

## **Education as a Tool of Empowerment: Changing Gender Roles in Post-Reform Saudi Arabia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Education has emerged as a central instrument in shaping women's empowerment and transforming gender roles in post-reform Saudi Arabia. This paper examines how educational expansion and policy reforms have contributed to redefining women's social, economic, and professional positions within a traditionally gender-segregated society. Drawing on the theoretical lenses of state feminism, Islamic feminism, and social role theory, the study analyzes education not merely as a tool for skill acquisition but as a transformative social process that enables women to renegotiate agency, identity, and legitimacy in both private and public spheres. The paper traces the historical trajectory of women's education in Saudi Arabia, evaluates post-reform educational initiatives, and assesses their impact on labor market participation, family dynamics, and societal perceptions of women's roles. While acknowledging significant progress in access to higher education and professional opportunities, the study highlights persistent structural and socio-cultural constraints that mediate the translation of educational attainment into substantive empowerment. The paper argues that education functions as a powerful yet contingent mechanism of empowerment, whose transformative potential depends on broader institutional reform, labor market restructuring, and evolving cultural norms.

**Key Words :** Women's education; Gender roles; State feminism; Islamic feminism; Saudi Arabia; Women's empowerment

### **INTRODUCTION**

Education has increasingly emerged as one of the most critical instruments for women's empowerment across diverse socio-political contexts, particularly in societies undergoing rapid transformation under state-led reform agendas. In Saudi Arabia, women's education occupies a central position within the broader project of socio-economic restructuring initiated under Vision 2030. Historically characterized by deeply entrenched gender norms, religious conservatism, and a gender-segmented public sphere, Saudi society has witnessed a notable reconfiguration of women's roles over the past decade, with education functioning as a key catalyst of this change.<sup>1</sup> The expansion of women's access to higher

education, professional training, and specialized fields has not only enhanced women's human capital but has also contributed to shifting perceptions of women's social, economic, and cultural roles. For much of the twentieth century, women's education in Saudi Arabia was shaped by restrictive interpretations of gender roles that emphasized domesticity, moral guardianship, and dependence on male authority. Educational opportunities for women were limited in scope, content, and purpose, reinforcing a gendered division of labor that confined women primarily to the private sphere. However, the gradual institutionalization of female education from the late 1960s onward laid the groundwork for more substantive reforms, even as societal resistance and religious debates continued to circumscribe women's

1. Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2013), 97–121.

educational trajectories. This historical context underscores the significance of contemporary reforms, which mark a qualitative shift rather than a mere expansion of existing structures.

The post-reform period, particularly after 2016, reflects a strategic recalibration of the state's approach to women's education. Under Vision 2030, education is explicitly linked to economic diversification, labor market participation, and national development, positioning women as active contributors to the knowledge economy rather than passive beneficiaries of welfare policies.<sup>2</sup> Increased investment in women's higher education, scholarships, STEM disciplines, digital learning, and vocational training reflects a broader recognition that gender inclusion is essential for sustainable development. As a result, Saudi women today constitute a significant proportion of university graduates, challenging long-standing assumptions about women's capabilities and social roles.<sup>3</sup> Beyond economic considerations, education has played a transformative role in reshaping gender norms and social expectations. Educational attainment has enabled Saudi women to renegotiate their positions within families, delay marriage, assert decision-making authority, and pursue professional careers previously considered socially inappropriate.<sup>4</sup> These changes, while uneven and contested, indicate a gradual redefinition of femininity, respectability, and social legitimacy in Saudi society. Importantly, education has provided women with a socially acceptable pathway to empowerment that operates within, rather than directly against, prevailing cultural and religious frameworks.

This transformation must be understood within the context of state feminism, wherein women's empowerment is promoted through top-down policies and institutional mechanisms aligned with state priorities. In Saudi Arabia, educational reforms are carefully framed as compatible with Islamic values, thereby mitigating resistance and enhancing their legitimacy. At the same time, Islamic feminist perspectives highlight that education and women's public participation are not antithetical to

Islam but are grounded in principles of justice, knowledge, and moral responsibility.<sup>5</sup> The convergence of state feminism and Islamic feminism thus creates a distinctive framework through which women's education is both authorized and regulated. Nevertheless, the empowerment generated through education remains conditional and constrained. Structural barriers such as gender-segmented labor markets, unequal employment opportunities, and persistent patriarchal norms continue to limit the full realization of women's educational achievements. The gap between educational attainment and labor force participation raises critical questions about the extent to which education alone can transform gender relations without complementary legal, institutional, and cultural reforms. Against this backdrop, this paper argues that education functions as a transformative yet contingent tool of women's empowerment in post-reform Saudi Arabia. While educational reforms have significantly altered gender roles and expanded women's agency, their impact is mediated by state authority, socio-cultural norms, and economic structures. By examining education as both an instrument of empowerment and a site of negotiation, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of gender transformation in conservative and religiously grounded societies.

