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## The New and the Old: Responses to Change in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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The authors have contributed equally to the research. We are particularly grateful to the members of the PMU Undergraduate Research Society as well as the members of the PMU Cognitive Science Research Cluster for their assistance and feedback. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the corresponding author, Maura A. E. Pilotti, Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University, P.O. Box 1664, Al Khobar 31952, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. E-mail: [maura.pilotti@gmail.com](mailto:maura.pilotti@gmail.com). Office phone: +966 5351 66572.

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## The New and the Old: Responses to Change in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract

This qualitative study was primarily concerned with Saudi women's reactions to social change in the political sphere. It focused on their responses to decrees allowing women to vote in municipal elections for the first time, become candidates in such elections, and be nominated in the *Shura* Council by the King. Structured interviews of urban dwellers illustrated that changes, seen as opportunities, had been noted, but their impact had yet to be processed thoroughly. Attitudes towards political participation were positive and largely optimistic, but rarely seen as applying to the self. Competence, rather than gender, was seen as relevant to voters' views of political candidates as well as of elected or appointed officials. Compared with older interviewees, young ones viewed the impact of women's political participation, along with other social changes, as gradual, manageable, and merely one of the many articulations of the *2030 Vision*, a strategic framework developed by KSA intended to reduce the country's dependence on oil and diversify its economy. Both young and older interviewees, though, were reluctant to forecast its specific future impact. Actual political participation, in the form of either voting or running for office, was dismal. These results indicate that not only time is needed for top-down interventions to enter the social fabric of a nation and the minds of its people, but also the necessary conditions must exist that enable the genuine flourishing of human agency.

*Keywords:* Globalization, Cultural traditions, Saudi Arabia, Saudia Arabian women, women's political participation, Responses to change, Human agency

### Introduction

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), social changes seem to start from the top, through a formal decree that creates a new standard for behavior (Ehteshami, 2003; Le Renard, 2014). Consider, for instance, the decree, issued in 2017, allowing women to drive, or the decree dispensed in 2019 permitting Saudi women over the age of 21 to travel without a male guardian's

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permission. The new standard, which often treats as obvious what was once thought to be not merely forbidden, but unthinkable, is at first perceived as if it were a paradigmatic shift in science (Kuhn, 1962), a new landscape of opportunities to navigate carefully. In fact, decrees may target specific norms and behaviors, but they reflect a much broader alteration in the underlying conceptualization of the boundaries of the quotidian life. Yet, change is usually motivated from the bottom (Al-Khateeb, 1998). Decrees appear to respond to what young people have been demanding with steadily louder voices and older people have been expecting for quite some time (Al-Ghathami, 2005). As the distance between outside models of societal norms, mostly of Western import, and traditional standards increases, the pressure to shift away from habits and values previously endorsed also increases. When a decree sanctions the shift, making permissible what once was forbidden, people are presented with choices: obedience to traditional values, which can offer respectability, but also solidify a reputation for a *passé* way of being that is detached from purported “progress”, or adherence to foreign values, which may offer a sense of independence and inclusion in the global community, but also scorn from members of one’s local community who see change as a violation of traditional teachings. People may also choose to pursue conduct midway between change and tradition, but find themselves in the worst of all possible worlds: unrewarded by both reformers for not exhibiting sufficient confidence, and traditionalists for choosing to compromise on the uncompromisable (see Iannaccone & Miles, 1990).

According to de la Sablonnière (2017), social change is defined by four key properties: the pace of change (i.e., the speed at which circumstances impact a collective, requiring manageable adjustments or a break with the past), alteration of the current macro socio-economic structure (i.e., the degree to which circumstances require a re-definition and a re-evaluation of government with its underlying economic, political and social institutions and legal frameworks), alteration of the current normative structure (i.e., the degree to which circumstances demand that new habits, norms, and roles be adopted by the members of the collective and the degree to which existing ones are still available or are entirely obstructed), and threat to cultural identity (i.e., the extent to which current identities, values, and beliefs within a collective are endangered, challenged and/or debased by circumstances, thereby inducing identities to be lost, changed or at odds).

