i>Kate</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>divorced and single</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>qualified teacher working for HR in hospital</i>	<i>Jizan city</i>
<i>Rose</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>medical doctor</i>	<i>Riyadh</i>
<i>Judy</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>no info</i>	<i>medical doctor</i>	<i>Riyadh</i>
<i>Lili</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>no info</i>	<i>news podcaster</i>	<i>Jeddah</i>
<i>Iris</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>no info</i>	<i>qualified teacher</i>	<i>Jizan</i>
<i>Violet</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>PhD; private sector</i>	<i>Riyadh</i>
<i>Jasmine</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>PhD; uni lecturer and entrepreneur</i>	<i>Riyadh</i>
<i>Daisy</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>qualified teacher, managerial position of a supermarket</i>	<i>Jizan city</i>
<i>Sunflower</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>private sector</i>	<i>Jeddah</i>

<i>Dalia</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>qualified teacher, giving private lessons</i>	<i>Jizan city</i>
<i>Zahara</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>married</i>	<i>no info</i>	<i>private sector in media</i>	<i>Jeddah</i>

The interview guide <sup>3</sup> had three parts and was designed to be in line with the survey questions. The first section had ‘warm-up’ questions about general information of the interviewees. The second part was aimed to examine what obvious socio-cultural changes have recently occurred concerning gender social roles, generation shift, male participation in the household. The third, collected answers to analyse the current female labour participation, attitudes towards Vision 2030, and the empowerment of women.

Ultimately, although the research findings provide valuable insight into the changes observed in Saudi Arabia, but they should be interpreted with caution. There are, however, certain limitations to this research. Due to the half year time difference between the data collection of the survey and of the semi-structured interviews in 2020, the variable of Vision 2030 was not highlighted in the questionnaire. Thus, there is no in-depth insight about the different opinions of the Vision 2030 and of the Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman in the survey findings. Plus, the survey was filled in only by women, and answers were given by Gen Z too, so the results are overshadowed and not nationwide. Another limitation is due to anonymity. Despite the survey and the interviews having no political content, some respondents might have lacked honesty, or expressed fear of criticizing the country, which could have affected the diversity and the representativeness of the research findings. Matured, successful women were interviewed, they were all Saudi nationals. As is well-known, Saudi nationals being immensely proud of the country and their origins and sometimes lack objective views. Lastly, all these limitations lead to a possible need to future research to explore whether the recent shifts towards the empowerment of Saudi females reach their goals after a ten-year period and can be empirically measured.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

This chapter is focusing on the introduction and analysis of the research data collected from the survey and the interviews. It is evident that research findings of both methods show a strong correlation thus, they are analyzed and discussed together under the selected variables signaled by the subtitles.

##### 4. 1. Personal and education indicators

Regarding the location, 46.57% of the survey respondents are from Jazan region, where the author used to be teaching at Jazan University. Jazan region is the most culturally traditional place of the KSA, 60 km from the Jemeni borderline where Bedouin cultural heritage, the traditional family values and social gender roles are still everyday practices. In certain remote areas of Jazan, many

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<sup>3</sup> The interview guide can be provided by the author for special request.

educated and married women are still tied to the Saudi familial and societal roles. Women handle housework and childcare, and men are the breadwinners taking most of the government-owned job vacancies. *„Here in the South, we do not have as good opportunities as in Riyadh. Jobs especially in education are taken by men. I applied for a job position in Riyadh, and I was accepted but my husband did not let me do it. Anyway, I have three kids, I guess it was only a dream trial for me.,”* Dalia said. 23.58% of the answers are from the Eastern Province, 11.94% are from Riyadh Region and 8.66% from Makkah Region, the most economically developed and most „enlightened and free” areas, as the Saudis say. The questionnaire listed all counties in the KSA and according to the survey responses, the sample covers a good ratio of the different geographical areas of the country.

The majority, 22.69% of the participants were 25-29 and 28.06% were between the age of 30-34. It means that most women have already finished their studies, had family and work experiences, and most belonged to Generation Y. Concerning the marital status of the women, 62.99% are married, and 30.75% are not. 4.78% are divorced which data are high in Saudi context. It reflects that, in opposition to the older generations GenY females have a desire and the courage of becoming independent or trying to get a solution if marriage does not work.

Surprisingly, 40.90% of the respondents still have not got a child and 23.88% of them have more than three children. The fertility rate in Saudi Arabia has been decreasing over the last few years. In 2022 it was 2.208 births per woman, it is a 1.47% decline from 2021. The current rate in 2023 is 2.175 births per woman, which is a 1.49% decline from 2022. (Saudi Arabia Fertility Rate 1950-2023) Research results affirm the prognosed fertility rate tendency.