### **Conceptual Foundations: Education, Empowerment, and Gender Roles**

A clear conceptual grounding is essential for analyzing the relationship between education and women's empowerment in post-reform Saudi Arabia. Concepts such as education, empowerment, and gender roles are neither static nor universally defined; rather, they are socially constructed, historically contingent, and shaped by political, cultural, and institutional contexts. In conservative and religiously grounded societies, these concepts acquire particular meanings that differ from liberal or Western feminist frameworks, necessitating contextualized and culturally sensitive interpretations.<sup>6</sup> Education, in this study, is understood as a multidimensional

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2. Government of Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030* (Riyadh: Vision 2030 Office, 2016).
3. World Bank, *Education and Gender Equality in Saudi Arabia* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021).
4. Hala Alyan, "Education and Women's Social Mobility in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 74, no. 3 (2020): 412–430.
5. Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
6. Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender & Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274–290.

and transformative social institution rather than merely a formal process of schooling. Beyond basic literacy and academic certification, education encompasses higher education, vocational and technical training, digital learning platforms, professional skill development, and international academic exposure. Scholars of development and gender studies emphasize that education functions not only as a mechanism for skill acquisition but also as a process through which individuals internalize values, norms, and aspirations that shape their social identities and expectations.<sup>7</sup> In the Saudi context, education has historically been embedded within gendered norms that prioritized moral instruction and domestic preparedness for women. However, contemporary reforms have expanded the scope of women's education, enabling it to function as a key site for social mobility and normative change.

Women's empowerment is conceptualized as a dynamic process through which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where such ability was previously denied or constrained. This definition moves beyond narrow economic indicators and incorporates dimensions of agency, access to resources, and achievement of outcomes. Empowerment thus involves both individual and collective transformations, encompassing increased self-confidence, decision-making authority within households, participation in public life, and access to institutional power. In Saudi Arabia, empowerment must be understood within the parameters of state authority and socio-cultural norms, where progress is often incremental and mediated rather than confrontational.<sup>8</sup> Gender roles refer to socially constructed expectations regarding appropriate behaviors, responsibilities, and identities assigned to men and women. These roles are maintained through cultural traditions, religious interpretations, legal frameworks, and everyday social practices. In Saudi society, gender roles have historically emphasized male guardianship, female domesticity, and gender segregation, reinforcing a hierarchical division between the public and private spheres. However, gender roles are not immutable; they evolve in response to structural changes such as education, economic transformation, and state policy

interventions.<sup>9</sup>

The interrelationship between education and gender roles is central to understanding empowerment. Education challenges traditional gender norms by expanding women's cognitive horizons, enhancing their economic potential, and legitimizing their presence in public and professional spaces. Sociological theories of social role change suggest that as women acquire education and professional skills, societal expectations gradually adjust to accommodate new female roles as workers, decision-makers, and leaders. In Saudi Arabia, education has become a socially acceptable pathway through which women can renegotiate gender roles without directly contesting religious or cultural values. Importantly, the empowerment derived from education is not automatic or linear. Structural constraints such as gender-segmented labor markets, patriarchal family structures, and normative expectations of femininity can limit the translation of educational achievements into substantive empowerment. As a result, education operates as a necessary but insufficient condition for gender equality. Its transformative potential depends on the extent to which educational expansion is accompanied by institutional reforms, legal protections, and cultural acceptance. Within the Saudi reform framework, education is strategically deployed as both a developmental tool and a legitimizing mechanism. By framing women's education as essential to national progress and compatible with Islamic principles, the state has positioned education as a non-threatening instrument of gender reform. This framing allows women's empowerment to advance within socially sanctioned boundaries, reinforcing the notion that gender roles can evolve without undermining cultural or religious identity. Conceptually, therefore, education, empowerment, and gender roles are deeply interconnected. Education serves as the primary catalyst that enables women to acquire agency and renegotiate gender roles, while empowerment reflects the outcomes of this process within specific socio-political constraints. Understanding these concepts in relation to one another provides a robust analytical foundation for examining how educational reforms in post-reform Saudi Arabia are reshaping women's lives and societal expectations.

