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## What Are the Attitudes towards Changing Gender Roles within the Saudi Family?

By Rasis Alanazi,<sup>1</sup> Munira AlHugail,<sup>2</sup> and Taghreed Almeshary<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Saudi Vision 2030 was launched with a focus on three main themes: “a vibrant society,” “a thriving economy,” and “an ambitious nation” (2017). In order to realize these primary themes, more participation of women is required in the workforce. A number of legislative reforms have supported the entry of more women into the workforce, such as lifting the male guardian permission for work and travel, supporting programs for childcare, allowing women to drive cars, and ensuring women’s involvement in leadership positions. Saudi women are now working in defense, mining, construction, manufacturing, and retail among other sectors. As a result, women's participation in the workforce increased from 19.4% in 2017 to 35.6% in the second quarter of 2022. Because these social and economic transformations have the potential to influence the dynamics within the Saudi family, this study investigates the attitudes of Saudi men and women toward gender roles within the Saudi family. Based on the short version of the Attitudes toward Women Scale, an online questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 431 Saudis in the fall of 2022. Statistical analyses were conducted to measure women’s attitudes compared to men’s overall scores. Results of the independent sample *t*-test indicated that women held more pro-feminist attitudes compared to men.

*Keywords:* Social Attitudes, Empowerment, Gender roles, Stereotypes, Saudi Vision 2030, Women’s Employment, Saudi Arabia, Feminist

### Introduction

Through the Saudi Vision of 2030, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia aims to empower women economically, politically, and socially. To ensure women’s participation and involvement in every sector (Naseem & Dhruva, 2017), different educational programs and initiatives have been launched nationally to help in achieving women’s full involvement. One initiative that was established in Saudi Arabia by the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (2019) was the Women in the Workplace Initiative. The goal of the initiative was to create better working environments for women in the labor force and to guarantee equal pay (Vitacco, 2019).

Saudi Arabia has undertaken many changes and shifts to increase women’s engagement and empowerment. These amendments to civil and labor laws improved women’s rights and addressed issues such as travel, employment, and finance that were mostly linked to male guardian approval (Nieva, 2016). With these changes, there have been studies that focused on

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women in the workforce and their participation in the labor market (Al-Shetaiwi, 2002; Mahdi, 2008). However, given the new regulations in accordance with Saudi Vision 2030 that aim to raise women's participation in the workforce, further studies should examine and explore the outcomes of women's empowerment. Several laws have been modified to ensure women's full engagement in the public and private sectors. This study helps in better understanding the attitudes of men and women towards the recent changes associated with women's engagement in the job market.

### **Economic Advantages of Empowering Women**

Women entrepreneurs in each economy play an influential role in developing countries, which means that entrepreneurship is essential to the development of a country's economic system (Al-Hawaj & Twizell, 2016). In the last two decades, women entrepreneurs in the Arab world have gradually increased in number. More Arab businesswomen have achieved regional and global recognition. This indicates that education is critical to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit among young women and girls in Saudi Arabia. Several positive shifts for women in Muslim countries have been explained by westernization, modernization, globalization, raised educational achievement, positive work experiences, and changes to the traditional role for women (Abdalla, 1996).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has driven headlines with its aim to "modernize the economy" and enforce the structural reforms required to recognize the country's "Vision 2030" (Topal, 2019). At the same time, current "pro-women reforms" have been praised in the international media. When women are empowered to work and contribute more, the potential for economic growth becomes more apparent, as most women worldwide depend on the informal employment sector as a source of income. Empowering women in developing countries is fundamental to reducing global poverty, as women constitute a large part of the number of poor people worldwide (Topal, 2019).

According to Ferguson and Harman (2015), the World Bank (2012-2015) has presented women's empowerment as one of the main factors that decrease poverty and help countries' overall development. However, there is no one agreed-upon scale globally that would measure countries' shifts toward women's empowerment.

