

“Contextualising women’s Leadership in Saudi Arabia: A Review of Significant Sociocultural, Political, Economic, and Normative Factors”

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Abstract:

This literature review examines the sociocultural, historical, and institutional factors that shape Saudi women's leadership experiences, addressing a gap in existing research that is predominantly centred on Western contexts. While studies often focus on barriers, such as stereotypes, discrimination, and organisational bias, limited attention has been paid to the unique interplay of cultural norms, religious beliefs, and tribal affiliations that influence women's leadership in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The review highlights that Saudi Arabia's historical and political transformations, coupled with its status as an oil-based economy, have reinforced traditional gender roles, restricted women's access to diverse professional sectors, and constrained pathways to leadership. Tribalism, regional differences, and kinship networks interact with collective social identities, influencing hiring practices, professional advancement, and the perception of women leaders. Although recent reforms, notably under Vision 2030, aim to increase women's workforce participation and leadership representation, cultural tightness and conservative norms continue to limit their effectiveness.

By situating these findings within the cultural tightness–looseness theory, the paper shows how the deeply entrenched traditions, religious frameworks, and institutional structures pose challenges that transcend simple policy solutions. Beyond merely increasing women's numbers in leadership positions, this review emphasises the need for nuanced, context-sensitive strategies that address the complex interplay of socioeconomic, ethnic, and tribal factors that shape women's leadership development in Saudi Arabia.

The paper concludes by recommending further research to assess the impact of recent reforms, explore the tension between tradition and modernity, and identify effective mechanisms—such as mentorship and tailored policies—to support and enhance women's leadership trajectories.

Keywords: Saudi women's leadership, Sociocultural factors, Gender roles in Saudi Arabia, Cultural tightness–looseness theory.

Introduction:

The majority of studies pertaining to women in leadership focus on Western European and North American contexts, often neglecting the experiences of Arab women (Metcalfe & Mimouni, 2011; Smith et al., 1989; Syed, 2010). This imbalance in the literature highlights the paucity of research exploring the unique sociocultural and institutional realities faced by women in Arab regions, particularly in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017; Abalkhail, 2017). Furthermore, studies that compare women's experiences in the West with those in the Arab world risk perpetuating a sense of “otherness,” which oversimplifies the diversity and complexity of the Arab sociocultural landscape. In the context of Saudi Arabia, the historical, religious, political, and sociocultural factors influencing women's lives have been underexplored, leaving gaps in empirical data and theoretical understanding. The leadership experiences of Saudi women remain insufficiently understood, with much of the existing literature offering only superficial insights. This review seeks to address this gap by examining the contextual factors that shape Saudi women's leadership development (Abdalla & Al-Homoud, 2001; Elamin & Omair, 2010; Marmenout, 2009).

Existing research on women leaders frequently highlights their invisibility relative to their male counterparts, attributing gender disparities to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012). Organisational cultures, often resistant to change, have been identified as key barriers that hinder women's professional progress. The Saudi context presents its own set of challenges in which sociocultural norms and religious frameworks act as additional layers of constraint, affecting women's pathways to leadership roles.

Day (2000) highlights that leadership development is a dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments, emphasising the importance of cultural context in shaping leadership outcomes. Similarly, Murphy and Johnson (2011) argue for the importance of studying embedded cultural gender expectations that profoundly impact women's leadership trajectories and their ability to navigate barriers to success (Carli & Eagly, 2012; Eagly & Carli, 2007). The intersection of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender during the formative years also plays a critical role in shaping leadership development in adulthood (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). For Saudi women, these factors are compounded by conservative sociocultural and institutional norms that influence the formation of their leadership identity. Despite the growing recognition of these challenges, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies addressing the nuanced interplay between these factors in Saudi Arabia.

As the literature suggests, the development of leaders is context dependent (Day, 2000; Reichard & Johnson, 2011; Thompson & Reichard, 2016). This literature review examines the specific sociocultural context that shapes the leadership experiences of Saudi women. Previous studies have largely focused on the barriers that women face in attaining leadership positions, including stereotypes, organisational bias, and limited professional support. However, few studies have delved into the sociocultural dynamics that affect women's leadership specifically in Saudi Arabia. This review explores the unique sociocultural influences that affect Saudi women's leadership development by providing a historical overview of Saudi Arabia as a context, detailing the sociocultural, ethnic, and kinship structures that influence women's professional status and their identities as leaders. The paper emphasises the importance of examining these contextual factors and how they influence Saudi women's leadership. By bridging the gaps in the existing research, the review aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics shaping the development of women's leadership in Saudi Arabia.

