



**The Effect of Social and Cultural Changes on  
Changing Saudi Women's Traditional Roles in the  
Light of Vision**

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## **Abstract:**

Recently, the Saudi society has witnessed a mixture of profound and rapid transformations such as Saudi women empowerment in the light of Vision 2030. The most important principle of this vision was to empower Saudi women through activating their role and leadership in labour market and economy. This study aimed to know the changes of Saudi women's roles when changes take place in the Saudi society including cultural and intellectual trends. An interview and focus group approaches were used in this study by selecting 15 purposive samples of students at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University to know both social and cultural changes in Saudi women's changing roles in the Saudi society after Vision 2030. Then, in-depth interviews were administered to the samples. The findings of the study showed that there was an effect for women's empowerment, digital environment, and social and cultural changes on Saudi women's changing roles and the society's acceptance for those new roles.

**Keywords:** Women's Empowerment, Intellectual and Cultural Changes, Women's Roles

## أثر التغيرات الاجتماعية والثقافية في تغيير الأدوار التقليدية للمرأة السعودية في ضوء الرؤية 2030

شروق الشريف، ميعاد الشهراني، إيمان الغامدي، ريوف الدوسري، لما الغامدي، نورة

اللغوي

قسم علم الاجتماع والخدمة الاجتماعية- كلية الآداب- جامعة الإمام عبد الرحمن بن فيصل، المملكة العربية السعودية

ملخص الدراسة:

شهد المجتمع السعودي مؤخراً مزيجاً من التحولات العميقة والسريعة، أبرزها: تمكين المرأة السعودية في ضوء رؤية 2030. فقد كان من بين أهم أهداف الرؤية تمكين المرأة السعودية من خلال تفعيل دورها وريادتها في سوق العمل والاقتصاد؛ لذا فقد هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على أثر التغيرات الاجتماعية والثقافية الحاصلة في المجتمع السعودي مؤخراً في تغيير الأدوار التقليدية للمرأة السعودية، كما اعتمدت الدراسة الحالية على استخدام أسلوب المقابلة كأداة كيفية رئيسة في جمع المعلومات اللازمة من أفراد العينة، وقد أجريت مقابلات متعمقة مع عينة هادفة قوامها (15) مشاركة من طلاب جامعة الإمام عبد الرحمن بن فيصل، وذلك بهدف تحقيق أهداف الدراسة المنشودة، وقد أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن هناك تغييرات جذرية في الأدوار التقليدية للمرأة السعودية، وفي درجة تقبل المجتمع السعودي لتلك الأدوار الجديدة، وذلك جراء التغيرات الاجتماعية والثقافية التي طرأت على المجتمع السعودي في العقود الأخيرة، كالتحول الرقمي، والجهود المتنامية في مجال تمكين المرأة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تمكين المرأة، التغيرات الفكرية والثقافية، أدوار المرأة.

## **1. Introduction**

Recently, the Saudi society has witnessed a mixture of rapid and developments and growth, producing major developments. KSA witnesses an unprecedented development renaissance in all economic, social, cultural and political fields since the adoption of Vision 2030 in 2016 which was launched by Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman. These developments succeed in changing ideas and roles of both gender in the Saudi society due to cultural and social changes acceleration (Saudi Arabia Vision 2030, 2023). Due to the dynamic expansion in the movement of projects and fundamental amendments in some new laws, regulations and policies, the most important development is empowering Saudi women in the society and proving the extent of being important for the sustainable development (Al-Sorour, 2021 & Qahtani, 2016). Men's roles differ from women's in that man is considered the main lord of family, while woman has to take care of home and all family affairs. Although Saudi women received educational attention to ensure their participation in development efficiently and effectively, this interest has not been reflected in the field of education. This requires activating their leadership role in all administrative positions in the government sector (Shuwaikh & Mohammed, 2017).

