

# Gendered precarity in Saudi Arabia: Examining the state policies and patriarchal culture in the labor market

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## Abstract

This study explores the intersection of state-driven policies, patriarchal culture, and gender precarity in the Saudi Arabian retail sector, drawing on twenty-six in-depth interviews with employees and other stakeholders. We offer a comprehensive understanding of the multi-layered nature of precarity, focusing on the role of the patriarchal state and culture in perpetuating gender inequalities and shaping individuals' subjective experiences of precarity against the backdrop of structural precarity. For Saudi men, state-driven policies exacerbate job insecurity and challenge traditional family ideology and the breadwinner model. However, Saudi women faced socio-economic vulnerability and organisational neglect, leading to underreporting of sexual harassment and limited protests against it. This antagonistic interplay of state policies and entrenched socio-religious norms creates both structural and subjective precarity in workplaces. Our study highlights the complexities in addressing gender disparities, emphasizing the intersectionality of gender, religiosity, and power relations. It contributes to understanding gender dynamics in Saudi Arabia by illustrating how state policies and patriarchal culture shape both structural and subjective forms of precarity and emphasizes the importance of fostering feminist

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consciousness amongst women as part of a broader strategy for addressing gender inequalities.

**KEYWORDS**

gender, patriarchal culture, precarious work, precarity, retail sector, Saudi Arabia

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In Saudi Arabia, persistent gender inequality and deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, coupled with the historical enforcement of gender segregation by the state, significantly shape women's labor market experiences; reflecting an interplay between state-driven initiatives and the enduring impact of patriarchal culture on Saudi society (Aldossari et al., 2021; Al-Rasheed, 2013). However, since 2016, the Saudi government has pursued a very public modernization agenda that specifically emphasizes women's empowerment, including targets such as increasing women's labor market participation to 30% by 2030 (Vision, 2016, 2030). Additionally, recent initiatives like Saudisation (job localization) have also focused on gender, implementing feminization programs to promote the active economic participation of Saudi women (Sian et al., 2020). However, despite these state-driven policy reforms aimed at greater integration of women in the Saudi labor market, we argue that the slower pace of change in social norms, influenced by a conservative tribal culture and patriarchal interpretations of religion (Aldossari & Calvard, 2021), will ultimately result in precarious lived experiences for women.

Despite extensive research on the influence of the "patriarchal state" and "patriarchal culture" in maintaining gender inequality (Gálvez et al., 2021; Liu, 2023), there is a lack of research that considers their specific role in shaping employment precarity or gender precarity in the workplace. While existing literature attributes the creation of precarious work to various factors, such as the impact of the state, globalization processes, the rise of the gig economy, and technological advancements (During, 2015; Forde & Slater, 2016), the specific influence of patriarchal state and culture remain understudied. Precarity is often conceptualized as a labor condition (Pulignano & Morgan, 2023; St-Denis & Hollister, 2023) and less often as a subjective experience of 'feeling precarious' (Harrison et al., 2022; Sutherland et al., 2020). In this paper, our key research objective is to examine the interplay between objective and subjective precarity, recognizing that these dimensions are mutually constitutive. We argue that an analysis of the patriarchal state and cultural dynamics is essential for understanding the lived experience of precarity. Through empirical research conducted in the retail sector in Saudi Arabia, we aim to address the following research question: How does the interplay between state-driven initiatives and socio-religious and cultural norms affect the lived experience of both structural *and* subjective forms of precarity?

Our study enhances the understanding of precarious employment by examining the complex interplay between objective and subjective precarity, particularly in relation to state intervention and societal norms. Drawing on Walby's (1989) theory of patriarchy, we provide insights into the intricate relationship between patriarchal culture and state, highlighting their role in perpetuating gender inequalities. This perspective allows us to examine how intertwined patriarchal structures shape gender-based experiences of precarity. Crucially, we extend Walby's (1989) conceptualization by exploring the interplay between religious norms and patriarchal structures in Saudi Arabia, shedding light on the socio-religious factors that underpin gendered inequalities. In the subsequent sections of the paper, we will present a comprehensive review of the relevant literature on precarity and gendered institutional practices. We will then outline our research methodology and provide a detailed analysis of our empirical findings from the retail sector in Saudi Arabia. Finally, we will discuss the theoretical implications of our findings.

## 2 | PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

The terms 'precarity' and 'precariousness' originated in the 1970s against the backdrop of wider European labor and social movements to broadly describe the emergence of flexible, casual and irregular forms of employment (Lorey, 2015). The literature on precarity has been the subject of ongoing debate regarding its conceptualization. Some scholars view precarity as a labor condition (Alberti et al., 2018; During, 2015; Kalleberg, 2009; Vosko, 2000) while others define it as the subjective experience of feeling precarious (Allison, 2012; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Those who adhere to the former perspective emphasize that precarious work is characterized by job uncertainty, temporary or part-time jobs, limited social benefits, and low incomes; whereby "employment... is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky" (Kalleberg, 2009: 2). Thus, precarious employment has been linked to changes in the labor market resulting from the growth of capitalism (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009), the casualization of labor (Kalleberg, 2009), and the neo-liberalization of an increasingly globalized economy (During, 2015). This leads to financial insecurity, reduced welfare state provisions, and the systemic casualization of labor over time (Alberti et al., 2018). While the structural foundations of precarity are widely acknowledged (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Waite, 2009) this body of literature has been criticized for its predominantly *objective* treatment of precarity; which fails to capture additional yet crucial nuances. For example, defining precarity as causal and short-term employment overlooks the differential implications of this type of employment in low-paid occupations (e.g., cleaners, drivers etc.) compared to high-paid positions (e.g., IT, freelance consultancy etc.) (Waite, 2009). Similarly, the conceptualization of precarity primarily as informal, non-standard work fails to account for new forms of work that may be equally precarious and do not capture the precariousness inherent in standard, formal work models (Lambert and Herod, 2016).