Theoretical framework

This paper applies the cultural tightness–looseness theory, which provides a structured lens through which to interpret the complex dynamics of sociocultural, political, and economic factors that influence women's leadership in Saudi Arabia. The cultural tightness–looseness theory examines cultures along a continuum from “tight” to “loose.” Tightness is characterised by robust social norms and a low tolerance for deviant behaviour, while looseness is marked by more lenient norms and a higher tolerance for deviations from the norm (M. Gelfand, 2018; M. J. Gelfand et al., 2006).

The present study emphasises the profound impact of deeply rooted traditions, tribalism, religious norms, and the overarching effect of institutions and Vision 2030 reforms on the pathways women choose to attain and excel in leadership positions. By contextualising these findings in the tightness–looseness framework, we may more effectively elucidate the persistence of these challenges, their contextual variability, and their intermittent resistance to policy interventions.

Historical events, environmental circumstances, and socialisation systems are among the main determinants of how strictly social norms are obeyed and enforced in a society. This idea has been used to examine variances in values, attitudes, and behaviours between cultures. Tight cultures are commonly associated with heightened compliance, traditionalism, and social control, whereas loose cultures are typically connected to individualism, nonconformity, variety, and innovation. The cultural tightness–looseness assumption posits that tight societies adhere to and impose strict standards and regulations, hence rejecting deviant behaviour. Loose cultures, by comparison, have a more flexible array of laws and norms, demonstrating greater tolerance for aberrant activity.

People in Saudi Arabia are stereotyped as having strict social standards and little tolerance for those who act differently. The conservative interpretation of Islam and the country's traditional social values—which stress the significance of modesty, submission, and conformity—are the root causes of this cultural tightness.

Accordingly, women in Saudi Arabia may face additional challenges due to the country's conservative cultural norms while trying to advance their careers or assume leadership roles. Creating a network and establishing connections with male coworkers may be challenging for women in the workplace, and they may also face prejudice. Thus, including this component in the theoretical framework will provide a crucial facet for comprehending the progress of women leaders in these cultures, as it impacts their development of leader identities (Gelfand, 2018; Toh & Leonardelli, 2013; Gelfand et al., 2006).

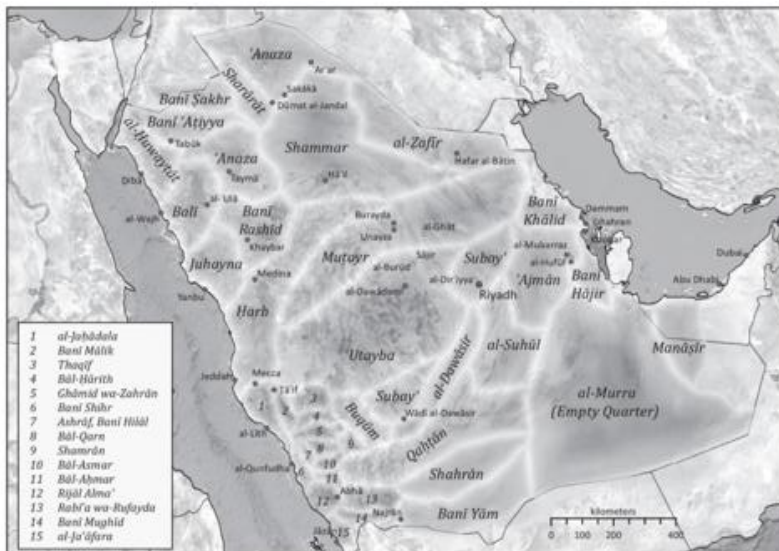
KSA as the context for women in leadership roles

Understanding Saudi Arabia's historical, political, economic, sociocultural, and religious landscapes requires uncovering the contextual factors influencing women's leadership development. These factors significantly shape the evolving social and personal identities of Saudi women within the country's specific context. Despite the KSA's global significance, marked not least by its status as custodian of the two holiest cities in Islam—Makkah and Madinah—and as one of the world's largest oil producers (Walker, 2004), research on the country has traditionally been limited in scope and depth. Historically, studies of the KSA have been conducted predominantly by Saudi scholars or researchers with ample experience in the Middle East. For decades, the Kingdom has restricted access to foreign researchers, with only a few academics permitted to study within its borders (Dirani et al., 2017); however, this has begun to change in recent years. According to Dirani et al. (2017), the KSA is undergoing rapid transformations across multiple political, social, economic, and educational domains. Power has progressively shifted to younger generations, fostering greater openness and easing the constraints imposed by past conservative administrations. These changes have brought significant reforms in less than half a century, reshaping societal structures and institutional frameworks. This chapter reviews the historical, political, and sociocultural context of the KSA to illuminate the factors influencing women's evolving perceptions of their leadership potential and readiness for leadership roles.

