

# **HIJAB AND STATE FEMINISM IN SAUDI ARABIA: REFORM, RESISTANCE, AND THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Islamic Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts (M.A.)**



by:

**Ayu Puja Lestari**

**0001232310004**

**UNIVERSITAS ISLAM INTERNASIONAL INDONESIA**

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## ABSTRACT

Ayu Puja Lestari

01232310004

ayu.lestari@uiii.ac.id

Islamic Studies

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia

This thesis interrogates the shifting politics of veiling in Saudi Arabia during the era of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (2015–2020), a time when the state sought to rebrand itself as modern and reform-oriented. The hijab, once strictly required as a religious and moral duty—along with the black abaya—has now been reframed as a matter of personal choice. But this apparent freedom raises deeper questions: Who is granted the authority to choose, and what are the socio-political implications of this perceived freedom? Using ideas from state feminism, Michel Foucault’s theory of power, and Islamic feminist views on agency, this study argues that state control over women has not ceased; rather, it has transformed in form and visibility. Instead of enforcing strict regulations and punishments, the government now seeks to promote national pride and ideas of empowerment, particularly in relation to women’s clothing. In the past, non-compliance with hijab regulations posed significant social and legal challenges for women, but now, if it aligns with the state’s desired image, she may be commended for taking it off. This study highlights a significant paradox in Saudi reforms by examining legislation, government media, and activist voices: whereas women are increasingly visible in public life, those who speak out on their own or seek actual rights are frequently silenced or even imprisoned. While women’s visibility is increasingly sanctioned by the state, their voices and political agency remain restricted. This research focuses on the actual experiences of Saudi women—those who wear the hijab, those who do not, and those who navigate between veiling and unveiling depending on social or spatial contexts—rather than reducing it to a simplistic symbol of either tyranny or freedom. Their choices are influenced by their need to live, adapt, and achieve moral balance in a strictly regulated society in addition to their religious or political convictions. This study returns attention to power in a society where governments, feminists, and international observers continue to debate the hijab. Who gets to define what it means to be visible, modest, or empowered? And whose bodies bear the consequences of such choices?

Keywords: *hijab, Saudi Arabia, state feminism, agency, visibility, Islamic feminism, women’s right*

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia has undergone significant changes as part its effort to present itself as a modern and reform-oriented nation. Under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the Kingdom launched *Vision 2030*—an ambitious reform plan aimed to modernise the economy, opening up society, and to loosen long-standing social restrictions.<sup>1</sup> These changes are not just about business, but these changes extend beyond economic concerns, encompassing significant cultural and symbolic shifts. One of the most visible and debated areas is the change on how women are expected to dress.

For decades, the hijab alongside the black abaya, was far more than clothing in Saudi Arabia. It was a tool of state authority, religious conformity, and gender segregation.<sup>2</sup> Wearing it in public was mandatory and strictly regulated by both legal institutions and social norms. The religious police (*mutawwa*) patrolled streets, malls, and schools to ensure that women abided by “appropriate” dress codes, which were tightly tied to the Kingdom’s Wahhabi identity.<sup>3</sup> This state-religious alliance produced a culture where dress signified not just modesty, but obedience, piety, and national belonging.

In recent years, however, this regime of control has softened—at least on the surface. In public spaces, Saudi women today are seen in brighter clothing, with uncovered hair, with increasing confidence. Some women have ceased wearing the abaya altogether. State officials now claim that “the hijab is a matter of personal choice”.<sup>4</sup> This transformation is often celebrated in international media as a sign of progress. However, the rapid, symbolic, and top-down nature of this transformation raises critical questions. *Has the hijab in Saudi Arabia truly shifted from obligation to option? Or are we witnessing a subtler repackaging of state power—one that uses the language of freedom while maintaining deep structures of control?*

This research examines how ideas and rules around the hijab have evolved in the era of MBS from 2015 to 2020. It not only examines legal developments, but also explores how these changes are represented in society, shown in the media and experienced by women themselves. It asks whether these reforms signal genuine agency for women, or whether they represent a modernised mechanism through which the state reshapes visibility while continuing to suppress dissent.<sup>5</sup> Saudi Arabia is a big example for exploring how law, religion, and politics shape the hijab. For a long period, the country has long been regarded as one of the most gender-segregated societies globally. Conservative interpretations of Islamic law, patriarchy, and state policy was strongly influencing its legal system.<sup>6</sup> As a marker of national identity, religious commitment, and societal expectation, the hijab has

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<sup>1</sup> Vision 2030, *Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 2016, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>.

<sup>2</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 96–98.

<sup>3</sup> Maha Akeel, “Saudi Women and the Religious Police: Between Compliance and Resistance”, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 72, no. 1 (2018): 45–62.

