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Reflection of Saudi Women's Participation and Leadership: A Study on the Gender Differences in Leadership and Structural Barriers

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Abstract

This article examines gender disparities and structural barriers in the Saudi Arabian workforce from 2000 to 2022. It proposes measures to promote women's participation and leadership. Multiple databases, including Emerald, IEEE Explore, Science Direct, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Web of Science, were searched using generic terms. Additionally, official Saudi government reports, magazines, newspapers, books, and journals were used as secondary data sources. Torraco's method analyzed 10 studies on gender gap and gender differences (2011-2023), 16 studies on structural barriers (2000-2012), and 30 studies (2013-2022). The study highlights critical areas of disparities and barriers, including the need for legal and policy reforms, increasing women's visibility in the economic sector, transforming attitudes towards women's leadership and participation, addressing time and mobility constraints, reducing wealth and power inequalities, inspiring and supporting women in leadership roles, and providing assistance for the transmission of leadership roles that recognize and promote women's rights. The findings divulged various implementations and Strategies to overcome the gender gap, gender differences in leadership, and structural barrier to women's participation by Saudi government. The research emphasizes the importance of policy reform to foster gender equality in the Saudi Arabian workplace. Reforms outlined in the "Saudi Vision 2030" have made significant progress. Policymakers can utilize this study's findings to promote women's participation and leadership in the Saudi workforce.

Keywords: Strategies & policies, Structural barriers, Gender differences, Gender gap, Saudi Women Studies

Sustainable Development Goals: Gender Equality

1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia has experienced significant changes, especially in terms of women's participation in public spheres and leadership positions. The study highlights the challenges faced by Saudi women in achieving higher leadership positions, as well as the strategies and efforts made by the Saudi government to address them. The analysis focuses on three contextual factors, namely gender gap, gender differences in leadership, and structural barriers. The Global Gender Gap Report (2022) reveals that Saudi Arabia ranks 127th out of 153 countries, with a significant gender gap in economic participation and opportunity. Women face discrimination and limited access to training and development programs, which hinder their career advancement. Researchers worldwide have shown interest in gender differences in leadership, and several studies have investigated the factors that contribute to the low representation of women in leadership roles in

Saudi Arabia. (Chiloane-Tsoka, 2013). Al-Shamrani (2015) reviewed literature and concluded that Saudi female managers are competent, even more so than their male counterparts. However, women still encounter challenges in the workplace. Social norms, cultural beliefs, and patriarchal structures hinder women's ability to attain leadership roles. Discrimination, lack of access to training, networking opportunities, mentorship, and HR support were found to be primary challenges faced by Saudi women professionals. Negative attitudes towards women's capabilities and patriarchal power relations also act as significant obstacles to women's leadership. Moreover, constraints on women's time and mobility limit their ability to pursue education, work, and advance in their careers. Women must obtain permission from their guardian or husband for travel purposes, both within and outside the country (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015; Ohlan, 2021). The (Global Gender Gap, 2021) report highlights the vast disparity between men and women in leadership and labor force participation in Saudi Arabia. Women face significant inequalities in wealth and power, with limited representation in parliament, ministerial positions, and as heads of state. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach involving policymakers, employers, and society. Strategies such as increasing visibility in the economic sector, changing attitudes towards women's leadership, addressing inequalities of wealth and power, inspiring and supporting women to take up leadership roles, and assisting women and men in carrying out leadership roles that promote women's rights are necessary to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in Saudi Arabia.

This research article aims to review the literature on gender disparities and the actions taken by the Saudi government to overcome barriers to women's participation and leadership. The study covers gender disparities from 2011-2023 and Saudi government's strategies from 2000-2012 & 2013-2022 to address structural obstacles. It aims to identify challenges/opportunities for women & highlight govt.'s efforts for gender equality in Saudi Arabia, contributing to the conversation on women's empowerment.

2. Literature Review

Gender gap

Academic scholars and researchers have focused on the gender gap in employment to determine the extent to which gender discrimination practices influence the recruitment process of companies and organizations, as well as to determine the extent to which gender discrimination affects internal organizational beliefs and behavior regarding women (Walsh & Queenan, 2020). The literature review covers the gender gap, differences, and structural barriers hindering Saudi women from attaining higher leadership positions. The government is working on reforms to overcome these barriers. The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report (2022) reveals that Saudi Arabia ranks 127th out of 153 countries. The report measures gender-based disparities in areas such as economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, political empowerment, health, and survival. In economic participation and opportunity, Saudi Arabia ranks 145th, with women's labor force participation rate at 18.7%. The report suggests that reducing gender-based discrimination and increasing women's economic participation can improve the country's competitiveness and economic growth. In terms of educational attainment,

Saudi Arabia ranks 137th, with significant gender disparities in literacy rates and enrollment in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. The report recommends promoting equal access to education for both genders and encouraging female participation in STEM fields. In political empowerment, Saudi Arabia ranks 146th, with women's representation in parliament at just 20%. The report recommends adopting policies that promote women's political participation and representation, such as quotas and affirmative action programs. In health and survival, Saudi Arabia ranks 124th, with a significant gender gap in life expectancy and mortality rates. The report suggests investing in women's health and promoting access to health services for all citizens. To improve gender equality in all areas, the report highlights the need for Saudi Arabia to continue making progress in reducing gender-based discrimination and increasing women's participation and representation in all spheres of society.