The KSA: Historical and political overview

The KSA, the largest country in the Arabian Peninsula, accounts for approximately 80% of the peninsula's land area (Bowen, 2008, 2014). Historically, the region has been characterised by a strong Islamic identity deeply rooted in Arab traditions and culture (Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020). In the 18th century, the foundation of the Kingdom was built on a collaboration between religious and political power. This partnership, established by Muhammad bin Saud and the religious reformer Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, led to the formation of the first Saudi state based on firm Islamic principles (Al-bakr et al., 2017). This partnership laid the groundwork for a tight sociocultural setting. It codified strict religious norms that governed public behaviour and reinforced low tolerance for deviation—a hallmark of tight cultures, as defined by Gelfand (2018). The current state, the third iteration of Saudi governance, emerged from the unification of the Kingdom in 1932 by King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud. Since then, the KSA has undergone profound economic and social transformations driven by extensive and rapid growth in oil wealth and the symbiotic relationship between the monarchy and religious Wahhabism (Özev, 2017).

Today, Saudi Arabia occupies a prominent geopolitical and religious position. With a population of approximately 33 million (General Authority for Statistics, 2020), it spans from the Arabian Gulf to the Red Sea (see Figure Error! No text of specified style in document..). The presence of Makkah and Madinah—the cities where the Prophet Muhammad was born and died, respectively—solidifies its importance, as Muslims worldwide direct their prayers toward the Ka'ba in Makkah.



Map 1. Approximate boundaries of Arabian tribal territories before the establishment of the modern Saudi state, along with toponyms significant for this study.

Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.. Map of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Samin, 2019)

Generational shifts and sociocultural dynamics

Yamani (2000a), in her work *Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia*, categorises the Saudi population into three distinct generational cohorts, each shaped by unique historical and political experiences and events. The First Generation (1930s), born during the early political reforms of the Saudi state, experienced a traditional, tribal way of life as the nation began establishing national institutions and a coherent identity. The Second Generation (1950s) witnessed the onset of the Kingdom's petroleum exploration era, benefiting from political integration, growing oil wealth, increased access to education, and expanded contact with Western cultures. The Third Generation (1970s–1980s) was exposed to greater Western influence via the media and faced economic instability tied to fluctuating oil prices. This third cohort has experienced the challenges of navigating a rapidly modernising yet culturally conservative society.

Building upon Yamani's generational framework, a fourth cohort has emerged. The Fourth Generation (1990s–2000s) has been significantly impacted by globalisation and the digital revolution, which encompasses Generation Z. Having grown up with the ubiquitous availability of the internet and social media, they demonstrate a high level of technological proficiency

and autonomy. They exhibit a more liberal, risk-taking, and entrepreneurial disposition, with Saudi Arabia having a considerable population of “millennial” entrepreneurs. Additionally, this generation navigates the balance between tradition and modernity, often using digital platforms to express and redefine cultural norms (M. K. Khan & Khan, 2020). This generational shift reflects the dynamic interplay between rapid technological advancements and evolving sociocultural dynamics in Saudi Arabia.

As of the most recent Saudi census report conducted in 2022, 52.7% of the population of Saudi Arabia is between the ages of 25 and 54, with a median age of 29, underscoring its status as a young nation (General Authority for Statistics, 2023). Yamani (2000) argues that this young demographic will play a crucial role in shaping the KSA’s future, including its political and social landscapes. Such generational changes are particularly significant in terms of changing gender roles within the country, as young Saudis adapt to reforms that challenge traditional norms (Al-Bakr et al., 2017). This section highlights the interplay between historical, political, and sociocultural factors in shaping the context of Saudi Arabia within which aspiring women leaders live and work. These factors, coupled with generational shifts, are essential features in understanding the evolving roles and identities of Saudi women as they navigate leadership development.

Oil production and the economy: Influence on women’s social status

The oil production boom in Saudi Arabia has significantly influenced the social status of women, reshaping gender dynamics and labour force participation patterns. Oil extraction and hydrocarbon production, as the country’s primary sources of income, have been linked to reduced levels of democratisation and economic instability in oil-dependent nations. These economic trends often reinforce patriarchal structures, resulting in imbalanced gender relations (Ross, 2012). Ross (2012) identifies two primary mechanisms driving this imbalance. First, the substantial wealth generated by oil production enables governments to impose low taxes on the population and its income. This economic structure often concentrates financial power in the hands of men, who are traditionally the primary earners. With men capable of independently earning adequate funds to support family life, the financial incentive to include women in the labour market is diminished, limiting their economic independence. Second, oil-intensive economies typically offer a high prevalence of export-oriented industrial jobs, disproportionately affecting women’s employment opportunities in service sectors that are more traditionally open to female participation. Moghadam (2005) argues that reliance on oil negatively impacts women’s employment, as exemplified in Saudi Arabia. In addition to these structural economic barriers, traditional gender roles and gender-stratified policies perpetuate restrictions on women’s workforce participation, compounding the challenges they face in achieving economic independence and professional advancement. These are, therefore, the impacts on gender dynamics of having an oil-dependent economy with economic structures and sociocultural norms combined to limit opportunities for women’s active engagement in the labour market. Understanding these intersections is critical in addressing the systemic barriers to women’s workforce participation in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi society and culture: Tribalism