## **2. Literature Review**

Women in particular, has encountered conflicts such as women's traditional roles, and traditional view of roles associated, the extent of their abilities to work outside home, balancing between working inside and outside home, customs, traditions interference, etc (Al-Rasheed, 2013). However, the woman's role may change after the cultural openness and economic changes in the Saudi contemporary society (Alsharif & Ulrich-Schad, 2019; Alsharif et al., 2018). To end this problem, the Saudi government has attempted to solve this problem through making related essential amendments and stating new laws and regulations to determine the roles of both

gender in society and reduce these conflicts. However, changes contribute in changing economic and technological developments in the kingdom which in turn increases job opportunities for both gender (Saeed et al., 2017); the case that allows Saudi women to participate in several economic fields. One of the main principles of Vision 2030 is to empower Saudi women by activating their leadership and basic roles in the labour market, the economic field in particular. Although the rate of women's participation in community affairs has increased recently, it remains unsatisfactory in public sector organizations despite the fact that it was previously limited to men. In turn, this change leads to increase and activate women's involvement in social changes, positions and roles to determine the future of the society. This takes place through empowering women to participate at educational, social, political, and economical fields. That is to say, empowering women to participate effectively in community life in sustainable development programmes is important as it shows the extent of women's integration into development issues. This depends on enabling women to hold leadership position and facilitating opportunities for them to reach to leadership positions and participate in making effective decisions concerning the situation of women and society (Al-Shaibani, 2022; Alsharif et al., 2019; Alsharif et al., 2018). In this connection, Al-Hussein's (2011) study, which aimed to know the characteristics and skills of Jordanian women leaders in Ministry of Education and the obstacles encountered by them. It found that women leaders in the ministry encountered some difficulties in holding leadership positions such as a people's negative traditional image about them, limited ambitions, loss of confidence and abilities, etc. all these problems compel them to stop working.

In general, in Vision 2030, women receive greater attention and empowerment. When the Vision gets into effect, the kingdom witnesses, and continues to witness, major mutations concerning women's empowerment. In so doing, they get their social, economic,

organizational, and legal rights such as driving cars, living alone, traveling without guardians' permission, traveling to study, working, etc. This study addressed many aspects and effects of changes on women's roles in the Saudi society. As a result, social and cultural changes may take place; the case that changes the roles of Saudi women in the Saudi society after Vision 2030 (Asiri, 2022). This study attempts to address a multi-faceted scientific gap by touching upon changes in women's roles in the Saudi society and including female students from Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University. The reason behind selecting this sample is that students select their specialization at universities themselves and it is necessary to know their viewpoints. The study, first, attempts to address the first main question: What are the changes in women's roles in the Saudi society the light of witnessed by the Saudi society? To address this question, the following sub-questions can be addressed:

1. What is the effect of women's empowerment on changing their social status and roles in the Saudi contemporary society?
2. What is the effect of the digital environment on changing women's roles?

Second, the study attempts to address the second main question: What are the cultural and intellectual trends in changing women's roles? To address this question, the following sub-questions are:

1. What are the negative cultural and intellectual trends in changing women's roles?
2. What are the positive cultural and intellectual trends in changing women's roles?

## 2.1 Social Role Theory

There are several types of roles, namely standard, expected, and functional. The standard role refers to a set of requirements stemmed from the overall culture that determines people's roles in their different positions, and values that come in line with culture. Thus, each individual has a standard role in society. Regarding the expected role, it is what an individual expects others to perform towards him/her in a particular situation and vice versa. The functional role is the actual role or the role actually performed because it performs the function of compatibility with the overall, sub-, or collective culture (Al-Saati, 1975, p. 133; Al-Shaibani, 2022).

The current study adopts the role theory to explain both traditional and modern roles as being derived from the vision of the Saudi society. These roles are considered as a group of interconnected social centres that include social roles exercised by those who occupy these centres. There are different types of expectations, which determine individuals' behaviours which are connected to each other to form a network of social relationships in society, depending on the expectations of social centres (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Contemporary changes make transformations in roles in general and in women's in particular because women still play traditional roles as being wives and housewives. Besides these roles, they play other contemporary roles in all economic, social, and political fields (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Empowering women in the kingdom in particular increases women's participation in several fields, showing an effective element in achieving development. This was achieved by raising the level of women's awareness psychologically, socially and economically, so, they could protect themselves from, or get rid of, dependency on men. It is known for all that the Saudi society was dominated by "masculinity", or what is called "masculine thought" for a long time. In this period, women's

roles were limited to home works, which are limited and traditional. However, there are a number of factors that isolate women from participation in life ongoing such as economy, immigration from countryside and villages to cities, etc.

According to Alsharif et al., (2019), today, the Saudi society witnesses high and rapid changes due to development and cultural changes of the Saudi society especially in the digital environment which has a major role, and still, in bringing about these changes. The Vision 2030 empowers women to occupy at public and private sectors, holding diplomatic positions (e.g., ambassadors) to represent the kingdom in international events and organizations, playing a remarkable role in entrepreneurship, etc.