However, most women (96.42%) regard the ideal age is 23-25 or even thirty for a female to have their first child. But once again, in the countryside the reality is a bit different, and was very distinct before the recent years’ change in the Kingdom. *„I was sixteen when my father made me marry to his 40-year-old friend. It was a bad sexual experience. I had my daughter early, now we look like sisters. Anyway, I divorced more than 10 years ago.,”* Kate said. Mary and her husband *“had an arranged marriage at the age of sixteen. They had no sexual life at all until they both became twenty even though they were living as a married couple. She had her first daughter soon after that. She wanted to move on doing MA studies at the university, but her husband and her family put a psychological stress on her to move on having babies and having a son. Now she has two daughters and a son.* These interview quotes are in line with the respondents’ opinions for Survey Question (SQ) thirty-three, where 50.45% say that lost childhood is the biggest disadvantage of early marriage.

The above research findings of Saudi female desires are conforming to the increasing number of the qualified and of the high education level of the women. Latest worldwide research all confirms that *„in both developed and developing countries, better-educated women have fewer children than less-educated women. However, the reasons for this are less clear”* (Kim, 2016:1). 60.60% of the

survey respondents have BA, 15.22% have MA degrees and 2.69% have PhD, which is an increasing trend again in comparison to the early 2010s.

Many observers agree that education has played a key role in empowering the women in Saudi Arabia for many years. “All Saudi women are pioneers of their field and their abilities are an asset to the Kingdom that must be utilized.” (Arab News. March 26, 2023). It started with the “King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which had been supporting international university chances for thousands of Saudi young men and women around the world from 2005 to 2020. King Abdullah wanted the young Saudis to know the world and for the world to know them, so they can pursue their higher education goals and meet national labor needs while gaining global experience and understanding of other cultures” (Havril, 2016:1). And it has resulted tremendous changes and progress. Women and men alike got equally challenging education in Britain, America or Australia then returned to Saudi Arabia to hold positions for which they are most qualified. And the Saudi society place their trust, reverse their local and global mindsets to empower young men and women. (Havril, 2016) These university and scholarship programs had been in line with the demand of the politics of Saudization which policy has been culminated in Vision 2030 governed by the Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman.

“Concerning the last two decades, the Saudi women stand to have benefited more from the latest educational and university projects than the Saudi men. Moreover, the author dares to say, that recently the Saudi women tend to be professionally more educated than men. Already in 2009, 59,948 women received post-secondary degrees compared with 55,842 men. In 2015, women made up 51.8 % of Saudi university students, and 551,000 women studied bachelor’s degrees compared to 513,000 men. 24,498 Saudi women completed their graduate studies, a total of 16,221 their master’s, and 1,744 their PhD inside the kingdom. In 2014, 35,537 Saudi women were attending universities abroad. A total of 3,354 gained their bachelor’s degree, 15,696 their master’s degree and 3,206 their PhD in various academic fields including education, social sciences, arts, business, law, engineering, natural sciences, agriculture, medicine, and service sector.” (Havril, 2016:1-2).

Data prove that the last decades’ impact on Saudi society of a new generation of highly educated, internationally and interculturally experienced women – many of whose grandmothers/mothers would not even have gone to school or did not write and read at all – has ripened and is fully felt in the Saudi labor market nowadays. They are the first flow of the Saudi empowered women, the Saudi female human capital, Gen Y who were at once ready to apply their knowledge and skills in the workforce as soon as social and political walls fell in the Kingdom.

#### **4. 2. Job participation indicators**

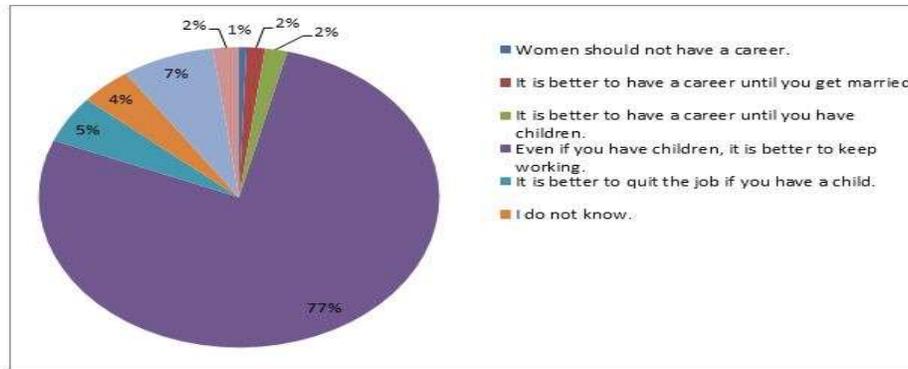
“According to the Global Gender Gap Index Report of 2020, there was an important level of gender inequality in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in particular. The index is concerned with measuring

