



Gender reforms in Saudi Vision 2030: Freedom Vs. Equality

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Abstract: This essay explores the motivations behind Saudi Arabia's gender reforms within the framework of the Saudi Vision 2030 plan. While this ambitious agenda seeks to diversify the Saudi economy and reduce its dependence on oil, it has also garnered attention for its proposed gender reforms. This work incorporates notions of freedom and equality and aims to research how these concepts are prioritized and balanced within the Saudi Vision 2030 plan. By reviewing the previously imposed and planned gender reforms, a basic understanding of the Saudi government's supposed motivations behind these reforms is developed. Finally, through a discussion of the remaining patriarchal structure, the state's response to female protestors and through visions of Saudi women themselves, this essay suggests an imbalance between (gender) equality and freedom in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Saudi Vision 2030, Gender Equality, Freedom vs. Equality, Women's Rights Activism, Economic Diversification, Saudi Women, Patriarchy, Wahhabism

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Introduction

In 2016, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman al-Saud announced the implementation of a reform policy named the "Saudi Vision 2030." This plan aims to diversify the Saudi economy and decrease its dependence on oil.¹ However, the Saudi Vision 2030 does not merely include economic reforms. The plan is praised by a variety of national governments because of its proposed gender reforms. In the 2016 ranking of the World Economic Forum, Saudi-Arabia was ranked 141st out of 144 countries in terms of gender parity.² Since 2017, the start of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's reign, multiple gender reforms have been implemented.³ However, the motivations for these gender reforms are questionable. This report aims to shed light on the Saudi state's incentive for the gender reforms proposed in the Saudi Vision 2030 plan. Additionally, the unequal balance between gender equality and freedom in Saudi society will be discussed.

¹ Eum, "New Women," 115.

² Okonofua, and Omonkhua, "Women Empowerment," 9.

³ Okonofua and Omonkhua, "Women Empowerment," 9.

To establish whether freedom, equality or both are prioritized by the Saudi government, it is essential to define these concepts first. The definitions provided by Patrick O'Neil will be used in this essay. O'Neil defines freedom as "an individual's ability to act independently, without fear of restriction or punishment by the state or other individuals or groups in society."⁴ O'Neil's refers to equality as "a material standard of living shared by individuals within a community, society, or country."⁵

Female Economic and Political Participation

Women in Saudi-Arabia have been excluded from social, political and economic processes for a long time. To narrow down the focus of this report, the political and economic participation of women in Saudi-Arabia will be discussed in relation to the Saudi Vision Plan. The specific demography this report is concerned with, are Saudi women eligible to participate in economic and political processes. That is to say, women who are eligible to join the labor force and who are eligible to vote. In other words, Saudi female nationals over the age of 18. Women in Saudi-Arabia were not allowed to vote until 2015 and the ban which prohibited women from driving was only lifted in 2018.⁶

One of the main factors that put women in a subordinate position in society, was the state's intensification of Wahhabi religious nationalism, which took place under the reign of King Khaled (1975-1982). This intensification of Wahhabi nationalism was a response to various turbulences, including the Grand Mosque Seizure of 1979 and unrest among Shia Muslims following the 1979 Shia Islamic Revolution in Iran. The Wahhabi regime portrayed women as the bearers of national identity who should reflect the strict and puritan interpretation of the Quran.⁷ However, the patriarchal structure of the Saudi state itself is the main contributor to gender inequality in Saudi Arabia. The country is built on state-supported discrimination that denies women basic human rights and on religious-based male domination.⁸ The Saudi Vision 2030 Plan has announced to steer away from Wahhabism with the intention to reflect the 'moderate' Islam.⁹ For the Saudi female population, this could mean an improved integration in political and economic processes, as various women empowerment measures have been implemented. Some of these measures include pension reforms, improved job mobility for women and measures against sexual harassment in the workplace.¹⁰ Though, the state's motivations for these improvements are dubious and certain empowerment measures seem to reinforce gender imparities and establish new ways of subjection.¹¹ This assertion will be addressed further on in this report.

