Jurnal Harkat : Media Komunikasi Gender, 21(1), 2025, 127-152
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070
Website: http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga
p-ISSN: 1412-2324| e-ISSN: 2655-7428

REFORMULATING GENDER NORMS IN SAUDI ARABIA: CULTURAL LIBERALIZATION UNDER VISION 2030

Fakih Fadilah Muttaqin[1], Yazid Hady[2]*, Nofi Maria Krisnawati[3], Endang Susanti[4], Siti Rohwati[5]
[1,2,4,5] UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia
[3]Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia, Indonesia
E-mail: yazidhady@uinjkt.ac.id

Abstract. This article examines the process of gender norm reconstruction in Saudi Arabia within the framework of Vision 2030, focusing on the state's strategy of selectively liberalizing culture to support its authoritarian modernization project. In the conservative Wahhabi tradition, women's positions have been limited by legal, social, and religious structures. However, since 2016, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi government has initiated a series of reforms that have allowed women to drive, work in the public sector, and access entertainment and cultural spaces. This article uses a qualitative-analytical approach with an exploratory-descriptive design through discourse and policy analysis, as well as a theoretical framework of modernization, state feminism, and ideological control in authoritarian states. It was found that gender reforms in Vision 2030 are not merely a form of emancipation, but rather a state strategy to build new legitimacy, attract global investment, and reframe national identity without overhauling the authoritarian political order. This study makes an important contribution to understanding the dynamics of gender in contemporary Muslim societies and development politics in the Gulf region.

Keywords: *Saudi Arabia; Vision 2030; gender norms; state feminism; authoritarian modernization*

Abstrak. Artikel ini mengkaji proses rekonstruksi norma gender di Arab Saudi dalam kerangka Visi 2030, dengan fokus pada strategi negara dalam meliberalisasi budaya secara selektif untuk menopang proyek modernisasi otoriter. Dalam tradisi Wahhabisme yang konservatif, posisi perempuan selama ini dibatasi oleh struktur hukum, sosial, dan religius. Namun sejak 2016, di bawah kepemimpinan Putra Mahkota Mohammed bin Salman, pemerintah Saudi menginisiasi serangkaian reformasi yang mengizinkan perempuan untuk mengemudi, bekerja di sektor publik, serta mengakses ruang hiburan dan budaya. Artikel ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-analitis dengan desain eksploratif-deskriptif melalui analisis wacana dan kebijakan, serta kerangka teori modernisasi, feminisme negara, dan kontrol ideologis dalam negara otoriter. Ditemukan bahwa reformasi gender dalam Visi 2030 bukan semata bentuk emansipasi, melainkan strategi negara untuk membangun legitimasi baru, menarik investasi global, dan membingkai ulang identitas nasional tanpa merombak tatanan politik yang otoriter. Kajian ini memberikan kontribusi penting dalam memahami dinamika gender di masyarakat Muslim kontemporer dan politik pembangunan di kawasan Teluk.

Kata kunci: Arab Saudi; Visi 2030; norma gender; feminisme negara; modernisasi otoriter

* Corresponding author

Introduction

Saudi Arabia is one of the countries with the most conservative social structures and legal systems in terms of gender relations in the Islamic world. Since the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, gender relations have been strictly regulated by Wahhabism, a puritanical form of Islam that forms the ideological basis of the state. This ideology emphasizes strict segregation between men and women, justifies the patriarchal system, and imposes severe restrictions on women's mobility in public spaces. In this context, women are systematically positioned under male authority, which is institutionalized through a system of guardianship or *wilaya.* Through this system, almost all aspects of women's lives, from education and employment to travel abroad, require the approval of a male guardian, usually a father, brother, or husband (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

These highly conservative social and legal norms not only shape the social identity of Saudi women, but also serve as an important tool in preserving the monarchy's power. In a political system as absolute and centralistic as Saudi Arabia's, control over women's bodies and spaces is part of a project to stabilize power (Van Geel, 2016) . Women are not only citizens with limited rights, but also symbols of the social order that must be upheld by the state and its religious institutions (Alessa et al., 2022) . However, since 2016, Saudi Arabia's socio-political landscape has undergone significant changes with the launch *of Vision 2030,* a long-term national development project designed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). This vision aims to reduce economic dependence on the oil sector, create innovation and tourism-based economic diversification, and build Saudi Arabia's image as a modern and progressive country in the eyes of the world. One of the important pillars of this vision is increasing women's participation in development, which is referred to in the official Vision 2030 document as part of social transformation and human resource development (Vision 2030, 2016).

Within the framework of these reforms, Saudi women are positioned as strategic subjects in the national development project. A number of seemingly progressive reform measures have been introduced, such as the lifting of the ban on women driving in 2018, the removal of some guardianship system rules, granting women the right to travel without guardian permission, and the involvement of women in the economic, entertainment, sports, and even military sectors (Albawardi & Jones, 2023) . The country has also begun to construct a new narrative about the "modern Saudi woman" a woman who is educated, professional, able to compete in the global job market, yet still upholds family and religious values (Zulifan, 2022) .

National media and state institutions play an important role in mainstreaming this narrative. Government advertisements, speeches by officials, and job skills training programs for women are designed to present a new image of Saudi Arabia that is inclusive of women, albeit within the limits set by the state (Alessa et al., 2022) . On a symbolic level, these changes seem promising. Women's participation in the workforce is increasing, and sectors that were previously closed to women, such as architecture, design, and even entertainment, are now open to them. However, behind this

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

success, an important question arises: to what extent does structural necessity drive this transformation, and to what extent does it reflect a genuine strengthening of women's agency?

This is where the important distinction, the main focus of this article lies. If we look at the existing literature, most studies to date have focused on Saudi social reform from the perspective of economic development and modernization (Aldossari & Murphy, 2024) . For example, Al-Rasheed (2019) notes that the modernization occurring in Saudi Arabia is more of an elite strategy to control the narrative of social change in order to maintain the legitimacy of power. However, these studies are still limited to the descriptive aspects of reform and few have discussed the role of the state as the main actor that actively reshapes gender norms for its own interests (Eum, 2019) .

In this context, it is important to view gender reform in Saudi Arabia not as the result of a successful women's social movement that pressured the state to change, but rather as a top-down social engineering project that aligns with the political and economic interests of the state (Smail Salhi, 2024) . The state, in this case, adopts an approach known as *state feminism*, a strategy in which the state defines, regulates, and utilizes the role of women in society to achieve certain goals, without truly opening up space for autonomous participation by women themselves (Müller & Camia, 2023) .

The concept of state feminism highlights how state actors shape policies that appear progressive on gender issues, but remain within a highly controlled framework (Aliyah et al., 2018) . The state may allow women to drive, work, or travel without guardian permission, but at the same time it continues to suppress independent women's activism fighting for these rights (Mahfud et al., 2017) . The arrest of activist Loujain al-Hathloul and several other women activists after the 2018 reforms is a clear example of this contradiction. They were arrested not because they broke the law, but because they were considered a threat to the state's narrative that the reforms were initiated by the government, not by civil society (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Gender reform in Vision 2030 must be read in a broader context as part of authoritarian modernization or a form of social liberalization that is not accompanied by political liberalization. The state has opened up limited new spaces in the social and cultural spheres, but it continues to maintain a repressive political structure and rejects political opposition. This project aims not only to change Saudi Arabia's image in the eyes of the world, but also to create a new social order that remains under state control (Rachman, 2019) .

In the social modernization theory approach, such transformations are common in authoritarian countries that are under global pressure to open up, yet still seek to maintain domestic political stability (Zain et al., 2016) . The state adopts part of the reform agenda to gain international legitimacy, increase foreign investment, and ease public pressure, but on the condition that the state remains the sole actor determining the limits and direction of change (Al-Rasheed, 2009) . The relationship between the state and religion in the context of conservative Muslim societies such as Saudi Arabia further complicates this dynamic, as the state must also maintain religious legitimacy amid the secularization of some public norms (Roro Fatikhin et al., 2024) .