Despite rapid modernisation in infrastructure, services, and governance, Saudi Arabia’s societal framework remains deeply shaped by tribalism, which continues to impact professional, marital, and educational decisions (M. C. Thompson, 2019a). While Saudi Arabia may appear externally as a homogenous society in terms of ethnicity and religion (Long, 2005a), this perception is overly simplistic. The country’s diverse regions possess distinct cultural identities, and it is incorrect to conceptualise Saudi society as culturally homogenous. Scholars have debated the implications of cultural heterogeneity, with some suggesting that diverse societies, characterised by differing customs and beliefs, exhibit loose cultural dynamics, and some posit that such diversity raises the cost of excluding in-group members, fostering cohesion within heterogeneity (Triandis, 1989). In collectivist, tight cultures like Saudi Arabia, adherence to group norms and role expectations is critical, with individual identity closely tied to collective membership (G. Hofstede et al., 2010). Tribal allegiance in Saudi Arabia promotes intense group cohesion, which in turn reflects a high level of normative control—a classic feature of tight cultures. Members often feel compelled to adhere to shared codes of honour and gender expectations, allowing minimal space for social deviation (M. Gelfand, 2018; M. J. Gelfand et al., 2006).

There is a fluidity in the shifts between cultural tightness and looseness, wherein excessive rigidity can give rise to flexibility and vice versa (Triandis, 1989). Internally, Saudi Arabia is recognised as an ethnically and culturally diverse nation (Al-Hassan, 2006). This diversity manifests in the distinct traditions, dialects, dress codes, and gender dynamics of the country’s regions, which predate its unification (Yamani, 2009a). Each region can be considered a “social construct” with its own identity rather than merely a geographical area.

Ethnic and regional diversity. Historically, Saudi Arabia was home to nomadic Bedouin tribes, primarily concentrated in the central regions. While modernisation has reduced the prevalence of nomadism, the descendants of these tribes now form the majority of the Saudi population and maintain a strong tribal identity (AlMunajjed, 1997). However, the Kingdom's diverse cultural heritage extends beyond the tribal roots of its predominant Bedouin centre. For instance, the western Hijaz region exhibits a unique ethnic composition. As the gateway to the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah, Hijaz has historically attracted pilgrims and settlers from across the Islamic world, creating a multicultural local society (Abalkhail, 2017; Yamani, 2009). Hijazi identity retains a strong sense of pride rooted in the region's role as the birthplace of Islam. As a result, Hijazis comprise a distinct ethnic group cemented by centuries of cultural exchange and religious significance (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2015). In contrast, the eastern oil-rich region of Saudi Arabia is home to a minority Shia population, which has played a vital role in the Kingdom's industrial and economic development (Z. Khan, 2019; Matthiesen, 2014; Yamani, 2008). This region serves as a reminder of Saudi Arabia's ethnic and cultural diversity. Before unification in 1932, various regions functioned as politically independent entities, each preserving its own unique traditions. Despite the creation of a centralised Saudi state, regional cultural differences continue to influence the population's social identity (Yamani, 2009a).

Challenges in understanding Saudi diversity

Several factors contribute to the misrepresentation of Saudi Arabia's demographic and cultural makeup:

First, predominance of Najdi/Wahhabi culture. After unification, the Najdi/Wahhabi culture became dominant and exerted significant influence over legal and quotidian life. As a result, norms became tightly enforced, rendering certain social practices—especially those involving women's roles—nonnegotiable. This institutional tightness is reflected in strict dress codes and gender segregation policies, illustrating low tolerance for deviation from prescribed behaviours (Özev, 2017). Today, tribal identity holds significant meaning for many Saudis as a marker of “authenticity.”

Second, media representation. Both domestic and international media often portray Saudi society as homogenous. Visual representations, such as those of women wearing black abayas and men in white robes, reinforce this perception of uniformity, obscuring the country's rich cultural diversity (Buchele, 2008).

Third, oral tradition. Much of Saudi culture and tradition has been transmitted orally rather than documented in written form. This reliance on oral history makes it challenging for outsiders to analyse and accurately interpret Saudi cultural dynamics (Lily, 2018).