Alasgah and Rizk (2021) have suggested that legal empowerment encourages women to know their legal rights and acquire societal support that helps them exercise these rights. Implementation of laws that support and defend women's rights provides a clear consequence for any violation of rights through the judicial system.

### **Cultural and Social Factors**

Gender stereotypes, in accordance with social role theory, result from the unequal distribution of men and women in social roles at home and work (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Kite, 1997; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Traditionally women have handled the majority of household chores and served as the primary caregivers. Women have a propensity towards working in service-oriented, people-oriented jobs as opposed to historically men-dominated and competitive, thing-oriented jobs in the workplace (Lippa et al., 2014). Not only are gender stereotypes used to describe others but also to describe oneself (Bem, 1974). Self-stereotyping has the potential to construct people's identities to fit stereotypes (Wood & Eagly, 2015). Thus, stereotypical traits may be absorbed and integrated into one's gender identity, a crucial component of one's self-concept. Young boys and girls pick up on gender stereotypes from their surroundings and the media, and they also learn how to act in ways that are considered proper for their gender. These socialization experiences undoubtedly continue to have an impact later in life, and research shows that men and women characterize themselves differently in ways that are consistent with stereotypes (Bem, 1974; Spence & Buckner, 2000).

The sorts of professions that are regarded as acceptable for each gender are frequently determined by gender stereotypes. These jobs are therefore referred to as largely masculine or feminine jobs (Heilman, 1983).

Increased cultural acceptance of women's independence in daily life is necessary for gender fairness (Al-Bakr et al., 2017). Thus, this study aimed to examine Saudi women's perceptions of gender roles in order to provide a better understanding of the changing position of women in Saudi Arabia and the underlying social dynamics behind these changes (Almunajjed, 1997). The relationship between education, social opportunity, and economic engagement has recently come to light in research and publications, particularly for women (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Almunajjed, 2010).

Prior research suggests that stereotypes are persistent and have a tendency to be reinforced via cognitive distortion (Hilton & Hippel, 1996; Heilman, 2012). As a result, the imbalanced distribution of gender in social positions contributes to the preservation of old gender stereotypes. The researchers aim to investigate whether gender stereotypes have changed to reflect current advancements in gender equality in the workplace and the easing of strict representations of men and women in historically pervasive gender roles.

It is uncertain to what extent there has actually been a shift in social roles; hence the answer to this issue is not simple. On the one hand, there are now higher numbers of women working in Saudi Arabia. Since Vision 2030 launched, women's participation in the workforce reached 35.6% as compared to 19.4% in 2017 (General Authority for Statistics). The findings demonstrate that old gender stereotypes are still prevalent in many ways. However, gender stereotypes still have an impact on women as they still perceive themselves as lacking in assertiveness and leadership skills compared to men. These findings, which take into account several facets of the agency construct, portend poorly for the ability of women to curb their propensity to restrict their options. Evidently, there is still a long way to go until conventional gender stereotypes are completely eliminated, allowing men and women to be evaluated on the basis of their merits rather than their gender, as well as to evaluate themselves without the constraint of stereotypes (Hentschel et al., 2019).

### **Attitudes**

Scholars such as Thurstone (1928) suggest that one of the most significant concepts in social psychology is the ability to measure attitudes. In fact, it is hard to envision contemporary social psychology without the notion of attitude. Allport (1935) argues that attitude is a distinguished concept. Fazio (1995) offers a thorough analysis of research that was inspired by a different, more traditional definition: attitudes as object-evaluation relationships. He explores the implications of this conceptualization for several highly contested topics in his article, including the idea of attitude construction, the stability versus malleability of automatically activated attitudes, the correspondence between implicit and explicit measures of attitudes, and the debate between single and dual attitude models.