Gender differences in leadership

In industries, organizations, and circumstances where males predominate, gender segregation reproduces societal disparities, making it difficult for women to lead (Sandberg, 2021). The paradigm of women's empowerment, which advocates for more economic control and access to social resources including work and education, provides the foundation for women's leadership (Lewis et al., 2017). Saudi culture prioritizes group goals over individual aspirations (Hofstede, 2001; House et al. 2002), leading to gender disparity and unequal power distribution. Despite women achieving higher educational qualifications than men do, they still occupy lower ranks within organizations (Romanowski & Al-Hassan, 2013). This lack of gender egalitarianism is a significant hindrance to women's presence in leadership positions. This group of researchers comes from various backgrounds and argues that the most important thing about women is that they may lack a strong vision to identify new chances in an area (Almathami et al., 2021; Alghofaily, 2019). Although various social reforms and women's rights activists have demanded more gender equality, the traditional attitude of limiting women's roles to their homes *is still prevalent in Saudi society*. According to Tlaiss (2015), organizational culture in Saudi Arabia shows prejudice against women, limiting their career advancement. Kemp, Madse, and Davis (2015) note the challenges faced by professional Saudi women due to outdated HR policies. Women managers believe conforming to male-dominated culture is necessary for higher leadership roles (Yaghi, 2016; Shaya & Abu Khait, 2017). Hodges (2017) attributes the low representation of women in senior leadership positions to patriarchal and cultural factors. The most significant assets that women have in terms of their leadership potential are their skills and capacities, which have been developed experientially as a result of their interactions and communication within and outside the workplace (Bridges et al., 2022; Gorondutse et al., 2019).

Gender Discrimination at Work. In past centuries, the Saudi government prevented women from sharing workplaces with males, establishing a societal construct that constrained women to become 'nurturing mothers' and 'decent housewives' (Bao, Ha, and Barnawi 2019). Gender discrimination is another element that limits women's possibilities in leadership roles. This issue, however, fosters the need to create a moral working atmosphere. As a result of societal conventions and the additional expense needed to enhance the working environment, the private sector frequently hesitates to hire women into the organization, particularly in senior roles (Tlaiss & Al Waqfi, 2020). Tlaiss (2014) has identified various challenges that hinder women's empowerment, such as limited opportunities for networking, insufficient involvement in decision-

making, and the lack of collaborations between organizations. Additionally, women have limited access to professional development activities, personal growth plans, and mentorship opportunities. Tlaiss and Dirani (2015) highlight the absence of access to professional and certification training and workshops/seminars/conferences as a primary obstacle to women's career advancement. Women leaders and managers in Saudi Arabia have also voiced concerns over unequal professional training opportunities compared to their male counterparts, which restricts their control over their career development (Abalkhail 2017; Hodges 2017). These findings underscore the importance of greater organizational support and initiatives to promote gender equality, provide equal opportunities for women's professional growth, and empower them to take charge of their career advancement. Abalkhail (2019) calls for the abolition of male guardianship since it will provide women with more opportunities for job progression and advancement to senior leadership posts. Reforms to empower Saudi women by removing this obstacle are required to provide equitable professional growth chances.

Attitudes towards women professionals. Arab nations are frequently examples of patriarchal, gendered environments. Women struggle to have their voices heard in decision-making (Almaki et al., 2016; Tameem, 2019), and women leaders face significant challenges and barriers in this area, including limited career development opportunities, under-representation in leadership roles, and limited access to organizational resources and information (Abalkhail, 2017; Ottsen, 2019). According to Abalkhail (2019), the most significant barriers to women's leadership careers in Saudi Arabia are negative attitudes and stereotypes towards women's capabilities and patriarchal power relations. Patriarchal culture, which is a crucial component of such societies, hinders women from exercising an optimistic leadership role in both work settings and society.

Dealing with constraints on women's time and mobility Women's travel views and behavior in Arab nations are influenced not only by economic and geographical considerations but also by other social and cultural variations and constraints. The level of intervention with women's travel decisions varies depending on the availability and number of private drivers in the family, household structure, socioeconomic characteristics, level of education, and income of the women, according to Saleh and Malibari (2021). The motives for such interventions were either religious, cultural, or societal in nature. Women's safety and security with private drivers were also mentioned as causes for concern in Saudi Arabia, as most drivers are foreign. Metcalfe's (2008) research found that Saudi women face restricted access to professional opportunities due to the requirement of obtaining permission from their guardian or husband for travel. This limits their career advancement. Moreover, women's work or leadership role is limited due to restrictions placed on the mobility of women in the state (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017).

The Global Gender Gap Report (2021) rates Saudi women's participation and leadership in the workforce at 2.23, while Saudi men's rate is 11.78. Political empowerment for Saudi women ranks 138th out of 157 countries, with only 19.9% of parliamentary seats held by women, and no female heads of state or ministerial positions in the last 50 years. These gaps contribute to structural barriers for Saudi women.

Discrimination against female leaders in Saudi Arabia stems from the country's cultural and social structures. Shahine (1997) notes that social pressures limit women's chances of attaining senior positions. Al-Halawani (2002) suggests balancing family and professional

responsibilities impedes women's ability to take on leadership roles. Vidyasagar and Rea's (2004) study indicates that travel, education, and work restrictions limit women's career advancement. Almenkash et al. (2007) found that women in leadership positions have limited power and authority, and Elamin and Omair's (2010) research shows that men perceive themselves as more competent for leadership positions, while women are viewed as suitable for domestic responsibilities. Al-Ahmadi's (2011) research suggests that insufficient leadership training hampers Saudi women's ability to assume leadership roles. Despite increased education, traditional gender roles deprive women of opportunities to participate in economic development, limiting their career prospects (Kassem, 2012). Patriarchal relationships and attitudes toward women are significant barriers to women obtaining leadership roles. Societal and cultural factors restrict women's career advancement and limit their access to leadership and senior managerial positions. *Gender segregation workplace*: Metcalfe (2008) reported that Saudi companies, including banking and petrochemical industries, opt for gender-segregated workspaces and educational facilities. This structure restricts women's career choices and is considered a significant structural barrier (Romanowski & Al-Hassan 2013; Abalkhail 2017). *Limited access to networking*: Saudi women have limited access to networking opportunities in the workplace, hindering their career development compared to their male counterparts. Tlaiss & Kauser (2010) found that social norms impede women from networking, making them reliant on male family members. This leads to less likelihood of Saudi women managers benefiting from mentoring programs. Abalkhail & Allan (2015) confirmed that Saudi women lack professional networks and have limited access to top decision-making levels in management.