These changes would increase their independence in all aspects, and equal chances between men and women (Al-Attar, 2002).

### **3. Research Methodology**

A qualitative approach was used in this study using interviews with a purposive sample of female students from College of Arts, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University. This college was selected in particular because it includes many departments with various academic specializations; the case that allowed for a large number of female students. However, the sample showed different characteristics, as variables, namely social status, economic status, specialization

However, human disciplines (e.g., the ones selected) established some concepts of gender roles in the kingdom long ago. That is, the work of woman was confined to traditional fields, of humanities and arts in particular, because of social traditional roles and norms. Participants provided with a concentrated form.

According to Qasem (2021), the purposive sample is the sample intended from specific cases or units which represents the original population. The interviews were also conducted, by person and by



phone, with complete confidentiality. Then, the interviews have been—the interviews, transcribed and transcriptions sent to the interviewees via email to ensure quality and validity. Then, data they were categorized based on the frequency of responses (Grinyer, 2002; Dougherty, 2021). Then, they were categorized based on a purposive sample and snowball using the MAXQDA program. Then, the data were coded and configured based on specific codes related to the theory that guides the study besides its (study) main objectives.

### 3. Results

This section discuss the study result based on the participants views in regard to the effect of women's empowerment, digital environment, and cultural and intellectual factors on changing their role in the Saudi society.

#### 1. The effect of women's empowerment on changing their role in the Saudi society.

Changing social and cultural standards related women limited roles in caring for family and home only increased their opportunities of interacting with technology and the digital environment. This means, changing the common view of women's role, as wives and housewives only, provided them with:

- a. Greater opportunity and scope to deal with technology and digital environment. According to a student,

*"When women go out for work, their social roles change and the circle of relationships in society improves. Empowering women and giving them an opportunity to work and be engaged in society improves and expands their social relationships."* (SAL,5)

That is, women leave their traditional roles and adopt more challenging roles to be able to contribute in improving economy. In

this connection, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development showed that 33.5% of the Saudi women participated in economy since 15 years in the end of the year 2020 (Ministry of Human Resources, 2024). This indicates that they can achieve financial independence and participate in decision making.

- b. The rises the economic development indicator

The participants pointed out that enabling Saudi women to work outside home rises the economic development indicator which in turn led to advancement of Saudi society. This means, providing women with opportunities to participate in various economic activities and jobs, which were limited to men only, increased the economic and development in Saudi Arabia According to a student,

*“Empowering Saudi women to participate in society leads to holding many positions in public and private sectors. This is manifested in the changes that have already occurred in the Saudi society when appointing 13 women in the new council of Human Rights Commission, a woman in the Royal Guard, etc. ” (NS,2)*

One of the women interviewed connected the relationship between women’s work with low rates of unemployment in the kingdom.

- c. Reduced the unemployment rate among Saudi women

Enabling Saudi women to participate economically reduced the unemployment rate among Saudi women. Another participant said:

*“Women plays an effective role in minimizing burden on men, and become active participants side by side with men in all economic activities” (SH,6).*

As the participants mentioned, women’s work changed their structural and functional roles in family. This means, when women went out to work, their typical functional roles in family changed, and their roles were not limited to take care of home and children only.

(SH,6, NS,2, QLA 4, REM 7 and SAL,5) participants took about the importance of seminars and meetings in raising women’s awareness about their empowerment and increasing their opportunities for community participation. This means that Saudi women benefited, to a very great extent, from seminars and awareness meetings.

## **2: The effect of digital environment on changing women's role in the Saudi society.**

Social media sites contribute in educating the Saudi society about the importance of empowering women. This means, social networks spread awareness quickly and widely as being at the reach of a very large segment of society. This in turn helped in spreading awareness of the importance of empowering women.

Social media are effective tools in making the Saudi society aware of the importance of women empowerment; the most important ones are as follows::

**Awareness:** Information about women's rights, challenges encountered, and opportunities can be disseminated through social media platforms to attract the attention of public to valid resources for more details.

**Communication and interaction:** Women and society can interact with each other through social platforms to exchange experiences, personal stories, and dialogues. A participant said "through social media platforms, awareness contributes in disseminating opportunities and challenges encountered by women" (WF, 13).

