

Strategies to Empower Saudi Women's Educational Attainment and Work

Hind Bint Faie Al-Shahrani

College of Social Work, Princes Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University, Saudi Arabia

*Corresponding Author: hfalsharani@pnu.edu.sa, dr.hend1@hotmail.com

Abstract This research attempts to build strategies to empower Saudi women's educational attainment and work through reframing of social welfare strategies. The findings of a major study are reported here.

Keywords Saudi Women, Empowerment, Social Welfare Policies

Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is one of the conservative countries in the world; therefore, the kingdom faces strands of challenges for attainment of gender equalities. This research is an attempt to develop strategies to empower Saudi women in work and qualification realms. Women's empowerment remains fundamental to development of any economy. Research conducted by UNDP, UNIFEM, and the World Bank too confirms that gender inequalities; especially in the developing nations are one of the key reasons impeding both economic growth and development. For instance, Mayoux (2005) argued that those nations that are biased towards gender inequalities indeed suffer from higher poverty, poor economic growth and lower living standard and of course, very timid governance. Mayoux (2005) goes on to argue that implementation of sustainable micro-finance programs among the poorest women in the 1990s have been one of the key strategies in alleviating poverty— indicating that the target group of women were not only empowered economically but they developed a number of skills such as entrepreneurial, organizational, decision-making, which in turn boosted their self-reliance. Having said this, with respect to Saudi women's workforce participation, it constitutes only 20%.ⁱ Of course, women's participation rates have steadily increased from 15.3% in 1990 to 18.6% in 2011.ⁱⁱ In another report published in the Al-Riyadh daily newspaper, combining the public and the private sectors, women comprises only 14.6% of the total workers in the Kingdom. Nonetheless, the percentage of participation of Saudi women

in the labour market drops down further to 6.1%, when female foreign expatriate workers are included.ⁱⁱⁱ This figure is meagre when compared to over 40% female labor force participation in other Muslim nations—Kuwait, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates, (AlMunajjed, 2010). This signals that Saudi Women's economic empowerment remains utterly limited despite their estimated literacy rates being 91.1% in 2015,^{iv} and women constitutes 60% of all university graduates.^v Indeed, out of 136 countries, the 2013 Global Gender Gap report published by the World Economic Forum, 2013 placed Saudi Arabia in the 127th position, the value of its gender gap index being 0.59. It is worth noting here that Iceland occupied the first position bearing a gender gap value of 0.87, while Yemen ranked 136 with a gender gap value of 0.51.^{vi} Notwithstanding, men and women remain highly segregated in the public spaces of the Kingdom. Until 2005, Saudi women's participation in the labour market remained limited to those arenas where they seldom encountered male counterparts— teachers, nurses, doctors and women's banks. Since 2011, King Abdullah has issued several decrees to replace male employees with females for those shops and departments that sell women's garments and cosmetics such as lingerie, cosmetics, *abayas*^{vii} and wedding dresses. Evidently, these decrees coincided with the Arab Spring beginning in Tunisia in December 2010. While the activists construed these decrees as endeavors to forestall pro-democratic dissents, religious police (locally known as Hai'a men or *mutaween*)^{viii} and conservatives argued that increase of female employment in the labor market have increased their everyday interaction with men outside their families (Zoepf, 2013). This escalated dispute between the female employees of the stores, women customers, Ministry of Labor on one hand and religious and conservative leaders on the other hand. Indeed, in November 2013, 200 religious leaders and the Ministry congregated at a meeting to frame new regulations for female employees (Zoepf, 2013). At the same time, these religious leaders handed a signed letter to the Ministry asserting that because of increased cases of *ikhtilat*^{ix} caused by increased female employees, their job have become extremely stressful and unmanageable (Zoepf, 2013). In response to this, the

Ministry issued an order to build partitions of approximately 5-feet high in those stores employing both males and females, which in turn would disallow interactions between males and females.

Considering these backgrounds and using empowerment approach, this research aims to examine empowerment of Saudi women in work and qualification areas. For this, the study was conducted amongst the faculty members and Shura's Council members using SOWT analysis. The research aims to answer two questions. First, it probes the ground realities of social welfare policies for Saudi women in the realms of work and qualification; second, it examines the bases and implementation mechanisms of proposed strategies for Saudi women's empowerment in social welfare policies in the aforementioned arenas. The following section reviews literature connected to the research.