The Saudi Vision 2030 Plan aims to increase women's participation in the economy and strives to increase female employment to 30% before 2030.¹² In 2018, the female labor participation rate was 23.4%, while at that time (2018) women made up 49% of the Saudi population.¹³ To complete this goal, women have been granted more freedoms by the Saudi government. The female driving ban has been lifted, which hindered women's freedom of

⁴ O'Neil, *Essentials of Comparative Politics*, 23.

⁵ O'Neil, *Essentials of Comparative Politics*, 23.

⁶ Eum, "New Women," 120.

⁷ Eum, "New Women," 120–121.

⁸ Topal, "Economic Reforms," 2.

⁹ Eum, "New Women," 118.

¹⁰ Okonofua and Omonkhua, "Women Empowerment," 9.

¹¹ Ennis, "The Gendered Complexities," 368.

¹² Eum, "New Women," 125.

¹³ Agboola, "Female Labour Force," 136.

movement.¹⁴ Furthermore, strict gender segregation in the workplace is not necessary anymore and an anti-harassment law has been enforced.¹⁵ Female political participation and representation have also witnessed improvements. Additionally, women have the right to vote and have been allowed to participate in municipal elections since 2015. This reform resulted in the election of 20 women for the position of municipal councilor. The first ever female ministers were also initiated in 2015, appointed by King Abdullah.¹⁶

However, Saudi women themselves seem to be skeptical about these developments. An interview with multiple Saudi women revealed their doubts about the state's motivations for the reforms. Some argued that the reforms were a result of international pressure and that they did not stem from a genuine aspiration to improve women's rights.¹⁷ Thus, though it may be possible to assert that women have been granted more liberties and that their freedom has increased; this does not imply that gender equality in Saudi Arabia has instantly become more balanced as well. This assertion relates to O'Neil's definition of freedom: "an individual's ability to act independently, without fear of restriction or punishment by the state or other individuals or groups in society."¹⁸ Women's ability in Saudi Arabia to act independently has improved — to a certain degree — when we look at reforms such as the lifting of the driving ban. However, these reforms merely grant women some freedoms and do not concern the patriarchal structure which is enshrined in the state and which is the main source of gender inequality in Saudi Arabia. Though it is important to assert that putting the blame entirely on the presence of a patriarchal state structure in Saudi Arabia is shortsighted.

Gender inequality extends itself past traditional patriarchal structures. The adoption of new ideologies, such as neoliberalism — which often results in a state to be perceived as progressive and modern by its Western peers — does not have to equate to an improvement in gender equality. Neoliberal conceptions of the self, as a self-sufficient, independent individual, do not inherently reject patriarchal structures. Research has shown that patriarchal structures can experience a reinterpretation and readjustment under neoliberalism; neoliberalism thus does not instantly boost gender parity.¹⁹ Moreover, if we incorporate O'Neil's definition of equality (a material standard of living shared by individuals within a community, society, or country) in our discussion — we see that neoliberalism does not inherently ensure this definition of equality.²⁰ It would thus be false to link equality — or in this case gender equality — to neoliberalism. The Western tunnel vision regarding neoliberalism is problematic and also affects gender inequality in other countries, including in Saudi Arabia. Neoliberalism is often framed as a phenomenon that possesses a liberating quality. According to this way of framing, adopting the Western, neoliberalist ideology will result in the liberation of the female subject through the power of the market.²¹ This view is problematic, as it simplifies structural gender inequality through assuming that this inequality is rooted in Arab, Gulf or Islamic culture.²² However, the recognition of the presence of this Orientalist perspective expands the debate on tackling gender inequalities in Saudi Arabia and illustrates how gender inequality extends itself past a patriarchal state structure. Thus, while the patriarchal state structure plays a significant role in gender inequality in Saudi Arabia, it is incorrect to frame this structure as the sole cause.

¹⁴ Lim, "Unveiling Saudi Feminism(s)," 462.