The properties of social change identified by de la Sablonnière (2017) allow societies around the world to be categorized in one of three states of being: status quo, incremental social change, or dramatic social change. When the equilibrium of a society’s social and normative structures and the cultural identity of its members are preserved through either stability or inertia, the label status quo applies. The difference between stability and inertia is that between a social order that is perceived by its members as functioning effectively with negligible disturbances, and a social order that is perceived by its members as in need of change, but is so rigid that alterations are both unlikely and unsustainable. The terms incremental and dramatic social changes refer to circumstances that disturb the current social order, leading to a substantial transformation of the social structure, normative structure, and/or the cultural identity of its members. The pace of the alterations differentiates incremental change, which does not suddenly generate open conflict between the old and new modes of being as it allows people to gradually adapt, from dramatic change, which shakes and disintegrates the equilibrium of the current order so rapidly and profoundly to make it unable to serve as a frame of reference. Dramatic social change demands that people reconstruct core elements of their existence. It calls for a re-definition of values, norms, and human relations. As habits and routine activities become ineffective or even inappropriate,

individuals are forced to learn new skills and new definitions of the self, as well as unlearn the old ways of doing things (Nadler & Tushman, 1995; Tomasik et al., 2010).

## Literature Review

Currently, KSA is in the process of substantially adapting its social and physical infrastructures to ensure a firmer inclusion into the global economy (Al-Khateeb, 1998; Haykel et al., 2015; Long, 2005). If Saudi people are asked about recent societal changes (as we have done in pilot work), they are likely to report a long list of instances, mostly involving women, who constitute 42.60 % of the entire population, but only 16.25% of the workforce (Global Media Insight, 2020; Trading Economics, 2018). According to Ménoret (2014, p. 114), “the oil boom was called *tafra* by ordinary Saudis, a word as opposed to the official notion of *tanmiya* (development) as a brusque leap is distinct from a progressive evolution”. Although the official discourse describes it as *tanmiya*, which sets the accent on the economic aspect, *tafra* reflects peoples’ realization that it is not only the economy that is changing but a whole way of life. To deal with the perils brought about by the wealth of *tafra*, a rigid code of conduct, based on a largely literal reading of Islamic texts (Qur’ān and Sunnah), was revived to govern the conduct of Saudi men and women in public and private spaces.

Are recent social and normative changes in the KSA society to be classified as reflecting a gradual or a dramatic alteration, as per the typology developed by de la Sablonnière (2017)? The making of another *tafra* might be currently in progress, driven by the need to reshape the economy of KSA to ease its integration into the global marketplace, the seeds of which were planted in peoples’ subjectivities in the oil boom era. However, if *Tafra* reflects people’s awareness of the deep changes that in the 1970s transformed not only their economy but also their way of life, including their very subjectivities, the current changes might not appear radical after all (Al-Ghadhami, 2005).

Undoubtedly, as a byproduct of reshaping the economy, gender roles, and more specifically, those of women, are changing (Hamdan, 2005). Le Renard (2014, p. 3) notes that “institutional actions, official declarations, lectures, decrees, regulations, reports, and measures” have coalesced in reforms promoting “women’s participation in society and women’s rights in Islam”. Reforms have redesigned the “possibilities, opportunities, and spaces accessible to Saudi women”. In principle, now women can pursue professions and jobs before forbidden, possess greater freedom of mobility and independence, and can even assume leadership positions and consider political participation. Reforms from the top have percolated into more trivial aspects of the quotidian. A walk to a nearby mall or urban street offers observers a backdrop of women sporting colorful abayas, faces unobstructed by niqābs (face veils), music being played, and the palpable disappearance of gender segregation from cafes, restaurants, banks, and shops, which, in a recent past, created separate entrances and spaces for men and women. Although changes are visible in the everyday fabric of the KSA society, especially among young women of college age, there is either a desire for more concessions by the recipients or a degree of resistance by the recipients themselves, their families, and tribes who see changes as depriving women of the protections that confinement afforded them in the past. For instance, reports, albeit scarce, exist indicating that views of the prototypical Saudi family and its physical structure are shifting into a less uniform mode, which includes a decline in family size, a greater tolerance or even appreciation for women’s education and work outside the house, an increase in the age at which young people marry, and an enhanced recognition that both husband and wife are responsible for making

decisions about family affairs (Hamdan, 1990). The belief that women's education is important in determining their social status in the KSA society may be on the rise along with young and middle-aged men's support for gender equality (as reported by De Jong & Moaddel, 2013). However, it coexists with a gender-segregated educational system supported by the belief that separate spaces for males and females protect learning and its recipients by removing distractions from academic pursuits (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013).