Structural barriers

The literature review shows that Saudi women face multiple obstacles that hinder their leadership potential. The government has developed reforms to overcome these barriers, such as judicial and law-making reforms, enhancing women's economic presence, transforming attitudes towards women's leadership, tackling constraints on mobility, and promoting leadership roles that uphold women's rights (Alreshoodi et al., 2022). These efforts also include inspiring and supporting women in leadership positions and addressing wealth and power inequalities.

3. Research Methodology

Torraco's recent research article (2016) guides on selecting appropriate studies, contrasting and comparing relevant perspectives, preparing analyses, aggregating results, and providing timely directions for future research.

Research Database: To conduct a comprehensive literature review, a variety of databases was searched using generic terms like Qualitative Research and Criteria. The selected databases included IEEE Explore, Science Direct, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Web of Science due to the high number of results. Additionally, official Saudi government reports, magazines, newspapers, books, and journals were also used as secondary data sources, which could include both published and unpublished data. The review focused on journals related to leadership, management, Saudi women's studies, gender differences, and structural barriers, with relevant topics that aligned with current research trends.

Criteria for selecting and evaluating papers: The search for relevant publications focused on journals and conference proceedings published between 2000 and 2023, with additional articles extracted from references of previously identified papers. The initial screening yielded a moderate number of publications related to qualitative research, so an inclusion criterion was added to the search string to narrow down the results. The search across selected databases retrieved a total of 100 publications, which were then screened for relevance using inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 1. Of the remaining 70 publications, 56 were found to be relevant to the evaluation criteria for good qualitative research and were selected for this review. The chosen literature includes ten scholarly studies focused on the gender gap and gender differences in leadership from the period of 2011-2023 and 46 scholarly studies covering structural barriers from 2000-2022, highlighting emerging issues in the research and practice of Saudi women in managerial and leadership roles. The findings of the systematic literature review are presented in Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4, which detail the gender differences and structural barriers faced by Saudi women.

Table 1 Inclusive and Exclusive Criteria for literature search

Inclusive Criteria	Exclusive criteria
Research papers that deal with the evaluation of qualitative research	Papers that solely present discussions and opinions.
Research papers dealing with quality criteria, analysis, and understanding of qualitative studies	Studies are available only in the form of Abstract.
Research papers that were written in English	Duplicates (for example, the same paper included is more than one database or in more than one journal)
Research Papers published later than 2000	Research papers that discuss topics unrelated to qualitative research or only mention it briefly in the abstract.
	Research papers that are workshop summaries.
*Note: Data is also inclusive of official Saudi government reports such as (Economic reports and statistics, Saudi Arabia’s National Unified Portal for government services, General Authority for Statistics (2009), Saudi Vision 2030, Gender gap report, 2021, and 2022), magazines, newspapers, books	

Keywords: To search for relevant literature, specific keywords (qualitative research, criteria, quality, assessment, and validity) were used, and their synonyms were organized in a logical structure.

Types of studies focused: Qualitative Studies

Table 2 Final search term used for the literature search

Qualitative research OR Qualitative criteria OR Qualitative studies)
 AND
 (Evaluation OR Assessment OR Identification OR Understanding)
 AND
 (Quality OR Rigor OR Criteria OR Analysis)
 AND NOT
 (Quantitative Research)

Table 3. A systematic literature analysis depicting gender differences from the period (2011-2023)

Publication/Country	Participants	Gender differences
Al-Ahmadi (2011)/ Saudi Arabia	527 women leaders and professionals	Attitudes towards women professionals
Abalkhail and Allan Saudi Arabia & UK (2015)/ Saudi Arabia	44 Saudi women managers in public settings	Attitudes towards women professionals
Abalkhail (2017) /Saudi Arabia	22 Saudi women professionals working in higher education	Discrimination at work
Hodges (2017)/ Saudi Arabia	25 Saudi women professionals	Attitudes towards women professionals and discrimination at work
Abalkhail (2019) /Saudi Arabia	24 women working in academia	Attitudes towards women professionals
Azhar Ali Mohammed Gawarir (2020)	A mixed-methods approach (134 surveys and 25 articles) working in the public sector	Women in Leadership Positions in the Public Sector in Saudi Arabia
Tahani H Alqahtani (2021)	A qualitative approach was conducted	Saudi female leaders discuss barriers and challenges they face in the leadership positions
E. A ALZEIBY (2021)	1000 Educational and academic staff members	Attitudes towards women leadership
Hammad Akbar, Haya al Dajani, Nailah Ayub and Iman Adeinat (2023)	14 semi-structured interviews in Saudi Arabia's three university settings	Barriers to Women's Leadership and gender segregation

Sajjadllah Alhawsawi and Sabria Salama Jawhar (2023)	Qualitative Element of Women’s Work and education experiences	Structure and culture have a diverse Impact on education and employment, which may ultimately lead to disempowerment.
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Source: Database is inclusive of articles ranging from (2011-2023)

Table 4: A systematic literature analysis depicting structural barriers from two decades