Participants' digital environment and social media contributed in developing Saudi women's Self-employment. A participant said that:

*"This result means, the digital environment can provide work opportunities for women such as selling products through social networks because Internet offers broad opportunities for marketing products, writing, research, translation, preparation of press reports, etc. All these works require an electronic device connected to Internet and a bank account." (NF,15).*

- a. New job opportunities: Participants showed how social networks helped in changing Saudi women's roles in the Saudi society because such networks provided women with many job opportunities that changed their traditional and roles.

### **3: Cultural and intellectual factors change**

- a. Freed women from the restrictions

One of the participant pointed out that by saying:  
*"Changing in cultural trends in line with the Vision 2030 has freed women from the restrictions that hinder their participation in various roles in society. Thus, their roles as housewives have changed in that their participation in*

*the development and provision of job opportunities to support their families and meet their needs." (WF,13)*

(MW,11) added that "the vision contributes in achieving women's goals they were struggling for them for a long time".

b. Changes occurred Saudi traditional women's roles were positive.

Most of participants argued that the changes that the changes occurred Saudi traditional women's roles in family after they went for work were positive. An example of a positive viewpoint is (NS,2) said that:

*"Women have become independent and able to support their families, the rate of unemployment among Saudi women is low, their thinking has developed, and their awareness has increased. That is, there has been a major mutation in their roles and social relationships in that their mental health has improved, their self-confidence has increased, and their interest in learning and working has increased." (SH,6)*

b. Some other impacts of the changes.

The most prominent negative responses were: a) women left their main role as a mother responsible for bringing her children up, paid less attention to her children due to the lack of time; and b) the "marital problems increase because women do not do their duties toward her husband and children".(FHD, 1)

So, the sample's responses to this question showed that women get more advanced as a result of going for work and participation in development in the light of Vision 2030. However, the positive aspects were more than the negative ones from the sample's point of view.

## 5. Discussion

**I:** The results of the study showed that empowering women had a significant effect on changing their role in the Saudi society. This can be shown in the following items which are ordered from most to least based on the sample's agreements; as follows:

- "Greater opportunity and scope to deal with technology and digital environment", according to the participants was the most responds. That is, the sample of the study emphasized that empowering women increased their chances of going out to work provided new ways and scopes for them to participate in the economic life. This finding was consistent with the findings of Saeed et al. (2017) which pointed out that women's work played a positive role in changing social changes positively, and providing them with a degree of freedom and works to improve their economic conditions and raise their social status.
- The sample of the study confirmed that the changing social and cultural standards related women limited roles in caring for family and home only increased their opportunities of interacting with technology and the digital environment". That is the changes in social and cultural standards that viewed women in a stereotypical manner reduced their roles, and limited them only to caring for home and children. This in turn provided women with a greater opportunity to immerse themselves in technology and digital environment.
- The women's work changes their social roles and improves their social relationships in society" was also pointed. That is, the sample of the study emphasized women empowerment

because they provided them with work opportunities; the case that allowed them to engage in society and expand their social relationships. This finding was consistent with the findings of Saeed et al. (2017) which pointed out that women's work played a positive role in changing social changes positively and providing them with a degree of freedom and works to improve their economic conditions and raise their social status.

**2:** The results of the study concluded that the digital environment had a significant effect on changing its role in the Saudi society. as follows:

- The sample of the study confirmed that the social networks spread awareness quickly and widely as being at the reach of a very large segment of society. This in turn helped in spreading awareness of the importance of empowering women.
- The sample of the study confirmed that the digital environment contributed in developing Saudi women's production abilities. This means, the digital environment can provide work opportunities for women such as selling products through social networks because Internet offers broad opportunities for marketing products, writing, research, translation, preparation of press reports, etc. All these works require an electronic device connected to Internet and a bank account.

However, the participants said that "the digital environment has reduced the gap between men and women in the Saudi society". By applying the Social Role Theory to some participants, there was a significant correlation between Saudi women's social roles and digital changes in favour of the social roles, showing that their social, political and national roles were important, unlike their family roles.