Social change involves, at the minimum, some degree of tension between the old and the new. Yet, to understand whether the wave of changes currently reshaping women's quotidian life in KSA reflects a gradual or a dramatic shift, in the present study, we asked the very people who are affected by it. We focused on one type of change, political participation, because of the ambiguity with which this innovation can be perceived by both men and women. On the one hand, it might be seen as opposing traditional gender roles that have been learned from a young age (Al-Bakr et al., 2017), and that embody the Wahhābī's interpretation of the Qur'an. According to the latter, the role of women is limited to the family (Alireza, 1987). Modesty codes, gender segregation, and male guardianship are key to an upright life, thereby applying to all spheres of the quotidian, from education and employment to all sorts of human interactions in public and private settings (Baki, 2004; Prokop, 2003). On the other hand, political participation might be viewed as capable of counteracting women's past exclusion from their full share of a wide range of opportunities (Smith, 1987), as well as being inspired by the roles of iconic female figures in the history of Islam (Badawi, 1995; Hamdan, 2005). Not surprisingly, several women, all linked to Prophet Muhammad, are often cited in historical texts as having had prominent roles in the social, political, and economic affairs of the early Islamic communities, such as Aisha bint Abī Bakr who was a thinker of religious and legal matters, as well as the narrator and teacher of Prophet Muhammad's message, serving the Muslim community for several years after his death, Khadija bint Khuwaylid who managed a successful commercial enterprise and was a prominent businesswoman, and Fatimah bint Muhammad who was heavily involved in the undertakings of her father, Prophet Muhammad.

Undoubtedly, social change is reflected in one's culture (i.e., normative structure in the vocabulary of de la Sablonnière, 2017). Culture consists of "shared elements that provide standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historical period, and a geographic location" (Shavitt et al., 2008, p. 1103). Scholars have relied on specific dimensions to capture the diversity of cultural instantiations around the world. Consider, for instance, individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), dimensions often linked to geographically distinct parts of the world. Individualism, located in the Western world, is viewed as assigning priority to the individual seen as an independent self, whereas collectivism, located in the Far East, is seen as assigning priority to an interdependent self, whose loyalty to the extended family and tribe as well as attention to in-group harmony are relevant (Triandis, 1989; Triandis, et al., 1988). KSA's traditional culture, as an expression of a Middle Eastern ethos, has been described as collectivistic, whereby loyalty to the family and tribe is of great importance (Abdrabboh, 1984). Yet, collectivism may be either horizontal, which emphasizes equality among all, or vertical, which emphasizes hierarchies (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). In this regard, KSA's traditional culture has been described in contradictory terms as one that tolerates or even endorses inequalities within a hierarchically organized social structure (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) and values honor and competition, or one that, propelled by Islam, favors egalitarianism (Dar, 2013; Davis & Robinson, 2006; Gibb, 1980; Khalid & Arshad, 2011) as well as harmony and collaboration. Moreover,

Islamic and local traditions and customs are difficult to pull apart because of the intermingling of tribal and Islamic affiliations that comprise the social fabric of KSA (El-Solh & Mabro, 1994; Jawad, 1998; Nevo, 1998; Metz, 1992). Research evidence not only is unclear as to the origins of specific traditions and customs, but also neglects to address the issue of the prevalence of biculturalism in the youth of the region, which is fostered by the promotion of bilingualism in formal education since an early age (Drbseh, 2015; Selvi & Yazan, 2017), and by intercultural exchanges made possible by internet surfing, interactions with expatriates who live in urban centers, and trips abroad (Ménoret, 2005; Murphy, 2012; Stürmer et al., 2013). Although KSA nationals who inhabit urban centers have received ample exposure to Western practices, beliefs, and values, all, and especially women, have endured a rigid code of conduct since a young age that has reinforced local tribal and religious norms, beliefs, values, and practices. The research outlined below emerges from this complex and ambiguous cultural context.

### **The Present Study**

The main aim of the present research was to report the responses of Saudi women to the changes that have been introduced in their society by decrees allowing women for the first time to vote in municipal elections, be candidates in such elections (2015), as well as be nominated in the Shura Council by the King (2013). The latter is an advisory body, which proposes laws to the King and his cabinet, but has no executive power. Female interviewees were selected to foster relaxed and candid exchanges. Responses of males were also sought, but their participation in our survey was expected to be scarce due to interiorized gender segregation customs creating self-imposed physical barriers between male interviewees and female interviewees. We analyzed responses to changes in political participation opportunities by KSA residents living in the urban centers of the Eastern Region and Riyadh (the capital), as city dwellers would be the first to encounter evidence of the impact of decrees. We aimed to answer the following broad questions and test related hypotheses:

- ✓ *Nature of attitudes.* Overall, did the change in the roles of women in politics evoke a positive response, embracing the change, negative, affirming conflict with traditional values of womanhood, or neutral, barely registering as notable? If a change was detected, did participants see political participation opportunities and realities as indicators of an incremental or dramatic transformation of the social structure, normative structure, and/or the cultural identity of KSA? Specifically, were the opportunities made available by changes in one's society seen as subverting established norms of conduct and values of womanhood taught since a young age (cultural shift), or merely offering alternatives (cultural opening)? We predicted that if political participation was perceived as just one aspect of an ongoing gradual transformation, it would not be seen as suddenly generating conflict between the old and the new modes of being because members would be allowed to gradually adapt. Alternatively, if it was perceived as one of the signs of a dramatic shift, participants would see it as shaking and disintegrating the equilibrium of the current order so rapidly and profoundly to demand that members hastily reconstruct core elements of their existence.
- ✓ *Demographic difference.* Although it is difficult to predict how any particular person responds to a social change institutionalized in decrees, we

thought it would be reasonable to make some guarded generalizations for broad classes of individuals. Thus, we asked whether responses were different depending on gender, age, or educational level. Age group differences were forecasted. For instance, different sentiments could be ignited by change seen by young interviewees as what they had been demanding, and by older interviewees as what they had been expecting. Furthermore, older interviewees were thought to be more cautious and less optimistic about the actual impact of women's political participation on the social fabric of KSA. In contrast, no substantial differences were expected in gender or educational level (as per pilot work).

Of interest were also topic-specific issues such as

- ✓ *The relevance of gender*: Was gender perceived as relevant in politics?
- ✓ *Current and future expectations*: Were there specific expectations for women holding public office? What could be the future for women's role in politics?
- ✓ *Personal opportunities*: Did interviewees see opportunities for themselves resulting from the decrees?
- ✓ *Level of women's past and future actual engagement in politics*: Did female interviewees vote in past elections? Did they seek public office? Would female interviewees vote in future elections? Would they seek public office?

Gender was not expected to be judged as relevant in politics. Irrespective of the influence that gender segregation customs might still hold, competence, broadly defined, was predicted to be the most mentioned factor. Based on the recency of the decree, reports of low levels of females' participation in politics, as either voters or candidates, were anticipated, irrespective of whether the past, present, or future was considered. Beyond estimates of participation rates, how respondents would explicitly forecast the nature and impact of women's political participation in the future was a matter to be investigated.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants ( $n = 469$ ) were Saudi citizens from urban centers of the Eastern Region of KSA and the capital Riyadh. Their demographic characteristics are described in Table 1. Participants' selection occurred in two phases as part of a class project on developing analytical skills through interpersonal exchanges and analyses of behavioral data. First, female undergraduate students (age range: 18-25) of a University located in the Eastern Region of KSA were asked to participate in a structured interview, serving as a practice session, whereby they were questioned by trained interviewers who provided the students with materials, instructions, and advice on their subsequent task. After this practice session, each student interviewed 5 members of her social circle (e.g., relatives within one's extended family and outside members, such as friends) all of whom had to be Saudi citizens 18 or older. This procedure was intended to ensure that a diverse array of individuals would be questioned besides the students themselves. Interviewees resided in urban centers, including Riyadh, Dammam, Dahrn, Khobar, Qatif, Jubayl, Saihat, and Safwa.



### *Procedure*

The structured interview was presented as a study on people's responses to social changes. Participants were reminded that a few years ago, Saudi women ran for elective office for the first time. The goal of the interview was to understand the views that Saudi people across generations hold regarding women's political participation (as both voters and candidates). It contained a series of questions organized into thematic clusters. Questions from a thematic cluster were intermixed with those of other clusters to ensure that the interviewer could probe further within a theme without encouraging mere reiterations or inducing resistance.

1. *Awareness* of changes regarding women's participation in politics: "Can you describe the latest changes in women's political participation in KSA? If yes, why do you think these changes are happening?"
2. *General opinion* of women in politics: "What do you think of women's holding political positions?"
3. *Expectations* regarding women in politics: "Today, women are part of the Shura Council, they can vote and be elected in municipal councils. What is expected of women in the Shura Council?", "Do you think such participation in politics will lead to changes in Saudi society? If so, what changes?", and "Will women's participation in politics be the same or change in the future?"
4. *Opportunities* for self: "What opportunities do you see for yourself in the fact that women are part of the Shura Council, and can vote and be elected in Municipal Councils?"
5. *Direct participation–Past*: "Have you ever participated in a political campaign?", and "Have you ever voted?"  
*Direct participation–Future*: "Do you see yourself in politics?", "Would you run in future elections? If so, would you use social media for campaigning or other tools?", and "If you were in the Shura Council or Municipal Council, what improvements would you like to bring to your country/area?"
6. *Relevance of gender* in politics: "Would you vote for a female candidate instead of a male?", and "Do you think that having a female (rather than a male) in the Shura Council would make it easier for you to bring your concerns to the decision-makers?"
7. *Social support* for role changes (including the availability of role models inside and outside the family): "Would you be able to count on the support of your family members had you decided to run for office?", and "Are there any obstacles Saudi women face when they try to enter politics?" "Is there a woman who makes you feel proud because she holds an office? Why?"