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7. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 292–298.
8. Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2013).
9. Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

## Theoretical Framework: State Feminism, Islamic Feminism, and Social Role Change

Theoretical engagement is essential for understanding how women's education functions as a mechanism of empowerment and gender transformation in post-reform Saudi Arabia. This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework that brings together state feminism, Islamic feminism, and social role theory to explain the nature, scope, and limitations of educational empowerment. These frameworks, when applied collectively, allow for a nuanced analysis of how gender reforms are initiated, legitimized, and internalized within a conservative and religiously grounded socio-political context. State feminism refers to a model in which women's empowerment is promoted through state-led policies, institutions, and legal reforms rather than through autonomous feminist movements.<sup>10</sup> In Saudi Arabia, gender reforms—particularly in education—have been initiated from above and are closely aligned with broader economic modernization and political consolidation goals. Educational expansion for women is framed as a national development imperative, serving the objectives of labor market diversification, human capital enhancement, and global competitiveness.<sup>11</sup> State feminism thus explains why women's education has advanced rapidly in institutional terms while remaining carefully regulated within the boundaries of political authority and social stability.

While state feminism accounts for the structural and institutional drivers of reform, it does not sufficiently explain the cultural and religious legitimacy through which women's education is normalized. Islamic feminism provides this critical dimension by asserting that gender equality, education, and women's public participation are compatible with Islamic ethical principles and jurisprudence.<sup>12</sup> Islamic feminist scholars emphasize that

patriarchal constraints on women stem not from Islam itself but from historically contingent interpretations shaped by male-dominated authority structures. In the Saudi context, educational reforms are increasingly justified through religious narratives that emphasize the Islamic value of knowledge (*ilm*), moral responsibility, and social contribution, thereby reducing resistance to women's expanded educational and professional roles. However, the application of Islamic feminism in Saudi Arabia is largely mediated by state institutions and religious authorities, limiting its interpretive autonomy. Rather than fostering independent feminist reinterpretation of Islamic texts, the state selectively incorporates Islamic feminist themes to legitimize reforms without challenging existing power hierarchies.<sup>13</sup> This selective engagement illustrates how Islamic feminism functions within a state-controlled framework, reinforcing reform while constraining its transformative potential.

Social role theory complements state and Islamic feminist perspectives by explaining how education translates into changes in everyday gender practices and expectations. According to social role theory, gender roles evolve in response to structural changes in labor markets, education systems, and social institutions.<sup>14</sup> As women acquire education and professional skills, societal expectations regarding their capabilities and responsibilities gradually adjust. In Saudi Arabia, women's increased educational attainment has contributed to the redefinition of acceptable female roles, particularly in professional, administrative, and service sectors. Education serves as a critical bridge between institutional reform and social transformation. Through education, women gain not only technical skills but also symbolic capital that legitimizes their participation in public life.<sup>15</sup> Educated women are increasingly perceived as contributors to national development rather than as

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10. Valentine M. Moghadam, "State Feminism and Women's Movements," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 35, no. 2 (2014): 135–150.
11. Government of Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030* (Riyadh: Vision 2030 Office, 2016).
12. Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).
13. Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
14. Alice H. Eagly and Wendy Wood, "The Origins of Sex Differences in Human Behavior," *American Psychologist* 54, no. 6 (1999): 408–423.
15. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–258.

dependents, facilitating gradual shifts in family dynamics, marriage patterns, and workplace norms. Social role theory thus helps explain how education enables incremental changes in gender norms without precipitating overt social conflict.

Importantly, the interaction of these theoretical frameworks reveals the conditional nature of empowerment in post-reform Saudi Arabia. State feminism enables access and opportunity but restricts political autonomy; Islamic feminism provides moral and cultural legitimacy but is constrained by institutional mediation; and social role change occurs gradually and unevenly, shaped by structural and normative constraints.<sup>16</sup> Together, these frameworks demonstrate that women's educational empowerment in Saudi Arabia is neither purely emancipatory nor merely symbolic but represents a negotiated process embedded within power relations, cultural values, and state priorities. This integrated theoretical framework allows the study to move beyond binary interpretations of empowerment as either progress or control. Instead, it conceptualizes education as a contested yet transformative space where women's agency, state authority, and religious discourse intersect. By applying state feminism, Islamic feminism, and social role theory together, this paper provides a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding how education is reshaping gender roles in post-reform Saudi Arabia while remaining circumscribed by broader socio-political structures.