Literature Review

Empowering Women

Notwithstanding, Saudi women's status and role have increased in recent years. Late honorable Saudi King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud granted women the right to vote in 2011. Following this, on 12 December 2015, women voted for the first time in the history of Saudi Municipal elections with Safinaz Abu al-Shamat and Jamal al-Saadi, who became first women to register to vote.^x Approximately, 130-thousand women registered to vote as against 1.35 million men. Although, the Kingdom as a whole have cast their votes for the third time, as there were no elections between 1965-2005, this historical election was contested by 978 women and 5,938 men. That said women's right to vote implies at least a symbolic change in their decision-making status.^{xi} The Global Gender Gap 2013 reports that with respect to political empowerment, Saudi Arabia ranks 105 (0.078), in health and survival, it ranks 52 (0.98), occupies 90th position (0.98) in educational attainment but 127th position (0.588) in economic participation and opportunity,^{xii} clearly indicating, and as already stated above that women's participation in the labor market is extremely low. Nonetheless, keeping at par with the Shari'ah (Islamic law), Ministry of Higher Education, Saudi Government have been continuously developing women's access to education. Princess Noura Bint Abdul Rahman University is the largest women-only university in the world embracing colleges of humanities (Education, Arts, Social Services, Languages and Translation) through to Colleges of Sciences (Computer and Information, Business Administration, Arts and Design) to Colleges of Medicine (Nursing, Pharmacy, Health and Rehabilitation, Dentistry and Medicine). Currently, there are more than 300 women-only colleges in Saudi Arabia, where women constitute 56.6%, out of which more than 20% benefit from overseas scholarships.^{xiii} All these positive transformations have obviously empowered Saudi women in terms of increased participation of women in decision-making

including political empowerment and improved self-esteem. These observations bear resonance to a number of studies conducted elsewhere (Biswas, nd; Cheston and Kuhn, nd; Sharma, 2006). Yet, women's employment outside the home remains limited. Hence, this research is an attempt to propose strategies in social welfare policies to empower women in work outside the home.

Social Welfare Policies

Gerring et al. (2012) argued that human development index of any nation is capable of promoting development. Most countries (alongside United Nations and World Bank) have adopted different types of social welfare policies for development of their respective human development index. However, social inequalities continue to remain in most countries (in education, health, employment, access to affordable housing, clean drinking water, electricity, etc.) especially in the developing countries as witnessed in the Global Gender Gap report 2013. This signals that, among other things, the social welfare policies have failed to produce the desired results, which are referred to as "Robin Hood paradox". This paradox signals that advanced democracies with low levels of inequality tend to redistribute more, while those nations with high levels of inequality redistribute less. In an ideal world, however, the correlation should go the other way, as the most unequal democracies have the greatest need for redistribution" (<http://www.russellsage.org/awarded-project/democracy-distribution-and-representation-economic-interests>) see also, Lindert, 2004). Nevertheless, Burgoon (2006) construes that social welfare policies addressing multi-dimensional social issues such as unemployment, sickness, disability, social security, health and social rights could be capable of reducing domestic and international terrorism. Modern lives of a nation are shaped by the rules and regulations of a state (Hall, 2004). For instance, in the language of Hall (2004), a state (here, the Saudi Kingdom) influences the personal conduct of an individual. Embedded in deeply societal values, women's access to public lives has remained limited within the kingdom, especially with respect to women's employment outside the home. However, with Saudi women's rising level of secondary and higher education, their aspiration to work outside the home have increased (Zoepf, 2013). Hence, this research aims to explore the question of women's work and qualification areas through facilitation of social welfare policies.

A number of feminist analyses continue to embrace the question of women's role within the family (Pascall, 1997). Women's responsibilities to household chores and childcare are pan-cultural phenomena—even in the Anglo-American societies that have witnessed more than four decades of feminism, women continue to perform majority of the housework (McVeigh, 2012). A similar research shows that while women make decisions to cater to the needs of their children, it is the men who continues to make major financial decisions within a household (Mader and Scheebaum, 2013).

I argue that Saudi women bear significant potential to contribute to KSA's economic and social development. Hence, gender mainstreaming remains paramount especially with respect to women's employment. The next section outlines the methods and materials deployed for this research

Materials and Methods

Research Methodology

This is a triangulated two-shot study aimed at building a strategy to enable empowerment of Saudi women in social welfare policies in the realms of work and qualifications using empowerment approach. For this, two questionnaires were administered. The first questionnaire was conducted amongst faculty members in five universities at KSA. The second questionnaire was conducted amongst Shura's Council members in five committees). A detailed demographic sheet was used to collect information from the faculty members and Shura's Council members (supplementary 1) Purposive sampling technique was used to conduct a survey among 338 faculty members out of a total of 2648 faculty members, and 55 Shura's Council of members in five committees. The questionnaire contained three sections. Section 1 was about unravelling demographic information of the respondents. Section 2 aimed at retrieving information regarding the concept of empowerment and its fields, needs and levels. Section 3 consisted of questions regarding the reality of social welfare for Saudi women in work and qualification areas. From the analyzed data, mean and standard deviation were calculated.