In addition, historically, physical remoteness within Saudi regions led to the development of distinct cultural practices and identities. This isolation generated a worldview in which in-group membership is vital for identity, safety, and belonging, reinforcing the importance of tribal and regional affiliations (Long, 2005a).

Understanding the scale and depth of Saudi Arabia's socio-cultural diversity is crucial in analysing the factors that shape women's identities and determine their opportunities to seek leadership. The next section explores how these cultural and ethnic dynamics influence women's roles in the Kingdom's evolving societal landscape.

Tribe and kinship

In Arab culture, tribal affiliation plays a central role, bestowing honour, fostering bonds, and enhancing social cohesion (San Martin et al., 2018). The concept of a “tribe” evokes stereotypical images of primitiveness or underdevelopment, yet in the Saudi context, tribes constitute a socio-cultural construct, grounded in family history, pride, heritage, and geographical rootedness, which is a mechanism of enterprise and dynamism (Al-Hassan, 2006).

The origins of tribalism in the Arabian Peninsula predate Islam, emerging as a survival strategy in a harsh desert environment. Families grouped into clans, and clusters of clans formed tribes to ensure survival and protection in an unsafe and volatile landscape (Losleben, 2003; San Martin et al., 2018). This collective interdependence shaped the tribal structures that continue to influence social dynamics in Saudi Arabia today. In premodern Saudi Arabia, tribes were kinship-based entities unaffiliated with nation-states. However, the Saudi state has maintained and integrated tribal identities to foster loyalty and political stability (Maisel, 2015; Stenslie, 2012).

Today, kinship and tribal affiliation remain integral to Saudi national identity, though they are increasingly overshadowed by religious and liberal ideologies as the country transitions towards being a modern civil society (Maisel, 2015). While the precise number of tribes and their respective population sizes are not the focus of this study, their influence on Saudi social identity and, by extension, women's roles and opportunities is pertinent. It is important to recognise that tribes in Saudi Arabia are not homogenous. Each tribe has its own unique value system, exhibiting varying degrees of conservatism or

liberalism. For instance, while the central region upholds conservative tribal customs, more cosmopolitan regions like Hijaz exhibit relatively looser norms, influenced by historic international trade and pilgrimage routes. Here, women may encounter slightly more flexibility in dress codes or social engagement, underscoring how cultural looseness can vary within the same national borders (Yamani, 2000b).

The concept of tribalism in Saudi Arabia extends beyond genealogical ties to include the complex interplay of in-group and out-group relationships. Tribal affiliation reinforces collective identity, shaping the factors that influence Saudi women's self-concepts and social roles. Hofstede's cultural framework categorises Saudi Arabia as a collectivist society where loyalty, pride, and respect for in-group membership are paramount (House et al., 2002; Samin, 2008). These norms prioritise relationships, networks, and social interactions over formalised rules, and these, in turn, affect professional and political life. For example, employment and promotion decisions often hinge on family or tribal affiliations, with familial and collective social bonds infiltrating professional contexts and economic interactions (G. H. Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001).

Tribal identity defines and influences many aspects of Saudi life, including employment and political participation. While the practice is unofficial and not formalised in written codes, it remains prevalent in the government and other sectors, and it is subtly communicated through the practice of unwritten norms (Abalkhail, 2017). Research shows that family names, which point to tribal affiliation, significantly influence professional opportunities and access to resources. Individuals from prominent families are better positioned to secure resources and advance their careers compared to those from less influential backgrounds (Long & Maisel, 2010). Family names serve as markers of heritage, authenticity, and societal status, shaping perceptions of loyalty, status, and connections. These markers are crucial in determining access to occupational opportunities and in shaping society's treatment of an individual (Elamin & Omair, 2010b; Long, 2005b).

Tribalism intersects with Wasta, a social construct pertaining to personal or familial connections. While Wasta is deeply rooted in Arab culture, similar practices exist globally, such as reciprocity in Western contexts (Hutchings & Weir, 2006; Lackner, 2016). In Saudi Arabia, the prevalence of Wasta reflects the country's collectivist culture in which close-knit relationships and networks are vital for professional advancement. Wasta often leads to favouritism in hiring and promotion, reinforcing the advantages of those with strong tribal connections and limiting the opportunities for those less well connected (Abalkhail & Allan, 2016).