Eagly and Chaiken (1993) discuss an all-encompassing definition of attitude: "a psychological propensity that is represented by judging a specific thing with some degree of favor or dislike." In particular, the all-encompassing definition of attitude must be compatible with the different metaphors academics have suggested to represent the tendency that underlies attitude. While being adequately comprehensive, a definition should also maintain its independence from shifting research trends. Schwarz and Bohner (2001) challenge the idea that attitudes are fixed, trait-like representations. They claim that regardless of whether attitudes are evaluated directly using traditional self-report measures or indirectly using implicit measures, they are typically generated on the spot.

Previous studies of working women in the Arab region show that attitudes towards women were found to hinder women's full progress in their careers (Al-Lamki, 2007; Omair,

2008). These attitudes might be related to gender roles within the society. Gender roles are a wide topic that includes adults' and children's gender roles, parental roles, multiple roles, marital roles, and gender stereotypes. Numerous studies show a link between egalitarian gender-role beliefs and greater levels of education and labor force involvement (Mason et al., 1976; Smith-Lovin & Tickamyer, 1978; Thornton & Freedman, 1979).

Few studies have examined attitudes toward women in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates. In the case of Saudi Arabia, a study conducted by Elamin and Omair (2010) examined Saudi men's attitudes toward working women. A sample of 301 men participants completed a Multidimensional Aversion to Women Who Work Scale (MAWWWS). Results revealed that men reported very traditional attitudes towards working women. The study found that single, unemployed, young, and educated participants reported less traditional views. This indicated that factors such as marital status, age, and employment status could play a role in influencing attitudes toward women (Elamin & Omair, 2010). A study conducted by Alibeli (2015) in UAE revealed that men's attitudes towards women were relatively low compared to women. Several variables were controlled in the study such as age, marital status, religiosity, education, and employment. Results showed that there were non-significant changes in the attitudes towards women after controlling for these variables.

## Method

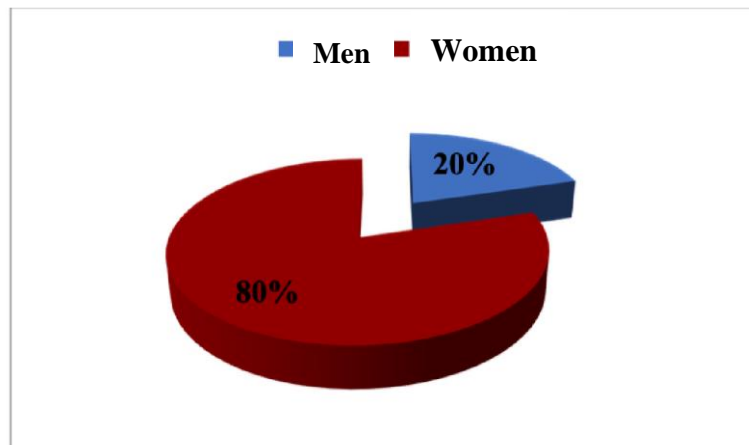
### *Study Sample*

The study pilot sample consisted of 120 people, both men and women, with an age range from 25-65 years. The total sample for the study consisted of 491 participants, including 100 men and 391 women. Table 1 presents the distribution of the study sample according to the demographic variables. Each figure shows demographic distributions: Figure 1 presents gender, Figure 2 presents employment status, and Figure 3 presents age group.

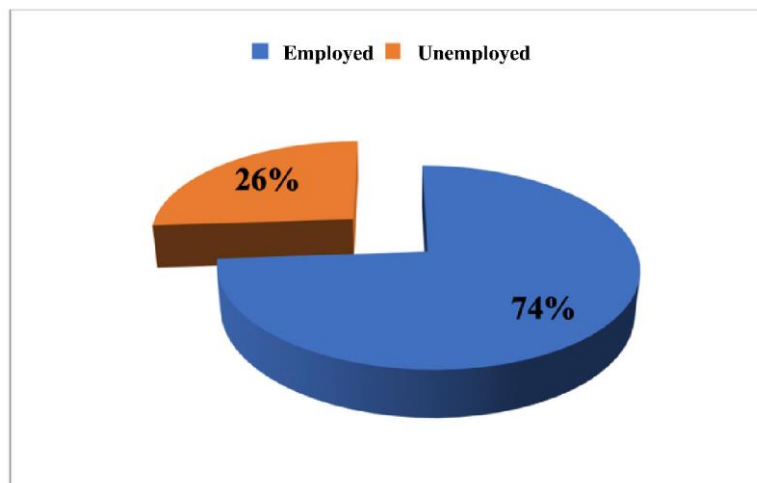
**Table 1: The Description of the Study Sample**

