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Empowered but not Equal: Challenging the Traditional Gender Roles as Seen by University Students in Saudi Arabia


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Abstract

This study examines perspectives of Saudi university students regarding changing gender roles as affected by women's rights, education, employment, and activity in the public sphere. Results from a questionnaire distributed among 4,455 male and female students indicate students are confident and optimistic about improving gender equity, however resistance from those holding traditional views still exist. Female respondents are more optimistic than male respondents, seeing changes in gender roles as advantageous to their personal and professional lives. Representing a group of allies, a majority of male students regard changing gender roles positively. Men and women reported personal courage to address these challenges, which is an asset moving forward. While approval will never reach consensus, changes may be forthcoming. By surveying the Saudi university population, this study seeks to inform strategy and policy. Gender equity is only possible through increased societal acceptance of women's freedom in their everyday lives.

Keywords

Culture; Gender issues; Middle Eastern Studies; Social values; Higher Education; Women's Education

Cover Page Footnote

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EMPOWERED BUT NOT EQUAL: CHALLENGING THE TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES AS SEEN BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SAUDI ARABIA¹

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia developed out of an arrangement between religion and political power that emerged in the mid-eighteenth century. The state of Saudi Arabia came into existence after political unification in 1932 and experienced rapid economic and social transformations for the rest of the twentieth century. The generation of Saudis born in the 1930s lived a traditional, tribal existence, as the state was just beginning to develop national institutions and identity. The children of this generation, born in the 1950s, bore the fruits of political integration, oil wealth, increasing access to education, and expanded contact with the West. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of post-unification Saudis, the young adults of today's Saudi Arabia, are facing new challenges and struggles to make sense of their societal and personal identities in relation to changing gender roles.

During the last few decades, demographic changes within Arab countries and globalizing trends around the world have contributed to new ways of thinking about society. A range of

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societal forces, including social media (Almujaibel, 2014), a young population studying abroad (Yusuf, Al-sharqi, & Durrani, 2015), e-learning (Badwelan, Drew, & Bahaddad, 2016; Yusuf et al., 2015), and the women's rights movement (Butters, 2009), currently challenges traditional Saudi culture and will continue to do so in the future. The younger generation in Saudi Arabia will undoubtedly play a crucial role in accepting or rejecting changes to their society. Previous research indicates that regardless of level of religious practice or belief, Saudi young people, especially women, desire a more gender egalitarian society (Kucinkas, 2010). Drawing from an Islamic feminism conceptual framework, this study examines perspectives of changing gender roles, resulting in the following research question: *What are the current perspectives of male and female Saudi university students in relation to their awareness of, attitudes toward, and readiness for change in gender roles?* This research is especially important, as women in Saudi Arabia are not completely free to gather to debate and consider such issues, even if they are in private homes (Butters, 2009).

Literature Review

A review of the relevant literature provides insight and context for the current situation of women in Saudi Arabia, which is heavily influenced by strict Islamic beliefs. As a result of a *Wahabi* interpretation of the Qur'an, gender segregation characterizes the broader Saudi Arabian society, including education, employment, and the public sphere (Baki, 2004). Recent studies and reports highlight the connection between education, social opportunity, and economic participation, particularly for women (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; AlMunajjed, 2010; Yusuf et al., 2015). The literature examined here outlines the status of women's rights by examining women's access to education, employment opportunities, daily public life, and roles in public office. Badran (2008) identifies such secular areas as more receptive to change than areas related to religion, including some activities in the public sphere and domestic life.