**3:** The results of the study showed that cultural and intellectual factors had a major effect on changing Saudi women's roles in the Saudi society. as follows:

- The sample of the study confirmed that "The Vision 2030 changes Saudi women's roles in the Saudi society". This indicates that there were major breakthroughs concerning women's empowerment represented in getting their social, economic, organizational, and legal rights such as driving cars, living alone, traveling without guardians' permission, traveling to study, working, etc.
- The sample of the study confirmed that "The limited view of women's roles in the Saudi society reinforces their stereotypical image and defines their roles". This indicates that the traditional and stereotypical view of women over years which considered their roles in society was limited to caring for husband, home, and children only; the case that helped marginalize women and reduce their participation in society.
- There is a significant relationship between the Social Role Theory and the cultural and intellectual changes in the Saudi society, which in turn highlighted their roles in social development. This requires activating the role of media in showing the role of Saudi women, providing training and qualification programmes for them in all sectors by the government. This awareness of governmental and society affected the cultural and intellectual changes in society in addition to the social roles of Saudi women recently.
- The results of this study can be linked to Social Role Theory because this theory is an important theory in explaining the aspects of social life, understanding the conditions that lead to meeting the social life requirements, such as cultural transmission of behaviours, customs, values, definition of social roles, etc. In addition, its new views provide



theoretical and interpreting perceptions about roles in a certain social pattern.

- The external contemporary trends and changes affect the roles of individuals in general and women in particular. These changes and attitudes changed women's stereotypical roles as wives and housewives; the case that rendered them play other contemporary roles in all areas economically, socially, or politically.
- The Theory of Social Role assumes that every society has a traditional view of roles played by nationals based on their social classification of them. The basic theory argument is that gender differences are attributed to mainly the adoption of these gender roles that define appropriate qualities and behaviors for males and females in a given society. Needless to forget that it is the individual's duties that determine the role played by them. However, their rights are defined by the tasks and duties they perform in society, bearing in mind that the individuals do not perform a single social role but several roles in several institutions. These roles differ from an institution to another in that some are higher and some others are lower. In other words, The results of this study showed that empowering Saudi women in the light of Vision 2030, digital environment, technological development, and intellectual and cultural trends played an important role in changing women's roles in the Saudi society. There is that the external contemporary trends and changes affected the roles of individuals in general and of women in particular. With regard to women, it was found that these changes and trends changed the stereotypical roles of women as wives and housewives, allowing them to play other contemporary roles in all economic, social or political fields.

## **6. Conclusion**

The response of society to changes in women's social roles varies significantly, reflecting cultural and social transformations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There is a notable and positive acceptance of the changing culture and attitudes towards women's roles. Women are encouraged to engage in various fields, such as science, technology, and the arts, closely tied to digital transformations and labor market demands, potentially signifying a progressive shift in women's societal roles. The driving ban for women has been lifted, and many laws have been revised to facilitate their participation in work, education, and public life, despite ongoing social challenges for women. Raising awareness about women's rights and offering educational and training programs that contribute to their empowerment also play a crucial role. The media is instrumental in disseminating information about women's issues. Overall, there is a trend towards empowering women and reshaping social roles in the Kingdom, reflecting positive societal advancements.

## **7. Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, there should be more studies to achieve equality between them in all economic activities.

- There could be different aspects that can be discovered in the accessible data. That is, data can be analyzed from different angles to obtain new views using various statistical techniques and research tools (e.g., questionnaire) to understand the relationship between variables.

## Expanding Study Scope:

- Involving more factors and samples; i.e., looking for a sample that shows big differences to obtain representative results.
- Studying women of different classes such as working women, mothers, young ladies, old women, etc.
- Interacting with the local society through focus-groups and interviews with effective women in the society. This can be achieved by using the anthropology approach to make use of their stories and experiences to determine needs and opportunities.
- Non-public organizations can cooperate with public authorities to implement the recommendations. In addition, cooperating with companies and institutions to implement the policy of empowering women in work places.
- Conducting many studies on women empowerment in a number of fields.

## Authors contributions statement

The ALL authors firstly did all needed research processes, namely topic conception, design, analysis and interpretation of data, and paper first draft. Then, they revised it critically for intellectual content and consulted a number of colleagues of the same major. Finally, the researchers themselves did the final approval version of paper before submitting it to publication. That is, ALL authors are accountable for all work aspects.

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### **Data Availability**

The data and materials supporting this work cannot be accessed for ethical, privacy, and security concerns based on the request of the respondents.

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النسبة	التكرار	الفئات	المتغيرات
55.5	71	10 سنوات فأكثر	
<b>11111</b>	<b>1111</b>	الإجمالي	



## قائمة المراجع:

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