| <b>Variables</b>  |            | <b>Number</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|-------------------|------------|---------------|-------------------|
| <b>Gender</b>     | Men        | 100           | 20.3%             |
|                   | Women      | 391           | 79.6%             |
|                   | Total      | 491           | 100%              |
| <b>Employment</b> | Employed   | 289           | 73.9%             |
|                   | Unemployed | 102           | 26%               |
|                   | Total      | 391           | 100%              |
| <b>Age</b>        | 25-35      | 159           | 40.6%             |
|                   | 36-45      | 118           | 30.1%             |
|                   | 46-55      | 68            | 17.3%             |
|                   | 56 & above | 46            | 11.7%             |
|                   | Total      | 391           | 100%              |

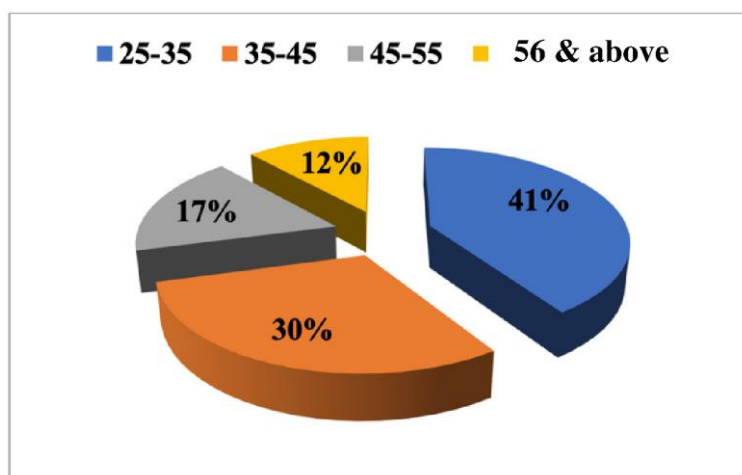
**Figure 1: Gender Distribution**



**Figure 2: Employment Status Distribution**



**Figure 3: Age Group Distribution**



*Psychometric of the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS)*

The scale used in the study was adapted from the short version of AWS. The questionnaire was developed to measure attitudes toward women. A high score indicates a profeminist, egalitarian attitude while a low score indicates a traditional, conservative attitude (Spence et al., 1973). For the purpose of the study, the scale was translated to Arabic, and modifications were made to ensure the items fit within the Saudi culture. As a result, a total of 23 items were used and two items were deleted (items 7 and 17 from the short version scale). Reliability was assessed by an internal consistency approach. Thus, the internal consistency was examined by the correlation of each item of the scale and its total score using Pearson. Table 2 shows the results of Pearson's correlation coefficient.

**Table 2: Pearson's Correlation Coefficient**

| Item |       |
|------|-------|
| 1    | .32** |
| 2    | .22*  |
| 3    | .56** |
| 4    | .47** |
| 5    | .45** |
| 6    | .55** |
| 7    | .49** |
| 8    | .51** |
| 9    | .66** |
| 10   | .23*  |
| 11   | .70** |
| 12   | .57** |
| 13   | .47** |
| 14   | .69** |
| 15   | .63** |
| 16   | .43** |
| 17   | .72** |
| 18   | .75** |
| 19   | .64** |
| 20   | .69** |
| 21   | .56** |
| 22   | .66** |
| 23   | .42** |

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

As shown in Table 2, all correlation values between the scale items and the total score of the scale were significant at .01 level except for items 2 and 10 which were significant at .05 level, and the correlation coefficient value ranged from .22 - .75.