Each question was always followed by the statement "Please explain your answer" to ensure that responses would be the result of careful reflection. At the end of the interview session, a set of demographic questions were asked, including age, city of residence, marital status, occupation, and educational level. To ensure candor, anonymity was guaranteed by labeling the interviewee's responses with a numerical code. The interview protocol complied with the guidelines of the Office for Human Research Protections of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and with the American Psychological Association's ethical standards in the treatment of human subjects.

## Results

Participants' responses were organized by the issue addressed in a question or set of questions. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify the themes of the participants' answers. To detect stable trends in our qualitative data set, answers that received above 80% consensus across all respondents of the selected sample or within a given subgroup are reported below. Demographic information (i.e., age category, gender, and educational level) is mentioned whenever discrepancies of viewpoints exist. Otherwise, responses are combined. Idiosyncratic responses are occasionally reported if they help elucidate an ambiguous matter. Important to note is that although respondents often quoted the Qur'ān and Sunnah as supporting beliefs, attitudes, values, practices, and predictions, the results summarized below focus on the thematic contents they reported. In some cases, responses reflect participants' tendency to conflate answers about the present and the future, which illustrates their view of life as a continuum that cannot be easily separated into distinct timelines.

1. Awareness of changes regarding women's participation in politics: "Can you describe the latest changes in women's participation in politics in KSA? If yes, why do you think these changes are happening?"

All participants admitted noting changes in the opportunities given to women. Although facial expressions indicated approval, not much specificity was offered as a description of or explanation for the observed changes, even after gentle prodding. If an explanation was given, it was often a brief reference to the *2030 Vision*, a strategic framework developed by KSA intended to reduce the country's dependence on oil and diversify its economy through the development of key sectors, such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism.

Interviewees appeared to like the change in women's political participation, but most said they did not devote much thought to it and were puzzled by, or indifferent to its actual impact. Exceptions existed though, mostly involving young females who saw the change as one of the indicators of a broadening of the opportunities available to women in the workforce. Yet, a state of cognitive dissonance was also communicated. For instance, one of the interviewees remarked that it was like the experience she had when her dad surprised her by buying her a car, even before she had the opportunity to get a driver's license. The car looked amazing and made her dream of all the ways she could use it, and of how her daily life would be more autonomous, and her mobility uncomplicated by negotiations with family members regarding traveling. But for several months she just kept it in the driveway without making the necessary steps to take driving lessons. The car represented enticing gains, but also the loss of a way of life to which she had grown accustomed. She stated, as an afterthought, that not all women might even want to drive.

2. General opinion of women in politics: "What do you think of women's holding political positions?"

All answers expressed a positive attitude towards the role of women in politics. Political engagement was seen as related to the increased presence of women in the workforce. Indeed, explanations were often embedded in the idea of KSA as a country undergoing economic restructuring which would bring about changes in other areas. Decrees, some noted, were merely responding to what young people have been demanding and the older ones were expecting for a long time. This comment captures a generational difference in responses to change. Most interviewees (age range: 18-39) implied that changes were merely cosmetic as they would not alter the tribal and family structure of the country, including people's loyalty to and respect for their

family and tribe, and would preserve other unique features of KSA, from substantial ones, such as its firm commitment to the Islamic religion, to superficial ones, such as its traditional food. Women's political participation was equated by one interviewee to the impact of wind or rain on a drawing engraved on a stone, just too hardened to be altered by any weather phenomena. Clashes between local traditions and participation in political affairs by females were not reported. The names of iconic women in Islamic history were retrieved to illustrate continuity and justify comfort with the idea of women in politics. In contrast, older interviewees (40 or older) were less likely to see women's political participation as a cosmetic shift. They saw it as a sign of broader alterations of the "order of things" (as one respondent stated), although they expressed positive attitudes towards the increased opportunities given to women. They often recognized that it was just a sign of a much broader shift in people's ways of being, and expressed uncertainty regarding the survival of the current collectivistic structure of KSA based on family values, tribal honor, and loyalty. The hold of Islam was not seen as challenged by women's political participation but rather as a logical expression of a tradition of iconic women in Islamic history. However, it was also recognized that political participation would require women to adopt behaviors in public settings that had been unthinkable a few years ago. Respondents who were currently employed focused their attention on the opportunities as well as the demands that they and their families would have to confront, and also expressed uncertainty regarding how to prepare for the future. Some reported that they were in the process of figuring out how to adjust. Yet, no one mentioned that more opportunities for women meant fewer opportunities for men. Most respondents noted though that men and women would be held to the same standards.

