

National Policies for Women Empowerment: Saudi Arabia

“Under Saudi Arabia’s male guardianship system, every woman must have a male guardian who has the authority to make a range of critical decisions on her behalf. Traditionally, a woman’s male guardian from birth is her father and once she is married her guardian becomes her husband. In other cases, such as when a woman’s father or husband has died, a brother or even her son may serve as her male guardian. All women in Saudi Arabia are subject to this practice. Until August 2019, women in Saudi Arabia were universally treated as legal minors, requiring a male relative’s permission for a range of critical decisions, such as working, obtaining family records, and applying for a passport. Women who traveled abroad were required to be accompanied by a male relative, including if they were attending school. Women also could not serve as legal guardians of their own children.” (Equality Now).

From 2018 to 2019, the Saudi government issued multiple laws and policies to catalyze a positive impact on women participation in the labor market. Several studies have assessed the short-term impact of each policy to understand the effect of policy on women’s participation in labor force. The assessments are “based on the adoption of well-known indicators approved by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the official entities in Saudi Arabia, such as the Ministry of Labor and the General Authority for Statistics” (Alotaibi, 2020).

Quick facts

Barriers addressed



Policy & Regulation
Broader legal constraints



Digital & Physical Infrastructure
Poor digital & foundational ID infrastructure



Social Norms
Mobility constraints
Ambivalence or antagonism towards women’s financial independence

Segment focus

1 2 3 4

Customer Journey Relevance



Geography

Saudi Arabia

Key stakeholders involved

Government of Saudi Arabia
Ministry of Interior’s Civil Affairs

Sources

[Al Arabiya, 2021](#); [Dawn, 2021](#);
[Equality Now](#); [Alotaibi, 2020](#).

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Key activities

1. In 2018, the restriction on women's right to drive was lifted.
2. In August 2019, Saudi Arabia changed the laws to allow "women above the age of 21 to apply for passports and travel freely without the permission of a male guardian. Other changes to the law have also allowed women to register a marriage, divorce, or their child's birth and to be issued official family documents." (Al Alarabiya, 2021).
3. Additionally in August 2019, the Kingdom passed reforms to protect women from employment discrimination and to make medical decisions related to birth and pregnancy about their own body.
4. As of 2021, "Saudi women can now live on their own without requiring the consent of their father or male guardian after a new legal amendment by the Kingdom." (Dawn, 2021).

Outcomes/results

Repealing these laws has had positive impacts on Saudi women's empowerment. "The female labor force participation rate was 15.1% in 2010. A major shift occurred in 2016 when it reached 18%, and this transformation continued when it reached 20.5% in 2019. This slight increase that happened in women's participation in labor market is due to granting women the right to drive in 2018. In the same year, and according to the statistics of Saudi Traffic Department there were 125,000 Saudi women who applied to extract driving licenses. Furthermore, the Saudi government issued a policy that allows women to travel without male consent, which enabled women to gain flexibility in terms of transport to gain a wider range of choices regarding job vacancies." (Alotaibi, 2020).

The gender gap on the rate of economic participation between men and women "reached its highest peak in 2013 at 48.3%, but it started to decrease in favor of women reaching 46.8% in 2015, and then it reached 42.8% in 2019." (Alotaibi, 2020). From 2015 to 2019, the percentage of increase in women's economic participation was 5% due to the new laws and regulations passed.

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Key enabling environment factors for the intervention

At the G20 meeting of 2019, Saudi Arabia took an interest in the Women Empowerment Initiative that targets lessening the wage gaps among men and women. The government also created the Saudi Vision 2030, which seeks to raise the participation of women into the workforce to 30% by 2030.

Key design elements and principles that led to successful outcomes

The main element to Saudi Arabia's interest in women's empowerment is repealing discriminatory laws. This involved removing discriminatory language. For example, paragraph (b) from Article 169 of the "Law of Procedure before Sharia Courts" once stated that "an adult single, divorced, or widowed woman would be handed over to her male guardian." (Dawn, 2021).

The language was replaced with an amendment which states: "An adult woman has the right to choose where to live." (Dawn, 2021). This new language explicitly centers women and ensures that women can choose where to live.

Potential for scale/replicability

These laws apply on a nationwide basis and affect all women in Saudi Arabia. Governments with similar legal restrictions in place can follow similar steps by setting women's economic empowerment targets accompanied by legal action.

Challenges encountered during the program

"Women in Saudi Arabia still require the permission of a male relative to:

- Leave prison
- Marry, or Divorce
- Or to exit a domestic abuse shelter

Women also still cannot pass on citizenship to their children, and male guardians are still able to file cases of disobedience against a woman, which includes absence from the home. Moreover, filial disobedience is still recognized as a crime." (Equality Now).

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Recommendations from the research

Researchers recommend studying the impacts of repealing these discriminatory laws more long term to see how women's economic empowerment changes over time. Additionally, more work is needed (as identified by the challenges listed above) to make men and women fully equal under the law.

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