In an effort to expand the objective/structural conceptualization of precarity, some scholars have explored the more subjective *feeling* of precarity, which is 'constituted by a sense of lost recognition and social integration' (Alberti et al., 2018: 447). Individuals invoke socio-familial bonds and the welfare state as protective measures against this form of precariousness (ibid). This alternative conceptualization views precarity as 'both a socio-economic condition and an ontological experience' highlighting both 'precarious labor and precarious life' (Millar, 2017: 5). For instance, Allison's (2012) research on Japanese youth revealed structural precarity at the level of the economy and labor market resulting from unemployment, as well as a 'more pervasive precarity... (involving) an evisceration of social ties, connectedness with others, and a sense of security' (p.345). Our paper aims to contribute to the existing literature on precarity by examining both structural, labor conditions and subjective, lived experiences. We seek to understand the interplay between objective and subjective precarity, recognizing that these dimensions are mutually constitutive. We argue that in order to fully comprehend individuals' sense of precarity as a lived experience, it is crucial to consider the broader social context, as the perception and extent of precariousness are closely intertwined with one's overall living environment. Therefore, a key research gap to address is how the implementation of state-level and organisational policies intersect with patriarchal structure(s) and religious values in Saudi Arabian society. We argue that understanding this complex interaction of the state, organizations, and societal norms is essential in comprehending the impact of precarity at the individual level.

Existing literature emphasizes the importance of understanding the broader socio-historical context of the labor market and economy in order to appreciate the meaning of precariousness within a specific national context (Lambert and Herod, 2016). For example, in Western economies, precarious working conditions have been attributed to macro-structural changes in the labor market and a lack of state intervention (Casas-Cortés, 2017). In contrast, in developing economies, precarity is often linked to a scarcity of economic and political resources at the state level (Lee & Kofman, 2012). Saudi Arabia emerges as an intriguing counterpoint because it combines state-level interventions aimed at addressing labor market inequalities through modernization and liberalization policies with a lack of social will and resources at the organisational *and* individual levels to fully realise these objectives. The existing literature on precarity often overlooks the nuanced interplay between the subjective experiences of gender and broader structural factors, especially in contexts where patriarchal state policies and cultural norms are evolving. Our study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how both men and women interpret,

navigate, and respond to the combined influences of socio-structural and organizational factors on their lived experiences of precarity. This gender-sensitive approach allows us to offer a more comprehensive understanding of precarity, integrating both its subjective nuances and structural underpinnings.

### 3 | GENDERED INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AND PRECARIETY

Deeply ingrained societal norms and often male-defined organizational structures contribute significantly to workplace gender inequalities (Acker, 2004; Ridgeway, 2011). These norms result in masculine work environments and the overrepresentation of women in precarious employment, informal labor markets, salary inequalities, and occupational gender segregation (Armstrong, 1996; Vosko, 2000). Additionally, these inequalities are often exacerbated by traditional expectations of women's roles within the family, an unequal division of labor within households (Benoit et al., 2021) as well as women taking on greater caregiving responsibilities (McMunn et al., 2020). This gendering of roles and jobs is critical in understanding precarious employment, as it not only channels women into low-paid jobs but also suppresses wages and working conditions in occupations predominantly occupied by women (Ridgeway, 2011; Vosko, 2000).

Extant research on gender and precarious employment has yielded two streams of literature. The first stream utilizes labor market statistics, particularly data on underemployment and unemployment, to define gender precarity (Greer, 2016; Prosser, 2016). While this literature provides valuable insight, the objective/structural perspective on precarity does not fully capture the gender complexities or the diverse subjective experiences of men and women in the labor market (Kalleberg, 2009). The second research stream focuses on how the interaction between the traditional gender division of domestic labor and organisational practices has resulted in women being pushed into precarious work (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019; Warren & Lyonette, 2018). For example, the marginalization of women into precarious, non-standard jobs following the 2008/9 recession (Warren & Lyonette, 2018) or the assignment of lower-paid and less-valued tasks to female academics while excluding them from decision-making processes (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019) reinforces existing gender inequalities and the precarious position of women in the external labor market. Our aim is to contribute to *both* streams of research by examining the implications of gendered institutional practices, societal norms, and the patriarchal state on the subjective, lived experience of precarity. This approach aligns with Armstrong's (1996) and Ridgeway's (2011) emphasis on the organizational reproduction of socio-institutional norms for a comprehensive understanding of gendered precariousness.

Extant research has highlighted that patriarchal societies exhibit distinct socio-institutional arrangements that reinforce gender inequality such as the feminization of certain jobs, the allocation of non-standard and exploitative work to women, and the persistence of unpaid female labor (Trappe et al., 2015). Furthermore, Walby's (1989) framework of the patriarchal state and patriarchal culture provides a comprehensive understanding of the institutions and mechanisms that sustain gender inequality in society. The notion of the patriarchal state emphasizes how patriarchal norms and values create institutions and policies that preserve women's subordination. Additionally, patriarchal culture promotes and justifies gender inequality via deeply established conventions, stereotypes, and beliefs (Walby, 1989). Despite extensive research on the role of 'patriarchal state' and 'patriarchal culture' in perpetuating patterns of gender inequality (Gálvez et al., 2021; Liu, 2023), their particular consequences for gendered precarity at work have not been adequately explored in the existing literature. Building on Walby (1989) conceptualization of the 'patriarchal state' and 'patriarchal culture', our argument underlines the crucial role of the state and cultural norms in perpetuating precarity by shaping gender inequality and the subjective experience of individuals. Moreover, we emphasize the need to recognize the significant differences in experiences of precarity between Western, industrialized contexts and traditional, patriarchal societies and advocate for a more critical understanding of precarity through an examination of how socio-religious beliefs,

family paradigms, and broader patterns of gender (in)equality intersect within socio-institutional arrangements established and maintained by the state.