Structural Barriers	Decade 1 (2000-2012)	Decade 2 (2013-2022)
Judicial and Law-making reforms	Albayan (2001), Bashtah (2011)	Al-Aenezi (2021), Bashtah (2011), Sustainable Development Goals (2021). Kechichian (2012)
Increasing visibility in the economic sector	General Authority for Statistics (2009), Bashtah (2011), Al-Zamil, M. b. (2009)	Arab News. (2013), United National Platform (2022), Ministry of Human Resources (2021), Alazmi (2016)
Changing Attitudes to Women’s Leadership and Participation	Al-Jazerah (2011), SPA (2010), Bashtah (2011), Al-Faisal, W., Alharthi, R., & Al-Nehmi, S. (2016). Unified National Platform (2005)	Misk (2020), Al-Mouallimi (2020), Alwatan (2019), Unified National Platform (2022), Alsubaie and Jones (2017), World Bank (2020). (Gawarir, 2022), (Alqahtani, 2021).
Dealing with constraints on women’s time and mobility	Gawi (2008), (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). (Sarah Williams et al., 2019), Saleh and Malibari (2021).	Alyaum (2020), Al-Ghabawi (2019), Abdul Hakim Shar (2019), Ministry of Human Resources (2021), Arab News (2016), (Sarah Williams et al., 2019), Saleh and Malibari (2021).
Addressing inequalities of wealth and power	Haider (2012), Bashtah (2011)	Unified National Platform (2021), Ministry of Human Resources (2021), Al Bawardi, (2021), Arab News (2020)
Inspire and support women to take up, and be effective in, leadership roles	Forum organized by the United Nations Development Program (2005), General Authority for Statistics (2009), Arab News (2005)	Alotaibi, 2020, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (2021), Alsharif, N., & Zuhur, S. (2016). Arab News (2018), (Gawarir, 2022)
Assisting women and men to transmit leadership roles that recognize and promote women’s rights	Bashtah (2011), Ministry of Labor (2010), Ministry of Economy and Planning (2010-2014)	Najm (2019), Alsharif (2019), Alyaum (2020)

Source: database inclusive of Emerald, IEEE Explore, ScienceDirect, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Web of Science, books, google website, Arab media

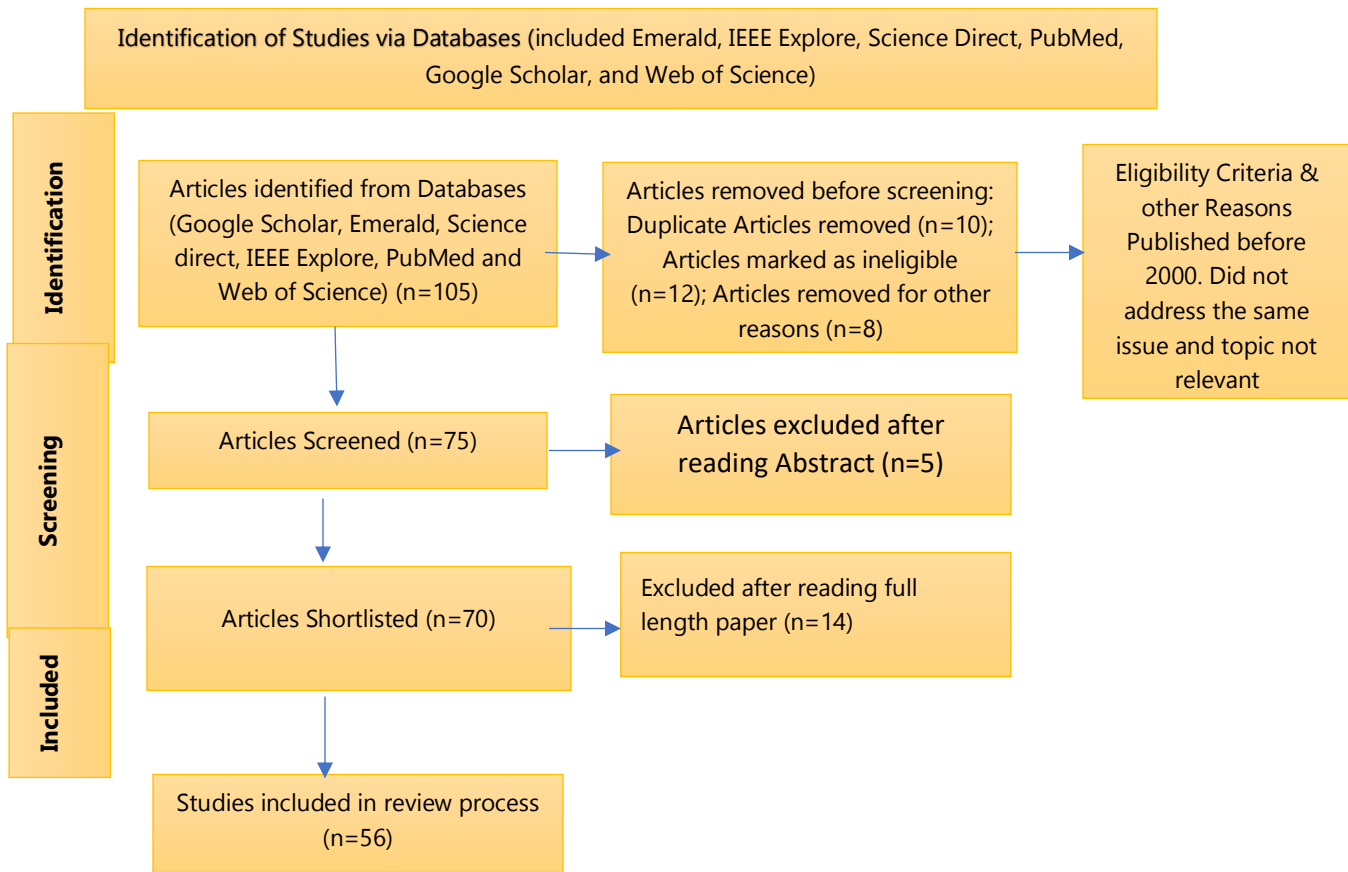


Figure 1: Prima Flow diagram (Flow diagram of the literature search and selection process)

4. Results and Discussion

The findings were acquired after a thorough review and integration of relevant literature on the gender gap, gender inequalities in leadership, and institutional barriers. This qualitative study included around 56 papers that satisfied certain inclusion criteria. The report provided new viewpoints and described several measures adopted by the Saudi government to empower Saudi women and overcome the challenges impeding their advancement by analyzing relevant research.