3. Expectations regarding women in politics: "Today, women are part of the Shura Council, they can vote and be elected in municipal councils. What is expected of women in the Shura Council?", "Do you think such participation in politics will lead to changes in Saudi society? If so, what changes?", and "Will women's participation in politics be the same or change in the future?"

Participants remarked that women's political participation as voters, candidates, or elected officials was expected to be the same as that of men. The expectation of competence to solve problems in local communities was mentioned as the only qualifying factor for both candidates to public office and elected or appointed officials. Whether women's participation in politics would lead to specific changes in the KSA society was frequently answered affirmatively, but generally. As noted earlier, the belief that participation was just one of the many items on the government's agenda of economic developments was held firm. Yet, it was not considered the most relevant one for women. Freedom of movement (e.g., driving, traveling without being accompanied by a guardian or needing his permission), and independence to choose a career that fits one's interests were reported as key.

Respondents often declared that women's participation in politics would increase in the future, either as voters or candidates. Both women and men viewed participation as an indicator of changing gender roles, which was perceived as an advantage to women's professional lives, increasing their opportunities but also the demands placed upon them. However, estimates remained vague. No one was willing to venture into more specific predictions regarding the demographics of the predicted change or its nature. The most common answer, if prodding was exercised, was "Inshallah" (i.e., if God wills). Again, the split between young and older respondents was detected in the degree to which they imagined the impact of this and other changes on their future existence. Without specificity added to it, the young respondents reported the

impact to be noticeable but merely the outcome of a progression of small steps, whereas the older respondents saw it as a leap into a largely unknown territory whose outcome was uncertain.

4. Opportunities for self: “What opportunities do you see for yourself in the fact that women are part of the Shura Council and can vote and be elected in Municipal Councils?”

By and large, respondents did not have much to say in response to this question. In most cases, irrespective of age, gender, and educational level, participants claimed that they were not interested in politics, they would not seek elective office and were unsure as to whether they would vote. Most admitted not to have voted in the past, even if they were of age. Further probing suggested that female-elected or appointed officials were seen as role models or merely indices of permissible conduct for other women. Frequently, the name of Princess Reema Al Saud, who has been serving as the Ambassador to the United States since 2019, was mentioned with pride as illustrating how women’s political participation is just one aspect of a much greater alteration of women’s place in society. Her name was followed by comments regarding women’s competence as critical to their success as well as to their being national resources to be showcased to the world.

5. Direct participation–Past: “Have you ever participated in a political campaign?”, and “Have you ever voted?”

Most individuals who were qualified to vote in past elections did not vote and no one participated in a political campaign. Their answers reflected the novelty of the opportunities available and the ensuing uncertainty as to their nature and consequences. All, however, made it clear that they cared about the wellbeing of their communities and of the *Ummah*, the larger community of all people who follow the Islamic creed. Some of them were eager to note that they used traditional channels to address issues within their communities. Namely, if unable to find a solution by themselves, they would rely on elders within their family or tribe for assistance. If the latter were unable to offer adequate assistance, they would enlist community mediators or judges (see Abu-Nimer, 1996; Pely, 2009). The same respondents noted that women serving as political representatives alongside men would be just a channel added to existing ones, but not necessarily the first one on which to rely.

*Direct participation–Future:* “Do you see yourself in politics?”, “Would you run in future elections? If so, would you use social media for campaigning or other tools?”, and “If you were in the Shura Council or Municipal Council, what improvements would you like to bring to your country/area?”

Most respondents reiterated their lack of interest in politics. It is reasonable to wonder to what extent this common assertion realistically reflected their viewpoints. Indeed, most respondents were quick to point out that they did not like politics, were not interested in it, or were not qualified to speak about it. Yet, they were quick to point out specific reforms and changes when asked what they would do as members of the Shura Council or Municipal Council. They noted that they would focus on improving education (1<sup>st</sup> choice), work opportunities and conditions (2<sup>nd</sup> choice), and infrastructure (3<sup>rd</sup> choice). For the latter, roads and parks were mentioned. Participants also noted that in the unlikely case of their being candidates in future elections, they would certainly use social media. Some listed several tools and mentioned their effectiveness in reaching a diverse group of potential voters. Thus, disinterest might be the expression of conformity to decades of learned exclusion or an eloquent refusal to pretend to possess a right whose impacts and implications are not clearly understood.