Women's education. As a relatively new country, Saudi Arabia has devoted significant attention and resources to the area of education in the past 60 years (AlMunajjed, 2009; Mtango, 2004). Since the first government school for girls was constructed in 1964, progress has been made toward closing the gender gap in education (Office of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2016). However, the inclusion of girls in the public education system was not a simple or easy process: persistent social stereotypes delayed girls' admittance to education twenty years after public schools were available to boys (Al-Bakr, 1997). Public education in Saudi Arabia is now free at all levels and compulsory for boys and girls from ages six to 14 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2014). The 2010 Gender Gap Index reports 84% of girls are enrolled in primary education compared to 85% of boys (Hausmann, Tyson & Zahidi, 2011). However, girls have begun to outnumber boys at the secondary level, with 76% of girls enrolled in high school compared to 70% of boys (Hausmann et al., 2011). Women clearly dominate the university level in Saudi Arabia, with 37% of women reaching the tertiary level, compared to 23% of men (Hausmann et al., 2011).

There has been extensive growth in the number of higher education institutions since Riyadh University, later named King Saud University, was established in 1957 as the first university not devoted to religious studies (Yusuf et al., 2015). The opening of large, updated women's universities, such as Princess Noura University in 2007, and gender mixed education with King Abdullah University of Science and Technology's opening in 2009 have increased women's opportunities to access higher education (Al-Fassi, 2010; Batrawy, 2013). Each year, 121,000 Saudi women graduate from secondary schools and 44,000 from universities, far outpacing their male counterparts (Doumato, 2010). Women also constitute 79% of Ph.D. awards each year (Doumato, 2010). The increase in women's education has been accompanied by an

increase in the average age of first marriage and a decrease in polygamy in Saudi Arabia (Ertürk, 2009).

Despite these impressive advances in school enrolment and the opening of new facilities, Saudi women still face discrimination in accessing the education system, receiving quality instruction, and pursuing their desired courses of study (Al-Fassi, 2010). The system of male guardianship requires male guardian approval to apply for a passport, travel outside of Saudi Arabia, and study abroad with a government scholarship (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2016). Throughout their international studies, many women must be accompanied by their male guardian (HRW, 2016). In addition, strict gender segregation relegates female students to inferior educational facilities and unequal academic opportunities, especially in rural areas, as their male counterparts are given priority in resources and access (Ertürk, 2009).

When the first government schools for girls opened in 1960, the overall goal of girls' education was to prepare them to be mothers and wives (Hamden, 2005). In the 1980s and 1990s, women made significant efforts to contradict these strict gender roles; however, the immediate results of these efforts were limited (Al-Bakr, 1997; Almanee, 1987). Although few restrictions presently exist on the subjects women can study in university, there is often an expectation that women will focus on the social sciences as opposed to the natural sciences (AlMunajjed, 2009; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Ninety-three percent of female university graduates specialize in education and the humanities, severely limiting their attractiveness to potential private sector employers (AlMunajjed, 2010). As recently as 2008, women in Saudi Arabia could not study engineering, architecture, political science, or petroleum at public universities (HRW, 2008). Cultural standards are slowly changing and new fields, such as retail, marketing, and industry, are opening to women (Yusuf et al., 2015). Offsetting this, however, is the restriction that women are still only permitted to work in places where there is no mixing of genders and dress codes are stringently enforced, limiting the range of occupations available and decreasing the appeal of hiring women (HRW, 2016).

Women's employment. According to reports from the United Nations and the World Economic Forum, the economies of the Arab world appear to be under-performing (Cornelius & Schwab, 2003). In addition, the Arab world has the lowest proportion of working women in the world, and in Saudi Arabia, women make up just 29% of the labor force (UNDP, 2005, p. 88). According to the World Economic Forum, Saudi Arabia ranked 127 out of 136 countries in the Gender Gap Index of 2013 (World Economic Forum, 2013).

There have been, however, successful steps toward women's inclusion and economic empowerment (HRW, 2016; Butters, 2009). International organizations, women's rights activists, the national government, and the private sector have developed initiatives to enhance women's skills, knowledge, and self-confidence to participate actively in the economy (HRW, 2016; Butters, 2009). Female participation in the labor force almost tripled between 1992 and 2010, including a high concentration of women in occupations such as teaching and administration (AlMunajjed, 2010).