Various implementations and Strategies to overcome the gender gap, gender differences in leadership, and Structural barriers to women's participation by the Saudi government

The Saudi government is striving hard to formulate various reforms, policies, and strategies to overcome the barriers associated with the structural environment. Furthermore, addressing structural impediments is connected to adopting policies such as resting the tenure clock or enabling flexible working schedules (Alsubhi et al., 2018). Even if the obstacles to women's advancement to leadership have grown more absorbent in the interim, the structural barriers recognized as biased continue to impede the advancement of women's career trajectories (Tlais & Al Waqfi, 2020).

According to the (Global Gender Gap, 2022) Report by the World Economic Forum, Saudi Arabia is ranked 127th out of 156 countries in terms of gender equality. However, in recent years, Saudi Arabia has made significant progress toward gender egalitarianism, as reported by (Al Arabiya English in January 2020). The Women Business and Law Report (2020) also confirms this progress, ranking Saudi Arabia as the top reformer among 190 nations, first in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and second in the Arab world with a score of 38.8. Furthermore, Arab News reported in February 2020 that Saudi Arabia now ranks sixth out of eight parameters, including the mobility of women. These achievements are attributed to the implementation of "Saudi Vision 2030," led by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, which has brought about significant positive changes in career prospects for Saudi women.

Gender differences in leadership: Women's leadership in Saudi Arabia has a bright future. The kingdom is undergoing major changes, particularly with the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy, which was implemented in 2016 to transform the country into a lively society, thriving economy, and ambitious nation by diversifying the Saudi economy and reducing its reliance on oil. Saudi Vision 2030 program also intends to restructure and modernize institutions (Nurunnabi, 2017), which have lately received significant government investments and have begun the road towards international competition (Ghulam & Mousa, 2019). Within the context of Saudi Arabia, the issue has been exacerbated due to the country's discriminatory policies and the lack of social capital women has due to their minimal presence in the public space. With recent law reforms, Saudi Arabia is slowly moving towards creating a more equitable citizenship model with increased representation of women in government positions and areas of economics and education.

Saudi Female Leadership: A Response to the Needs of the Future?

The Saudi Vision 2030 initiative seeks to empower women and overcome obstacles to their progress in various fields. Spearheaded by the kingdom's leadership, the comprehensive plan recognizes the significant contributions of women in society and aims to increase their participation in all developmental areas (Alotaibi, 2020). King Salman Abdul Aziz and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman are leading the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative, prioritizing women's empowerment and participation in all areas of society. They are committed to ensuring that Saudi women receive equal opportunities and support, to restore Saudi Arabia's civilization. The leadership recognizes the positive and pivotal role played by women and seeks to promote their participation at all levels of life (Elias, 2018).

With recent legislative changes, recent legislative changes have opened doors for Saudi women to take up leadership roles in various fields, including the diplomatic corps. Princess Rima Bent Bandar became the first female ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the United States in 2019, and Amal Al-Mouallimi was appointed as the ambassador to Norway in 2020. Women are also breaking down gender barriers in the public sphere, as evidenced by their appearance in military uniforms at the Grand Mosque. These legislative changes have created new opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia, empowering them to play a more significant role in the country's development (Al-Mouallimi, 2020; Alsubaie & Jones, 2017).

Enhancing women's leadership skills through training programs and workshops, According to Belasen et al. (2021), the individual with the abilities and attributes to become an

amazing leader, regardless of gender or identity, is the most crucial in attaining the leadership position. By this, the author stated that in a male-dominated corporate setting, women were given group talks and cooperative exercises to help them improve their abilities (negotiation communicating influencing) (Hodges, 2017). The government is in charge of programmes that help women develop the necessary knowledge and leadership skills in public and private organizations (Naseem & Dhruva, 2017). The Saudi government has implemented training programs and workshops to enhance women's leadership skills and participation. These initiatives cover topics such as leadership approaches, high-performing teams, networking, and organizational change. They are hosted by formal colleges and offer a supportive team-learning environment. These strategies are part of the government's efforts to promote women's professional growth and improve their leadership skills (Nestor, 2013).

Upliftment of the Education sector, According to Alhawsawi and Jawhar (2023), the Saudi government has consistently stated its commitment to ending women's marginalization and emphasizing empowerment via education and work. The Saudi Arabian government acknowledges the vital role of education in the country's progress, providing free general and post-secondary education for both genders, including financial aid fields. University students also benefit from free housing and transportation, with female students receiving additional freebies. The government's commitment to education, evidenced by the establishment of the first Ministry of Education, aims to provide equal access and support for all students (United Nations, 2021). Although the literature shows the profound impact, education has on women's empowerment and their successful participation in the labor market (Kabeer 2020).

Access to work in all sectors, the Saudi government has opened up new job opportunities for women in sectors previously restricted to them, such as conciliators in the reconciliation services. This service enables women to resolve disputes between parties using fully automated procedures in areas such as family law, financial law, maintenance law, custody, castigatory law, traffic law, commercial law, real estate law, and intellectual property law. Women are also encouraged to work as lawyers and receive training programs through the Ministry of Justice and an automated electronic system called "Najm (2019)" for performing judicial services.

Empower women and increase their participation across the economic spectrum, The Ministry of Trade in Saudi Arabia has implemented policies and programs to empower women and increase their participation in the economy, aligned with the objectives of the "Saudi Vision 2030". Women can now start a business without parental approval and have equal treatment to men in the workplace. Women-only business centers have been established, and they can register businesses, obtain trademark registration, reserve business names, perform freelancing, and register business agencies. These initiatives aim to increase women's contribution to the Saudi economy (Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority, 2021).

In recent times, Saudi women now have equal rights to participate in all activities as men, as mandated by Sharia law, including inclusion in the Shura Council. The Qiyadyat program aims to enhance women's leadership skills and provide a conducive environment for their growth. The government offers specific programs and e-services for women, such as premarital screening, reproductive healthcare, education, training services, and a digital literacy program by the Ministry of Education (Unified National, 2022).