Table 1. Population, sample and response analysis

Faculty members sample			Shura's Council members sample		
University	KSU	97	Committee	Human Rights and Petitions	10
	PNU	85		Social Affairs and Family and Youth	12
	UQU	74		Management and Human Resources	12
	UOD	58		Islamic and Judicial Affairs	7
	KKU	25		Housing, water and public services	9
	Total	338		Total	50

Results and Discussion

The sampling size, response rates and demographic data analysis are provided in the Fig. 1, which includes information retrieved from the sample of faculty members and Shura's Council members. The value of Cronbach's alpha test is used to check the reliability of the instruments given in Table 2, which is very good for its scale reliability and internal consistency.

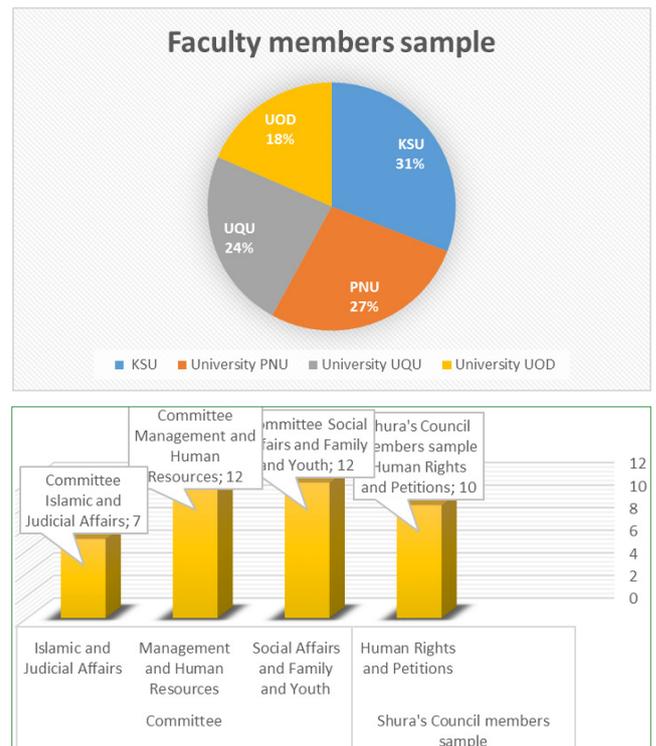


Figure 1. The sampling size, response rates and demographic data analysis

Table 2. Reliability analysis- scale (alpha)

Reliability coefficients	
No. of cases = 15	No. of Items = 24
Alpha = .9696	

In Table 3, strengths of descending order are shown according to the averages of approval. While Table 4 highlights the weaknesses in the realms of work and qualification, Table 5 shows the opportunities in the same, and in Table 6, the threats in work and qualification areas are shown according to the ranking of the study sample.

Table 3. Sample responses on the axis of the strengths phrases in descending order according to the averages of approval

Item	Sample	Mean	SD	Ranking
Orientation for the development of regulations to serve women's rights to access work and qualification in the government and NGOs	Faculty members	2.85	.425	1
	Shura's Council members	2.7	.614	
Interest in work and qualification issues for the neediest groups of women (divorcee, head of the households, widows, etc.)	Faculty members	2.86	.402	2
	Shura's Council members	2.46	.788	
Decision-makers deal with women's needs for work and qualification according to a legal system	Faculty members	2.83	.455	3
	Shura's Council members	2.4	.833	
The formulation of the laws governing the rights of women in work and qualification realms	Faculty members	2.81	.501	4
	Shura's Council members	2.34	.939	

Table 4. Sample responses on the axis of the weaknesses phrases in descending order according to the averages of approval

Item	Sample	Mean	SD	Ranking
Increase the number of women's working hours in the private sector	Faculty members	2.74	.562	1
	Shura's Council members	2.78	.418	
Weakness, qualification and employment opportunities for women outside the education and health sectors	Faculty members	2.74	.570	2
	Shura's Council members	2.68	.741	
Low wages in the private sectors	Faculty members	2.73	.599	3
	Shura's Council members	2.70	.614	
Weakness, attention to review work and qualification of women's policies to keep pace with the needs of the labor market	Faculty members	2.74	.552	4
	Shura's Council members	2.52	.839	
Weak awareness of women's rights in work and qualification areas	Faculty members	2.69	.617	5
	Shura's Council members	2.84	.548	
Low levels of qualification available to women in educational & training institutions	Faculty members	2.66	.636	6
	Shura's Council members	2.70	.614	