#### 4 | CONTEXT OF THE STUDY: SAUDI ARABIA

In Saudi Arabia, the patriarchal state, characterized by absolute monarchy, tribal influences, and strict Sharia law application, limits women's labor market participation, evident in high unemployment rates among Saudi women (30.2%) compared to Western societies (World Bank, 2020). Recent nation-building and modernization efforts, notably the ambitious "Saudi Vision 2030" introduced in April 2016 aim to diversify the economy and transition to a knowledge-based economy (Vision 2030, 2019, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/>), including gender reforms to enhance women's social involvement (Eum, 2019). These reforms include increasing women's workforce participation from 22% to 30% (Vision 2030, 2019, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/>) and implementing 'feminization' policies in sectors like retail, often involving the provision of gender-segregated spaces.

Despite progress in women's overall labor participation rising from 10% in 2005, to 17.7% in 2016 and 33.2% in 2022 (GASTAT, 2022), concerns persist about women replacing unskilled migrant workers in precarious jobs (Alkhowaiter, 2021) in sectors like manufacturing and retail and trade (GASTAT, 2022). Critics suggest these reforms may be more about improving Saudi Arabia's international image than genuinely enhancing women's rights (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Eum, 2019). Crucially, recent research on Saudi women has highlighted the challenges that arise when governmental initiatives clash with patriarchal culture (Syed et al., 2018). For instance, the provision of segregated women-only spaces offered to satisfy Saudi social expectations of 'acceptable' workplaces, has inadvertently hindered women's career progression (Sian et al., 2020).

The patriarchal culture, rooted in conservative tribal and religious norms, potentially limits opportunities for women, despite Islam acknowledging their rights to earn and own property (Aldossari et al., 2021). This results in pervasive gender segregation in social, educational, and work settings, with Le Renard's (2014) research indicating that while gender-segregated workplaces allow women's public participation, they also uphold conservative societal views. Efforts to achieve gender equality, especially in mixed-gender organisations, often face socio-religious opposition (Sian et al., 2020), highlighting the complex interplay of state, society, religion, and organisations in a context marked by economic wealth coexisting alongside precarity. While extensive research exists on precarity amongst migrant workers (Pourmehdi & Shahrani, 2021), the intersection of precarity and gender inequality in Saudi Arabia, particularly in how socio-institutional norms and organizational mechanisms contribute to gender-specific forms of precarity, remains relatively unexplored. Our aim is to deepen the understanding of these dynamics and their impact on gender relations by examining the lived experiences of precarity within organisations.

#### 5 | METHODOLOGY

In our study, we included both men and women to compare perceptions of work conditions, address critiques of mainstream feminist research that often omits men's perspectives, and to understand gender politics and power dynamics holistically (e.g., Charles & James, 2005). This approach is particularly relevant in Saudi Arabia's complex socio-institutional context (Aldossari & Calvard, 2021), where the interaction of tribe, class and gender influences differential experiences. Additionally, the recent entry of women into the Saudi retail sector, following Feminization initiatives, necessitates examining emergent dynamics between new female entrants and existing male employees.

We focused on the retail sector, significantly impacted by the Saudi state feminization policies. Using purposive and snowball sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) we utilized the personal connections of one of the authors to

identify five gatekeepers, including business owners, HR specialists, and a state official, who helped us gain access to potential participants. This approach was crucial in the Saudi context, where personal networks are vital for research access, especially on sensitive topics like gender precarity (Aldossari & Calvard, 2021). Our selection criteria included being a Saudi national employed in the gender-mixed retail sector. We conducted 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Saudi women ( $n = 11$ ) and men ( $n = 9$ ) working in the retail sector. Additionally, we conducted interviews with two business owners, two HR specialists, and two state officials to gain additional insights (Appendix 1 provides demographic details of the participants). The participants held various positions in different shops located in both traditional markets and shopping centers in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic by two of the authors who are native Saudi nationals. This shared cultural and linguistic background between the researchers and participants facilitated interviews conducted 'in a sensitive and responsive manner' (Bishop, 2008: 148). Following Oakley's (2016) recommendation, the female researcher in our project interviewed the women participants to create a safe and comfortable environment and alleviate any anxieties related to discussing sensitive topics such as sexual harassment. All interviews were conducted and recorded digitally, adhering to prevailing safety measures during the first wave of the pandemic, and lasted on average between 45 and 60 min. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' university's research ethics committee, and written consent was obtained from each participant before the interview.

The interviews were fully transcribed and translated into English. To ensure the accuracy of the meaning after translation, a sample of transcripts was back-translated into Arabic by a third party and then re-translated back into English. The interview schedule used with the employees was designed to explore potential challenges faced by working men and women in Saudi Arabia, as well as their relational and interpersonal experiences at work. Our interview schedule drew from the precarity literature, considering participants' work and life experiences, financial circumstances, awareness of regulatory protections (or lack thereof), job security, and career prospects. It also addressed our specific research objective of studying the impact of Saudi women entering the retail sector in response to state-driven policy and the influence of socio-religious norms on gender relations. Additionally, our semi-structured approach allowed for flexibility to explore emerging themes during the course of the interview. In addition to employee interviews, we conducted interviews with business owners, HR specialists, and state officials to gain a broader understanding of organisational implementation of the state's Vision 2030 policies and to uncover underlying norms and attitudes regarding gender equality.

During the initial stage of data analysis, we adopted an emic approach that considered emergent categories of gender differences and power imbalances, within the specific temporal and geographic context of Saudi Arabia (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). This approach allowed us to understand gender relations and participants' work interactions, as well as their reported work experiences in gender-mixed workplaces. We examined how individual constructions of gender interacted with socio-institutional, religious, cultural norms, and organizational factors in shaping precarity in the retail sector. In the first stage, we identified emerging categories that mark gender relations and participants' experiences, organizing comparable statements together into provisional categories (first-order codes). In the second stage, axial coding was used to incorporate first-order categories into emergent themes relevant that were relevant to the source of precarity and responses to it (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The analysis revealed the coexistence of structural and subjective forms of precarity. Codes relating to 'governmental intervention' and 'organisational gendered practices' were grouped as potential sources of structural precarity, while participants' feelings, and experience of social norms, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment were grouped as potential manifestations of subjective precarity. In the third stage, we compared and contrasted the major themes identified to finalize our analysis of relational, multidimensional patterns and sources of precarity, considering the influence of structural changes, socio-religious codes, and gender relations. This process involved individual analysis by each author followed by joint analysis to ensure validity and reliability (Karmowska et al., 2017).