gender inequality in terms of four principal areas: (1) economic participation and opportunity, (2) educational attainment, (3) health and survival, and (4) political empowerment. It is based on calculating the gender-based gaps between men and women in all developed and developing countries of the world. According to the figures in the report in 2020, which benchmarks 153 countries, Saudi Arabia was ranked 146, putting it among the lowest ten countries in terms of gender performance. As an example, women made up only 16% of the labour force in Saudi Arabia, which was considered the lowest in the world. The deteriorating picture reflected in the report, highlighted the importance of the role of policymakers in supporting women’s issues, considering their challenges, and devising strategies to ensure women’s empowerment, autonomy, and equal political representation. (Hamad, 2021:21)

The rationale for focusing on Saudi Arabia is that the rapid socio-cultural transitions during the implementation of Vision 2030 in recent years have seen a huge development of changes in the Saudi policies towards women’s rights and their participation in the labour market. In this regard, many commentators have noted that Saudi women have received great attention over the last three years and that there is an unprecedented interest in women’s rights in Saudi Arabia today. The Vision 2030 has given Saudi women a terrific opportunity to take part and prove their value, keeping pace with the aspirations of Saudi society and thus contributing to the process of economic and social development. The empowerment of Saudi women has been one of the pillars of the Saudi Vision 2030. One of its strategic aims is to increase the participation of Saudi women in the labor market to 30%. (Naseem & Dhruva, 2017)

Surprisingly, according to the figures of the Labor Market Statistics Quarter1/2022, there was a large expansion in labor market participation of Saudi females over the last three years. In Quarter1/2019, the labor force participation rate of Saudi females was 20.5% and the employment-to-population ratio of Saudi females stood at 14.0%. Growth in employment of Saudi females has kept pace with the expansion of labor market participation. Three years later, the percentage of Saudi women with jobs has continued to trend upwards to 26.8% and the employment-to-population ratio had risen to 26.8% in Quarter1/2022. The unprecedented rate of entry of Saudi women into the labor force resulted, that Saudi women now make up 33.6% of the Saudi workforce as of March 2022. That figure is up to 17.45 just five years ago. And the labor market indicators show, that 27.7% of Saudi women were employed in the education sector, 17.7% in the retail and wholesale sector as of March 2022. (Arab News. March 13, 2023)

The research results clearly show the employment tendencies which also contributed to the fast female participation of 33.6% of the Saudi workforce as of March 2022. In the survey, in 2020, 60.60% of the respondent women did not have a job and 38.21% had a job country wise. Out of the employed women 25.07% had been working for more than four years, 4.48% had been working for a year, and 32.84% worked in full time. In reference to the current occupations, 20.60% worked in education, 5.97% in health care, 4.18% in a company, 2.99% had managerial position, 1.79% was a business owner and 0.30% worked in Media. 25.67% were stay-at-home spouses. No one among the respondents worked for industry or agriculture sector.



**Figure 1:** What do you think about women in general to have a career/job? Please answer only one of these.

Figure 1 shows that 77% of the survey answerers are very keen on having a job or a career even if they are married and have children. The sample audience belong to GenY, most have children<sup>4</sup> but even so get a better satisfaction to keep working. Only 5% think that it is better to quit the job if you have a child. Women in Saudi Arabia can officially stay out of education or work after the delivery of the baby for six weeks. Based on the traditional extended family model, mothers, grandmothers, and sisters all live in a close environment thus, they really help each other in child-bringing since the sense of sisterhood is remarkably high. Beside these family and community relations, on average all Saudi families have maids at home to do the housework and help in baby caring. The ratio is insignificant of the answerers who think women should not have a career.

With respect to equal rights of having a job for a female, all educated Saudi women do want to join the labour market in their profession. Thus, 57.61% of the survey responders completely disagree with the traditional Saudi idea that husbands should work outside, and wives should stay at their home. 41% out of the disagreed respondents argue that it would be better for the individuals and the society if wives work and show their abilities. 40% think that it is possible for a wife to continue working while being compatible with housework and childcare, and 30% say, that families can have more income if both husband-and-wife work. 10% think that it violates equal job opportunity if women do not work. Even in the villages or close communities people think that women should be allowed to work outside home (62.69%). For Q39 “When you choose a job, what do you emphasize or want to do?”, 40% get self-satisfaction, 40% are happy that their abilities are suitable for the work and 20 % say that they can use their specialized knowledge.