6. Relevance of gender in politics: “Would you vote for a female candidate instead of a male?”, and “Do you think that having a female (rather than a male) in the Shura Council would make it easier for you to bring your concerns to the decision-makers?”

The answers to the question of whether the gender of a candidate matters in voting were consistently a firm denial. Respondents made it a point to note that competence is what counts. However, for most female respondents, the idea of talking to a woman did not necessarily make the process of discussing an issue or conveying a concern easier. They often reiterated that solving problems in their communities required competence, along with knowledge of local matters and social relations. Some female respondents added that if an issue involved a dispute between parties, and was perceived as unlikely to be addressed fairly, they would go directly to a judge rather than to a community mediator because community mediators were often men favoring men.

7. Social support for role changes (including the availability of role models inside and outside the family): “Would you be able to count on the support of your family members had you decided to run for office?”, and “Are there any obstacles Saudi women face when they try to enter politics?” “Is there a woman who makes you feel proud because she holds an office? Why?”

Responses regarding social support were mixed, including expectations of acceptance, tolerance, and fear of disapproval, but not necessarily organized along education or age lines. Most female respondents said that family and tribe members would be surprised or even skeptical at first and that support would be given if they proved that they had the competencies necessary for the position they sought. Male respondents mostly reported that their families would be supportive but that competencies and the reasons behind their choices were critical for determining the extent to which support would be granted. Thus, uncertainty regarding social support seemed to define more the responses of females than those of males. Obstacles for women were reported to be family obligations (e.g., children), misperceptions of them as failing traditional roles, and poor confidence in their abilities. Concerning role models, the name of Princess Reema Al Saud was again mentioned with pride by female respondents as somebody to emulate in life. The names of iconic females in Islamic history were also cited as if they were still alive.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the present study can be summarized in three main points: First and foremost, there was a considerable uniformity in participants’ answers across age, gender, and educational levels. Attitudes were by and large positive towards women’s political participation perhaps due to the sample of individuals interviewed. They inhabited urban centers where Western expatriates are numerous and familiarity with foreign modes of being is widespread. Yet, it is important to note the difference between attitudes towards women in politics, which were consistently positive, and attitudes towards the broader context of social change, as embodied by the myriad of ongoing alterations in KSA, which were perceived with a mixture of hope and palpable uncertainty. The degree to which one prevailed over the other appeared to involve the age of the respondent. Indeed, there were two exceptions to the uniformity of responses towards women’s political participation, both involving age. (a) Younger participants tended to see the changes occurring in their society (including women’s political participation) as gradual, thereby requiring manageable adjustments. Instead, most older participants saw the same changes more as abrupt social alterations that visibly broke from the past, entailing a re-definition of values, norms, relations, and identities, and thus making old ways of being obsolete. (b) Older respondents not

only regarded changes in the present as drastic but also were less clear about the impact of such changes in the future seen as a largely unknown space. Young respondents reported the impact to be noticeable but merely the outcome of a progression of small steps. The future appeared less uncertain to them, albeit predictions by both age groups were meager on details. Thus, age differences did not merely involve distinct views of changes in the present. They also extended to the future, reflecting ostensibly unique coping mechanisms. Young adults appeared to rely on minimization as a way to deal with change, treating its impact now and in the future as a manageable task. This strategy might have been a way to address an unsatisfied thirst for change, as well as the byproduct of preparation since they had imagined change in diverse areas of life for quite some time. Although young respondents noted the opportunities that did not exist in the past for women, they were not blind to the demands of time and effort that such opportunities might place upon the recipients. Older respondents dealt with the discomfort and effort of having to discard old ways of being and adopt new ones by magnifying change and envisioning its impact less clearly. The strategy might have been an effective mind trick for mobilizing one's resources to adjust to changes and thus enhancing one's resilience. Yet, both age groups saw opportunities for women. Many interviewees remarked that such opportunities had taken more time than they had anticipated.

The discrepancies we uncovered between young and older participants are reminiscent of the different conceptualizations of change held by scholars such as Al-Ghathami and Canclini (Kraidy, 2018). Al-Ghathami (2005) sees a battle between the old and the new (modernity). The battle is about replacing the old with modernity which he sees as an imported product promoted by the news media and social media. Canclini (1995) sees change as a mixing of the old and the new. Mixing entails contradictions that foster an unending uncertainty regarding the meaning of modernity as a human condition. Both agree though that modernity is to embrace the unforeseen and uncertain.