Microfinance has been used to enhance women's economic participation in a financially sustainable way (Kabeer, 2003). Research indicates female microfinance clients consistently demonstrate higher rates of loan repayment and larger monetary household contributions, with positive implications for education, health, and nutrition (International Labour Office, n.d.). Furthermore, studies show women who receive microfinancing are more involved in family decision-making and demonstrate increased participation in community affairs when compared to other women (Alturki & Braswell, 2010; Coleman, 2004). These women also show increased mobility and political and legal awareness (Alturki & Braswell, 2010; Coleman, 2004).

Attitudes of some male counterparts, who often serve as legal gatekeepers in women's

lives, present another barrier to women's employment in Saudi Arabia (Elamin & Omair, 2010). Elamin and Omair's study (2010) explored the attitudes of Saudi Arabian men toward the increasingly common phenomenon of women working outside the home. Married, employed, less educated, and older Saudi males preferred that women tend to domestic responsibilities rather than leave the family home (Elamin & Omair, 2010). However, single, unemployed, educated, and younger Saudi men reported more positive attitudes toward women who work (Elamin & Omair, 2010).

Despite obstacles by Saudi culture, not only have some women managed to enter the labor market, they have risen to senior positions as well. Al-Ahmadi (2011) explored the growth of women in senior decision-making positions in public and private sectors during the last ten years by conducting a survey of women holding civil service leadership positions in Saudi Arabia. The results portray a generation of highly educated women leaders who work in various fields and have extensive professional and managerial experience (Al-Ahmadi, 2011).

Though policymakers have initiated strategies to increase women's presence in top public leadership positions, these new women leaders face organizational, personal, and professional challenges because of their gender (Al-Ahmadi, 2011). Al-Ahmadi (2011) found the most important challenges facing these women were structural, including centralized decision-making and lack of participation in strategic plan formulation. Women in leadership experienced a lack of support for professional growth, including an absence of training opportunities, limited opportunities to gain diverse experience and skill sets, and a lack of networking and mentoring programs (Al-Ahmadi, 2011). Other challenges cited by women surveyed include limited resources and cultural and personal challenges (Al-Ahmadi, 2011). These results contradict the widespread belief that women are unwilling or unable to bear the social pressures of leadership positions by highlighting where they would like more professional support (Al-Ahmadi, 2011).

Women's access to public life. In Saudi society, women's daily lives are directly limited by the near universal practices of male guardianship and gender segregation, which are principal challenges to women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia (Prokop, 2003). Under the system of male guardianship, a father or husband, but sometimes a brother or son, is essential to decision-making in women's lives, including the areas of schooling, employment, family planning, and healthcare (HRW, 2016). Women must submit to the will of their guardian on significant issues, such as marriage, as well as seemingly inconsequential ones, such as traveling for vacation (HRW, 2016). These requirements exist for all females, regardless of socio-economic class (HRW, 2016).

Gender segregation is the other widespread practice in Saudi Arabia significantly hindering women's ability to exercise their rights and participate fully in public life. *Khulwa*, the mixing of unrelated men and women, is forbidden (Berger, 2011; Tønnessen, 2016). The Saudi system of gender segregation is unique among Muslim-majority countries and ensures gender segregation in all public places, including schools, universities, restaurants, government offices, and private businesses (Berger, 2011; Tønnessen, 2016). As a result, all facilities must be duplicated: women have their own schools, university campuses and banks, and government buildings have separate entrances.

However, gender segregation and male guardianship are implemented inconsistently in Saudi Arabia (HRW, 2008). Men who think the law should require a male guardian to make a woman's decisions, even when it does not, often require a man's permission anyway (HRW, 2008). The government's policy on these issues is ambiguous. For example, the Saudi labor code no longer requires workplaces to be segregated by gender, yet the government has not implemented a formal repeal, so the practice continues (Ertürk, 2009). Gender segregation and male guardianship are enforced more by social custom than by law, but the government does little to stop these discriminatory implications (HRW, 2008).