### **Historical Trajectory of Women's Education in Saudi Arabia:**

The evolution of women's education in Saudi Arabia reflects the broader tensions between tradition, religious authority, and state-led modernization that have shaped the Kingdom's social and political development. For much of the early twentieth century, formal education for

women was either absent or confined to informal religious instruction within households and local *kuttab* schools. Social norms rooted in tribal structures, gender segregation, and conservative interpretations of women's roles limited educational opportunities for girls, reinforcing a rigid division between the public and private spheres.<sup>17</sup> Education during this period was primarily oriented toward moral upbringing and domestic preparedness, rather than intellectual or professional development. The institutionalization of women's education began cautiously in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a period marked by the Saudi state's efforts to consolidate authority and modernize key social sectors. The establishment of the General Presidency for Girls' Education in 1960 represented a significant, albeit contested, milestone.<sup>18</sup> The move provoked considerable resistance from conservative religious circles and segments of society who feared that women's education would undermine Islamic values and social order. To mitigate opposition, the state framed female education as compatible with Islamic principles and emphasized curricula centered on religious studies, family roles, and gender segregation.<sup>19</sup> This early phase illustrates how women's education was introduced as a carefully regulated project aligned with moral and cultural legitimacy.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, women's education expanded in scale but remained limited in scope. Enrollment rates increased at the primary and secondary levels, and women's access to higher education gradually improved with the establishment of women-only colleges and universities.<sup>20</sup> However, academic disciplines available to women were largely restricted to education, humanities, and health-related fields, reflecting prevailing assumptions about appropriate gender roles. Despite these constraints, higher education began to function as a critical site for social mobility and consciousness formation among Saudi women. The 1990s marked a

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- 16. Frances S. Hasso, "Authoritarian Gender Politics," *Middle East Journal* 72, no. 2 (2018): 181–200.
- 17. Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 45–66.
- 18. Amélie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 28–41.
- 19. Eleanor Abdella Doumato, *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam, and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
- 20. Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2013).

period of gradual diversification in women's educational opportunities, influenced by demographic pressures, economic needs, and increasing exposure to global norms. Women's participation in higher education continued to rise, and the state expanded scholarship programs and overseas education opportunities, albeit within tightly controlled parameters. At the same time, the aftermath of the Gulf War and subsequent social debates brought renewed attention to women's visibility and participation in public life, indirectly reinforcing the importance of education as a legitimizing tool.

A significant structural shift occurred in 2002, when the General Presidency for Girls' Education was merged with the Ministry of Education. This integration symbolized a move toward institutional normalization of women's education and greater alignment with national development goals.<sup>21</sup> The merger facilitated improved coordination, resource allocation, and curriculum reform, enabling women's education to transition from a morally justified exception to a recognized component of national human capital development. The post-2016 reform era represents a qualitative transformation in the trajectory of women's education. Under Vision 2030, women's education has been explicitly linked to economic diversification, labor market participation, and innovation-driven growth.<sup>22</sup> The expansion of women's access to STEM fields, vocational and technical training, digital education platforms, and international academic networks reflects a strategic reorientation toward productivity and competitiveness. Women now constitute a majority of university graduates in Saudi Arabia, a development that challenges longstanding gender stereotypes and redefines women's social legitimacy.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, historical legacies continue to shape contemporary outcomes. While educational access has expanded dramatically, the translation of educational attainment into equitable labor market participation and leadership remains uneven. The historical emphasis on gender segregation, moral regulation, and role differentiation continues to influence institutional practices and societal expectations.

Understanding the historical trajectory of women's education is therefore essential for contextualizing both the achievements and the limitations of post-reform empowerment initiatives.