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070 129-152

Gender reforms in Vision 2030 show that modernization and women's liberation do not always align. The state can promote an image of progress without dismantling the roots of inequality that underpin the patriarchal social structure (Moghadam, 2020) . In this context, the transformation that is taking place reflects the state's efforts to reorganize women's social roles in accordance with development needs and political legitimacy, rather than as a form of liberation born of women's own consciousness and agency. The representation of modern women is shaped through the state's official narrative, while spaces for change remain under the control of political authorities (Al-Rashdi & Abdelwahed, 2022) . Thus, the success of gender reform in Saudi Arabia cannot be separated from the power structures that actively shape the boundaries of social participation in accordance with the state's strategic interests. This research is important for uncovering the power dynamics behind reform projects that appear progressive on the surface, as well as for examining the extent to which the state uses gender issues as a political tool in its authoritarian modernization strategy. By placing the analysis at the intersection of gender, state, and power, this study contributes to an understanding of the limits of emancipation in a repressive political system.

Method

This study uses a qualitative-analytical approach with an exploratory-descriptive design to uncover the socio-political dynamics underlying gender norm reform in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 policy. The main focus is on how the state shapes the discourse on women's empowerment within the context of authoritarian modernization (Jamilah & Isnarti, 2024) . The main method used is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Fairclough (1995), which enables the tracing of relationships between language, power, and ideology in policy and media texts. The data sources in this study are entirely secondary, including official state documents (Vision 2030, ministry reports, GASTAT statistics), speeches by state elites (especially Mohammed bin Salman), national media content (Arab News, Saudi Gazette), and reports from international organizations (HRW, Amnesty, UNDP).

Academic literature related to state feminism theory (Charrad, 2001), authoritarian development (Thompson, 2021), and gender performativity (Butler, 1990) served as the main references in the interpretation stage. The analysis process was conducted in three stages: thematic compilation, text and discourse analysis, and critical interpretation based on the themes of law, economics, media representation, and the dynamics of state power in the construction of female identity in state narratives. Validity is maintained through the use of verifiable public data and the application of analytical protocols that have been tested in policy studies. Since this research does not involve direct interaction with human subjects and uses open sources, formal ethical approval is not required.

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

Results and Discussion

Wahhabism, the State, and Gender Reform in Saudi Arabia

The gender reforms that have taken place in Saudi Arabia in the last decade have often been welcomed with praise from the international community as a symbol of progress and openness. Under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the ambitious Vision 2030 program was launched with the aim of transforming the kingdom's economic, social, and cultural landscape, including by promoting the role of women in the public sphere (Latifah & Solihat, 2024) . However, behind this progressive narrative lies a complex reality regarding how gender reform in Saudi Arabia actually operates in the shadow of Wahhabist ideology, state control, and economic modernization interests (Topal, 2019) . Understanding this process requires a critical reading of the long history that has shaped the relationship between religion, politics, and the construction of social norms in the kingdom.

Wahhabism, a religious school of thought originating from the ideas of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the 18th century, carries a mission of purifying Islam by rejecting all forms of religious innovation that are considered to deviate from the literal text of the Qur'an and Hadith (Ali Yazid Hamdani, 2019) . This ideology gained political power when Abd al-Wahhab formed an alliance with Muhammad bin Saud in 1744. This collaboration not only resulted in established political power, but also formed the ideological foundation of the Saudi state, which would be officially established in 1932. Since then, Wahhabism has become more than just a religious doctrine; it has become the normative framework of the state, shaping the way society interprets morality, authority, and the relationship between men and women (Ridwan et al., 2024) .

In the Wahhabi view, women are placed in a subordinate position, with the theological justification that the honor of the family and society lies in protecting women from slander and temptation. This norm is manifested in various forms of restriction, such as strict gender segregation, a guardianship system that gives men authority over women's lives, and restrictions on access to education and employment outside the domestic sphere (Aldossari & Murphy, 2024) . Women's bodies and movements are regulated not only by religious law, but also by state law based on conservative Wahhabi interpretations. Even daily activities such as traveling, seeking medical treatment, and opening a bank account require the permission of a male guardian. This system is deeply rooted in Saudi society and creates a patriarchal structure that is solid and legitimized both religiously and legally (Zain et al., 2016) .

When the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded by Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, Wahhabism was institutionalized through two main institutions, namely Hay'at Kibar al-'Ulama (Council of Senior Scholars) and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), commonly known as the moral police (Takao, 2021) . These institutions not only produce religious fatwas, but also oversee their implementation in public life. They regulate dress codes, behavior in public places, interactions between genders, and even intervene in personal religious practices (Pietenpol et al., 2018) . In this system, the state works closely with religious authorities to control

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070 131-152

the lives of the people, especially women, in order to maintain the image of public piety. Women who violate the norms are considered not only to have tarnished the family name, but also to have damaged the social and moral order of society.

However, over time, especially since the 2000s, pressure for reform has grown stronger. Globalization, developments in information technology, and growth in education have created opportunities for Saudi women to voice their rights, albeit through limited channels (Abdelwahed et al., 2022) . On the other hand, economic dependence on oil, which has become increasingly unstable, has prompted the government to rethink its development strategy. It is in this context that Vision 2030 emerged, bringing an agenda of economic diversification that no longer relies solely on oil, but also on the contributions of all elements of society, including women. Women are now considered an important resource for national productivity. Thus, progressive policies have been introduced, such as lifting the ban on women driving in 2018, the relaxation of guardianship rules, and the involvement of women in the economic, tourism, and even military sectors (Topal, 2019) .

However, these changes must be viewed critically. Gender reform in Saudi Arabia reflects a process of reorganizing patriarchy rather than a genuine effort at emancipation. The state retains full control over the reform process, and women are made subjects of the modernization project rather than agents of change. Even women activists who previously fought for driving rights or legal equality, such as Loujain al-Hathloul, were arrested and imprisoned, even after their demands were realized in state policy (Smail Salhi, 2024) . This shows that the state only accepts changes that are controlled from above and continues to reject forms of resistance that arise from civil society. In this context, the state acts as both protector and controller of women's movements.

The state's official narrative frames this reform as a form of moderate Islam, as if it does not conflict with Islamic values (Sinani, 2022) . Some Wahhabi clerics who were previously conservative have now begun to voice the importance of women's participation for the benefit of the ummah, which is essentially an adjustment to the state-led modernization project. Wahhabism has not been abolished, but reformulated into an instrument of legitimacy for new policies. In other words, the state has not dismantled the ideological structure of Wahhabism, but rather reworked it to remain relevant and support national strategic objectives. This is a form of co-optation of religious ideology by the state for economic and political interests (Ainurrofiq & Khasanah, 2024) .

Although from the outside these reforms appear significant, in reality Saudi women still face many structural obstacles. In the education sector, women have indeed gained broader access, but the curriculum and educational environment are still often gender-segregated. In the world of work, women are allowed to enter various sectors, but they are still constrained by social norms and moral control. In the field of family law, the guardianship system has not been completely abolished and remains in use as the basis for important aspects of women's lives (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2024). The reforms that have taken place are more cosmetic and symbolic in nature, not yet touching the roots of patriarchy that are embedded in Saudi social and legal systems (G .

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

In this context, gender reform in Saudi Arabia cannot be interpreted as a form of liberation, but rather as part of an economic nationalism project that seeks to make women productive actors, without dismantling the power structures that oppress them (Ainurrofiq & Khasanah, 2024) . Women are often presented as symbols of progress, yet they remain within the framework of state control and supervision. The state has assumed the role of civil society in voicing change and has made religious authorities partners in regulating the limits of that change.

Gender reform in Saudi Arabia is not a revolution, but rather a complex compromise between the ideological legacy of Wahhabism, the political power of the monarchy, and global economic needs. It takes place within a highly controlled framework, where the state determines the direction, limits, and narrative of change. These reforms have indeed opened up new spaces for women, but these spaces are still constructed by the state, limited by the values reproduced by Wahhabism, and directed to fulfill development goals determined from above (Ridwan et al., 2024) . Therefore, the struggle for genuine gender equality in Saudi Arabia is far from over and requires structural transformation that goes beyond policy reform alone.

Saudi Women in the Grip of the Guardianship System and Religious Discourse

For decades, women in Saudi Arabia have lived in a social system that places them in a subordinate position, legally, culturally, and religiously. The guardianship system, which is part of the country's legal structure, has systematically institutionalized control over women's bodies and movements (Elyas & Aljabri, 2020) . Within this framework, women are not considered autonomous legal subjects, but rather individuals who must always be under the supervision and approval of a male guardian, whether it be their father, husband, brother, or even son, in various aspects of life. They need permission to travel, marry, continue their education, or access health services. This dependence not only weakens women's capacity as citizens, but also reinforces the patriarchal family structure, which is the main pillar of social control over women.