Saudi women also face severe limitations to their freedom of movement in the form of legal restraints and social regulations (Doumato, 2010). Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world that still forbids women from driving, although the government has made some subtle indications that it is reconsidering this regulation (Doumato, 2010). The driving ban, combined with a lack of accessible and affordable public transportation, precludes women from participating in the labor market, as well as public activities in general (Doumato, 2010).

Saudi women encounter resistance to their participation in the political arena, reflecting the widely-held belief that women cannot engage fully in public life (Doumato, 2010; HRW, 2016). A lack of gender-segregated facilities prevents women from voting at the municipal level (Doumato, 2010). In Saudi Arabia's first municipal elections in February 2005, women were prohibited from standing (Prados & Blanchard, 2007). They were also barred from voting on the grounds that there were no appropriate facilities to separate male and female voters (Doumato, 2010).

Women in public office. Women in Saudi Arabia celebrated in 2011 when King Abdullah announced that women could be appointees to his Shura Council, and within four years they would be able to run in municipal elections (Epatko, 2011). However, women must bring a man to verify their identity when conducting business in government offices and are often prohibited from speaking in legal proceedings due to the unofficial requirement that their male guardians represent them (HRW, 2008). The lack of clarity in the Saudi legal system and the discretion granted to judges are particularly problematic for Saudi women, who are often prevented from even appearing in court in their own defense (Ertürk, 2009).

In 2009, women assumed positions as deputy minister and university president for the first time in Saudi Arabia's history, and, since then, more women are receiving high-level appointments in government institutions, universities, and civic organizations (Ertürk, 2009). This exposure has contributed to a shift in public opinion in favor of women sharing decision-making power with men (Ertürk, 2009). Nonetheless, female participation in decision-making in all sectors remains extremely low, with less than 1% of leadership posts held by women (AlMunajjed, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

This study seeks to examine perspectives of changing gender roles with the following research question: *What are the current perspectives of male and female Saudi university students in relation to their awareness of, attitudes toward, and readiness for change in gender roles?* Change and the feelings it evokes from the men and women involved, therefore, are the overarching themes of the survey used in this research.

Islamic feminism is characterized as a feminist perspective through the lens of Islam and the use of Islamic texts and beliefs to support a contextualized feminist agenda (Ahmadi, 2006). Islamic feminism developed out of women's changing status across the Muslim world (Ahmadi, 2006), which could be due, in part, to globalization, which influences changes at domestic, national, and global levels, and is experienced by women whose identities remain deeply rooted in Islam (Ahmadi, 2006; Tohidi, 2003). Islamic feminists emphasize equality of all people—both male and female—as a central tenet of the Qur'an (Badran, 2013). Islamic feminism is not only for practicing Muslims, as secular and non-Muslim individuals have also adopted the perspective (Badran, 2013).

The religious ties of this framework are reflected in the challenges these women pose to men's domination of Qur'an interpretation, with women pressing for female interpreters to avoid the need for male mediators (Tohidi, 2003). Also, advocating for *ijtihad*, or "independent critical examination of religious texts", opens the way for women to point out patriarchy, both in Islam

and daily life, resulting in women who have voices in society, while also maintaining roots in Islam (Badran, 2008, p. 29). This “Qu’ran backed doctrine of gender equality” includes activities in both public and private arenas, including religious areas of public life (Badran, 2008, p. 32). As Muslim women define modernity for themselves, Tohidi (2003) sees them as similarly defining feminism in their own terms.

Islamic feminism could also be called transnational feminism, which challenges institutional patriarchy in the context of globalization (D’Enbeau, Villamil, & Helens-Hart, 2015). Although Mohanty (2003) does not explicitly describe Islamic feminism, she does discuss feminism outside of a Western-focused perspective. Islamic feminism, as a contextualized form of feminism, seeks to critique a Western driven perspective while maintaining a common foundation with feminist perspectives worldwide. Non-Western feminist perspectives encourage examinations of gender issues with particular emphasis on context—which is especially important in the uniquely gender segregated society of Saudi Arabia (D’Enbeau et al., 2015). Rather than focusing on differences, feminism outside of the Western world must consider historical, economic, and political context, as well as global positioning and power dynamics between groups of women (Mohanty, 2003). Feminism becomes the uniting discourse through which connections across boundaries can be made (Mohanty, 2003). In part because of the tensions between Western feminism and all others, Islamic feminism first focuses on its Islamic foundation (Ahmadi, 2006).