*Scale Reliability*

Two methods were used to measure reliability: the Coefficient of Cronbach's Alpha, and split halves.

**Table 3: Results of Cronbach’s Alpha and Split Halves**

| The Scale  | Number of items | Cronbach’s alpha | Split halves |
|------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------|
| AWS Arabic | 23              | 0.88             | 0.82         |

As indicated in Table 3 the value of Cronbach alpha and split halves for the overall survey was high. This indicates that the scale’s reliability and validity are considered acceptable. Therefore, the AWS Arabic version can be used to test the study hypotheses.

**Results**

*Hypothesis 1: There will be no statistically significant differences between men and women on the attitude towards women scale.*

An independent *t*-test was conducted to determine if a difference existed between the mean AWS scores of men and women in the study sample. There were statistically significant differences between the mean scores on the attitudes scale of women ( $N = 391, M = 43.42, SD = 9.39$ ) and men ( $N = 100, M = 36.50, SD = 12.63$ ),  $t(6.09), df = 489, p < .001$ . Table 4 shows the results of the independent sample *t*-test.

**Table 4: Results of Independent Sample T-Test between Women and Men**

| Variable  | Gender | N   | Mean  | Std. Deviation | df  | T    | Sig. |
|-----------|--------|-----|-------|----------------|-----|------|------|
| Attitudes | Women  | 391 | 43.42 | 9.39           | 489 | 6.09 | .000 |
|           | Men    | 100 | 36.50 | 12.63          |     |      |      |

As shown in Table 4 there is a statistically significant difference between men and women’s attitudes at  $p < .001$ . Women had higher mean scores than men, which indicates that women were more pro-feminist and egalitarian compared to men. Lower scores on the scale indicate participants hold more traditional, conservative attitudes.

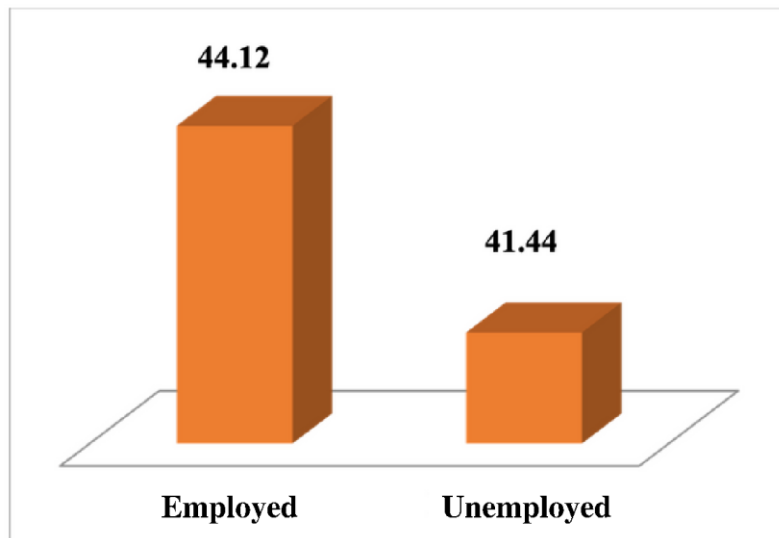
*Hypothesis 2: Saudi employed women will report less traditional views than unemployed women.*

An independent *t*-test was conducted to examine the difference between employed women’s mean scores on AWS compared to unemployed women. There were statistically significant differences between the mean scores on the attitudes scale of employed women ( $N = 289, M = 44.12, SD = 9.23$ ) and unemployed women ( $N = 102, M = 41.44, SD = 9.56$ ),  $t(2.49), df = 389, p = .03$ . Table 5 shows the results of the independent sample *t*-test.