Saudi Arabia lifted its ban on women driving in June 2018, which had limited their career prospects and job site access. This has led to increased opportunities for women, including in the training sector and their contribution to the country's GDP. The Saudi government prioritizes women's entrepreneurship by providing resources and support for micro-enterprises, aligning with Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's focus on innovation and economic growth (Saudi government portal). Saudi women are now occupying leadership positions in various fields, such as Basmah Al-Mayman, Regional Director at the United Nations World Tourist Organization, Princess Haifa, Permanent Representative of Saudi Arabia to UNESCO, and Lubna AlOlayan, Chairperson of the Saudi British Bank (Arab News, 2020; 2021). Saudi women have achieved remarkable feats against all odds. Yasmine Maimani became the first Saudi woman to fly a plane and serve as a "pilot captain" at "Nesma Airlines." Aseel Al-Hamad is the first female member of the Saudi Arabian Motorsports Federation. Nawal Bakhsh became the first Saudi woman to appear on the Kingdom's television screen. Mashaal Al-Shmairi worked as a graduate research assistant in designing and analyzing a new thermal rocket engine for NASA's Mars mission. Maryam Ferdous is the first Saudi woman and the third in the world to dive into the North Pole. Samar Saleh became the first commercial attaché in the Saudi Business Attaché office in Tokyo. Raha Muharraq became the first woman to climb high-altitude mountains and reach the summit of Mount Everest in 2013 (al-Ain newspaper, 2020).

Despite having several women in leadership positions, Saudi Arabia still has a long way to go to achieve gender equality in the workforce. However, the country has made significant strides in removing structural barriers that may hinder women's access to jobs, and the World Bank recognized it as the top performer for the Women, Business, and Law Report 2020.

Structural barriers

The following table shall give an overview of women overcoming structural barriers over the last two decades and driving change within Saudi Arabia. Transformation of structural barriers from decade 1 (2000 -2012) to decade 2 (2013-2022).

Judicial and Law-making reforms

Decade 1: (2000-2013)

During the 21st century, the Saudi Arabian government has been focused on enhancing women's legal status and revising regulations to ensure their rights. In 2001, the government started issuing national identity cards for women, who previously needed permission from their guardians to obtain one (Arab News, 2013, March 26). In 2005, women were granted the right to vote in municipal council elections, but it was not implemented until 2011 (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011). Throughout the decade, women required the permission and approval of their guardians for all legal and legislative matters. Additionally, in 2009, the government issued a decree that allowed women to work in lingerie shops, which was a male-dominated industry (Arab News, 2005, June 30). This was viewed as a significant step in reducing gender segregation in the workforce and increasing economic opportunities for women.

Decade 2: (2013-2022)

Women's rights in Saudi Arabia have improved significantly in the past decade, including the right to join the Shura Council in 2011 and run for municipal council elections in 2015. The number of female lawyers increased by 120%, and they were hired in six legal fields. Women benefited from 33% of Saudi Arabia's rights reforms, including amendments related to custody and maintenance, preventing forced marriage, and protecting inheritance and succession rights. The government has also made efforts to increase women's participation in the workforce, including launching a program to support female entrepreneurs. (Bashtah, 2011; United National Platform, 2021; Sustainable Development Goals, 2021).

Increasing visibility in the economic sector

Decade 1: (2000-2012)

Women's presence in the Saudi Arabian economy was limited, with a female labor force participation rate of 13.4% (Labor Market, 2016). However, there were initial steps to support their participation, such as removing the requirement for a woman's legal representative to obtain commercial registration in 2004 and allowing women to stand for election to local chambers of commerce in 2005. Dr. Lama Al-Sulaiman became the first woman to hold the position of Vice President of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Article 160 of the Labor Law was amended in 2008 to allow men and women to work in the same place, and regulations were revised to give women the freedom to choose whether to work without needing their guardian's consent (Alzamel, 2009; Bashtah, 2011).

Decade 2: (2013-2022)

According to the Arab News (2013), women in Saudi Arabia held capital worth 60 billion riyals (\$16 billion) in 2013, with businesswomen having assets valued at over 75 billion riyals in Saudi banks and real estate investments of about 120 billion riyals. To fully benefit the economy, it is necessary to have proper legislation and regulations in place, which have been the focus in recent years. Saudi women are making strides in the country's economy, as evidenced by Sarah Al Suhaimi's appointment as chair of the Saudi Stock Exchange in 2017, making her the first woman to lead a major financial institution in the country. This progress is due in part to government reforms, such as granting women the right to inherit half of their male relatives' inheritance and allowing them to practice law, among other careers (Alazmi, 2016). Women also have the freedom to own land and control property owned by their husbands.

In 2019, women accounted for 23% of the Saudi workforce, up from 19% in 2015, with the government aiming to increase this to 30% by 2030 (World Bank, 2020). To support this goal, the government has relaxed some strict social restrictions that have traditionally limited women's ability to work outside the home and implemented initiatives to provide women with education and training in business and entrepreneurship. The government also plans to increase the representation of women on boards of directors in the private sector (World Bank, 2020). These efforts aim to increase the visibility and participation of Saudi women in the country's economy. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development in Saudi Arabia has implemented initiatives to enhance women's economic situation and increase their participation in the labor market. These include promoting flexible and remote work, resulting in a rise in women's participation from 17% to 31.8% in 2020. Over 30% of women now hold senior and middle-level

management positions, and the percentage of Saudi women in civil service has surpassed 41%. These indicators demonstrate the effectiveness of the government's initiatives in promoting gender equality in the workplace (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2021, 2022).