Rose reflects to human rights of working as it follows: „*Women can do a lot if they want. My father did not like it, but they accepted me in medicine at Jazan University. I made a self-development study at the university. At the hospital I was selected for the position by male doctors, but women became jealous, I think the sisterhood bond is loosening. First men feared my strong power, and I seemed to be efficient but stayed under male control. Well-educated women are challenge to the*

<sup>4</sup> Based on the author’s life-like experience, 9 out of her 10 students had already babies or were pregnant during the three-year BA studying period.

men. Women are motivated men are not, and communication of women is better. Women always need to prove their success, but do not overtake men just work parallel with the same rights and same responsibility for the same job and for the same salary. As Bedouin heritage says stay strong, and Saudi females are strong. The government supports the women, they also help with kindergarten.” The Vision 2030 reform program aims to increase women participation in the job market, which is why several new rules and regulations have been rolled out since 2018. One of the most important is equality in the workplace with equal wage for all genders, preventing discrimination in terms of wage, equal occupation and working hours.

Judy told, „I am OK but women undereducated are not. Qualified women take over the males’ position. Though men and my father too are scared of women become a leader I myself got the position over the old male boss at medical department.” „Women are more privileged to get a job in the last three years. I think it is a positive discrimination now. Government sector is still male dominated but private sector is not. There are more women in private sector, the government might give them numbers. A CEO woman changes the image of the company. Women are empowered now, and it was missing from the Saudi society. It has been a dramatic change, but women have the rights to work. And they opened a lot of sectors for them. It was a waste of money not having women at the labour market.,” Violet added.

Data also proves that female entrepreneurship is continuously being promoted with several enabling programmes. As a result, 17.7 % of the Kingdom’s women are engaged in entrepreneurial activity, compared to 17 % of Saudi men, according to a report issued by London-based Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) which included forty-three countries. (Equiom. July, 28. 2022)

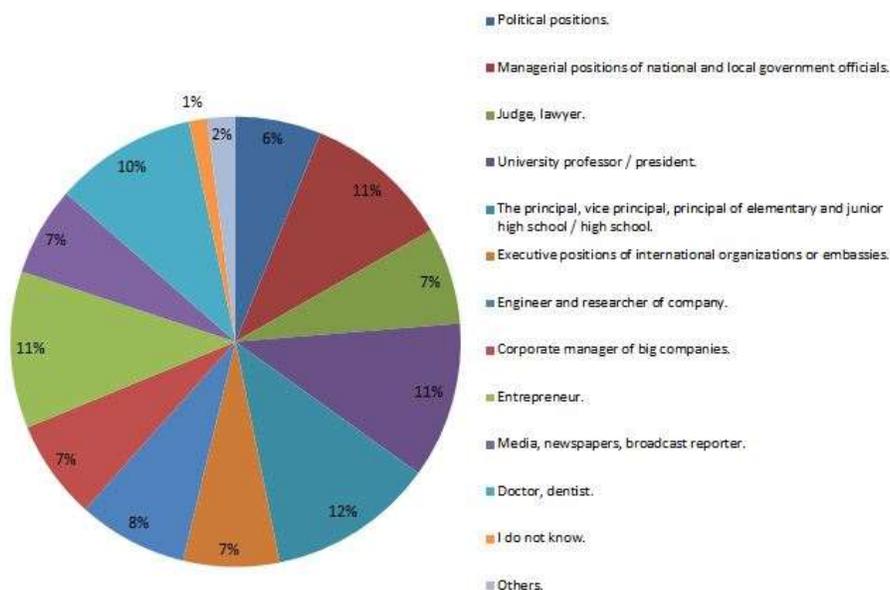


Figure 2: Which occupations and positions do you think would be better for women to increase?

Figure 2 displays that Saudi women feel very qualified and motivated to take any job in any sectors of the labor market such as education, business, even in the Shura Council, in diplomatic work, security operations centers (Arab News. March 26, 2023). As they say and labor market statistics also confirms they have boundless chances in entrepreneurial businesses and getting increasingly in state owned sectors too. Undoubtedly, they are aware of the support of the government thus, they can achieve success in their career. They are overly confident with the power of doing and Saudi males are getting used to having equal competitive female colleagues in their workplaces. Both young genders are starting to believe that women play pivotal roles in the society to ensure its stability and structural balance, a role that is no less than a man’s.

Moreover, in compliance with Vision 2030, the Saudi government has committed to elevating the status and the human rights of the women. On February 14 in 2023, it has been declared, signed, and presented to the Office of the High Commissionaire for Human Rights, that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia compliments the elimination of discrimination against women. (Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2023)

#### 4. 3. Social indicators and Vision 2030

As mentioned earlier, Vision 2030 under the execution of Muhammad Bin Salman, brought tremendous quick changes in the Saudi society which has divided the population: the older generation, the uneducated and the country people who are more traditional in social norms and customs, and the younger Saudis, highly educated people in big cities who often take a more modern and global perspective on life. The changes have been incredible fast as Lili was saying, *„First we, Saudis dislike the change then we love the change. MBS is our age, we love him”*. Even if, assuring the Saudis’ old Bedouin attitude to any change, meaning that they are shocked by the change at first then they have the capability to accept and adopt to things so quickly, the social strain is perceptible in the society.