While Islamic feminism advocates for equality between men and women in both public and private spheres, it is important to note that equality, for women especially, comes with the freedom to choose her own life course rather than have a male guardian choose for her (Badran, 2013). According to Badran (2001), an Islamic feminist perspective advocates that women should make their own decisions about whether they pursue a career in a field of their choice, stay at home to focus on their families, or do any combination of these options. This distinction is important because feminist movements that push women into the public sphere can be patriarchal and oppressive (Badran, 2001). Because Saudi Arabia is a country actively incorporating Islam into its institutions, Islamic feminism is an appropriate frame for considering these survey results.

Methods

Our team used cluster sampling to collect data from four Saudi universities (one in the capital, Riyadh, and three in the provinces). After controlling for completeness of answers and considering rejections, additional respondents were chosen from the same institutions. Altogether, 4,455 questionnaires were included in our analysis: 1,498 from King Saud University (Riyadh, capital); 2,185 from Al Qasem University (Qasem, central province); 493 from King Faisal University (Dammam, eastern province); and 279 from King Abdul Aziz University (Jeddah, western province).

“Bridging the Gap”, the questionnaire used in this study, was developed by Edit Schlaffer, a sociologist from Women without Borders, and Ulrich Kropiunigg, a psychologist from the Medical University of Vienna. The questionnaire, written in both English and Arabic, was reviewed and tested with 85 university students from King Saud University to ensure the correctness of the Arabic version and to adapt it for use in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire consisted of 131 questions. This article examines a portion of these questions.

An important point to emphasize revolves around the interpretation and understanding of the term “modern,” which in this context refers to change. In this survey, participants were asked about their “openness to change,” which aligns with how *modern* is portrayed in relevant literature. For example, Tohidi (2003) points to increases (i.e., changes) in urbanization, literacy, and employment for both women and men as examples of modernity. The clarification of *modern*

in this survey distinguishes it from the modernization of the functionalist modernization framework (see, for example, Welch, 2013). Tohidi (2003) points to the way Western understandings of modernity are actively challenged by Muslim women who seek to define modernity in their own terms. Additionally, debates around distinguishing the term “modern” in Saudi Arabian culture is one that has been ongoing for several decades (Kechician, 1986).

After obtaining general permission from the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia, leaders of the various universities were contacted to ensure access to their institutions. All questionnaires were administered by our team, with the help of one or two individuals named by university heads who further arranged distribution of the questionnaire among various classes. Class teachers or members of the research team verbally transmitted instructions regarding how to fill out the questionnaire. Students were assured complete anonymity. Questionnaires were distributed during several months in 2008 and 2009.

Analysis of the data is mainly descriptive. The respondents’ answers to categorical items are presented as percentages. Gender differences using categorical data are evaluated by Pearson’s r -statistic, and, for continuous data, by independent samples t -tests. Gender disparities are also quantified by the respective effect size, namely Cohen’s d for comparison of continuous data, Spearman’s ρ for comparing gender and ordered categorical data, and ρ -correlation coefficient for comparing gender and dichotomous answers.

For many of the survey questions, respondents were given the option to strongly agree, moderately agree, moderately disagree, or strongly disagree. For the sake of a useful comparison, the data from the strong and moderate categories were combined. Therefore, unless otherwise noted, agreement refers to the sum of strong agreement and moderate agreement, and disagreement refers to the sum of strong disagreement and moderate disagreement.