The power of male guardians not only affects personal relationships within the family, but also has a broad impact on the formation of women's social identity. In public spaces, social norms based on conservative religious interpretations prohibit women from appearing as independent actors. Women are required to wear black abayas, full headscarves, and are prohibited from mixing with men who are not mahrams. These rules drastically limit women's participation in the public sphere, whether in economic, political, or social fields (Alhajri & Pierce, 2023) . Even as late as the mid-2010s, women's involvement in state decision-making institutions was minimal, and public positions were reserved for men. In religious activities, women were segregated and denied access to formal positions such as scholars, preachers, or members of fatwa institutions. In other words, women were not only restricted in their physical mobility but also excluded from symbolic spaces and public representation.

The gender norms that dominate Saudi society did not arise spontaneously, but were shaped through the production of structured and institutionalized religious discourse. Religious institutions such as the Council of Senior Scholars (Hay'at Kibar al-'Ulama) and sermons delivered

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070 133-152

from mosque pulpits became the main actors in spreading conservative views on the position of women. The fatwas issued by these scholars have great authority in influencing state regulations and shaping public opinion (Alsaedi, 2024) . For example, before the policy change in 2018, a number of fatwas stated that women should not drive because it was considered to open the way for slander, promiscuity, and a weakening of moral control in society. This kind of religious narrative normalizes gender inequality as a form of obedience and piety, so that any form of resistance to it is often seen as defiance of religion (Albawardi & Jones, 2023) .

The production of this conservative gender discourse is reinforced by the national education system. The curriculum in girls' schools is designed to instill domestic values and piety, rather than public participation or leadership. Education for girls focuses on domestic skills, the role of wife and mother, and obedience to one's husband and family (Aldegether, 2023) . Choices of majors in higher education are also limited to fields considered "safe" in terms of gender, such as education, nursing, and Arabic literature. Thus, the state and its religious institutions not only control women's behavior but also shape the collective imagination of what women can and cannot do in society. This inequality begins in childhood and is perpetuated through social mechanisms rooted in the education system, the media, and the family.

One of the root causes of gender inequality in Saudi Arabia is the absence of women in the structure of religious discourse production (El-Sanabary, 1994) . All important positions in fatwa institutions, Islamic universities, and religious media are controlled by men. Women have no space to interpret religious texts from their own perspective, let alone to voice their life experiences in authoritative religious language. As a result, the religious interpretations circulating in society become homogeneous, conservative, and masculine. There is no diversity of understanding about women in Islam that comes from women's own experiences and perspectives. Even women who try to voice criticism or alternative thoughts are often criminalized or ignored (Sirri, 2024) . In this system, women are silenced not only through the law, but also through a religious epistemology built exclusively by men.

This reality shows that the social identity of Saudi women is shaped through dual mechanisms: legal and ideological. Legally, women are constrained by a guardianship system that makes them legally dependent on men. Ideologically, they are reduced to symbols of family honor and morality, which must be preserved by covering their bodies, limiting their social interactions, and avoiding public spaces (Alrasheed & Lim, 2018) . Both are reinforced by the systematic production of religious discourse and the state acting as the protector of traditional values, rather than as an agent of equality.

In the context of Vision 2030 and the ongoing socio-economic reforms in Saudi Arabia, some rules restricting women's mobility have indeed been revised. Women are now allowed to drive, work in various sectors, and travel without a guardian's permission. However, these changes are more political and economic in nature, rather than ideological (El-Sanabary, 1994) . The state encourages women's participation to support economic growth and the image of modernization,

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

but it does not dismantle the epistemic and institutional systems that have historically controlled them. Fatwa and educational institutions still maintain conservative narratives, and women's participation in the religious sphere remains very limited. These reforms have opened up physical space for women, but have not touched on the discourse that determines the meaning of piety, honor, and women's leadership in society.

The struggle of Saudi women is not only about freedom of movement or work, but also about reclaiming space to speak, interpret, and determine their own identities in society. As long as gender discourse continues to be produced exclusively by men within a conservative ideological framework, gender inequality will persist, albeit with a more modern face. Women need to be given space not only as objects of change, but as subjects of knowledge and key actors in determining their own future. In this regard, true transformation can only occur if the state and religious institutions open themselves to the democratization of religious, knowledge, authority, and the recognition of diverse voices within society.

Women's Resistance and the Transition of Gender Reform in Saudi Arabia

Although the conservative Wahhabi social system and ideology have long restricted women's movements in Saudi Arabia, seeds of resistance began to grow in the late 1990s. A number of women began to voice their rights through limited but effective channels, such as online campaigns, petitions, and cooperation with international human rights organizations (Khalil & Storie, 2021) . One of the most prominent actions was the "Women2Drive" movement in 2011, which fought for women's right to drive. This movement, although silenced by the authorities, became an important symbol of resistance against the oppressive guardianship system and discriminatory policies against women in public spaces (Khairur Rijal & Zahrotun Khoirina, 2019) . Female figures involved in this campaign, such as Manal al-Sharif, successfully drew global attention and brought the issue of gender inequality in Saudi Arabia to the international stage.

In addition to internal pressure from women's groups, external pressure from the international community also played a significant role. Media globalization and the development of digital technology have created new opportunities for Saudi women's activism. Social media enables the rapid and widespread dissemination of information and has become an advocacy tool that transcends state censorship. International organizations have begun to criticize Saudi Arabia's human rights record, including its treatment of women (Ruspini, 2025) . In the economic context, Saudi Arabia's reliance on foreign investment and its trade relations with Western countries have led to demands for the government to demonstrate its commitment to social reform, particularly in the area of gender equality. Thus, the changes that are beginning to emerge are not solely the result of the will of the ruling elite, but rather a response to multi-directional pressure, both from within and outside the country.

However, the resistance that has emerged has not taken the form of a radical revolution. The women's movement in Saudi Arabia tends to be evolutionary and cautious. Activists are aware that frontal changes to the Wahhabi system could trigger a harsh reaction from the state and religious

institutions (Ridwan et al., 2024) . Therefore, the strategy used is more gradual and adaptive. They utilize the small spaces available to voice their aspirations and strive to frame their demands within a narrative that remains consistent with Islamic values and piety. This reflects a distinctive form of resistance: one that takes place within the boundaries of the hegemonic narrative but still has the power to dismantle structural injustice from within.

When Mohammed bin Salman ascended as Crown Prince in 2017, the state began to respond to this wave of resistance in a seemingly progressive manner. Under the broad umbrella of Vision 2030, the Kingdom has adopted several policies that signal openness to gender reform. The ban on women driving was officially lifted in 2018. Several restrictions in the guardianship system began to be relaxed, and women's access to the workforce and public spaces expanded. However, these reforms were top-down and remained tightly controlled by the state. Many activists who fought for these rights before the reforms were actually criminalized. Some of them were arrested, tortured, and even punished without a transparent legal process. This phenomenon indicates that the state seeks to control the narrative of reform and claim it as a government initiative, rather than a result of pressure from civil society.

The transition towards reform in Vision 2030 cannot be separated from the broader ideological and political context. The gender structure that has been built by Wahhabism for decades has not been immediately destroyed, but renegotiated to be compatible with the interests of development (El-Sanabary, 1994) . Vision 2030 is an ambitious project aimed at modernizing the economy. In this project, women are considered human resources that need to be empowered for national growth. Therefore, women's participation in the labor market, education, and the public sector has become a strategic necessity for the state. The gender reforms that have taken place are more oriented towards economic productivity than structural liberation (Moghadam, 2020) .

The dramatization of gender reform in Vision 2030 often obscures the fact that what is actually happening is a process of reconstructing patriarchy in a new format. The state has taken over the narrative of change, regulating the limits of freedom and creating a version of "equality" that remains under the control of power (Razak & Mundzir, 2019) . On the one hand, women are given new opportunities in various sectors, but on the other hand, they remain restricted from accessing symbolic and ideological power, such as religious authority, media, and legal institutions. The transformation that has taken place is more like a superficial reform, in which the old patriarchal structure is not dismantled, but given a new face that appears more modern and flexible.

To fully understand gender reform in Saudi Arabia, it is important to view it not as the beginning of something entirely new, but as part of a long process of negotiation between old forces and new challenges (Aldegether, 2023) . The Saudi state, which has long supported its identity through conservative Wahhabi interpretations, is now attempting to rebuild its socio-political foundations without completely abandoning its ideological heritage. Gender reform in Vision 2030 has become an arena where global economic interests, domestic political legitimacy, and civil society pressure meet, clash, and compromise.