The very first, most visible step in the empowerment process of the Saudi females was that women had the right to drive. Due to the lifting on Saudi Arabia’s long-standing driving ban for women since 1957, in June 2017 women became free from the need to rely on males for their basic ability to drive to work and move around. *“All society said no for driving, but MBS is brave. When he said it, everybody said „Halas”. When I was learning driving, my son told me, „Mama don’t give up!!”. Now, I can wear pants, make yoga, in the coffee we can sit outside, and drive. I love when they see me pick up my son after school.”*, Iris commented. Sunflower confessed that, *„Driving is a sad story, but it is new, you can do it. My auntie criticized me, attacked me first, but now she is proud of me”*. Zahara described the society such as, *“10% they don’t accept anything. The old ones. But 90% of Saudis don’t think the same.70% are OK. Men supported us on the street when started driving”*.

In opposition to the euphoric feeling over female driving, surprisingly, only 11.34% of the survey respondents drove to work officially in 2020. Many of the author’s friends have been doing it unofficially without a driving license, especially in Jizan region. As there was a big demand for driving schools in 2017, and there was a long waiting list to take the driving lessons, women just

started to drive. A lot of Saudi girls have had driving experiences just like Daisy who said: *„I am lucky, my father taught me to drive when I was a child.”* Luckily, the authorities ignored these incidents at the beginning, just the author’s comment.

Regarding generational shift and reflections on social changes, Lili commented that *„Generation Y is divided in Saudi Arabia. We are „shock or transition generation” and we are married generation. Earlier, we could not talk before men, could not go shopping alone, not to mention the abaya. Which uni speciality you want? The fathers made the decision. We are new from the old generation.”* Jasmine moved on such as, *”The present generation, yes, we are optimistic but not sure of the young ones.”*, then Judy concluded, *„The generation shift brings a big difference. The old generation got used to prohibition. We are free in the mind, flexible, travel alone, study what I want.”*

For the interview question “Why did these changes happen now?”, the answers were like the survey results, reflecting the conscious feelings and attitudes of the Saudi women towards this period. *„The reason of the rapid change is Vision 2030 driven by economy, health care, political life, changes in the ministries, opening tourism to the country, change in life of women and the new generation. The last few years are too fast. MBS, the Prince belongs to our generation. He thinks like us, knows what we need. He made the changes. He belongs to good qualified royal members. The goal the mission is to make Saudi economy booming.”*, proclaimed by Rose. Violet affirmed, *”Demography shows that 70% of people in Saudi below 30 years old. The King or Prince is young, we all have future. King Abdullah started but was a small notion. I love him (MBS), 30% love him, as he gave power to the people. He is giving them what they want: “Give the same life as westerners have”. Seventy percent are happy. Royal family? They follow him, but I am not sure.”*

But the tangible social tension and confusion was described by Iris: *„I scarry, I am afraid. The change is fast. We always fear of new things. Not all people accept the change. God will anger us. Even young ones don’t like it. If the father is a Mutawa, he says, girls go to Hell if drive. Everything depends on the socialization. Fifty percent say good, 50% say bad for the changes, 50% support or 50% not support them. I fear the people behave, talk. Men and females have verbal abuse, and they are aggressive. Economic reasons drive the changes. Oil is not like before. Must open to the world, and we cannot open if we cover our women. The government does the right things. Brave leaders can do it. Saudis are emotional. MBS is big here, as makes the good decisions. MBS is young, most interested in the changes than King Salman, who supports him. We are in love with him. Many girls put his photo into their purse. His speeches attract us.”*

Social contract or appreciation or just a feminine admiration for Muhammad Bin Salman? Time will tell. Changes are fast but still need to settle down the socio-cultural adjustments of transformation in Saudi Arabia.

#### 4. 4. Socio-economic, political, and civic indicators

Based on the living experiences of the author she dares to say, that Saudi women are exceptionally good in financial and business issues. Contrary to the widespread belief, traditionally they have always had a right to say their word and make decisions about the family budget. They are smart if they have the money as Sunflower confessed, *„I still have the money that I saved from my university scholarship and invest or in emergency, I spend it. My husband has no information about this bank account.”* In the KSA, banks are still gender separated and the traditional sisterhood feeling makes the female bank staff give good financial advice to their female clients.