Changing Attitudes to women's Leadership and participation

Decade 1: (2000-2012)

During this decade, various measures were taken to enable women to become leaders, some of which were implemented immediately, while others were implemented later. The initial years of the decade did not witness substantial progress in empowering women, but their persistent efforts bore fruit in the final five years. Although gender roles and societal norms have traditionally limited women's opportunities, there has been a growing acknowledgment of their significant contributions to society. The government has introduced various initiatives, including the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women in 2005 and the establishment of the first female university in 2009, to promote greater inclusion of women in various fields. This has resulted in more women assuming leadership roles, including the first female cabinet member in 2009, and an increase in female labor force participation during this period. Women leaders, intellectuals, and academics have actively participated in public discourse, raising issues and challenges faced by Saudi women and increasing public awareness (Bashtah, 2011). The percentage of working women in Saudi Arabia increased from 14.9% in 2000 to 22.4% in 2010 (Al-Faisal et al., 2016).

Decade 2: (2013-2022)

During 2013-2023, Saudi Arabia implemented several government-led initiatives to promote gender equality and increase women's participation in society, including granting them the right to vote and drive and launching the Vision 2030 initiative aimed at increasing women's participation in the workforce. While progress has been made, there is still room for improvement. According to the World Bank, the percentage of women in the labor force in Saudi Arabia increased from 16.7% in 2010 to 23.5% in 2020. While this is an improvement, it is still lower than the global average of 47% and the MENA region's average of 28.2% (World Bank, 2020; Trading Economics, 2022). Furthermore, the survey discovered that women who have previously established positions of leadership in the monarchy had received higher academic degrees. Employers favor women with master's or doctoral degrees from international universities. When compared to other elements that may lead to men's success in leadership jobs, this is the key cause for their success (Gawarir, 2022). It is critical to comprehend how university regulations and culture influence women's decisions to take on leadership responsibilities. Institutional policies are defined as a course of action developed by an institution to guide actions, whereas organizational culture refers to the beliefs and values that have existed in an organization over time, as well as the beliefs of the staff that influence their attitudes and behavior (Alqahtani, 2004). Saudi Arabia has made remarkable progress in women's empowerment, with women assuming high-level leadership positions. Dr. Tamader Al-Rammah became the first female deputy minister of labor in 2018, and Princess Rima bint Bandar and Amal Al-Mouallimi became the first female ambassadors to the United States and Norway, respectively. Women's representation in higher education leadership positions has also increased, according to Alsubaie and Jones (2017). The

establishment of the Women Empowerment Agency in 2019 and Hind bint Khalid Al Zahid's appointment as Undersecretary of the Ministry of Civil Service to Empower Women demonstrate the government's commitment to advancing women's participation in the labor market (Unified National Platform, 2022; Arab News, 2018; Al Arabiya English, 2020; Alwatan, 2019).

Dealing with constraints on women's time and mobility

Decade 1: (2000-2013)

Saudi Arabian women typically relied on male relatives, hired drivers, or private transportation to travel to work because females were not allowed to drive until June 2018 as stated by (Sarah Williams et al., 2019). Some people think that this has made it more difficult for women who wish to work. Additionally, it implies that qualitative data points to the high expense of private transport as a barrier for women seeking employment in Riyadh. Women have always faced obstacles in Saudi Arabia, notably Riyadh when it comes to transportation and employment prospects. The nation has long maintained tight laws enforcing gender segregation and limited access to public transport.

Decade 2: (2013-2022)

Saudi Arabia has implemented significant changes in recent years to improve women's lives in the country. The 2017 decision to grant women the right to drive was transformative, enabling them to manage their own lives and work. In 2018, a royal decree was issued to allow women to drive, and in 2019, amendments were made to laws allowing women to obtain passports and travel abroad without a guardian's permission (BBC News, 2019). Additionally, in 2021, a new law was passed allowing women to live independently without the need for a male guardian's permission (Al Jazeera, 2021). These reforms mark a significant shift towards greater gender equality and women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia.

Amendments to travel documents and civil status systems now allow women to obtain passports without requiring the consent of their guardians, giving them equal rights to men. In 2019, the Tourism Authority allowed women to stay in tourist accommodation facilities without a mahram, increasing their mobility and facilitating work and education opportunities. The "Enrollment in Wusool Program" by the Human Resources Development Fund reduces transportation costs for Saudi women working in the private and commercial sectors across 13 regions. These efforts demonstrate the government's commitment to improving women's lives in Saudi Arabia (Alyaum, 2020; Al-Ghabawi, 2019; Arab News, 2016; Ministry of Human Resources Development Fund, 2021).

Addressing inequalities of wealth and power

Decade 1: (2000-2013)

Saudi Arabia has ratified International Labor Organization Conventions No. (100) and (111), which promote equality and non-discrimination in employment. A 2010 ministerial decision prohibited wage discrimination between male and female workers for work of equal value. The amendment of Article 160 of the Labor Law in 2008 allowed for more job opportunities for women by lifting the restriction on men and women working in the same workplace. Gender inequality was responsible for 76% of the loss in human development, according to the 2010 United Nations

Human Development Report for Saudi Arabia. (Unified National Platform, 2021; Al Arabiya English, 2009; Bashtah, 2011).

Decade 2: (2013-2022)

Saudi Arabia established the Human Resources Development Fund in 2005 to provide training and job opportunities for women. The National Women's Employment Strategy was launched in 2007 to reduce gender disparities in wages and increase women's participation in the workforce (Alsharif & Zuhur, 2016). The government launched job search subsidy programs in 2011, providing equal subsidies to men and women for training and employment support in the private sector (Ministry of Human Resources and Development Fund, 2021). Women have entered fields previously restricted to men, such as aviation, engineering, law, and the military from 2018 to 2021 (Al-Bawardi, 2021).