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

Saudi women's resistance and the transition towards reform cannot be seen simply as a victory or defeat, but rather as a complex, ambiguous process full of competing interests (Sirri, 2024) . Saudi women are not merely objects of policy, but also active actors navigating limited spaces to expand their rights and voices. The ongoing gender reforms are the result of a dynamic interaction between internal pressures, state political calculations, and ever-changing external influences. The future of gender equality in Saudi Arabia will depend heavily on women's ability to continue fighting for their agency, and on the state's courage to open up spaces for truly inclusive and democratic participation.

Gender Reform within the Framework of Saudi Vision 2030

Saudi Vision 2030, announced in 2016 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), is the most ambitious national transformation project in Saudi Arabia's modern history. This initiative aims to free the country's economy from its sole dependence on the oil sector and encourage diversification into industry, tourism, entertainment, technology, and the creative economy (Topal, 2019) . In this context, the role of human resources becomes vital, and women, who have long been marginalized in economic and social structures, are positioned as one of the main pillars of national development. Not only as an issue of social justice, the empowerment of women in Vision 2030 is used as a strategic instrument to increase economic productivity, create a modern image of the kingdom in the eyes of the world, and respond to international pressure on Saudi Arabia's human rights record (Aldegether, 2023) . In the official Vision 2030 document, gender reform is explicitly articulated as an integral part of strengthening national capacity and expanding comprehensive community participation.

One of the most significant aspects of this reform is the changes to the legal framework governing the civil and social status of women. A significant step that has attracted global attention is the lifting of the ban on women driving in 2018. This policy was an important turning point in Saudi Arabia's social history, ending decades of discriminatory practices (Al-Qahtani et al., 2020) . More than just giving women the right to drive, this policy opened up greater access to mobility and individual autonomy, while creating new economic opportunities in the transportation, logistics, and technology-based services sectors. For middle-class and working women, the ability to drive expands access to education, employment, and participation in economic activities that were previously limited by dependence on male guardians or drivers.

This legal transformation does not stop at the issue of mobility. In 2019, the government repealed most aspects of the male guardianship system, a system that previously regulated women's lives from birth to adulthood within a framework of strict supervision by male guardians (El-Bakr, 2022) . With this reform, adult women are allowed to travel internationally without guardian permission, enroll in higher education independently, and have direct access to government services. Even within the administrative structure, women are now legally recognized as heads of households, a status previously reserved exclusively for men. These reforms reflect a significant shift from the

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

paradigm of the state as the protector of women's morality and chastity toward a state that recognizes women's capacity as autonomous legal subjects.

These steps were accompanied by strengthened legal protections against gender-based violence. The government updated its anti-domestic violence laws and established a special unit to handle reports of violence against women, including a national hotline for complaints (Moghadam, 2020) . These efforts demonstrate the state's formal recognition of the structural dimensions of domestic violence and seek to establish institutionally-based responsive mechanisms to violations of women's rights. These reforms also open up opportunities for collaboration between government agencies and civil society organizations on issues related to gender justice and family welfare, albeit within the limits set by the state.

However, the euphoria over the success of this reform needs to be responded to with critical reading. Although the national legal framework has improved, its implementation is not always consistent in all regions. The disparity in implementation between major cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah and rural areas shows that there is strong cultural resistance to changes in gender norms (Jamilah & Isnarti, 2024). In some conservative areas, local interpretations of religious values still dominate administrative and social practices, so women continue to face barriers in accessing legal rights that are actually guaranteed by the state. In addition, most reformist policies are still top-down and oriented towards the country's external image, rather than the substantive democratization of the legal and social systems (Aldekhyyel et al., 2024) .

Critics also point out that gender reform in Vision 2030 is inseparable from the state's interest in restructuring society to support its economic development agenda. In this context, women's empowerment is not solely due to the recognition of equal rights, but because women's roles are seen as essential in increasing national productivity and competitiveness (Saleh & Malibari, 2022) . In other words, women are made subjects of development, but are not yet fully recognized as agents of social and political transformation. Even some women activists who fought for basic rights before the reform took place, such as Loujain al-Hathloul, were arrested and imprisoned for being considered a threat to the stability and authority of the state. This phenomenon indicates that reform is occurring within a framework of strict state control, where the voice of civil society remains limited and opposition is still repressed.

However, it cannot be denied that the changes that have taken place have had a concrete impact on the daily lives of Saudi women. Many women are now able to pursue careers in various sectors, access higher education more freely, and participate in public spaces that were previously closed to them (Al-Rashdi & Abdelwahed, 2022) . These symbols of change offer hope to the younger generation of women, inspiring them to envision a more inclusive and egalitarian future. However, the struggle for true gender equality still faces major challenges, especially in dismantling the remnants of patriarchal structures embedded in social norms, religious institutions, and bureaucratic practices.

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

Gender reform within the framework of Vision 2030 represents a significant step in Saudi Arabia's modernization history, but it is not without contradictions. It reflects the dynamics between the state's political will, global economic pressures, and social demands within society. Women have become symbols of change as well as a field of ideological contestation between modernity and conservatism (Zulifan, 2022) . Whether these reforms will evolve into a profound social transformation depends heavily on the political will to continue opening up spaces for participation, strengthening equitable law enforcement, and acknowledging the diversity of voices in Saudi Arabia's evolving society.

Gender reform within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030 targets not only the symbolic or rhetorical dimensions of change, but also reaches into the structural aspects of women's lives in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the economic, educational, political, and cultural sectors. This transformation marks a significant shift from the old paradigm of women as objects of social control to their active participation in national development, albeit within the confines of state control. Various policies have been implemented to expand women's roles in the public sphere, with the narrative that women's empowerment is not only a human rights demand but also a strategic necessity to support Saudi Arabia's economic competitiveness and its modernization.

In the economic dimension, Vision 2030 explicitly targets an increase in women's participation in the workforce from 17% to 30% by 2030. This target has even been exceeded faster than projected. According to official data from the General Authority for Statistics (2023), women's participation in the workforce reached 36% by the end of 2022 (Gastat Media Center, 2023) . This figure reflects structural changes that have occurred not only because of the country's political will, but also as a result of a combination of previous social resistance and the restructuring of national economic needs. Women are now positioned as productive actors, no longer as passive symbols of domestic piety shaped by conservative Wahhabi ideology for decades.

To achieve this target, the government launched various policies that directly support women's participation in the workforce. The *Wusool* program offers transportation services to working women, overcoming mobility barriers that were previously a significant obstacle. The *Qurrah* program offers childcare subsidies, enabling women to pursue careers without compromising their domestic responsibilities. On the other hand, formal dress codes in the workplace have been relaxed to allow for more flexibility, and protection against discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace has begun to be legally enforced. The private sector has also been involved by providing fiscal incentives and skills training for women, opening up job opportunities in fields that were previously almost closed to them, such as finance, transportation, tourism, and even defense. One symbolic achievement was the appointment of women as security guards at the Grand Mosque in 2021, a significant step in marking the inclusion of women in traditionally male-dominated religious spaces.

However, this progress is not without challenges. Disparities remain in terms of wages, job promotions, and female representation in high-tech sectors and strategic managerial positions.

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070 139-152

Women have indeed entered the workforce more broadly, but they have not yet gained equal access to decision-making positions. This shows that the transformation has not touched the roots of structural patriarchy, which is still part of Saudi organizational and bureaucratic culture.

Reforms have also impacted the field of education, which has long been a primary arena for the formation of traditional gender roles. Saudi Arabia has expanded access to higher education for women, including in fields previously dominated by men, such as engineering, computer science, and business. The increase in women's participation in overseas scholarship programs, such as *the King Abdullah Scholarship Program,* also reflects the country's commitment to producing a generation of educated women who are prepared to compete globally. At the same time, there has been a transformation in the national curriculum, particularly in civics and history lessons, where narratives about gender equality have begun to be introduced (Alhazmi & Kamarudin, 2021) . Some higher education institutions have even established gender studies units and women's research centers. Although institutionally this represents a step forward, in practice these institutions are still highly dependent on central government policy and do not yet have strong academic autonomy.