Table 5. Sample responses on the axis of the opportunities phrases in descending order according to the averages of approval

Item	Sample	Mean	SD	Ranking
Increasing community awareness of the importance of women's work and qualification	Faculty members	2.79	.492	1
	Shura's Council members	2.72	.607	
The development of work and qualification through framing of women policies	Faculty members	2.76	.514	2
	Shura's Council members	2.70	.463	
The existence of decisions on the orders of King to expand women's work and qualification areas	Faculty members	2.73	.589	3
	Shura's Council members	2.92	.274	
Decision-makers interested in women's needs in work and qualification realms	Faculty members	2.78	.525	4
	Shura's Council members	2.54	.762	
The existence of scientific research in work and qualification areas	Faculty members	2.76	.510	5
	Shura's Council members	2.26	.828	
Orientation to deal with the global trends in the equality between women and men in work and qualification opportunities	Faculty members	2.64	.644	6
	Shura's Council members	2,64	.589	
Saudi society to accept the idea of women's autonomy in work and qualification areas	Faculty members	2.70	.568	7
	Shura's Council members	2,16	.792	

Table 6. Sample responses on the axis of the threats phrases in descending order according to the averages of approval

Item	Sample	Mean	SD	Ranking
Resistance of community for work and qualification of women in some areas	Faculty members	2.76	.560	1
	Shura's Council members	2.74	.443	
The weakness of the rehabilitation of community awareness of women's work and qualification programs in some areas	Faculty members	2.75	.552	2
	Shura's Council members	2.60	.782	
The complexity of the special procedures to obtain a suitable job for women's work and qualification	Faculty members	2.72	.559	3
	Shura's Council members	2.58	.758	
The high cost of qualification (education and training) for the Private Sector	Faculty members	2.74	.590	4
	Shura's Council members	2.42	.758	
Increase the proportion of women's unemployment	Faculty members	2.67	.598	5
	Shura's Council members	2.62	.753	
Low wage for women workers	Faculty members	2.66	.635	6
	Shura's Council members	2.48	.735	
Cover the needs of the labor market in many areas without Saudi women	Faculty members	2.63	.668	7
	Shura's Council members	2.56	.705	

Conclusions

As remains well documented, employment contains the necessity of women's work in the public sector and civil society and its role in societal development. This research aimed at probing the empowerment of Saudi women in the realms of work and qualification. In doing so, it aimed at focusing on the development of women's capabilities, and thereby, finds ways that can remove barriers to their participation in development activities, through Islamic values at par with Shari'ah law. The research highlights not only at reformulating women's jobs in the civil service but also at women's equality in rights, duties and privileges to work (via regular promotions, retirement, and leadership positions).

The research urges upon for the enactment of legislation that are able to protect women from all forms of abuse and violence during their participation at work. The Saudi Kingdom draws design programs to encourage investment in work and qualification areas for Saudi women. Hence, review of Saudization of women's jobs in the private sector remains paramount. In addition, a review of programs and disciplines provided by higher education institutions for women should be constantly updated. Although, the overall percentage of girls receiving education is increasing and indeed, more than the boys, but a bottom-up approach is required where the level of general education for Saudi girls should be raised. Alongside, the overall learning environment (such as proper building and improving the curriculum and good teachers) needs to be improved. Restructuring of the public and higher education at KSA remains important.

This research findings calls for implementation mechanisms that can strategize and enable Saudi women in social welfare policies in work and qualification areas through empowerment approach, like

(a) The formation of committees of institutions of higher education, technical training and Sharia scholars and relevant authorities to the labor market,

(b) Allowing women to join qualification programs after placing necessary legitimate controls.

(c) Adjust the legitimate rules of women's work by Shari'ah scientists,

(d) The formation of committees to re-describe the functions of women in the civil service system,

(e) The Ministries of Civil Service and work through the cooperation with specialists' academics and women leaders to participate in the re-drafting of items associated with women,

(g) A regulation to sanction abuse and violence against women,

(h) The establishment of a representative body of the relevant ministries to formulate regulations and programs to support investment in the areas of rehabilitation of women, and the follow-up projects implemented.

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