In total $N=4400$ Saudi Arabians (2908 female, 1492 male) answered the questionnaire. The respondents ranged in age from 17 to 40 with a mean age of 20.9 years ($+2.2$), with the men being significantly (small effect size: Cohen’s $d=.17$) older than the women. Respondents were students and recent graduates of King Saud University (931 females, 551 males), Qasim University (1392 females, 762 males), King Abdul Aziz University (97 females, 179 males), and King Faisal University (488 females, 0 males).

Results and Findings

Indices. To assess changes in gender roles among university students, aspects of the respondents’ opinions were analyzed together. Indices were based on the following theoretical constructs: awareness of changes in gender roles, attitudes toward traditional gender roles, and readiness for changes in gender roles. These indices serve as a broader perspective on more specific questions regarding women and education, employment, public life, and public office.

To determine students’ *perception of changes in gender roles*, the following items were used to build an index:

- When I look around I see more and more women in social leadership positions.
- In regards to women’s rights, there will be a substantial change in the next five years.

Results show that women were significantly more aware of these changes than men (Cohen’s $d=0.88$, $p<0.001$).

To measure *attitudes toward traditional gender roles*, the following items were summarized:

- A woman’s priority should be to take care of the family.
- A man’s priority should be to take care of the family.
- Women should not play sports in the presence of men.

- Men should not play sports in the presence of women.
- A woman's goal should be to be an educated wife and mother.
- A woman should give up her job when she gets married.

Response options ranged from 1 (disagree) to 4 (agree). This index was derived from a combination of the items, and it measures the attitudes toward traditional gender roles from 6 (in favor, conservative) to 24 (opposed, progressive). Women's rejection of traditional gender roles was significantly higher than male's rejection of traditional gender roles (Cohen's $d=0.62$, $p<0.001$).

To measure the *readiness for change in gender roles*, the following items were combined into one index:

- Women in our country should have the same opportunities to excel and compete with men.
- Women have to become more visible in politics and in the government.
- Women should have more access to sports.
- Both men and women have to contribute to household income in a modern family.
- The media should present positive role models for both men and women in our society.
- More women should strive to achieve positions of leadership.

Response options ranged from 1 (disagree) to 4 (agree) and were combined to create this index. The index, therefore, measures the readiness for change from 6 (no change necessary) to 24 (change necessary). Men and women have very different attitudes toward the need for change concerning gender roles (Cohen's $d=1.0$, $p<0.001$).

Individual measures. Participants were asked to respond to statements about their views on various topics pertaining to gender in Saudi Arabia.

The evolution of women's rights. Substantially more women than men (75% vs. 49%) believe there will be substantial changes regarding women's rights in the next five years. There is less variance regarding the role that media should play in promoting positive images of men and women, but women have a greater affinity to this statement than men (83% vs. 66%).

Opinions on the value of education for women. The majority of respondents hold progressive views about women's access to education in Saudi Arabia. Fifty-nine percent of women and 51% of men agree that girls waste their education by not going into a profession. Only a minority of the respondents—though a sizeable minority—hold traditional views on this topic, such as the 19% of women and 39% of men who agree that boys' education is more worthwhile than girls' education or the 25% of women and 40% of men who believe that an uneducated man has more power than an educated woman.

Opinions on access to education for women. Female respondents generally hold more positive views than their male counterparts about the expansion of access to education for women in Saudi Arabia. Strong majorities of both men and women reveal that boys and girls in their families have equal opportunities for education (women: 81%; men: 73%). In addition, they believe men and women should be equally educated on the rights granted by Islam (women: 93%; men: 88%). The majority also indicates their happiness that more girls are attending university now (women: 92%; men: 84%). Participants also believe expectations for women to succeed in their studies are higher than for men (women: 80%; men: 57%).

Postgraduate plans. A strong majority of respondents expressed the desire for further studies (women: 88%; men: 70%), and many expressed a desire to study abroad in the future (women: 48%; men: 68%). The majority of respondents were also confident in obtaining a job after graduation (women: 58%; men: 57%). The majority of respondents expressed a desire to

have a great career as well (women: 75%; men: 83%).