Challenges in the education sector arise in the form of access inequality and cultural resistance. In rural areas and conservative communities, limited educational infrastructure and the dominance of patriarchal values still hinder women's access to quality education (Al-Bakri, 2024) . Resistance to the narrative of equality in basic education also persists, especially from conservative religious groups who view gender-sensitive education as a threat to traditional values.

Beyond the economic and educational spheres, women's representation in politics and public institutions has also undergone a transformation. Women can now be appointed as members of the Shura Council, hold strategic positions in state-owned companies, and become diplomats abroad (Alghamdi et al., 2021) . The appointment of Princess Reema bint Bandar as Ambassador to the United States is a symbol that the country is beginning to entrust women to represent the national identity on the global stage. However, as in other sectors, this representation is more symbolic than structural. No women hold positions in strategic ministries or have direct influence in national policy-making. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's political system, which is highly concentrated in the hands of the monarchy, limits opportunities for democratic participation and means that women's representation only reaches the elite, not reflecting the reality of middle and lower-class women.

One of the most expansive dimensions of Vision 2030's gender reforms is the increased involvement of women in the culture and entertainment sector. Women are now not only passive spectators but also active participants in the arts, music, media, and sports. They perform in concerts, festivals, and sporting events, and are present as news anchors, screenwriters, and fashion designers (NEWS, 2025) . The government actively promotes the image of the "new Saudi woman" through various media: modern, professional, nationalistic, and still religious. Events such as

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

Riyadh Season and Saudi Fashion Week serve as a platform to showcase to the world that Saudi Arabia has undergone significant changes.

However, this narrative is not entirely free from criticism. Many argue that the state has created the figure of the modern woman as part of a global image campaign in which women's bodies and identities are commodified to reinforce the narrative of progress. This creates tension between personal agency and the state's construction of the ideal role for women. Women are presented as symbols of change, but the space for difference, criticism, or alternative expressions remains limited (Ainurrofiq & Khasanah, 2024) . On the other hand, cultural reforms are more enjoyed by middle-class women in major cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam, while women in rural areas and conservative tribal communities still face significant social and economic barriers.

Throughout this process, gender reform in Vision 2030 is a major project operating within a complex ideological and political landscape. The state is trying to balance the demands of modernization, the conservative Wahhabi heritage, and the need for global legitimacy. Women have become a battleground between state symbolism and social reality. These reforms, despite bringing about real change, still leave much work to be done, especially in creating a system that is truly inclusive, fair, and based on substantive equality. A development agenda that lists women as the main subjects must be accompanied by serious efforts to dismantle the structural inequalities that have long constrained their agency and potential.

Gender reform in Saudi Vision 2030 outwardly shows significant achievements in terms of women's participation in the workforce, access to education, involvement in the public sector, and presence in cultural spaces (NEWS, 2025) . However, these changes do not yet fully reflect a profound structural shift. Women are indeed more visible in the public sphere, but their involvement remains framed within a strict and symbolic state framework. The state engineers the image of modern women as part of its diplomatic and economic strategy, rather than as a result of an emancipation struggle that grew from grassroots society. This creates tension between women's individual agency and the state's idealized construction of women, which essentially remains under the control of patriarchal politics and ideology.

Despite increased participation, inequality still looms in the form of wage gaps, minimal representation in strategic positions, and limited mobility for women outside urban centers (Dewi et al., 2020) . In the education and culture sectors, the discourse of equality has not yet fully permeated the local level, and resistance from conservative groups continues to hinder inclusive reform. Thus, gender reform in Vision 2030 should be understood not as a social revolution that completely liberates women, but as a calculated strategy aimed at balancing economic modernization with the preservation of ideological control. To make it an authentic transformation, a commitment is needed to dismantle the foundations of patriarchy that are still deeply rooted in the Saudi legal, social, and cultural systems.

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070 141-152

The Construction of the Discourse on "Modern Saudi Women"

Gender reform within the framework of Vision 2030 not only addresses legal, economic, and social aspects, but also plays a crucial role in shaping the symbolic and cultural representation of Saudi women. Amid Saudi Arabia's major efforts to revamp its global image, women have become the main representation of the country's new face. The state is not only expanding access for women in education, work, or public spaces, but also actively shaping the narrative, aesthetics, and ideal figure of who the "modern Saudi woman" is. (Afzal & Omar, 2021) In this process, the state utilizes the power of media, official speeches, and visual representations as tools to reframe gender roles in society not as an organic form of emancipatory struggle, but as part of a top-down nationalist project.

One of the most striking indicators of this transformation is the change in the way the state represents women in various official statements and policies. Whereas previously women were more often framed as objects of protection, symbols of family purity, or moral subjects who needed to be controlled, they are now beginning to be portrayed as pillars of development, economic partners, and symbols of national progress (Topal, 2019) . In his 2018 speech, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman emphasized that "Saudi women have tremendous potential" and that "it makes no sense for half of our society not to be involved in development." This narrative establishes legitimacy for the notion that women's empowerment is no longer solely related to rights, but rather an integral part of the country's strategic needs in addressing global challenges and economic diversification.

This change in narrative is explicitly stated in the official Vision 2030 document, which refers to women as vital human resources and equal partners in building a dynamic society. Through this framing, the state is constructing a technocratic and patriotic form of state feminism. Women are empowered not on the basis of individual rights, but because their contributions are considered important for achieving the state's macro targets. This reflects an approach in which gender issues are positioned within a framework of stability, productivity, and loyalty to the monarchy. This kind of representation avoids conflict with conservative norms that are still deeply rooted, as it continues to affirm Islamic values as the foundation of public life.

The media has become the main channel for disseminating this new construction. Various visual campaigns such as #SaudiWomenCan and coverage in Arab News and the Saudi Gazette portray women as modern professionals such as engineers, lawyers, pilots, police officers, and even ambassadors. Figures such as Reema bint Bandar, Raha Moharrak, and Haifa Al-Mansour are elevated as national icons who represent Saudi women as intelligent, global, and loyal to Islamic values. Documentaries, television commercials, and digital platforms are filled with images of women wearing modern abayas, working on laptops, speaking at conferences, or winning international awards. Behind this representation, the state seeks to combine modernity and piety into a neat, clean, and ideologically safe aesthetic package (Rachman, 2019) .

However, this representation is highly selective and exclusive. The figures portrayed as ideal Saudi women generally come from the upper-middle class, are highly educated, and have access to

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

global resources. The voices of women from rural communities, informal workers, or minority groups rarely appear in the dominant discourse (Sirri, 2024) . Thus, this construction of modern Saudi women reflects the state's vision of homogeneity, not the diversity of social reality. This representation leaves no room for dissent, let alone forms of female agency that do not align with the official agenda.

The use of language and symbols in this gender discourse is highly strategic. Slogans such as *"Empowering Women for a Thriving Nation" and "Women at the Heart of Vision 2030"* portray women as tools for national growth, not as subjects with political autonomy or individual rights. The visualization of women in government media is also carefully curated: smiling, wearing pastel-colored abayas, and performing professional activities that are considered "safe" in terms of gender (Aldossari & Murphy, 2024) . This is a form of aesthetics that balances modernity and the state's version of Islamic morality. Women can appear progressive, as long as they do not disrupt established social structures and religious symbols.

The state's approach to gender discourse aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of political symbols, in which the state creates and controls symbolic signs to shape public perception and behavior. The state becomes the main agent in determining who is worthy of being a national representative and what the ideal form of Saudi women should be. In this context, women are used as a symbolic arena where the state demonstrates its ability to change, but also its ability to remain in control of that change (Trainer, 2017) .

This approach can also be interpreted through Judith Butler's lens of gender performativity, where gender identity does not arise from a fixed essence but is the result of actions continuously reproduced through social norms and expectations. The Saudi state, through its media and formal institutions, produces symbolic actions that shape the ideal female figure: active, empowered, yet still within the framework of obedience. Women who appear in public spaces are not representations of freedom, but rather the result of a state's performative project that seeks to present a particular image on the global stage.

Criticism of this model also comes from Islamic feminist studies and media studies, which show that the state often uses women's bodies as a tool for political legitimacy. Gender reform is packaged as proof that Saudi Arabia has transformed, even though in practice, women still face significant structural barriers (Karolak, 2023) . Freedom of expression remains limited, women activists are still criminalized, and autonomous forms of resistance are considered disruptive to the social order. In this context, women are not only the objects of reform, but also objects of symbolic control regulated by the state through discursive and visual mechanisms.