### **Educational Reforms in the Post-Reform Era:**

The post-reform era in Saudi Arabia, particularly following the launch of Vision 2030 in 2016, marks a decisive shift in the state's approach to women's education. Unlike earlier phases, where female education was justified primarily on moral and social grounds, contemporary reforms position education as a strategic economic and developmental imperative. Women's education is now explicitly linked to national objectives such as economic diversification, labor market efficiency, innovation, and global competitiveness, reflecting a broader transformation in state priorities.<sup>24</sup> This reorientation signifies a move from symbolic inclusion toward instrumental integration of women into the national development agenda. One of the most significant features of post-reform educational policy is the expansion and diversification of academic disciplines accessible to women. While women had long been concentrated in humanities, education, and health sciences, recent reforms have encouraged their participation in STEM fields, business administration, law, and technical disciplines.<sup>25</sup> Universities and higher education institutions have revised curricula, introduced market-oriented programs, and strengthened partnerships with private sector actors to align women's education with labor market needs. This diversification challenges entrenched assumptions regarding women's intellectual capacities and appropriate professional roles. Higher education reforms have been complemented by the expansion of international scholarship programs, most notably the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which has facilitated women's access to global academic institutions. Exposure to international educational environments has contributed to the development of professional skills, cross-cultural competencies, and new aspirations among Saudi women,

21. Ministry of Education (Saudi Arabia), *Education Development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Riyadh: MOE, 2003).

22. Government of Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030* (Riyadh: Vision 2030 Office, 2016).

23. World Bank, *Education Statistics and Gender in Saudi Arabia* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021).

24. Government of Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030* (Riyadh: Vision 2030 Office, 2016).

25. World Bank, *Education, Skills, and Labor Market Outcomes in Saudi Arabia* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021).

further reshaping their perceptions of self and society.<sup>26</sup> These experiences have played a crucial role in normalizing women's professional ambitions upon their return, particularly in emerging sectors aligned with Vision 2030.

In addition to higher education, the post-reform era has witnessed a growing emphasis on vocational and technical education for women. Recognizing the limitations of university-centric models, the state has invested in skill-based training, entrepreneurship programs, and digital education platforms designed to enhance women's employability. Online education initiatives and remote learning opportunities have been particularly significant in expanding access for women in conservative or geographically remote regions, thereby reducing spatial and cultural barriers to educational participation. Institutionally, the integration of women's education into national development planning has been accompanied by governance reforms within the education sector. Greater coordination between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, and private sector stakeholders reflects an effort to ensure that educational outcomes translate into workforce participation.<sup>27</sup> This alignment underscores the state's recognition that education alone is insufficient unless supported by employment pathways and institutional incentives. Importantly, educational reforms in the post-reform era are carefully framed within religious and cultural narratives to maintain social legitimacy. Official discourse emphasizes that women's pursuit of education and professional skills is consistent with Islamic values of knowledge (*ilm*), productivity, and societal contribution.<sup>28</sup> This framing reduces resistance to reform by situating women's education within an ethical and religiously acceptable framework, reinforcing the compatibility between modernization and cultural continuity.

Despite these advances, the impact of educational reforms remains uneven. While women's educational

attainment has risen dramatically, challenges persist in translating qualifications into equitable employment and leadership opportunities. Structural constraints such as gender-segmented workplaces, occupational clustering, and differential wage outcomes continue to limit the full realization of educational empowerment.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the post-reform educational landscape represents a significant departure from earlier models, signaling a gradual but meaningful transformation in the relationship between education, gender roles, and state development strategies. Overall, educational reforms in the post-reform era demonstrate the centrality of education as a tool of empowerment in Saudi Arabia's modernization project. By expanding access, diversifying disciplines, and aligning education with economic objectives, the state has laid the groundwork for redefining women's roles in society. However, the long-term success of these reforms will depend on sustained institutional support, labor market integration, and broader socio-cultural change.

### **Education and the Reconfiguration of Gender Roles:**

The expansion of women's education in post-reform Saudi Arabia has played a pivotal role in reshaping gender roles across social, economic, and familial domains. Education has functioned not merely as a mechanism for skill acquisition but as a transformative social process through which women renegotiate identity, agency, and legitimacy within a traditionally gender-segmented society. As women's educational attainment has increased, particularly at the tertiary level, long-standing assumptions regarding women's intellectual capacities, social responsibilities, and public participation have come under gradual re-evaluation.<sup>30</sup> One of the most visible outcomes of educational expansion is the transformation of women's relationship to the labor market. Higher levels of education have enabled Saudi women to enter professional sectors previously dominated by men, including finance, technology, law, and public administration. Education provides women with

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26. Amélie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 115–132.

27. Ministry of Education (Saudi Arabia), *Education Sector Transformation Program* (Riyadh: MOE, 2019).

28. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Islam and Gender Justice," *Gender & Development* 15, no. 2 (2007): 249–260.