**Table 5: Results of Independent Sample T-Test between Employed and Unemployed Women**

| Variables               | Work Status | N   | Mean  | Std. Deviation | df  | T    | Sig. |
|-------------------------|-------------|-----|-------|----------------|-----|------|------|
| Attitudes Towards Women | Employed    | 289 | 44.12 | 9.23           | 389 | 2.49 | .013 |
|                         | Unemployed  | 102 | 41.44 | 9.56           |     |      |      |



**Figure 4: Differences between Employed and Unemployed Women's Attitudes**

As shown in Table 5 and Figure 4 there is a statistically significant difference between employed and unemployed women's attitudes at  $p = .01$ . Employed women had higher mean scores than unemployed women. Higher mean scores indicate that employed women were more pro-feminist and egalitarian compared to unemployed women. Lower scores on the scale indicate unemployed women held more traditional, conservative attitudes.

*Hypothesis 3: Young Saudi women participants will report less traditional attitudes towards women than older participants.*

In order to test the hypothesis, the ANOVA test was used to compare the four subgroups of the age range (25-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56 and above). Table 6 shows the results.

**Table 6: ANOVA Test - Effect of Age Difference on Attitudes**

| Variable       | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F     | Sig. |
|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|------|
| Between Groups | 4506.63        | 3   | 1502.21     | 19.48 | .000 |
| Within Groups  | 29846.58       | 387 | 77.12       |       |      |
| Total          | 34353.21       | 390 |             |       |      |

As shown in Table 6, there was a statistically significant effect of the age range ( $F(3, 387) = 19.48, p < .01$ .) To identify which pair(s) of age groups significantly differed, a Scheffé post-hoc test was performed. As shown in Table 7 the mean and standard deviation are presented. The results of Scheffé post-hoc are presented in Table 8.

**Table 7: Mean Scores, Standard Deviations According to the Age Variable**

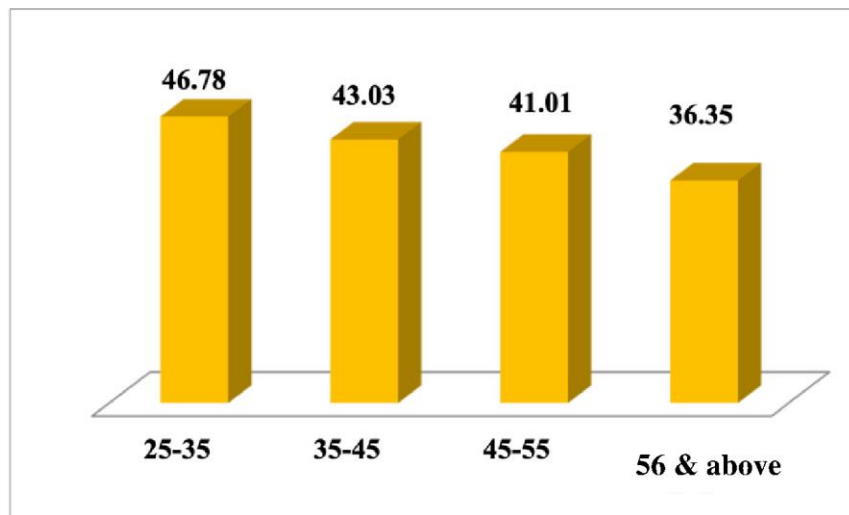
| Age range | N   | Mean  | Std. Deviation |
|-----------|-----|-------|----------------|
| 25-35     | 159 | 46.78 | 9.17           |
| 35-45     | 118 | 43.03 | 8.67           |
| 45-55     | 68  | 41.01 | 8.93           |
| 56 & more | 46  | 36.35 | 7.34           |
| Total     | 391 | 43.42 | 9.39           |