The construction of women in Vision 2030 cannot be understood merely as linear progress toward equality, but also as an ideological instrument in a controlled national transformation project. The state uses symbols, language, and representative figures to shape public perceptions of women, while ensuring that change does not disrupt existing power structures and social norms. The figure of the "modern Saudi woman" becomes an instrument of consensus, not an arena for

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

debate. They are presented to balance global demands and internal stability, economic modernization, and ideological conservatism. Despite opening up greater space for participation and access, these reforms remain untouched by the most fundamental aspects of equality: recognition of diversity, conflict, and women's agency born from below. Without the courage to dismantle this exclusive symbolic foundation, the resulting changes will remain superficially progressive, but in reality still controlled by the logic of the state.

The transformation of the image of Saudi women within the framework of Vision 2030 cannot be separated from the state's symbolic political strategy. Previously, the state actively produced visual representations and discourse about "modern Saudi women," namely, women who are economically empowered but remain loyal to Islamic values and the Kingdom (Dewi et al., 2020) . The next step is to keep this construction under control. This is where the strategy of co-opting and hegemonicizing women's roles becomes important. Representation is not just a matter of image; it becomes a political tool to regulate women's agency and set safe limits for social change.

From Antonio Gramsci's theoretical perspective, this practice can be understood as a form of cultural hegemony, where power is exercised not through coercion but through ideologically shaped consent (Ainurrofiq & Khasanah, 2024). The Saudi state not only regulates policies involving women but also produces values and meanings that define what constitutes an ideal woman. Women are given a platform in the media, allowed to work, and even promoted as ambassadors or company leaders, but within a fixed ideological framework: nationalistic, productive, pious, and not disruptive to the patriarchal order. Agency is accommodated, but not a critical or subversive agency.

In this context, there is a paradox that the state claims to promote gender equality, but rejects forms of women's struggles that do not fit with its official narrative. Several women activists fighting for basic rights such as the abolition of the guardianship system or the legalization of driving have experienced repression, even though the issues they fought for have since become official policy (Aldossari & Calvard, 2022) . Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, and other activists have become symbols of this contradiction: they have been imprisoned and intimidated, despite fighting for a cause that is now part of Vision 2030 (HRW, 2021). The state does not tolerate forms of female agency that develop independently outside the framework of legitimate power.

This phenomenon demonstrates that the state controls not only women's physical space, including access to mobility, employment, and education, but also their symbolic and discursive space. The meaning of what constitutes an ideal woman, what a good woman is like, and how women should play a role in society is determined and disseminated by state institutions and official media. Behind the spirit of reform lies a structure of control that regulates how change can occur, how far it can extend, and who has the right to be involved in it.

However, this hegemonic strategy is not entirely accepted without resistance. In the context of an increasingly digitally connected society, new spaces are emerging beyond the total control of the state. Social media has become an arena where open debates between conservative and progressive

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

groups take place (Albawardi & Jones, 2023) . Some members of society, particularly the younger generation, welcome the changes and use them to expand their agency, for example, through online businesses, non-formal education, and women's communities on digital platforms. However, on the other hand, conservative groups criticize the reforms as a form of Westernization and a deviation from Islamic law. This polarization indicates that the state's symbolic project has not been entirely successful in establishing a unified consensus.

This ambivalence is a key feature of gender reform in Vision 2030, which both opens up and closes spaces. It also gives freedom, but within defined limits. Women are welcome to be part of the national development project, but not to form political movements or voice structural criticism of gender inequality (Latifah & Solihat, 2024) . Legalized female agency is technocratic, apolitical, and loyal to the state narrative. Meanwhile, critical, collective, or radical forms of agency are considered a threat to stability and public morals.

A critical evaluation of this situation reveals that the construction of the "new Saudi woman" in Vision 2030 is ambivalent and selective. It reflects complex negotiations between the demands of globalization, the need for economic modernization, and the state's desire to maintain its political and ideological legitimacy (Latifah & Solihat, 2024) . Women are made the face of change, but are not given the space to truly be the drivers of change. Symbols of progress are used to show that Saudi Arabia has changed, but the basic structures of patriarchy and authoritarianism remain intact.

Gender reform in Vision 2030 should be seen as part of the state's hegemonic strategy of producing controlled narratives and symbols of progress, rather than the result of organic struggle or participatory social transformation. To achieve more substantive equality, there needs to be space for women to freely articulate their agency not only in terms of economic productivity, but also in the political, legal, and cultural spheres more critically and inclusively. Without this, the "new Saudi woman" will only be a symbolic product of the state's agenda, not a proper subject of change.

Limitations and Contradictions of Gender Reform in Vision 2030

The Saudi Arabian government often presents gender reform within the framework of Vision 2030 as a significant achievement in social transformation towards an open and progressive modern state. Through various policies that expand women's roles in education, the workplace, public spaces, and even international diplomacy, the state has constructed a narrative that a new era for Saudi women has arrived. In the eyes of the international community, this image is reinforced through media campaigns, women's participation in global forums, and symbols of success such as the lifting of the driving ban and the appointment of women to strategic positions (Media, 2015). However, when these reforms are observed critically, various structural limitations and fundamental contradictions accompanying the process become apparent. Rather than being an organic emancipation movement, gender reforms under Vision 2030 actually exhibit characteristics of authoritarian modernization that are rife with co-optation, control, and ambivalence.

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070 145-152

One of the main limitations of this reform lies in its highly elitist and centralized design. The reform process did not emerge from public participation or the collective demands of Saudi women, but was entirely directed by the state elite, particularly under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. This has resulted in a *top-down* dynamic of change, in which the state not only determines the direction but also limits the space for women to articulate their rights outside the official framework of the state (Juwita Pratiwi Lukman, 2024) . In this logic, women's agency is recognized as long as it is not critical, collective, or disruptive to the narrative of national development. Women are given space to work, study, and achieve, but within the framework formulated by the state as the "new Saudi woman," a figure who is modern, productive, and nationalistic, yet remains loyal to the kingdom and the Islamic values of the state.

This construction of controlled agency becomes very apparent when we look at how the state treats women activists who fought for basic rights even before the reforms began (Alrasheed & Lim, 2018) . The cases of Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, and several other activists illustrate the most striking paradox: they were arrested and imprisoned for fighting for the right to drive and the abolition of the guardianship system, two things that were later institutionalized by the state. This indicates that the state seeks to control not only the outcomes of reform, but also who can be considered the legitimate representative of change. Independent advocacy is considered dangerous because it can challenge the state's narrative hegemony, leading to repression even when the substance of the demands has been accommodated. Thus, gender reform in Saudi Arabia is not only about expanding rights, but also about seizing control over who can voice change.

In addition to limited participation, this reform also faces inequality in terms of benefit distribution. Women from the elite and upper middle classes, especially in major cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam, are the most benefited group. They have access to higher education, formal employment, international networks, and a modern lifestyle in line with the country's vision of "(El-Bakr, 2022) . In contrast, women in rural areas, conservative communities, or from tribal families still face powerful structural barriers. Patriarchal values remain dominant, infrastructure is limited, and access to opportunities is severely restricted. These reforms, which are homogeneous and insensitive to social disparities, have ultimately created new classes within Saudi society: those who can appear as symbols of progress and those who remain marginalized within traditional structures.

Meanwhile, the state's official narrative continues to promote the image of modern, empowered Saudi women as proof that the kingdom has changed. In various international forums, the state highlights successful women, such as female ambassadors or national athletes, as representations of this transformation. However, behind this progressive global image, the domestic reality still leaves many legal and social inequalities. The family law system has not undergone fundamental changes, inheritance rights remain unequal, and reproductive rights are not yet part of legal protection (Dewi et al., 2020) . In fact, in the religious education curriculum taught in schools, the narrative of female subordination remains dominant. This gap between image and reality creates ambivalence among Saudi women themselves: some see these reforms as a real

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

opportunity. In contrast, others view them as a cosmetic strategy that does not address the root causes of structural patriarchy.

One of the hallmarks of gender reform in the authoritarian modernization model is the coexistence of limited liberalization and ongoing repression. The state provides women with some new spaces, both legally and symbolically, but these spaces are highly controlled. Women can become professional workers, news anchors, or diplomatic officials, but they are not allowed to form independent organizations, criticize state policies, or discuss gender issues that are considered too political (Ainurrofiq & Khasanah, 2024) . When women try to demand greater political participation rights, reform of the Sharia legal system, or more freedom of expression, the state responds with silencing. There is no freedom of association, no independent press, and no open electoral system that enables women to influence public policy collectively. Social reform is underway, but political reform has stalled, creating a gap between illusory individual freedoms and strict collective control.