In agreement with earlier investigations of social change (see Stewart & Healy, 1989), our data indicate that within a society in transition, social changes may be perceived differently by its members, due to varying life experiences and selective attention. As such, our data question de la Sablonnière's conceptualization of social change as an expression of an entire social system (2017) and suggest that it be revised to integrate cross-sectional differences. Indeed, the subjective experiences of change in various agents within a society are unlikely to be perfectly uniform, albeit diversity may not be immediately visible or necessarily influential. Of course, age might be a key factor in shaping views and reactions to change in urban populations, but whether it is equally influential in rural communities is difficult to extrapolate. In the latter, exposure to foreign modes of being is more limited and the social and normative structures are more rigid.

Second, both women and men in our study believed women's visibility in politics, government, and leadership would increase in the future. It was tacitly admitted though that women's ability to act on these beliefs would hinge on increased societal acceptance of their freedom in everyday life. The nature of such freedom appeared something that was yet to be clearly defined. The fact that older respondents noted that change might require leaving something behind, brings up the question of the nature of the discarded cultural items. Is it the collectivistic nature of the social fabric of KSA which fosters harmony, collaboration, and loyalty to the family and tribe (Abdrabboh, 1984)? Is it the value of honor encouraged by the hierarchy of the social structure (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), or the egalitarianism and modesty propelled by Islam (Dar, 2013; Davis & Robinson, 2006; Gibb, 1980; Khalid & Arshad, 2011)? These questions

were not answered by our participants, thereby suggesting that for both age groups, the familiarity of the quotidian might make these properties impervious to unprompted analysis.

Third, the data of the present study spoke of citizens who had noticed the undergoing changes in their country and were adjusting to them. Often, adjustments had not been fully processed. Predictions and plans had been only partially articulated. Nevertheless, most of the changes that our participants noted showcased women. Interestingly, in the minds of our respondents, not all changes were treated as equal. Women's participation in politics was seen as just one aspect of a broader transformation in women's lives, but not one to which much attention had been devoted. Not surprisingly, changes in the workforce, workplace, and education appeared to be much more relevant and impactful. Agreement existed though that if women were given a public forum from which to operate, their skills and work products would be recognized as valuable as those of men.

Our study has limitations that constrain broad generalizations. We targeted urban dwellers to assess the impact of change on a population that was likely to have experienced it. It is unclear how rural dwellers in different regions of KSA might respond to the idea of women's political participation. Furthermore, young adults were disproportionately represented in our sample. Albeit efforts were made to equate the sample of older adults to that of young adults, interview requests made to older adults were more frequently declined. The numbers displayed in Table 1 illustrate the extent to which participation was uneven. Reasons might include uneasiness with the topic and unfamiliarity with the experience of being interviewed. Indeed, in debriefings, some interviewers explicitly mentioned that the elderly of the family had declined to participate because they perceived politics with distrust and concern. Thus, they wanted to keep their distance. Other limitations pertain to the data collection and analysis adopted. For instance, our reliance on structured interviews, even with the promise of anonymity, might have encouraged less candor than a questionnaire to be filled out in the privacy of one's home. Our reliance on female interviewers might have promoted participation in female interviewees but did not have the same encouraging effect on males. The absence of gender differences might also have been fostered by our sole reliance on female interviewers. Lastly, even though our grouping of the data into two broad age categories illustrated qualitatively different ways of responding to change by young and older respondents, it might have led us to overlook a more linear continuum of qualitatively different responses.

According to Markham (2013), women's participation in the political process affects not only the range of issues that a nation, or more modestly a local collective, may consider but also the types of solutions that are put forth. Yet, the mere visibility of women in leadership roles is a symbol of change, making them an example for other women to follow (see Butz, 2009). Thus, the participation of Saudi women in the political process, as voters as well as candidates, can be expected to be impactful even if participation rates are initially low (see Quamar, 2016), and their restructuring of the quotidian is still a work in progress.

**Table 1. Demographic Information of the Selected Sample**

<i>Variables</i>		Female ( <i>n</i> = 392)	Male ( <i>n</i> = 77)
Marital Status	Single	62.5%	48.1%
	Married	37.5%	51.9%
Age Group	18-39	75.0%	61.0%
	40 or Older	25.0%	39.0%
Primary Occupation	Student	43.9%	20.8%
	Employed	41.0%	74.0%
	Unemployed/Retired	15.1%	5.2%
Education	High School	58.9%	32.5%
	Bachelor Degree	32.4%	62.3%
	Graduate Degree	8.7%	5.2%

*Note:* Individuals with a high-school diploma include undergraduate students.



**Authors' Note**

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