## 6 | FINDINGS

In the context of Saudi Arabia, our analysis revealed two primary forms of precarity, impacted by the interplay of patriarchal state policies and cultural norms. The first, structural precarity, emerges from socio-institutional factors including governmental initiatives, socio-religious norms and organisational policies, collectively shaping the employment experiences of retail workers. The second form, subjective precarity, reflects the individual experiences of these employees. Men experienced increased uncertainty and challenges to the traditional male breadwinner role, leading to a sense of insecurity and a disruption of the male-centric family ideology. Women, conversely, encountered subjective precarity through heightened visibility in public spaces, a marked shift from their traditional societal roles. This new visibility often resulted in fears, or experience, of sexual harassment and perceived social status decline, illustrating the complex impact of evolving patriarchal norms on their employment experiences.

### 6.1 | Structural precarity

In Saudi Arabia, the reliance on foreign labor, constituting 51.2% of the overall labor market and 77.4% of the private sector (General Authority for Statistics, 2020), led to state-level localisation policies (see Figure 1 for a timeline of the key state-driven labor market initiatives) in order to reduce dependence on expatriates' and boost Saudi's employment (Tlais and Al-Waqfi, 2022). These policies initially targeted job opportunities for Saudi men specifically. However, the 2011 Feminization Program, aimed at the retail sector encouraged recruitment of Saudi women in segments such as lingerie shops, representing a salient example of the interplay between patriarchal culture and state policies as outlined in Walby's theory of patriarchy. This initiative, while progressive, also upheld gender segregation norms, with women-only sections in workplaces, showing the state's role in reinforcing patriarchal structures. This approach seems to reflect an attempt to balance socio-cultural expectations rooted in religious and traditional norms with the goals of economic modernization. Such strategies suggest that the integration of women into the workforce, while progressive on the surface and serving economic objectives, may possibly lack a deeper commitment to genuine gender equality and empowerment within the framework of Saudi society's religious and cultural context.

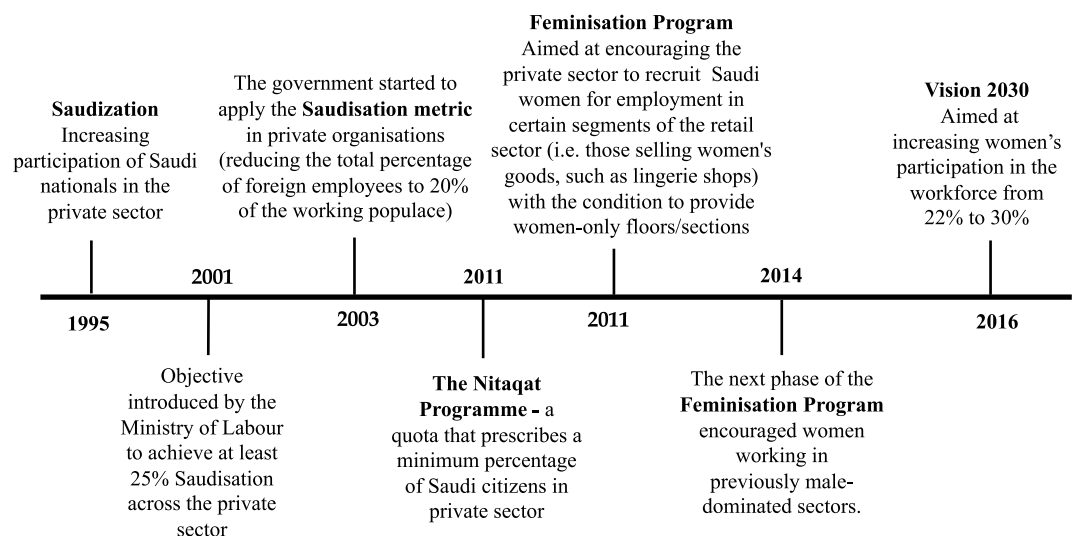


FIGURE 1 Timeline of the key state-driven labor market initiatives.



A key outcome of these policies, especially the 2011–2016 Feminization Program, was an unintended increase in precarity. This outcome illustrates the nuanced ways in which state initiatives, aimed at integrating women into the workforce, can simultaneously create new forms of employment instability and precarity. As one businessman stated:

Firstly, the initiative [feminization program] was a great move regardless, what do women prefer? To get an inferior job or to stay at home with no income, no work and no self-development, so of course, it's a step up no matter what. (But) of course, they are in inferior jobs... (at) the bottom  
(Businessman 2, Co-owner of a pharmaceutical company).

The Feminization Program, intended to reduce reliance on unskilled expatriate workers *and* facilitate women's entry into the labor market, led to a notable increase in the number of Saudi women in low-paid retail jobs, with significant growth in sectors such as food (40% increase since 2019) and support services (37% increase) (GASTAT, 2021). These outcomes highlight the paradox of state policies that, while modernizing women's employment, also inadvertently create new forms of gendered precarity. This impact was evident in our participants' reflections on these policies in the retail sector:

The reason behind women entering the organisation was due to Saudi Arabia's nationalisation and feminising (initiatives). Before 2011 [the year in which the feminisation programme was launched], it was rare to see women working in the retail sector  
(Businessman 1, Owner of accessories shops).

Women are now working in factories and warehouses... The company at the beginning was quite conservative. But... with all the enabling [of women], they started bringing more women in (Woman Participant 10, employees' affairs official).