In the context of domestic politics and geopolitics, gender reform also serves as a tool for legitimizing the new regime under Mohammed bin Salman (Dewi et al., 2020) . In the official narrative, Vision 2030 not only outlines the direction of the country's development, but also shapes the image of MBS as a progressive and courageous young leader. The changing role of women is used as evidence that the kingdom is moving towards a more open future, while also distinguishing the current regime from the conservatism of the past (Alghamdi et al., 2021) . However, because the success of these reforms is largely dependent on the state and is closely tied to the figure of MBS, their sustainability is highly contingent upon political stability and the consistency of the ruling elite. There is no guarantee that the direction of reform will be maintained in the event of a change in power or a shift in policy. This dependence highlights the fragility of change when it is not grounded in institutions and social participation.

A theoretical reflection on this dynamic shows that what appears to be gender progress in Saudi Arabia is actually a form of emancipation that takes place under subjugation. Women are given space to move, but that space is guarded and directed. The changes that have taken place are performative, not transformative; symbolic, not structural (Aldekhyyel et al., 2024) . Women become tools for representing change, but not its drivers. This illustrates a pattern of control-based development in which emancipation is framed in a way that does not disrupt the existing power structure. As stated by several observers, this type of emancipation does not foster substantive equality; instead, it masks the face of authoritarianism with a veneer of modernity.

The limitations and contradictions of gender reform in Vision 2030 show that seemingly progressive changes can coexist with the perpetuation of repressive power (Saleh & Malibari, 2022) . The future of this reform will be determined by the extent to which Saudi women can expand their agency beyond the state's boundaries through education, organization, digital solidarity, and cross-sector advocacy. Without independent social power, gender reform will remain an instrument of state legitimacy rather than a path to true justice and equality.

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

Conclusion

Gender reform within the framework of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is part of a national development project that encompasses not only economic but also social and symbolic aspects. Changes in women's roles include greater access to education, employment, and public spaces, as well as the transformation of their image through the media and official state narratives. However, this entire process is top-down, lacking independent involvement from civil society. The state strictly regulates women's movements, granting limited freedoms that remain within the control of patriarchal structures and monarchical authority.

Although these reforms are presented as progress, this study argues that these changes are part of an authoritarian modernization strategy that balances a progressive image with the preservation of power. The state actively shapes the figure of the "new Saudi woman" as a representation of religious productive nationalism. Still, women's agency is only legalized to the extent that it supports the official narrative. Critical activism is repressed, and women are not given the space to become independent actors of structural change. The representation is symbolic, while inequality and political control are maintained.

Gender reforms are also uneven and contradictory, varying between cities and villages, the upper class and the working class, and between the global image and local reality. The coexistence of reform and repression indicates that formal achievements are not yet aligned with substantive equality. Thus, these reforms are better understood as controlled reforms, where openness is selective and directed at supporting the state's legitimacy. The future of reform depends on the internal dynamics of the kingdom, civil resistance, and international pressure for the establishment of a more inclusive and democratic system.

References

Abdelwahed, N. A. A., Bastian, B. L., & Wood, B. P. (2022). Women, Entrepreneurship, and Sustainability: The Case of Saudi Arabia. *Sustainability*, *14*(18), 11314. https://doi.org/10.3390/su141811314

Afzal, N., & Omar, A. (2021). The Saudi Vision 2030: Reproduction of Women's Empowerment in the Saudi Press: A Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis. *Register Journal*, *14*(1), 121–138. https://doi.org/10.18326/rgt.v14i1.121-138

Ainurrofiq, F., & Khasanah, N. (2024). FROM DOMESTIC TO PUBLIC: THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT DISCOURSE IN SAUDI ARABIA'S VISION 2030. *Akademika : Jurnal Pemikiran Islam*, *29*(1), 101. https://doi.org/10.32332/akademika.v29i1.7755

Al-Bakri, A. (2024). The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Empowering Women Leaders in Light of the Vision of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2030 AD. Case Study University Majmaah. *Journal of Umm Al-Qura University for Educational & Psychological Sciences*, *16*(3), 308–326. https://doi.org/10.54940/ep99804217

Albawardi, A., & Jones, R. H. (2023). Saudi women driving: Images, stereotyping and digital media. *Visual Communication*, *22*(1), 96–127.

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

https://doi.org/10.1177/14703572211040851

Aldegether, R. A. (2023). Representations of girls and women in a Saudi Arabian family education curriculum: A content analysis. *Frontiers in Education*, *8*, 1112591. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1112591

Aldekhyyel, R., Alhumaid, N., & Alismail, D. (2024). Saudi Women's Views on Healthcare Leadership in the Era of Saudi 2030 Health Transformation. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare*, *Volume 17*, 237–249. https://doi.org/10.2147/JMDH.S439146

Aldossari, M., & Calvard, T. (2022). The Politics and Ethics of Resistance, Feminism and Gender Equality in Saudi Arabian Organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *181*(4), 873–890. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04949-3

Aldossari, M., & Chaudhry, S. (2024). Gendered precarity in Saudi Arabia: Examining the state policies and patriarchal culture in the labor market. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *31*(6), 2698–2716. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13119

Aldossari, M., & Murphy, S. E. (2024). Inclusion is in the Eye of the Beholder: A Relational Analysis of the Role of Gendered Moral Rationalities in Saudi Arabia. *Work, Employment and Society*, *38*(5), 1244–1266. https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170231180823

Alessa, N. A., Shalhoob, H. S., & Almugarry, H. A. (2022). Saudi Women's Economic Empowerment in Light of Saudi Vision 2030: Perception, Challenges and Opportunities. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, *12*(1), 316. https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2022-0025

Alghamdi, H, A. K., El-Hassan, W. S., Aldossari, A. T., & Alrasheed, H. S. (2021). Toward a Female Entrepreneurship Education Curriculum in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education*, *24*(5), 1–743. https://www.abacademies.org/abstract/toward-a-female-entrepreneurship-education-curriculum-in-saudi-arabia-10916.html

Alhajri, W., & Pierce, B. J. (2023). Saudi Women's Attitudes Toward Advocacy for Women's Rights. *Affilia*, *38*(1), 111–126. https://doi.org/10.1177/08861099221113878

Alhazmi, A. H., & Kamarudin, S. (2021). An Overview of the Current Educational Strategies for Women: A Prospective from Saudi Arabian vision 2030. *Rigeo*, *11*(5), Article 5. https://rigeo.org/menu-script/index.php/rigeo/article/view/1096

Ali Yazid Hamdani. (2019). Debut Politik Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab & Muhammad Ibn Saud. *Ishlah: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin, Adab dan Dakwah*, *1*(2), 176–184. https://doi.org/10.32939/ishlah.v1i2.38

Aliyah, I. H., Komariah, S., & Chotim, E. R. (2018). Feminisme Indonesia dalam Lintasan Sejarah. *TEMALI : Jurnal Pembangunan Sosial*, *1*(2), 140–153. https://doi.org/10.15575/jt.v1i2.3296

Al-Qahtani, M. M. Z., Alkhateeb, T. T. Y., Abdalla, M. A. Z., Elsayed, S. A. M., Ibrahim, E. M. M., & Mawad, G. S. E. (2020). The Economic Empowerment of Saudi Women in the Light of Saudi Vision 2030. *Asian Economic and Financial Review*, *10*(11), Article 11. https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.aefr.2020.1011.1269.1279

Al-Rashdi, N. A. S., & Abdelwahed, N. A. A. (2022). The Empowerment of Saudi Arabian Women through a Multidimensional Approach: The Mediating Roles of Self-Efficacy and Family Support. *Sustainability*, *14*(24), 16349. https://doi.org/10.3390/su142416349

Alrasheed, G., & Lim, M. (2018). Unveiling Saudi Feminism(s): Historicization, Heterogeneity, and Corporeality in Women's Movements. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *43*(3), 461–479. https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2018v43n3a3379

Al-Rasheed, M. (2009). Modernizing authoritarian rule in Saudi Arabia. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, *2*(4), 587–601. https://doi.org/10.1080/17550910903244976