Inspire and support women to take up, and be effective in, leadership roles

Decade 1: (2000-2013)

The UNDP organized the "Women and the Millennium" forum in 2005, and the Saudi Women's Media Center organized the "Media and Community Issues" forum in 2006, providing opportunities for female professionals to engage in discussions (Unified National Platform, 2021). The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Program for External Scholarships was launched in 2005, providing equal opportunities for men and women to obtain scholarships. In 2009-2010, 34% of female students were enrolled in master's degree programs (Alsharif, 2019). Higher education is seen as a means of empowerment, and there was a high demand for advanced degrees during this time.

Decade 2: (2013-2022)

The QYADIAT initiative created a database of national female leaders, accessible by public, private, and civil society organizations (General Women's Union, 2020). The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development introduced a leadership training initiative in 2019 to increase women's participation in middle and senior leadership roles (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2021). The initiative aims to train female professionals in both the public and private sectors across various fields, enhancing women's representation in the labor market. One of the most important steps towards reaching this goal is allowing Saudi women, who make up more than half of the population, to participate in and contribute their necessary skills and talents to the Saudi labor market. As a result, it is critical to assist women in leadership roles in the public sector in Saudi Arabia under the 2030 vision (Gawarir, 2022).

Assisting women and men to transmit leadership roles, which recognize and promote women's rights

Decade 1: (2000-2013)

Significant changes have been made in Saudi Arabia to promote women's empowerment, including the appointment of the first female Vice Minister in 2009 and the inclusion of female

members in the Shoura Council in 2013 (Alsharif & Zuhur, 2016). As of 2008, Princess Noura University in Riyadh was considered the largest university for women globally (Bashtah, 2011). In 2010, a detailed plan was approved to address the increasing number of female university graduates seeking employment, with the Ministry of Labor directed to implement necessary measures (Unified National Platform, 2021). Policies were developed by the Ministry of Planning from 2010-2014, including the creation of a women's section within each government department to review transactions of women within a year (Ministry of Planning, 2014).

Decade 2: (2013-2022)

"Pre-Vision 2030, women were appointed to top positions in both government and private organizations. Saudi Aramco had a female board member, and Citigroup appointed a woman as head of business in Saudi Arabia (Najm, 2019). In 2013, the Saudi Shura Council increased the number of female advisors to 45, granting those voting rights and full participation in Council sessions (The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2013)." The official statement of Vision 2030 emphasizes that the Saudi economy will provide equal opportunities for all individuals, including men and women, to contribute to the best of their abilities, with women being viewed as a critical component of the country's strength (Saudi Vision, 2016). Riyadh was declared the capital of Arab women in 2020 to support women and increase international involvement in the most important issues impacting Arab women's development. Saudi Arabia has made significant progress regarding women's rights in recent years, such as ending the driving ban and appointing women to prominent positions in both banking and government sectors. The image of Saudi women has shifted from a "cultural repository" of traditional values under religious nationalism to "partners" in nation-building mainly through economic contribution (Eum, 2019).

5. Conclusion

According to Showunmi (2002), Saudi Arabia is the most contentious country due to low performance and a gender imbalance. Furthermore, several studies have found that there is a low ratio of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia (Baker, 2017; Alshareef & AlGassim, 2021). One of the most important steps towards reaching this goal is allowing Saudi women, who make up more than half of the population, to participate in and contribute their necessary skills and talents to the Saudi labour market. The administration created "Vision 2030" to address the gender performance gap. As a result, several changes impacting women's empowerment have been developed within this vision (Alghamdi et al., 2022). Many formerly imposed socio-legal constraints are being lifted in the country.

Aside from Western countries, the aforementioned survey found that following Vision 2030, Saudi women are projected to play an important role in the country's growth. The number of Saudi women in executive roles has increased over the previous decade. The monarchy recently put new measures in place to enhance its overall "female empowerment and gender equality" record. According to the World Bank research "Women's business and the Law 2020," Saudi Arabia was the top reformer in the previous year globally. Saudi Arabia has taken ground-breaking initiatives to enhance women's economic participation. The Act provided women over the age of 21 the freedom to travel and move freely.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia's move towards modernization and globalization has facilitated the creation of more career opportunities for women. For instance, Saudi Aramco, the world's most profitable oil company, appointed its first female board member, while Citigroup named a female as head of their business in Saudi Arabia. However, more needs to be done to increase women's participation in the workforce and sustain these efforts. The "Saudi Vision 2030" initiative is a critical step towards achieving gender equality, emphasizing the need for equal opportunities for both men and women. The declaration of Riyadh as the capital of Arab women in 2020 is another indication of the government's commitment to women's empowerment. However, achieving gender equality requires sustained efforts, with a critical goal being to increase the percentage of women in the workforce to at least 30% by 2030. As a result, the Saudi government is expected to provide women with diverse cultures (Gray & Mitten 2018) and take up more responsibilities and leadership roles in the social domain.

In addition, ongoing efforts toward promoting women's empowerment and gender equality have the potential to bring about positive changes in Saudi Arabian society, both economically and socially. The Saudi Arabian government's commitment to these efforts is crucial towards achieving gender equality, particularly in creating more opportunities for women in education and employment and increasing their representation in leadership roles.

Theoretical implication: Saudi Arabia's efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment have theoretical implications, challenging traditional gender norms and promoting diverse and inclusive societies. Women in leadership positions can positively impact organizational outcomes, such as innovation and creativity. However, more research is necessary to inform policy development, according to Abalkhail's (2017) study. The progress made has important implications for women's rights, economic development, and cultural change in Saudi Arabia.

Practical Implications: There are practical implications that can be drawn from the study for promoting women's leadership. Firstly, policy changes and reforms that support women's participation in leadership positions are necessary, such as implementing gender quotas, targeted training and development programs, and promoting work-life balance and flexible working arrangements. Secondly, education and training programs are essential in supporting women's leadership, such as mentoring, coaching, networking opportunities, and technical training in areas like financial management and strategic planning. Lastly, monitoring and evaluating the impact of interventions aimed at supporting women's leadership is crucial to identify areas where additional support may be needed and adjust strategies and programs accordingly.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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