While tribal affiliation remains a source of pride for many Saudis, its significance is changing for some. Among the younger generations, tribal identity is increasingly seen as symbolic, serving as a source of cultural affirmation and self-representation rather than as a rigid framework for building relationships and thriving in society. Younger people are renegotiating tribal identity in looser ways, often embracing digital platforms to question traditional gender hierarchies—a sign of cultural elasticity that contrasts with the older generations' tight adherence to conservative tribal roles (Maisel, 2014). Tribalism is also criticised for perpetuating inequality and fostering divisions, as reflected in debates on social media platforms (Samin, 2008; M. C. Thompson, 2019b). Akers (2001) suggests that tribal identity in contemporary Saudi Arabia is less about literal kinship structures and more about adherence to shared collective values and behaviours. This shift has blurred the lines between tribal and nontribal affiliations, integrating diverse groups into broader social networks. Tribalism and kinship remain deeply embedded in Saudi societal practices and norms, influencing social identity, professional opportunities, and political participation, but tribal practices are adapting to modern societal changes. Nevertheless, their influence persists in shaping individual roles and opportunities. Acknowledging the emerging perception of tribalism and its relevance to Saudis is crucial in examining the challenges and dynamics affecting Saudi women's leadership and social mobility.

Sociopolitical reforms: Vision 2030

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is a comprehensive reform initiative introduced in 2016 and designed to diversify the economy and modernise the social landscape of the Kingdom. One of its core objectives is to increase the participation of women in the workforce and boost their representation in leadership roles, recognising the untapped potential of nearly half of the working-age population. The reforms initiated under Vision 2030 aim to create a more inclusive environment by addressing systemic barriers and enhancing opportunities for women to access education, employment, and leadership (Saudi Vision 2030, 2024). Vision 2030's current initiatives are not stand-alone policy projects; rather, they are a phase of a continuous process of globalisation, social flexibility, and diversification (Khan & Khan, 2020). This historical framing can offer a more nuanced, evidence-based perspective on the pace and longevity of changes in women's leadership landscapes. Vision 2030's emphasis on women's workforce participation suggests a deliberate shift from tight to looser norms, as policies such as allowing women to drive and increasing female employment actively counter decades of strict social regulations.

One specific objective for women under Vision 2030 is to enhance their involvement in the labour market (2.2.4-Vision 2030). All of this aligns with the National Transformation Program 2020's goals of increasing the number of women in administrative positions, giving them more agency in government, and developing their leadership skills. Increasing the number of women in leadership and middle management roles is the goal of another program that emphasises mentoring and training (Khan & Khan, 2020).

In terms of women's empowerment and economic engagement in the labour market, the Kingdom has made great strides. Women's empowerment has been favourably affected by the reform initiatives and legislative progress achieved in recent years within the scope of Saudi Vision 2030. Women in Saudi Arabia who are 15 years and above had gained 33.5% in economic participation by 2020, while women's labour force participation had almost doubled, going from 17% to 31.8%, far beyond the 30% goal set by Vision 2030 (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2025).

Of equal importance, in 2020, women made up 30% of public and private sector middle- and upper-level managers. The number of Saudi women working in public services has also been on the rise, attaining 41.02% by 2020.

The Gender Balance in Civil Service project focuses on reviewing policies, legislation, and human resource practices to address gender-based inequalities. Meanwhile, the Remote Work Strategy aims to introduce flexible employment opportunities for all public sector employees, irrespective of gender. Finally, establishing workplace childcare centres across various sectors supports inclusive work environments while providing new employment and investment avenues for women (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2025).

Social change:

Recent advances in women's leadership warrant a critical reevaluation of organisational diversity strategies. Scholars and practitioners have observed the impact of these evolving trends and gender-related dynamics on the cultural and structural dimensions of organisations.

According to Terjesen and Sealy (2016), women's involvement in leadership positions has strengthened leader identities, encouraging more women to visualise themselves as future leaders. As leadership is contextual, more women in high leadership positions make male-dominant boards inappropriate due to social identity shifts.

Due to the deeply ingrained nature of gender inequality within Saudi cultural practices, the introduction of reforms was imperative, particularly those aimed at enhancing women's inclusion. The Saudi government implemented new policies to promote the equitable representation of women across diverse domains, including the economy, politics, and societal practices.

Nevertheless, a recent study, based on research conducted by the Institute of Public Administration, highlights that Saudi women continue to face various, albeit subtle, obstacles to empowerment in leadership roles within government institutions, even after reforms were introduced (Al-Rabia & Al-Hadithi, 2018). The study identifies four categories of women's empowerment in contemporary Saudi Arabia. The first is genuine empowerment, which occurs when women in high-ranking leadership positions have both the expertise and the experience required to excel in their roles along with the authority to implement decisions effectively. The second is constrained empowerment, which refers to situations in which women in similar positions are well-qualified but lack the authority to fully execute their responsibilities, making their roles largely symbolic. Third, superficial empowerment involves appointing women to senior roles, not based on their capabilities but to create a perception of gender inclusivity; this practice may have negative consequences, as failures in these roles could perpetuate stereotypes about women's leadership ability. Finally, mock empowerment involves women being visibly present in public spaces, such as in the media and at conferences, without holding any genuine influence or authority. The author characterises this as undesirable and offers a misleading interpretation of "symbolic token gender representatives" (Kanter, 1977, cited in Terjesen & Sealy, 2016). However, strong cultural "tightness" persists in certain regions and institutions where the informal enforcement of patriarchal norms continues to hamper women's mobility. Such resistance underscores the difficulty of rapidly shifting deeply embedded values within a short reform timeline.