According to survey results, 80.60% of the respondents have their own bank account. 58.51% have separate savings or financial assets from their husband or father. Only 14.03% of them save and/or invest money regularly, and 46.87% do it sometimes. Kate declared that *„Money gives freedom. If I work for it, I do with it what I want. Beside saving it, I am crazy to buy new jewelry, clothes, parfum and many other silly things. I know that many rich women buy cars or houses or a farm.”*

In 61.79% of the households’ husbands and wives make the decision together about the monthly budget. Similarly, 53.13% of the women state that most decisions about the health expenditures for the family members are made together. It suggests the trend, that in the future younger couples will manage a more conscious family budget together.

In general, most Saudi females are not *extremely interested* in political and economic affairs, it is only 9.55% of the answerers. The *somewhat interested* ratio is 40.00%. For the female young Saudis, being tech-savvy Generation Y and Z, the most important sources for information about political and economic life is social media which is 53.73% of the respondents. Then comes the internet with 17.01% and only 2.99% collect information from community or local newspapers.

#### 4. 5. Indicators of family, identity, and the empowered Saudi females

Alterations appear and become visible in the partnerships as well. The young Saudi females have a big desire to experience romantic love in marriages in opposition to the traditional arranged marriages. Due to the opening tendencies in the society, women are brave enough to speak about their confluent love, as Rose said, *„I have been married for three years. My husband and me met during the university and we had a real love before marriage. I am different from my mom. My husband and me share all financial issues, family responsibilities, he helps me in the housework. We have a maid only four hours a week, not a maid. I have not yet a child.”*

Research findings indicate that the women of Saudi Gen Y and Z are much more open to question, challenge and even behave differently against the traditional norms. For Q30 of the survey, *„Suppose tomorrow your parents tell you that they found a good guy for you to marry. What would you do?”* 35.22% of the respondents would like to meet the guy at first, and 27.16% would try to negotiate by herself or with friends first. 19% completely and 24% agree that women should be able to marry whomever they want, regardless of their parents’ views.

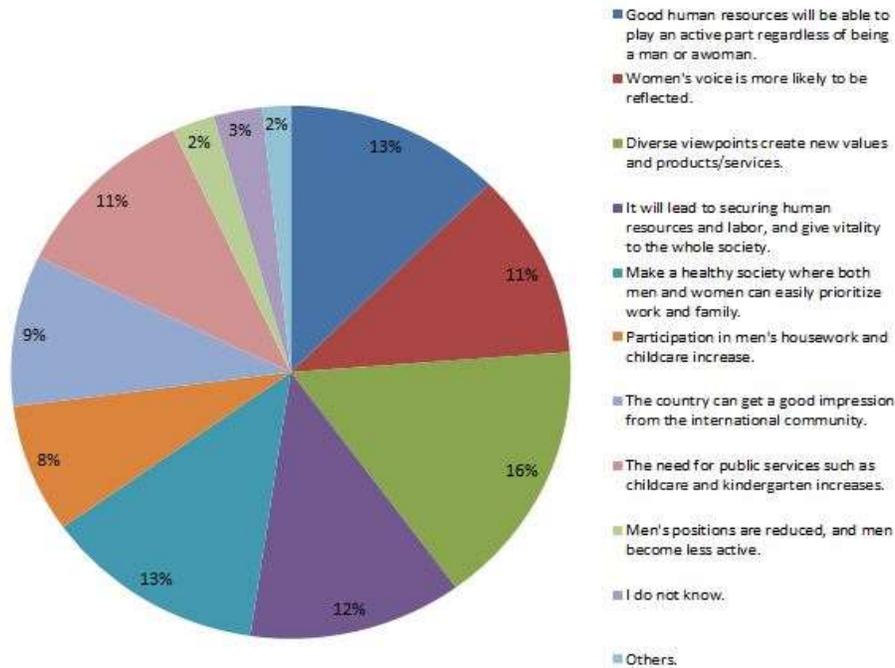
Women’s empowerment in Saudi Arabia is complicated for historical, cultural, and religious reasons but it has been going on with an extremely high respect of the family values and of keeping the Saudi identity. Young Saudi females are very aware of this fact. Family is the most core cultural value, the community bond in the Kingdom what Saudi women seem not to ignore even if they build up their working career. What is more, it gives them more power to fulfill their social, gender, individual and personal satisfaction.