Attitudes toward female participation. When asked about their views on women's participation in the public sphere in Saudi Arabia, male and female students demonstrated a wide disparity. Thirty-nine percent of female respondents strongly or moderately agreed that women need to be more visible in the political realm, compared to only 15% of male respondents. More women than men acknowledged seeing an increase in the number of successful women (women: 77%; men: 42%). Similarly, 56% of female respondents strongly or moderately agreed that more women should strive for leadership roles, compared to 30% of male respondents. There was overwhelming agreement and consensus on the statement, 'I want to be part of the new modernisation process in Arab countries' (women: 73%; men: 72%).

Courage and readiness for change. Respondents generally have high levels of self-confidence, personal courage, and strength. Across the three statements, men and women had consistent positive responses of strong or moderate agreement. Women felt confident in their courage to overcome challenges associated with working (84%) and their strength to promote women in society (87%). Sixty-five percent of men indicated both their courage and strength to address the challenges associated with the working life of women and promoting women in society. A strong majority (women: 84%; men: 67%) also believes in cooperation between men and women to improve society.

Attitudes toward future employment. Sixty-five percent of women and 59% of men said they preferred a workplace with no members of the opposite gender. Accordingly, 80% of women but only 35% of men could accept working for a female superior. In addition, an overwhelming majority of respondents expressed a desire to start their own business (women: 80%; men: 78%).

Stumbling blocks to female education and employment. There is a significant difference between the way men and women view the challenges to female education and employment in Saudi Arabia. While only 15% of female respondents believe that allowing women to work undermines Islamic practice, 43% of male respondents expressed this belief. Nearly half of the men (42%) and more than three quarters of the women (79%) said they believed that women should be given the chance to compete directly with men. However, strong majorities of women and men (76% and 64%) acknowledged that men receive more support than women.

Perceptions of the changing roles of men and women. Survey respondents selected up to six perception statements regarding the changing roles of men and women in their society. Their options included seeing change as a personal opportunity, a burden, a challenge for the country, a new wave of Arab modernization, part of a new policy, or part of a positive global trend. A strong majority of both men and women regard the development of gender roles as a personal opportunity (women: 65%; men: 61%) and as a new wave of Arab modernization (women: 62%; men: 56%), while a minority views the changing roles as a burden in their lives (women: 18%; men: 28%).

Discussion and Conclusions

The areas of education, political inclusion, and economic participation have been identified as means through which women can develop their own engagement with modernization and globalization. Women's rights are a sensitive subject in Saudi Arabia, as traditional conceptions of gender roles are often seen as part of the country's cultural identity. This was demonstrated by a government survey of women in 2006 where results showed 86% of women believed they should not be employed in environments with mixed genders and 89% believed they should not drive (Butters, 2009). While approval for far-reaching social change will never reach consensus, there are indications that changes may be forthcoming. By surveying a segment of the university

population in Saudi Arabia, this study seeks to inform strategy and policy by identifying the hopes, ambitions, priorities, and challenges regarding greater inclusion of women in these areas.

Overall, the majority of respondents regarded changing gender roles as a manifestation of the new wave of Arab modernization, demonstrating a transition away from tradition. Nearly half of those surveyed embrace these changes as part of a new national policy. There is a strong correlation between perceptions of the need for change and whether those changes are viewed as beneficial. When changes are considered necessary, they are also likely to be regarded as beneficial (women: $\rho=.416$, $p<0.001$; men: $\rho=.580$, $p<0.001$). By comparison, students who hold traditional views on female and male roles in domestic settings are more likely to consider any changes to these roles problematic and not part of a positive global trend.

As might be expected, female respondents are more optimistic about changing gender roles than male respondents. However, in light of Saudi Arabia's extreme respect for tradition, it is significant that more than half of women and nearly half of men view changes in gender roles as part of a positive global trend. Saudi women view the changing gender roles as an advantage to their professional lives, and they regard increased opportunities as beneficial.