These accounts underline the role of state-led initiatives in altering the gender composition of specific sectors, notably leading to a concentration of Saudi women in lower-paid positions and potentially intensifying labor market precarity. Interviews with state officials revealed the government's awareness of the challenges associated with the 'Feminisation Program' targeting the recruitment of Saudi women in traditionally male-dominant sectors like retail. The officials conceded that the program had fallen short of its intended objective. As one state official from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development stated:

In the past, we had requirements in the ministry that any workplace that was to employ women would need to have a (separate) women's section. As a business, to employ women there is an economic burden which is the cost of splitting the workplace up. So, the normal thing you would say was "Why would I employ women? And sustain these costs?" ...you would prefer employing men... so the government made the decision to feminise some stores. (But) I have to admit, the Feminisation of Jobs has not achieved its goals. (it) created a stereotype of what jobs women can occupy. It did not empower women, rather, it designated low-paid jobs to women...(which) is degrading and humiliating... So... now... the direction of the ministry is (that) there is no job that is just for one sex

(State official - Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development).

The quotes emphasize that the state's policy of promoting Saudi women's employment, although well-intentioned, has inadvertently led to structural precarity. Women were pushed into employment options



characterized by unclear job structures, long hours and minimum wages. The rapid and strict enforcement of this initiative, with fines imposed on businesses that did not meet the required number of Saudi women employees, placed immense pressure on business owners and resulted in substantial economic losses:

Imagine you are opening a hospital and (they) say "You don't have female doctors; I will give you a fine." You would say "(there are no) female doctors (available)" They would say "We don't care, you need to figure it out." ... I am small in size and I don't have the resources to successfully implement (this policy). They got the smallest people and asked them for the toughest things to implement

(A Business Owner - accessories shops).

Vision 2030, introduced in 2016, aims for a more inclusive and diversified economy with enhanced roles for women across various sectors, marking a significant shift from sector-specific feminization to a much broader form of inclusion. These policies, while progressive, also underline the top-down patriarchal nature of reforms, a key aspect of Walby's framework. The move to eliminate state-sanctioned gender segregation in the retail sector represents a major step toward gender-neutral/inclusive workspaces, yet it risks clashing with traditional Islamic and tribal cultural values. This unique context illustrates Walby's theorization that state efforts to redress gender inequalities might sometimes unintentionally reinforce them, especially when not fully conscious of the entrenched patriarchal culture. Our findings explore this critical transition, highlighting the shift in women's experience from one form of objective precarity, instigated by initial state policies, to another stemming from the tension between state initiatives and patriarchal norms. This is notably evident in the abrupt removal of gender-segregated spaces in retail, as reflected in the experiences shared by our female participants:

Honestly, when I first started, my father met my manager. So, if we're [me and my sisters] employed anywhere, my father meets the manager first. If he feels that he is a good person then he might agree to (me) working

(woman 2, Saleswoman, 24 years old).

If we followed norms and traditions we would have never worked or left the house. But due to our circumstances, I need(ed) to work. I try to be modest and I take care of my image and reputation and I don't raise my voice... When I work with men, I keep my boundaries and limits.

(woman participant 3, Saleswoman)

These quotes highlight how patriarchal norms and societal expectations impose constraints on women in the workplace. Despite their eagerness and need to work, women are compelled to navigate these deeply ingrained norms, balancing the need to professionally interact with male colleagues against the need to maintain their image and reputation. This added layer of societal negotiation, whereby women reconcile their employment aspirations with traditional expectations, exemplifies the complex interplay between patriarchal norms and women's work pursuits, contributing to the structural precarity they encounter.

The co-owner of a pharmaceutical store chain highlights the challenges women face in gender-mixed environments, including family disapproval and the perceived threat to conservative social norms. He emphasized the cultural resistance encountered during the implementation of Vision 2030, stating:

Roughly around 2017... the labour market witnessed a significant shift with the removal of gender segregation. This was a very weird thing for us... No one accepted that women would go (out) and work. So, when the father comes with their daughter and asks us to explain the job, we say that it's a job where women will be in the pharmacy but when we mention that there (are) males there, they say

"Stop, we won't do it. Thank you." We opened around 40 vacancies and we were only able to recruit 10...

(Businessman 2, Co-owner of a pharmaceutical company).

The co-owner's account highlights the resistance to employing women in gender-mixed settings, reflecting the deep-rooted influence of patriarchal culture where families are often reluctant to let women work with male colleagues. This resistance further perpetuates the objective precarity for women by restricting their employment options and reinforcing traditional gender roles. Additionally, some male participants in our study emphasized how state labor market interventions disrupted social structures and clashed with Islamic values. One participant noted:

The society is Bedouin, and the Vision (2030) does not go in line with what we are used to. It is not only me, my small community agrees that women have no place outside, women have to be at home. Either they stay at home or find an all-female job... men do not behave, and you don't know what might happen.

(Male participant 2, Sales representative)

This quote illustrates the tension between progressive state initiatives and entrenched conservative socio-religious norms within a patriarchal culture, exemplifying the persistent state patriarchy described by Walby. This tension is further manifested in the allocation of job positions by shop managers and owners, who continue to adhere to traditional gender roles and perpetuate the gendered division of labor. By assigning women to societal "appropriate" roles, these practices reinforce patriarchal norms in organisations and contribute to the objective precarity experienced by women in the workforce.

In the bookstore, the jobs available are either seller or cashier. Most of the women employees (are not) in the mixed section of the bookstore, (so) they only have them as cashiers

(Male participant 7, General Inspector)

I am a manager and I control 2 branches. I have (instituted) rules which I see fit. For example, I have a rule where it's forbidden for a man to enter the shop alone. it's completely forbidden, I don't want it. If this happens, the girl will be penalised.