29. Frances S. Hasso, "Authoritarian Gender Politics," *Middle East Journal* 72, no. 2 (2018): 181–200.

30. Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2013), 145–170.

credentials and symbolic capital that legitimize their presence in the public sphere, reducing social resistance to women's employment. As women increasingly contribute to household incomes, traditional notions of male breadwinning and female dependency are incrementally reconfigured, altering power dynamics within families.

Education has also reshaped gender roles within the private sphere, particularly in relation to marriage, family formation, and decision-making. Educated women tend to delay marriage, prioritize career development, and exercise greater autonomy in marital choices and family planning.<sup>31</sup> These shifts reflect a broader redefinition of femininity in which women's value is no longer solely tied to domestic roles but is increasingly associated with educational and professional achievement. Importantly, these changes often occur through negotiation rather than confrontation, allowing women to balance new aspirations with cultural expectations. The reconfiguration of gender roles is further evident in changing societal perceptions of women's public visibility and leadership. Educational attainment has enabled women to assume roles in academia, civil service, entrepreneurship, and diplomacy, thereby normalizing women's presence in positions of authority.<sup>32</sup> Social acceptance of educated and working women has expanded, particularly among younger generations, contributing to a gradual cultural shift in gender norms. Education thus functions as a legitimizing force that redefines respectability and social status for women. However, the transformation of gender roles through education is uneven and conditioned by structural and cultural constraints. Despite high levels of educational attainment, women continue to face gender-segmented labor markets, occupational clustering, and limited advancement opportunities. Traditional expectations regarding caregiving and domestic responsibility persist, often resulting in a double burden for educated women who balance professional and familial roles. These constraints highlight the limits of education as a standalone tool for gender transformation. From a theoretical perspective, social role theory provides valuable insights into these dynamics by emphasizing that gender roles evolve in response to changes in social structures such

as education and employment. In the Saudi context, education has altered the distribution of skills and opportunities, prompting a gradual adjustment in gender expectations. However, the pace and depth of change are shaped by institutional frameworks, religious discourse, and state regulation, reinforcing the negotiated nature of gender transformation. Education's impact on gender roles must also be understood within the framework of state feminism. The state actively promotes women's education as part of its modernization agenda while simultaneously defining the boundaries of acceptable gender change. This approach facilitates incremental reform while maintaining social stability, but it also constrains the emergence of alternative or grassroots expressions of gender equality. Consequently, women's empowerment through education remains embedded within state-sanctioned narratives of productivity, morality, and national development.

### **Structural and Socio-Cultural Constraints:**

Despite significant educational reforms and the expansion of women's access to higher education in Saudi Arabia, structural and socio-cultural constraints continue to mediate the extent to which education translates into substantive empowerment. These constraints operate at multiple levels—legal, institutional, economic, and cultural—shaping women's lived experiences and delimiting the transformative potential of educational attainment. Understanding these barriers is essential to contextualizing the uneven outcomes of educational empowerment in post-reform Saudi Arabia. At the structural level, labor market segmentation remains a persistent challenge. Although Saudi women now constitute a significant proportion of university graduates, their participation in the workforce is concentrated in a narrow range of sectors such as education, healthcare, and public administration.<sup>33</sup> Gendered hiring practices, limited access to leadership positions, and wage disparities constrain women's career mobility despite their qualifications. These structural inequalities reflect institutionalized gender norms embedded within organizational cultures and employment policies, which continue to privilege male participation in high-status and

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31. Hala Alyan, "Education and Women's Social Mobility in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 74, no. 3 (2020): 412–430.

32. Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Globalization and Governance in the Gulf," *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 4 (2017): 92–108.

33. World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law 2023* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023).

decision-making roles.<sup>34</sup>

Legal and regulatory frameworks, while reformed, still impose indirect limitations on women's autonomy. Although restrictions related to mobility and employment have been eased, women's economic and professional choices remain influenced by guardianship norms, family consent, and bureaucratic practices that reinforce gender hierarchy. These constraints are particularly pronounced for women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, whose access to social capital and institutional support is limited. Education alone, therefore, does not guarantee equal outcomes, as structural power relations shape how educational credentials are valued and utilized. Socio-cultural norms constitute an equally significant barrier to the reconfiguration of gender roles. Deeply entrenched expectations regarding women's primary responsibilities as caregivers and homemakers continue to shape social attitudes toward women's education and employment.<sup>35</sup> Even as women pursue higher education, they are often expected to prioritize family obligations over professional aspirations. This normative framework results in a "double burden," wherein educated women navigate the competing demands of public participation and domestic responsibility. Resistance to changing gender roles is also evident within familial and community structures. While state discourse promotes women's education as a driver of national development, societal acceptance of women's public roles varies across regions, generations, and social classes.<sup>36</sup> In conservative social settings, women's educational and professional ambitions may be perceived as disruptive to social cohesion or moral order. Consequently, many women adopt strategies of negotiation and accommodation rather than overt resistance, seeking to align personal advancement with socially acceptable norms.