*“Work and family? Good rules should be more. Part time jobs, on-line business they ease the regulations. Consciousness is important, if you are conscious, women can do more. Family is important, it gives me the power to work, the bad feelings to share. And I give my children the power too. Single women may be more successful, but not happy. Family is good for sharing. And I want both: happiness and success. It is important.”*, says Violet. Then she continued, *„Husbands changed too in our generation. My husband became more open to me and helps me in the house work. Gives me space and supports me. I want to go to Ireland. He said: “OK go. Have fun!”. I have my business. When I make workshops I make my own money and I give my kids 500 SAR. I do it to show them what I do. And they are proud of me „Oh, Mummy gives the money.”*

Another modern family concept, a very significant social change is reflected in Daisy’ speech: *„Young Saudi couples split the job. If I wash, I cook, I wake up at night my husband helps me. We need help from the goverment for breastfeeding period and from companies to provide nursery for the kids. Yes, we Saudis never stop deliver babies.”*

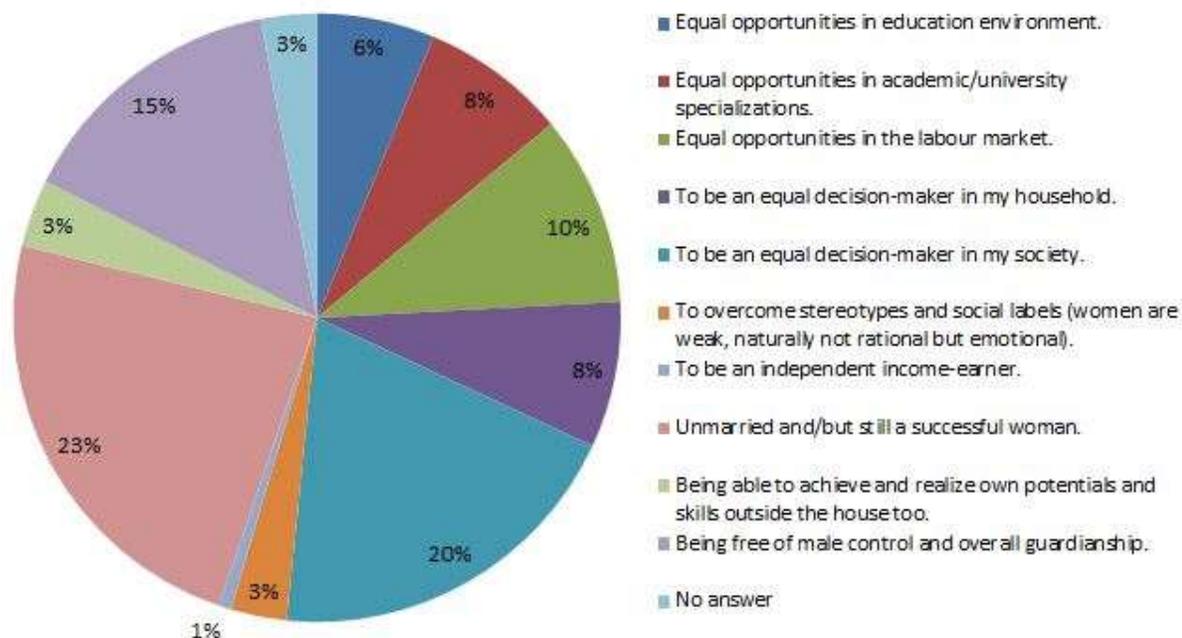
Female Generation Y in Saudi Arabia! Full of motivation, energy, and positive sense of the change. And the young male Saudis are supportive. They also changed. They help and take part in child upbringing and household chores rather than leaving it all to the women. It is natural for men to do housework and childcare because they can also get a sense of fulfillment during childcare. Just like in other counties, this phenomenon changed worldwide in Gen Y. 64.78% of the survey respondents say that their husbands’ domestic participation gives a good influence on the child/ren, and men should cooperate in the kids’ upbringing and household chores.

Research results also prove that family is a core value in the Saudi women’s life. For Q37, “What are the priorities in your daily life?”, 52.84% of the answerers give priority to "work", "family life" and " personal life" together, and only 1.79% give priority to "work" in the first place. And how do the Saudi females feel about themselves? 36.12% feel that their life will improve in the future, and overall, 35.82% satisfied with themselves.



**Figure 3:** What effect do you think there will be if women's participation increases in political, economic, regional, and other fields? Please choose as many as you think.

As shown on *Figure 3*, the young Saudi women are overly optimistic on every level of the society concerning their future perspectives. They do not necessarily want to overcome men but believe that diverse viewpoints create new values and products/services in the society (16%). 13% think that good human resources will be able to play an active part regardless of being a man or a woman, and 13% would like to make a healthy society where both men and women can easily prioritize work and family. All these elements merge into the proud Saudi national identity that they can provide as a good impression to the international community.