(Businessman 1, Owner of accessories shops)

There was also widespread acknowledgment amongst men, shop owners and employees, that women co-workers were paid less than men for the same jobs:

Of course, the male Saudi Arabians will not accept lower wages... The Saudi Arabian female is 100 times more efficient than the male Saudi Arabian. This piece of information I don't tell everyone... So people don't say "He's spoiling his women (employees)"

(Business Owner - accessories shops)

Our findings demonstrate how enduring patriarchal norms in a male-dominant labor market can undermine state policies aimed at empowering women and reducing gender inequalities. In the Saudi retail sector, characterized by low-paid jobs and poor regulation, we identified a distinct gendered aspect of structural precarity. Women faced higher levels of precarity due to the nature of their assigned roles in an already insecure market segment. Additionally, the interplay of socio-institutional norms, and organisational policies, in line with patriarchal norms, added tension to their work environments. Despite government initiatives aimed at improving employment opportunities for women, our findings reveal that in the retail sector, these policies often replicated the societal

precariousness of women. Women were pushed into peripheral roles with low pay and minimal benefits, echoing the entrenched gender inequalities and power imbalances in employment relationships. Our findings extend the extant understanding of precarious employment by highlighting its intersection with gender and religiosity, in line with research that illuminates how socio-cultural factors can shape women's integration into the labor market (Frenkel & Wasserman, 2020; Raz & Tzruya, 2018; Tariq & Syed, 2018). We contribute to the literature on gender intersectionality and workplace precarity (Avishai, 2008; ; Essers & Benschop, 2007; Mahmood, 2011) by detailing how religiosity, combined with gender, not only influences women's roles and activities but may also exacerbate their marginalization and discrimination in employment, thereby reinforcing structural precarity. This analysis sheds light on the complex dynamics of gender and religiosity in the Saudi Arabian labor market, illustrating their pivotal role in shaping women's precarious employment conditions. We argue that structural precarity is shaped by the interplay of objective policies, socio-religious beliefs, and organizational procedures, resulting in a distinct, multifaceted form of vulnerability, especially when considering the interplay between the patriarchal state and patriarchal culture.

## 6.2 | Subjective experiences of precarity

The subjective experiences of precarity among our female participants were closely linked to increased visibility resulting from working alongside men in non-segregated environments, marking a significant shift in gender dynamics. This progressive change resulted in challenging scenarios, particularly heightened risk of sexual harassment, reflecting deep-rooted patriarchal norms that often objectify women (Tariq & Syed, 2018). Such experiences, aligning with Walby's work, highlight how institutional transition toward gender integration may exacerbate patriarchal pressures and power imbalances. Studies have shown that women in male-dominated occupations with socio-economic vulnerability are more susceptible to harassment (McLaughlin et al., 2017). Our participants' experiences, including instances of unwanted sexual attention and harassment as part of their daily working lives, almost considered it an inevitability. These experiences reproduced and reinforced societal patriarchal power dynamics within workplaces and contributed to women's subjective sense of precarity. For instance, one participant recounted a customer's disturbing comment:

A customer once said "I'm ready to kidnap you from your workplace and make you do what I want to and then return you"... There are also some gestures or words... from customer(s) that are very insulting and should not be said in a public place. A customer came and sat on the bed and he kept doing things and I asked him to leave or I would call security. I told him "Be respectful, get out now" and he said, "Stay calm, there's no need for all this (drama)"

(Woman Participant 6, Sales representative).

These occurrences highlight the precarity that women face in male-dominated spaces, especially in contexts like Saudi Arabia, where traditional gender norms, including religiously condoned gender segregation, are being actively challenged in the workplace. The harassment from male colleagues and customers can be seen as a form of resistance to state-imposed entry of women in workspaces, serving to maintain and amplify the power imbalances emblematic of patriarchal cultures. This form of harassment is a direct manifestation of the struggle against the progression of gender equality in the workplace. A Cashier participant shared her experience with a customer:

I faced physical offences from a customer, he threw something at me, because he wanted to be served (first). My manager asked me to just endure this as we must achieve our financial targets.

(Woman participant 5, Cashier)

Female participants in our study also faced harassment and unwelcome advances from their male colleagues:

One of my colleagues, he said he want to get to know me better. He asked me to start talking to get to know each other and he said "I love you" and all that. When I rejected him, he started insulting me, he started harassing me and he started taking customers away from me to annoy me

(Woman Participant 6, Sales representative).

Quotes similar to these were recounted by several of our female participants, emphasizing the widespread nature of workplace harassment. These accounts not only highlight the frequency of distressing experiences but also the lack of workplace support and the manifestation of harassment as a form of resistance to women's presence in these settings. This contributed to women's heightened sense of subjective precarity. Moreover, these experiences reflect a broader patriarchal context, perpetuated by state and societal structures. This resonates with Walby's theory, which shows how changes in workplace gender dynamics can inadvertently amplify patriarchal pressures and challenges in achieving gender equality in environments with deeply ingrained patriarchal norms.

In our study, many female participants connected increased harassment and unwanted attention from male colleagues to the men's own sense of precarity. State-driven initiatives, such as women quotas in the retail sector, diminished job opportunities for men, perceived as a threat to their livelihoods. However, societally they continued to be seen as the main breadwinners within the domestic/family sphere. This heightened male employees' sense of social and economic insecurity was highlighted by several male participants:

The company recruited women as (per) instructions of the ministry... related to the enabling of women. It is in the company's interest to enable women... prioritising women will help them (with the quota. So, instead of employing 100 men, (they) would rather employ 50 women

(Male Participant 4, Pharmacy Manager).

It is evident in the Quarter Labour Force Survey that female unemployment has decreased while it has increased amongst males... this is not the best way to balance the distorted labour market

(Male 1, Pharmacy manager).