Key reforms impacting women's roles

1. Workforce participation goals

One of the goals of Vision 2030 was to increase women's workforce participation from 22% in 2016 to 30% by 2030. By 2023, the Kingdom had already exceeded this objective, with an estimated 35.4% of women participating in the workforce, which prompted the identification of additional objectives. The officially declared aim of Vision 2030 was elevated to 40%

by the year 2030 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2024). To achieve this, initiatives include the creation of more jobs for women in sectors previously dominated by men and encouraging entrepreneurship among women. Programs such as the Women in the Workforce initiative promote skills development and capacity building to prepare women for leadership roles (Mitchell, 2016; Saudi Vision 2030, 2024).

2. Education and training initiatives

The government has invested in educational reforms to prepare women for roles in emerging industries. Scholarships for women to study abroad and the formation of partnerships with global institutions have opened new avenues for women's professional development (Kinninmont, 2017; Mitchell, 2016).

3. Representation in leadership

Women's inclusion in decision-making bodies has been prioritised. For example, women serve as members of the Shura Council, the Kingdom's advisory body. In 2020, Saudi Arabia appointed its first female ambassador, and several women were assigned high-profile leadership roles in academia, finance, and government (Mitchell, 2016).

Vision 2030 has brought about transformations in women's economic lives in Saudi Arabia, marking a significant step toward enhancing women's status and raising their visibility in public life. In addition, Vision 2030 aims to increase women's representation in leadership positions, which will have a positive impact on the economy and the world at large (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016).

As a result, with the goal of enhancing the capabilities of female leaders and managers across different industries, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development partnered with the Institut Européen d'Administration des Affaires (INSEAD) to establish a leadership training program. The project mentored and trained 1,170 women—600 leaders and 1,100 managers (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2024).

Moreover, on International Women's Day 2020, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, in partnership with Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, launched "Qiyadiyat,"¹ a national platform dedicated to empowering Saudi women leaders. This initiative aligns with Vision 2030 by supporting women in achieving leadership roles across various sectors, offering organisations access to a database of over 7,000 qualified candidates for high-level positions, board memberships, and international representation. Qiyadiyat, as part of the Women's Empowerment in Civil Service and Leadership initiative, not only monitors the accomplishments of Saudi women leaders but also assures equity, leverages expertise, and encourages women's participation in government roles at all levels (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2024).

However, the effectiveness of such reforms in addressing systemic barriers remains limited by culturally rooted resistance, workplace discrimination, and regional disparities. Strengthening these initiatives through institutionally robust and standardised policies, tailored region-specific measures, and systematic monitoring of compliance can ensure more inclusive, measurable, and meaningful progress. Until 2023, women still held only 31.89% of top leadership positions (General Authority for Statistics, 2023). Only by addressing these challenges can Saudi Arabia unlock the full potential of its female population, fostering a dynamic and inclusive leadership landscape.

Conclusion:

This study presents a critical review of several sociocultural, political, normative, and economic factors—those that facilitate and those that inhibit women seeking to assume leadership roles in Saudi Arabia. The paper discusses the ways in which Saudi Arabia's tribalist and collectivist culture presents unique difficulties for women seeking to assume leadership positions, and it explores how the structure of the economy, focused as it is on oil industry growth and revenues, also disadvantages women in the labour market. Overall, Saudi Arabia is characterised by a range of context-specific challenges to female leadership, in addition to those commonly encountered by women leaders in the West. These challenges include the following:

First, tribal allegiances comprise the foundation of the Saudi state and are characterised by traditionalism in terms of gender role expectations. Family, clan-based, tribal, and regional alliances and connections are often the basis of promotions and access to resources or power, and as women's roles within these hierarchies often already lacked relative power, this reinforced cultural tightness, as the central authority imposed uniform regulations and swiftly sanctioned those who stepped

¹ Qiyadiyat is an Arabic term referring to women leaders or female leaders.

outside normative boundaries. As a result, women leaders must now learn to operate within these traditional modes of organisation.