**Table 8: Scheffé’s Test Results for Mean Comparison according to Age**

| Age group (I) | Age group (J) | Mean Difference (I-J) | Age group (I) | Age group (J) | Mean Difference (I-J) |
|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| 25-35         | 36-45         | 3.75*                 | 46-55         | 25-35         | -5.77                 |
|               | 46-55         | 5.77*                 |               | 36-45         | -2.02                 |
|               | 56 & above    | 10.43*                |               | 56 & above    | 4.67                  |
| 36-45         | 25-35         | -3.75*                | 56 & above    | 25-35         | -10.43*               |
|               | 46-55         | 2.019                 |               | 36-45         | -6.69*                |
|               | 56 & above    | 6.68*                 |               | 46-55         | -4.67                 |

\* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

**Figure 5: Differences between Women’s Attitudes according to Age**



The results presented in Table 8 indicated that the only group that is significantly different is the age group 25-35. This indicates that younger women participants in the study sample had less traditional attitudes toward women than older counterparts (35-45, 46-55, 56 and above) as demonstrated in Figure 5.

**Discussion**

Results of the current study have revealed that women participants hold more optimistic attitudes about women and gender roles. Women might view gender role changes as a step towards more involvement in society which adds to their professional lives, financial security, and overall well-being. As more women are now empowered and actively engaged in different aspects of life, this results in more of a positive shift and acceptance of such changes in the dynamic of Saudi families. After major reforms that were established in Saudi in the educational and workforce system, women are ready to be the change they want.

Saudi Arabia has supported women and men by allowing them to pursue degrees abroad through scholarships such as the King Abdullah scholarship program (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). These educational opportunities have enabled women to be prepared and ready to enter the workforce. Gradually, women began to hold positions that were previously restricted to men and are now involved in decision-making roles. Women role models are being assigned to

positions such as university leaders and ambassadors of Saudi Arabia abroad. This has allowed younger women to build more positive views and attitudes towards women empowerment. However, men in this study have less positive attitudes toward changes in gender roles. This could be due to social structure, conservative culture, traditional gender roles, and gender stereotypes in society (Elamin & Omair 2010).

The social structure of Saudi families has been built on the social structure where men are considered the providers and women are the caregivers. It is expected that changes to such a structure will include more women's involvement in the workforce and society which will cause men to slowly build positive attitudes. Gender roles are still present within Saudi Arabia, especially among men, unemployed women, and people who are older or younger than 25-35 years old. As changes are recent, men will need time to accept and embrace such shifts. The attitude of Saudi women in the age range of 25-35 is more empowered compared to other age groups due to the vision's launch when they were either fresh graduates or just starting their careers. The nature of the culture has been established to be more of a conservative culture where men and women were segregated in the workforce. Now, women and men are equally involved in the workforce and work to achieve their institutions' goals and missions. Allowing both men and women to work together physically will allow such cultural restraints to gradually vanish. Women are no longer passive and are more involved in different roles within the family and professional life. As Vision 2030 has indicated, one of the goals is to increase women participation in the workforce from 22% to 30%. Saudi Arabia has taken huge steps to develop women's talents and improve their production capabilities so they can contribute significantly to the development of the country.

Due to undergoing societal and governmental changes in Saudi, now is the best time to capitalize on these changes to properly enhance women's empowerment by incorporating policies that support women's education, women's employment, women's legal rights, and women's health. The findings of the study are very promising given that younger men and women are prepared to break old social norms and stereotypes and follow current shifts and changes. Despite several difficulties, including a restrictive society, deeply ingrained customs, and associated barriers, Saudi women have continually demonstrated tenacity in regards to their professions and careers.

## **Statements and Declarations**

### *Ethics Approval*

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional review board at Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, Graduate Studies and Scientific Research Vice-Rectorate, IRB #: H-01-R-059, under the Exempt Category of Approval.

### *Consent to Participate*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

### *Authors' Contributions*

The study design upon which this paper was written was a collaborative effort between the three authors. The authorship order is reflective of the amount of writing that each of us did on the final draft.

### *Acknowledgment and Funding Information*

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### *Conflicts of Interest*

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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