I see the vision of supporting women to work as a good thing, but ... sometimes if a man and a woman are applying, they will prefer women...this is a bit unfair to men... supporting the employment of women is an excellent initiative but (it's) at our expense as men

(Male participant 4, Pharmacy Manager)

As a result of patriarchal norms perpetuated by both the patriarchal state and the dominant breadwinner model, men experienced a loss of control within the job market that had traditionally been dominated by them. This highlights the pervasive influence of patriarchal culture, as emphasized by Walby (1989), and the pressure placed on men to be the primary providers for their families. The resultant shift in the job market exacerbated their financial insecurity and fears of failing in their breadwinner roles. One participant, a Sales Representative, shared his frustration and apprehension:

I financially take care of my father and sister. All my salary goes to them. There were jobs that I applied for...and you are excited to work in this job (because) it has a good salary... (but) they said they need females. That is what is upsetting. If you were a male with low education, it is difficult for you to find jobs (anyway). (Now) all jobs for low education have been designated for females.

(Male participant 2, Sales representative).

The priority should be...the man. If he is not employed, then he won't be able to marry or start a family or raise his family... No one will marry an unemployed man. No one will accept (a man) if they don't have a stable income

(Male Participant 4, Pharmacy Manager).

Participants highlighted the deep societal emphasis on a man's ability to work, crucial not only for personal milestones like marriage but also for fulfilling societal expectations. The entrenchment of the male breadwinner ideology (Charles & James, 2005) and its ties to patriarchal culture (Tariq & Syed, 2018), underline the pervasive influence of traditional gender roles. In Saudi Arabia and similar patriarchal societies, cultural and religious practices, such as the *maher* (a man giving money or gift to his prospective bride before marriage) and covering wedding expenses, place significant financial pressures on men. Failure to meet these obligations can impact marriage prospects, with long-term implications for the broader social fabric. As a result, many male participants expressed resistance to labor market reforms favoring women, viewing them as a challenge to their role as primary breadwinners and established gender norms.

The experience of workplace harassment and the consequent precarity faced by women in our study led to various coping strategies. Women adopted measures like dressing modestly, wearing veils, only leaving the office accompanied by other women, and minimizing interactions with men to avoid harassment. These tactics reflect adherence to patriarchal norms, such as veiling from the male gaze as a form of protection. Interestingly, some interviewees, in supporting each other against harassment, unwittingly embraced feminist principles like sisterhood. This demonstrates the potential for cultivating feminist consciousness, even when not done intentionally. However, these strategies were merely micro-level coping mechanisms and a prevalent norm was the silent and non-reporting of harassment and inappropriate behaviors by males. This reluctance often stemmed from women's fear of damaging their own or their family's reputation, and in some cases, the fear of being held responsible for the incident. This silence, rooted in fear, highlights the power dynamics in a patriarchal culture, where women might feel compelled to protect the reputation of the harasser or an external male figure rather than seeking justice for themselves. A Saleswoman participant explained her perspective:

If I see such inappropriate behaviours... I just leave it. I feel that it's something that is not even worth it. ... If I were (harassed), I would forgive him. I feel bad to be the reason for his contract being terminated and ending his livelihood

(Woman participant 2, Saleswoman).

The co-owner of a pharmaceutical company noted:

We had a situation of a female employee who was harassed by her male colleague, it took her 2 weeks to report it. We asked, "Why did you wait for 2 weeks?" She said I don't want to cut his livelihood.

(Businessman 2, Co-owner of a pharmaceutical company)

In many cases, these women were the sole breadwinners or significant contributors to the household income. This socio-economic vulnerability and the need to maintain employment further heightened their subjective experience of precarity to the extent that they did not report instances of sexual harassment.

...some (women) are afraid...to cause a problem. They don't want the issue to grow...the parents of the girl would say that there is harassment in the work environment and then force the girl to leave her job

(Businessman 2, Co-owner of a pharmaceutical company)

Usually, women fear talking about harassment. They fear being exposed...(they) fear dismissal. (WOMan participant 1, Assistant manager in shop)

There are a lot of women who need this work so they can't report their manager. So, there are some women, I know why they need to work in this environment... because they have no other opportunity.

(Woman participant 2, Saleswoman)

Our findings highlight the existence of an additional layer of subjective precarity by both men and women in the context of Saudi Arabia's retail sector, intricately linked to Walby's theory of patriarchal culture and state influence. For men, this precarity stemmed from a perceived disruption of traditional gender norms against a backdrop of a patriarchal societal framework that upholds the male breadwinner model. Women, on the other hand, encounter subjective precarity through pervasive sexual harassment, fear of job loss, economic insecurity, and societally-driven concerns about reputational damage. By explicitly recognizing the influence of patriarchal culture and the role of the state, our findings reveal the complexities of gender dynamics and the intersecting factors that contribute to the heightened precarity experienced by both men and women in the context of labor market reforms.

## 7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our study significantly advances the understanding of precarity by highlighting its multi-layered nature, specifically the complex interplay between patriarchal culture, state policies, and the intersectionality of gender, religiosity, and power. By exploring how gender norms and state-led initiatives contribute to structural precarity, we offer insights into the more subjective experiences of precarity, against the socio-institutional backdrop of Saudi Arabia. Drawing on Walby's (1989) theory, we capture the intricate interplay between patriarchal culture and the patriarchal state, highlighting how these factors jointly influence the labor market experiences of both women and men. Our research highlights the significant role of the patriarchal state in shaping both women's employment insecurity and men's sense of insecurity, while considering the impact of religious beliefs and societal norms.

Our research contributes to theoretical and empirical knowledge in several key ways. Firstly, we expand the understanding of precarity beyond the binary classification of labor conditions (Pulignano & Morgan, 2023; St-Denis & Hollister, 2023) or as a subjective experience of 'feeling precarious' (Harrison et al., 2022; Sutherland et al., 2020). Our study highlights the need to consider both objective and subjective precarity, acknowledging the role of state and societal norms in shaping these experiences. This aligns with critiques by Lambert and Herod (2016) and Kalleberg (2009) of the precarity literature's limited consideration of the broader social context. Our findings reveal the influence of societal and cultural beliefs, particularly in perpetuating gender segregation and shaping attitudes toward women's employment. For example, the experiences of Saudi women in our study highlight visible forms of structural precarity, such as being relegated to low-paid jobs in male-dominated fields alongside invisible structural precarity, stemming from societal norms restricting women's presence in mixed-gender work environments. By capturing the complex interaction among socio-religious beliefs, socio-institutional mechanisms, and organisational procedures, our study contributes to the existing literature by providing a deeper understanding of precarity as a multifaceted phenomenon. Thus, our research underlines the importance of considering the broader social context and the interplay of various factors in shaping gendered inequalities and experiences of precarity.