Second, the major importance of the oil industry in Saudi Arabia and the relative dearth of sectoral diversity have affected women's participation in the labour market. Men earn good salaries in the context of relatively high levels of national wealth, meaning that it is not necessarily financially vital for the women in their households to work. Moreover, business activity is scarce in export-focused and service sectors, traditionally occupied by a higher proportion of women workers than in heavy industry and manufacturing.

In addition, as tribal and familial networks often underlie collaborations and exchanges, with promotions and appointments frequently based on membership in a specific in-group, women in Saudi Arabia who are from less privileged families with less access to powerful contacts face even harsher constraints to leadership. Wasta remains a consequential determinant, and women leaders must navigate its politics.

In the same vein, different regions espouse different values in terms of gender roles and expectations, with some tribes valuing women's education and freedom of movement more than others. Accordingly, attitudes toward women leaders vary significantly. Because the tribe constitutes a salient source of identity and belonging for many Saudis, women residing in more conservative settings may face harsher obstacles to leadership and find fewer opportunities than women in more liberal tribes and regions.

In conclusion, the Vision 2030 strategy is designed to open new opportunities for women in terms of education, access to the labour market, and positions of power in public life, but these top-down legislative reforms run up against conservative societal expectations and a culture that can prioritise men's interests and protect existing male power. The future women leaders of Saudi Arabia must learn to navigate this dichotomy effectively.

Women in leadership in Saudi Arabia: Moving forward

Moving ahead, policies must be implemented across the country's regions that are geared to address precisely the kinds of sociocultural, economic, and politiconormative barriers to leadership that have been discussed here. Crucial policies and programs must (a) enable women to overcome major structural constraints to their assumption of leadership by challenging organisations, both public and private, to initiate substantive internal measures that counter deep-seated gender biases; (b) aim to initiate cultural change across and within organisations and measures that include clear lines of accountability to ensure that organisations comply with policy directives; and (c) use the Vision 2030 reforms as a springboard from which to develop new policies that enable ambitious women to attain leadership roles.

Policy implications and practical recommendations

Translating the insights from this review into policy-oriented strategies has the potential to accelerate women's leadership development in Saudi Arabia. While Vision 2030 has set ambitious national targets aimed at increasing women's workforce participation and representation in leadership roles, the nuances of cultural tightness–looseness, institutional constraints, and intersectional identities suggest that a one-size-fits-all policy approach is inadequate. Instead, policymakers and practitioners should consider adaptable, context-sensitive measures informed by current data, international examples, and evidence-based best practices.

Institutional reforms that specifically target Saudi Arabia's women leaders are necessary to remove the structural obstacles these women face by dismantling patriarchal norms. The implementation of these reforms should be monitored and enforced, and they should promote gender equity openly and fairly. To minimise opposition, policy ideas should be delivered gradually and in ways that correspond with Saudi culture's ideals, taking into consideration the cultural tightness of Saudi society.

The Vision 2030 reforms offer a unique opportunity to position women's empowerment as a cornerstone of national development. One way to increase support for these changes is to frame gender inclusion as crucial to economic growth and global competitiveness. Regulations should also aim to promote a change in institutional culture by establishing gender-sensitive workplace regulations, diversity quotas, and inclusive recruiting procedures. These kinds of actions can break down barriers and pave the way for women to develop in leadership roles.

Future research

This study produced some valuable findings that contribute to the ongoing development of the literature pertaining to women leaders in Saudi Arabia, but there are limitations to its scope and generalisability, affording room for expansion and improvement in future research. Studies in the future might:

- (a) Ascertain how Vision 2030 and related reforms have affected women thus far in terms of leadership, exploring their impact and the key barriers to policy effectiveness that have arisen.
- (b) Deepen the analysis of how tradition and conservative norms contrast with and/or work in conjunction with modern life goals and values, with specific reference to how women leaders negotiate these value systems.
- (c) Conduct comparative analyses of the impacts and outcomes of various interventions designed to facilitate female leadership in the country, perhaps focusing on collecting data pertaining to mentoring services or specific organisations' policies.
- (d) Identify the specific ways in which networks, mentors, and other resources are leveraged by women leaders in achieving their career objectives.

Overall, women leaders in Saudi Arabia face constraints to their success that are contextually specific to the country, its traditions, and its history, as well as barriers that are commonly experienced by women leaders worldwide. The Kingdom has made significant strides, both substantively and symbolically, in empowering women leaders, yet too many cultural, economic, religious, and political factors remain that inhibit the effectiveness of central government policy and legislation. There has been a policy trajectory toward increasing reform, driven in part by the youthfulness of the population and its political leadership, and Saudi Arabia must seize this moment of demographic and cultural transition to effect lasting changes in the ways women are expected to behave as professionals and to engage in the labour market. A far more dynamic leadership culture within Saudi organisations and across wider society can be fostered by facilitating the development of more women leaders.

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