The path to gender equity requires men to reconsider the formation of their own personal and professional lives as well. A majority of men regard changing gender roles as a personal opportunity. However, those with progressive attitudes toward gender roles must contend with those skeptical of benefits from any transformation. The courage and strength reported by both women and men to address these issues will be an asset in moving forward against such skepticism.

Education has the potential to greatly benefit women in Saudi Arabia. Women's aspirations to acquire additional qualifications and participate more fully in society, as reflected in the survey results, reflect a decisive new direction for the women's movement in Saudi Arabia. While more young women than men are eager to pursue their education beyond university, a majority of both desire further education. Study abroad offers the potential to explore a wide range of educational and social opportunities, especially for young Saudi women, currently more restricted by Saudi societal norms (Doumato, 2010). Though the law requires women travel abroad with a male guardian, this is rarely enforced (Doumato, 2010). After a slow process of adjustment, parents have more readily accepted study abroad for their daughters. Strategic measures by the government include expansion of scholarships, such as the King Abdullah scholarship program, so that students have financial resources to study abroad (The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, 2009). This lack of enforcement, adjustment by parents, and availability of funds has meant more study abroad opportunities and, therefore, educational opportunities, for all.

With a large portion of the population under the age of 25, the Saudi government has aimed to proactively grow new and diverse economic sectors offering employment by expanding higher education offerings (The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, 2009). The government has sought reciprocal agreements with universities in the West and Asia (The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, 2009). University departments have been augmented through the provision of expertise, curricula, lectures, and collaborations (The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, 2009).

Women's access to the job market, even with expansion of sectors, remains one of the most pressing and controversial challenges confronting Saudi Arabia's segregated society. Only a small majority of respondents, both male and female, said they believed their education would prepare them for future careers. With access to the job market tightly regulated and still limited for women, these findings should serve as a warning to Saudi Arabian policymakers responsible for education.

The attitude toward gender specific roles is relevant when it comes to segregation in the workplace. The more critically the students felt toward traditional roles and the more they saw a need for change, the less likely they were to prefer a workplace with no member of the opposite gender (women: $\rho = -.271$, $p < .001$; men: $\rho = -.264$, $p < .001$). Progressive men will more easily accept a female boss, while the boss's gender is not relevant for most women (women: $\rho = .060$, $p = .002$; men: $\rho = .459$, $p < .001$). Gender-segregated work environments have demonstrated women's ability to take leadership positions, as women do not face opposition from men in these workplaces. Proven leadership indicates that authority and competence in the workforce are not necessarily male domains, an important insight for Saudi Arabia, where men make all important legal, religious, and socio-political decisions.

One alternative to the traditional workplace is to go into business for oneself, an equally popular alternative among both female and male students. This is a viable path to independence for women, though approval of the woman's father or husband is always necessary for women to pursue such activities outside the household. Nonetheless, a private business is a viable and socially acceptable alternative to the public sector for many female university graduates, and microfinance offers potential for pursuing this path.

More women than men in this study believed women should increase their visibility in politics, government, and leadership. Their ability to act on these beliefs, however, hinges on increased societal acceptance of women's freedom in their everyday lives. Smaller steps, such as formal repeal of the Saudi labor code requiring workplace segregation, will be integral to this acceptance. Several access points for women to move into decision-making positions in Saudi Arabia exist. Women entering the workforce as entrepreneurs or working as leaders in university education are examples of women transitioning to decision-making roles. Involvement of women in the media, currently weak, could be another means of access, capitalizing on the majority view that media should promote positive role models for all. Exposure to works influenced by Islamic feminism by both women and men through electronic means, including online journal and websites (Badran, 2008), demonstrates the power of technology as an access point as well.

The findings from this study demonstrate that young Saudis have the opportunity to come together, find common ground, and confront changes occurring between old stereotypes and new realities, on their own terms. They will need to work together to confront the challenges that lie ahead in education, employment, and government. Though the pace may sometimes seem slow, the energy and enthusiasm are there.

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