Our second contribution to the literature on precarity is the application of Walby's (1989) lens of structures of patriarchy, which sheds light on the multi-layered nature of precarity and its interplay with patriarchal culture and the patriarchal state. Our findings highlight the unintended consequences of government initiatives aimed at

feminizing the retail sector between 2011 and 2016. While these initiatives aimed to address women's unemployment and adhere to gender segregation norms, they unintentionally pushed women into precarious jobs resulting in what extant literature has classified as objective experiences of precarity. However, in 2016, when the state removed the requirement of gender segregation, a new form of modernized patriarchy emerged, reflecting the often implicit clash between modernity and conservative traditions. Our findings indicate that the introduction of women into traditionally male-dominated sectors in the Saudi labor market, coupled with the state's ongoing transformation, led to an intensification of women's objective precarity and the emergence of a new form of subjective precarity. This transition was met with resistance from male colleagues, mirroring patterns observed in other contexts where men perceive women's entry into the workforce as a threat (Ashcraft, 2005; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2018; Van Douwen et al., 2022). In Saudi Arabia, this resistance manifested as harassment and unwanted attention toward female colleagues, which can be understood not only as a reaction to perceived threats to male livelihoods but also as a reflection of the deep-seated patriarchal culture where women's sexuality is often objectified. The findings are in line with Walby's (1989) research, which emphasizes how the state plays a crucial role in shaping the conditions under which women experience violence, including harassment and unwanted attention in the workplace. Furthermore, Walby's (1989) framework also draws attention to the intersectionality of gender with other systems of oppression, such as patriarchal culture. Our findings support this perspective by highlighting the influence of patriarchal culture on women's experience of precarity and the emergence of a new form of subjective precarity as a result of the clash between modernity and conservative traditions. Patriarchal culture, reinforced by societal norms and expectations, creates an environment where women are vulnerable to harassment and face additional challenges in male-dominated spaces.

Our third contribution addresses the theoretical implications of Walby's (1989) conceptualization of patriarchal culture by offering nuanced understandings of the interplay between religious norms and patriarchal structures, and their combined impact on gender-based experiences of precarity. The dominant religious standpoint in Saudi Arabia assigns women the role of representing and safeguarding the nation's moral integrity, nurturing a pious future generation, upholding notions of tribal Arab purity, and symbolizing the nation's commitment to Islam (Al-Rasheed, 2013). In line with previous research (Frenkel & Wasserman, 2020; Raz & Tzruya, 2018; Tariq & Syed, 2018), which illuminates how the intersectionality of gender, religiosity, and power relations shapes the integration of women into the labor market. Our study emphasizes the influence of religious interpretations and teachings on societal norms, gender roles, and work activities in Saudi Arabia. For example, our findings demonstrate how women experienced subjective precarity due to traditional hegemonic masculine norms perpetuating the societal perception that women employed in mixed-gender workplaces are dishonorable and sexually available and thus, create space for workplace harassment. Likewise, religious interpretations and teachings also shape societal norms surrounding men's gender roles. In this context, men are traditionally regarded as the providers and breadwinners for their families, and the practice of male financial responsibility in the form of "mahr" during marriage is deeply rooted in Arab culture (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Our findings indicate that the preservation of existing family structures and adherence to the prevailing male breadwinner ideology was deeply intertwined with men's increasing sense of job insecurity. Previous studies on men's gender ideologies have shown that institutional provisions in the labor market reinforce and maintain men's breadwinner status (Smithson et al., 2004; Trappe et al., 2015). Although research suggests that men adjust their gender ideology when recognizing the benefit of a dual-earner situation (Charles & James, 2005), our findings revealed that men's role as breadwinners was deeply rooted in wider patriarchal family structures prevalent in Saudi society, and threats to this role created subjective forms of precarity.

In line with Walby's framework, our research underlines that state patriarchy, characterized by the state's role in perpetuating gender inequalities, can persist despite women overcoming certain cultural barriers. While Walby's theoretical foundation is instrumental in understanding patriarchy's multifaceted nature, our study brings to light a dynamic increasingly relevant in gender inequality discourse. We found that in Saudi Arabia, women's entry into the workforce and the overcoming of some cultural barriers does not necessarily correlate with a strong feminist



consciousness. This observation suggests that dismantling state patriarchy requires more than just addressing cultural barriers; it necessitates fostering feminist consciousness and awareness among women in the workforce. Therefore, our findings significantly extend Walby's focus on structural and institutional patriarchy by highlighting the critical role of individual agency in confronting patriarchal systems. Women's empowerment and the dismantling of patriarchy are not solely dependent on structural changes but are also accelerated by women's active engagement with feminist values. This perspective prompts a reconsideration of strategies for gender equality, advocating for a dual approach that marries structural reforms with efforts to cultivate a feminist mindset, especially in contexts like Saudi Arabia.

Our research highlights the necessity of coupling new employment norms with deliberate efforts to raise awareness of feminist or women's rights amongst female employees. Employing culturally sensitive frameworks, such as Islamic Feminism, could be instrumental in empowering Saudi women and fostering gender equity in the workplace. This approach recognizes that comprehensive gender equity is not just a matter of policy change but also of changing mindsets and crucially empowering women themselves to actively participate in challenging and reshaping patriarchal norms. In particular, it could allow for the reinterpretation of traditional gender roles, challenging patriarchal norms while remaining rooted in the cultural and religious context of Saudi Arabia.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings will be available in [Maryam Aldossari] at [<https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/en/persons/maryam-aldossari/>] following an embargo from the date of publication to allow for commercialization of research findings.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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