**Figure 4:** What does „empowerment of women” mean to you? Please select only one thing from the list.

In *Figure 4* the indicators are sporadic, but all answers reflect the desired equality of human rights of the female Saudis as the strongest motive in their empowerment, such as equal opportunities in education and labor market, equal decision-making partner in the households. 20 % of the respondents want to become equal decision-maker in the society and 23% of them can imagine their empowered lives as unmarried and/ but successful women. Desires and future dreams are slowly coming to be realized in Saudi Arabia.

The most complex and very intellectual opinions about the empowerment of women were formulated by Violet and Jasmine. *“Empowerment of women is a Saudi issue, a cultural value for the young ones. Being married is a continuous success. End up with a family and being single? No. Marriage is sometimes an obstacle if we don’t share the tasks. Success is having a family. Success is being happy with a family and a career. I am powered by, I targeted two and God gave me four kids. Kids empower me. You can’t understand community if you are alone. Struggle a lot is success and I can share it with my family.”* And Jasmine concluded: *„ Women share the identity of females all over the world. Women can share „suffer”, everywhere is the same. Marriage is a challenge. What makes you a woman is have a child. Family value is a big issue, bigger than career value. A balanced woman is happy. Most women share this issue. Child can be an obstacle*

*in career, but I can do more with them. Women are stronger with the kids than alone. This is universal. Single female Saudis have harder life. Single life is not the norm in Saudi. Of course, global pressure can influence us. Saudi identity still holds their culture like a China town. Arabic identity is still related to religion. Saudi identity is family issues, education plus religion. The biggest community, family makes you feel safe in Saudi. And how do I feel? I live my days!”*

However, there have been some positive findings in this research, which are similarly reflected in the local Saudi media and in the statistics. The Saudi women have come a long way, they have many new options to open in the society, but the road is still long and sometimes slippery to walk through. It is clear from the research results that this is a golden age for Saudi women, a great celebration of achievements making up for the lost time in the era of the historical change of the pre-, and present- and, hopefully, the post-Vision 2030. Most survey respondents and interviewees are as bridging the gap between tradition and modernity in the Saudi society which undeniably fosters women’s empowerment and emancipation.

## 5. Conclusions

This study highlights the importance of an integrated approach to the present daily life of Saudi Arabia including the voices and lived experiences of the Saudi females of particularly Gen Y in the last few years. The research intended through this investigation to learn more about young female Saudis' perspectives to deconstruct negative stereotypes, and to clarify how Saudi women's active participation in the labour market raise more empowerment for them within the framework of the cultural values of the country to gain a better society; while also contributing new insights that could improve cross-cultural communications about the KSA, overall.

The survey and interview responses supply valuable insight into the socio-cultural changes seen in Saudi Arabia. Based on this research findings, the concluding part supplies the answers for the research questions. Departing from early predictions (Hamdan, 2014; Havril, 2015, 2016; Naseem&Dhruva 2017) with the concerns of the corresponding literature (Alsisy& Alsewiket, 2020; Havril, 2018, 2019), journals and official statistics data, the findings ensure that the last twenty years’ gains in women’s education have led into a broader social change, translating into widespread labour market and societal participation of Saudi females (RQ1).

The study carefully analyzed the female responses of their lived experiences to the socio-cultural changes within Saudi Arabia and concludes that young Saudis, Gen Y, view these changes in a positive manner and have future perspectives. It is plausible to say, based on the respondents’ point of view and by the confirmation of Vision, that Saudi Arabia is targeting the young generations, as they are more receptive to change and to modernize, and very supportive to make up “new Arabia” with keeping up a powerful sense of national pride mixing traditional and modern cultural values. (RQ2)

The opinion-driving factor is undoubtedly the local media. It covers topics of changes regularly such as Vision 2030, socio-cultural and legal reforms, women’s increasing participation on the labor force. The research participants claim that they have been seeing evidence of initiatives and

changing social trends supporting their ideas and daily chances. They also feel that they are a significant part of the country's national strategy. (RQ3)

The research primarily focused on the modernization process of Saudi Arabia fostering and supplying equal human rights and closing the gender gap. Though not representative but the research findings prove that Saudi females have free access to the labour market, the government supports them and provides them equal human rights in the workplace with equal wage for all genders, equal occupation and working hours, thus, slowly closing the gender gap. (RQ4)

The transformations taking place in the Kingdom offer fertile ground to study the complex interplay between tradition, culture and modernity, regional and global influences, and the impact of cultural change on identity formation, gender issues, social structure. More extensive and varied future researchers can delve more deeply into these problems and investigate how these changes have affected the KSA. Then, the scientific world will have a better understanding of the ongoing complexity of the Saudi society. This will help people comprehend the challenges and opportunities brought on by globalization and cultural fusion.

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