Religious discourse further complicates the socio-cultural landscape. While Islamic principles emphasize knowledge acquisition for both men and women, patriarchal interpretations have historically been used to

justify gender segregation and limitations on women's public roles.<sup>37</sup> Competing religious narratives coexist in Saudi society, with reformist interpretations supporting women's education and participation, and conservative perspectives emphasizing gender complementarity and domesticity. This discursive contestation shapes societal perceptions of women's empowerment and influences the legitimacy of educational reform. From a theoretical standpoint, feminist institutionalism provides a useful lens for understanding these constraints by highlighting how formal rules and informal norms interact to reproduce gender inequality. In the Saudi context, institutional reforms promoting women's education coexist with informal practices and cultural expectations that constrain women's agency. This disjuncture explains why educational progress has not uniformly translated into gender parity across social and economic domains. Moreover, the state's approach to women's empowerment—often characterized as state feminism—introduces additional limitations. While the state has played a central role in expanding educational opportunities, it also regulates the pace and scope of gender change to maintain social stability.<sup>38</sup> Women's empowerment is thus framed within narratives of national development, productivity, and moral responsibility, rather than rights-based or feminist discourses. This framing restricts the emergence of autonomous women's movements and limits women's capacity to challenge structural inequalities independently.

### Conclusion:

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that education has emerged as a central pillar in the evolving landscape of women's empowerment in post-reform Saudi Arabia, functioning as both a catalyst for social transformation and a site of negotiated change. Educational expansion has significantly altered women's access to knowledge, skills, and professional opportunities, enabling a gradual reconfiguration of gender roles within

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34. Valentine M. Moghadam, "Gender and Development in the Middle East," *Journal of International Affairs* 70, no. 2 (2017): 43–58.

35. Suad Joseph, "Gender and Family in the Arab World," *Middle East Report* 218 (2001): 22–26.

36. Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Women and Work in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 2 (2017): 199–215.

37. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 145–172.

38. Hala Alyan, "State Feminism and Women's Empowerment in Saudi Arabia," *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 6 (2020): 1025–1042.

the family, labor market, and public sphere. Through increased educational attainment, Saudi women have acquired new forms of social and symbolic capital that challenge traditional assumptions about women's capacities and societal roles, contributing to shifting perceptions of femininity, productivity, and leadership. At the same time, the study underscores that education alone is insufficient to dismantle deeply embedded structural and socio-cultural constraints. Labor market segmentation, gendered institutional practices, and persistent expectations surrounding women's domestic responsibilities continue to limit the full realization of educational empowerment. These challenges are compounded by legal ambiguities, uneven policy implementation, and conservative social attitudes that mediate women's ability to translate educational credentials into sustained economic and political agency. As a result, women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia remains uneven, stratified by class, region, and access to social capital. The findings further reveal that gender transformation in Saudi Arabia is occurring through a process of incremental and state-mediated reform rather than through radical social restructuring. The state's promotion of women's education reflects a broader development-oriented agenda in which women's empowerment is framed in terms of national modernization, economic diversification, and global competitiveness. While this approach has facilitated rapid progress in educational access and workforce participation, it also constrains the scope of empowerment by limiting rights-based discourse and restricting autonomous feminist mobilization. Consequently, women's agency often operates within carefully defined boundaries that prioritize social stability over structural equality. Despite these challenges, the prospects for advancing women's empowerment through education remain significant. The growing presence of educated women across professional, academic, and public sectors is gradually reshaping societal norms and expanding the range of acceptable gender roles. Younger generations exhibit greater acceptance of women's employment, leadership, and public visibility, suggesting the potential for deeper cultural transformation over time. Moreover, the convergence of educational reform with economic restructuring under Vision 2030 provides opportunities to address gender disparities through targeted labor policies, institutional accountability, and inclusive governance frameworks.

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