Alsaedi, N. (2024). Empowering Saudi Women through Automobile Advertisements: A Transitivity Analysis. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, *6*(2), 297–315. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i2.1714

Dewi, N. R., Fikri, A. I., & Febriani, A. (2020). Dinamika Kesetaraan Gender di Arab Saudi: Sebuah Harapan Baru di Era Raja Salman. *JURNAL SOSIAL POLITIK*, *6*(1), 30. https://doi.org/10.22219/sospol.v6i1.11208

El-Bakr, F. (2022). Empowering Saudi Women under Vision 2030: Opportunities and Challenges. *International Journal of Childhood and Women's Studies*, *2*(4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.21608/ijcws.2022.270720

El-Sanabary, N. (1994). Female Education in Saudi Arabia and the Reproduction of Gender Division. *Gender and Education*, *6*(2), 141–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/0954025940060204

Elyas, T., & Aljabri, A. (2020). Representations of Saudi Male's Guardianship System and Women's Freedom to Travel in Western Newspapers: A Critical Discourse Analysis. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, *7*(3), 339–357. https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798920921977

Eum, I. (2019). "New Women for a New Saudi Arabia?" Gendered Analysis of Saudi Vision 2030 and Women's Reform Policies. *Asian Women*, *35*(3), 115–133. https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2019.09.35.3.115

G.F., A. J.-A., D., A. H., S.M., K., M, Z., L., O., S., D.-N., E.S., A., T., K., N., A.-W., R.F., A., T.T.A., A. H., H.F., A. R., & L.D., M. (2024). Institutional and Socio-Cultural Factors that Influence the Wellbeing of Women Working in Academia in Arab Countries: A Scoping Review. *Sage Open*, *14*(4), 21582440241259693. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241259693

Jamilah, M., & Isnarti, R. (2024). Pioneering Change: Women's Economic Empowerment under Saudi Vision 2030. *Sawwa: Jurnal Studi Gender*, *19*(2), 169–200. https://doi.org/10.21580/sa.v19i2.23305

Juwita Pratiwi Lukman. (2024). Pemberdayaan Perempuan Sebagai Poros Utama Pembangunan Berkelanjutan: Membangun Kesetaraan, Kesejahteraan, Dan Keseimbangan Lingkungan. *Journal of International Multidisciplinary Research*, *2*(8), 88–97. https://doi.org/10.62504/jimr822

Karolak, M. (2023). Saudi Women in the Mohammed bin Salman Era: Examining the Paradigm Shift. Dalam L. H. Skalli & N. Eltantawy (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender, Media and Communication in the Middle East and North Africa* (hlm. 65–81). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11980-4_5

Khairur Rijal, N., & Zahrotun Khoirina, R. (2019). The Roles of Civil Society to Changing of Women Driving Policy In Saudi Arabia: Case Women2Drive Campaign. *Journal of Islamic World and Politics*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.18196/jiwp.3125

Khalil, A., & Storie, L. K. (2021). Social media and connective action: The case of the Saudi women's movement for the right to drive. *New Media & Society*, *23*(10), 3038–3061. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820943849

Latifah, A., & Solihat, A. (2024). Power relation and knowledge: Linking Islamic education to socio-political reform in Saudi Arabia. *ATTARBIYAH: Journal of Islamic Culture and*

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070

Education, *9*(2), 157–172. https://doi.org/10.18326/attarbiyah.v9i2.157-172

Mahfud, D., Nazmi, N., & Maula, N. (2017). RELEVANSI PEMIKIRAN FEMINIS MUSLIM DENGAN FEMINIS BARAT. *Sawwa: Jurnal Studi Gender*, *11*(1), 95. https://doi.org/10.21580/sa.v11i1.1448

Media, Z. B. (2015). *Wajah Studi Agama-Agama dari Era Teosofi Indonesia (1901-1940) Hingga Masa Reformasi*. Pustaka Pelajar.

Moghadam, V. M. (2020). Gender Regimes in the Middle East and North Africa: The Power of Feminist Movements. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, *27*(3), 467–485. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa019

Müller, H., & Camia, C. (2023). Between Uniformity and Polarization: Women's Empowerment in the Public Press of GCC States. *Politics & Gender*, *19*(1), 166–194. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000465

NEWS, S. A. B. (2025). *Saudi Women's Sports Witness Historic Growth Under Vision 2030, Empowering a New Generation of Champions*. Saudi Arabia News. https://www.saudiarabiabreakingnews.com/post/saudi-women-s-sports-witness-historic-growth-under-vision-2030-empowering-a-new-generation-of-champ

Pietenpol, A. M., Morgan, M. A., Wright, J. P., Almosaed, N. F., Moghrabi, S. S., & Bashatah, F. S. (2018). The enforcement of crime and virtue: Predictors of police and Mutaween encounters in a Saudi Arabian sample of youth. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *59*, 110–121. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2018.05.007

Pusat Media Gastat. (2023). *GASTAT Issues Saudi Women's Report 2022*. **الهيئة العامة للإحصاء**. https://www.stats.gov.sa/w/

Rachman, M. F. A. (2019). The Reality behind the Rhetoric: An Examination of Saudi Vision 2030 Using Imminent Critique. *Journal of Islamic World and Politics*, *3*(2). https://doi.org/10.18196/jiwp.3239

Razak, Y., & Mundzir, I. (2019). OTORITAS AGAMA ULAMA PEREMPUAN:RELEVANSI PEMIKIRAN NYAI MASRIYAH AMVA TERHADAP KESETARAAN JENDER DAN PLURALISME. *PALASTREN Jurnal Studi Gender*, *12*(2), 397. https://doi.org/10.21043/palastren.v12i2.5981

Ridwan, Hasibuan, S. B., Supendi, U., & Thohir, A. (2024). The Wahhabi Movement and Abdul Aziz Al-Saud in the Formation of the Third Period Saudi Dynasty (Emirate of Riyadh 1901-1932 AD). *Al-Afkar, Journal For Islamic Studies*, *7*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.31943/afkarjournal.v7i1.827

Roro Fatikhin, Syihabuddin Qalyubi, & Subaidi Subaidi. (2024). The Authority of Policy: Transitioning from Traditionalist to Modernist Moderate in Saudi Arabia. *Fikri : Jurnal Kajian Agama, Sosial dan Budaya*, *9*(1), 122–135. https://doi.org/10.25217/jf.v9i1.4778

Ruspini, E. (2025). Towards an inclusive (post)globalization? Women as agents of change. *Dialogues in Sociology*, *1*(1), 46–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/29768667241310830

Saleh, W., & Malibari, A. (2022). Saudi Women and Vision 2030: Bridging the Gap? *Behavioral Sciences*, *11*(10), 132. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs11100132

Sinani, B. (2022). Post-Salafism: Religious Revisionism in Contemporary Saudi Arabia. *Religions*, *13*(4), 340. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040340

Sirri, L. (2024). From Theory to Action: A Saudi Arabian Case Study of Feminist Academic Activism against State Oppression. *Societies*, *14*(3), 31.

https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14030031

Smail Salhi, Z. (2024). Striving for autonomy and feminism: What possibilities for Saudi Women? *Diogenes*, *65*(2), 251–263. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0392192124000087

Takao, K. (2021). Women in the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice: Through the Case of "Religious Police" in Saudi Arabia. *Orient*, *56*(0), 141–155. https://doi.org/10.5356/orient.56.141

Topal, A. (2019). Economic reforms and women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *76*, 102253. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2019.102253

Trainer, S. (2017). Piety, Glamour, and Protest: Performing Social Status and Affiliation in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *46*(3), 361–386. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241615611728

Van Geel, A. (2016). Separate or together? Women-only public spaces and participation of Saudi women in the public domain in Saudi Arabia. *Contemporary Islam*, *10*(3), 357–378. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-015-0350-2

Zain, M., Kassim, N., & Ayub, N. (2016). Modernisation without Westernisation in Saudi Arabia: Perceptions of the Country's Urban Dwellers. *Social Change*, *46*(4), 583–601. https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085716666632

Zulifan, M. Z. (2022). Reposisi Identitas Sosial Perempuan Saudi Pasca Terbitnya Visi Saudi 2030. *Nady Al-Adab : Jurnal Bahasa Arab*, *19*(2), 64–79. https://doi.org/10.20956/jna.v19i2.23510

http://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/psga | DOI: 10.15408/harkat.v21i1.49070