¹⁵ Eum, "New Women," 125.

¹⁶ Karolak and Guta, "Saudi Women as Decision Maker," 76.

¹⁷ Karolak and Guta, "Saudi Women as Decision Maker," 88.

¹⁸ O'Neil, *Essentials of Comparative Politics*, 23.

¹⁹ Ennis, "The Gendered Complexities," 373.

²⁰ O'Neil, *Essentials of Comparative Politics*, 23.

²¹ Ennis, "The Gendered Complexities," 373.

²² Ennis, "The Gendered Complexities," 373.

Women's Rights Activism

Women's rights protests in Saudi Arabia shed light on the state's motivations of the reforms. Women's rights protests against institutional gender inequality in Saudi Arabia have resulted in the detention of women's rights activists. Even in 2018 — after the announcement of the Saudi Vision 2030 plan — activists were arrested on the grounds of having suspicious ties with foreign organizations and they were declared a threat to the nation.²³ These arrests illustrate how limited the proclaimed gender reforms in Saudi Arabia are and how little agency women in Saudi Arabia actually have.²⁴ While the gender reforms allow women some more freedoms, this event shows that the institutional patriarchal structure has not changed and that protesting against this structure is not tolerated. Women's movements protest against the state structure which is still based on Sharia law and lacks legal framework to tackle gender inequality.²⁵

An example of this lack of legal framework is the existing male guardianship system, which denies women the agency to make their own decisions.²⁶ Moreover, the gender reforms are not the result of genuine social change through bottom-up activism, but they are the product of top-down decisions that aim to benefit the state.²⁷ The reforms seem to be part of the Saudi Vision 2030 economic goals, aiming to open up the Saudi economy and benefit market integration.²⁸

Another proof of this is the aftermath of the Women2Drive campaign in 2017. During this campaign, women protested against the driving ban. Activists were arrested and some of them still remain in prison, even after the lifting of the driving ban in 2018.²⁹ This illustrates how the gender reforms are portrayed by the Saudi government as granted top-down privileges and not as awarded through social activism. The legal framework against women's movements also supports this stream of thought. These organizations are not allowed to openly promote their ideas and when their activities are perceived as a 'threat to national society', the civil organizations may even be disbanded.³⁰ Thus, the response of the Saudi state to women's activism reveals how the gender reforms are not the product of social, bottom-up activism, as they do not tackle the institutional gender inequality. Instead, their purpose is to benefit the Saudi economy.

Conclusion

The balance between freedom and equality in Saudi Arabia in terms of gender is not equal. The Saudi state tends to view gender reforms — and thus the new freedoms granted to women — as a means to an end. The gender reforms of the Saudi Vision 2030 plan do not concern the structural gender inequality rooted in Saudi society. The gender reforms offer women enough freedom to contribute to the economy and thus benefit the Saudi state itself. Gender equality is not prioritized by the Saudi economy, as the patriarchal state structure remains in place. While the gender reforms of the Saudi Vision 2030 may create the illusion that gender inequality is being countered by the government, the state's response to women's rights activism illustrates the continuity of the Saudi society based on male supremacy. Thus, in terms of gender, the Saudi government prioritizes freedom over equality. This becomes abundantly clear when we

²³ Eum, "New Women," 126.

²⁴ Eum, "New Women," 127.

²⁵ Topal, "Economic Reforms," 3.

²⁶ Topal, "Economic Reforms," 3.

²⁷ Eum, "New Women," 117.

²⁸ Topal, "Economic Reforms," 5.

²⁹ Alkhaled, "Women's Entrepreneurship," 956.

³⁰ Topal, "Economic Reforms," 4.

relate the reforms to O’Neil’s definitions of freedom and equality. While women are granted some space to act more independently, this is not done to ensure a specific material standard of living for Saudi women.³¹ On the contrary, the state does not endeavor to stimulate actual gender equality with this focus on freedom, but it aims to stimulate the economy.

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³¹ O’Neil, *Essentials of Comparative Politics*, 23.

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