<sup>4</sup> “Saudi Women Not Required to Wear Abaya, Says Crown Prince”, *The Guardian*, March 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Amélie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 33–36.

<sup>6</sup> Fawziah Al-Bakr, “Women’s Education in Saudi Arabia: The Way Forward”, *Higher Education Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2013): 5–15.

had several overlapping meanings in this setting.<sup>7</sup> The state's recent attempt to recast it as a personal decision disrupts these long-held meanings, but it also demands closer scrutiny: *Who benefits from this new narrative? And what remains unchanged beneath it?*

Saudi changes first appear to be quite outstanding. Women are now permitted to work in sectors that were previously reserved for men, drive, get passports without a male guardian's consent, and even join in the military.<sup>8</sup> Female labour force participation has almost doubled in only five years.<sup>9</sup> Saudi women are more visible, on billboards, in the media, and in leadership roles than ever before. Even though Saudi women are now more seen in public—like on TV, in jobs, or on billboards—the government still take control to silence and treat them unfairly.

One of the most well-known examples is Loujain al-Hathloul, a women's rights activist who campaigned for the right to drive and to end male guardianship. She was arrested, reportedly tortured, and imprisoned—even as the government adopted some of the reforms she had demanded.<sup>10</sup> While Loujain's activism did not focus on the hijab, her case illustrates the boundaries of state-managed reform. Her experience illustrates a deeper contradiction: women's empowerment is endorsed only insofar as it aligns with state interests. In this way, the post-reform era offers a carefully curated illusion of freedom—one that remains conditional, monitored, and politically useful. Social media campaigns celebrating the “new Saudi woman” are often produced and carefully chosen by the state, silencing voices that do not conform to the official image.<sup>11</sup> This contradiction suggests a deeper tension between performance and reality—between appearing liberal, and being truly free.

To make sense of this contradiction—where women seem more free, but are still being controlled—this thesis uses Michel Foucault's theory of biopower. This idea explains that governments do not just control people through force or punishment. They also shape how people live every day—how they use their bodies, how they behave, and even how they speak.<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, changing the hijab rule from something mandatory to something optional does not automatically mean the state is giving up control. It might simply be changing the way that control works. The notion of choice remains heavily structured by state-sanctioned limitations.<sup>13</sup> Thus, this represents a constrained form of freedom. It's a new way of managing people's behaviour.

This thesis further focuses on women's agency—their ability to make decisions and shape their own lives. It resists framing Saudi women either as passive victims or as fully liberated subjects of state-led reform. Instead, it follows the thinking of Saba Mahmood, who reminds us that freedom and oppression are

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<sup>7</sup> Ibtisam Alamri, *The Hijab Between Men and Women in Saudi Society* (MSc thesis, University of Sheffield, 2022), 12–15.

<sup>8</sup> “Saudi Women Allowed in the Army”, *Al Jazeera*, February 2021.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank, “Saudi Arabia: Female Labor Force Participation”, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International, “Saudi Arabia: Women's Rights Reforms Mask Continuing Repression”, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org>.

<sup>11</sup> “Saudi Feminist Activists Arrested”, *Time*, 5 August 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 139–145.

<sup>13</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013), 6–8.

not always clear-cut opposites.<sup>14</sup> Some women are happy to remove the hijab. Others continue to wear it for their own reasons—like faith, habit, or comfort. And many women choose something in between.<sup>15</sup> But none of these choices happen in a vacuum. They are shaped by the bigger picture: the power of the state, ideas about identity, and constant surveillance. In this context, the hijab is not just about clothing. It's a powerful symbol, full of political meaning. Whether a woman wears it, takes it off, or wears it in a new way, the hijab reflects deeper struggles about belief, womanhood, the nation, and resistance. The Saudi state's attempt to reframe veiling as optional is not neutral—it is embedded in a larger project of national rebranding, economic liberalisation, and political consolidation. Saudi Arabia offers an example of an authoritarian system that controls gender by creating the appearance of choice and flexibility, in contrast to some governments that impose uniform rules for everyone. This stands in contrast to other contexts, such as France and Iran, where the hijab is subject to restrictions, bans, or politicisation.

This study does not attempt to provide a definitive answer as to whether the hijab is always oppressive or liberating. Rather, it views the hijab as a space of struggle. By examining Saudi Arabia during these government-led reforms, it joins discussions about gender, visibility, and what it means to be “modern” in a Muslim-majority society. It also raises important questions: What happens when reforms are for women, but not for them? And what does it mean to be visible in public while remaining without a real voice? By doing this, this research joins ongoing conversations about gender and Muslim societies. It looks at how the hijab can be a space where the state's power and women's choices come together and sometimes push against each other. Instead of seeing the hijab as just about freedom or oppression, this study tries to understand how women respond to change. This thesis uses a qualitative and interpretive method. It relies on books, journal articles, news media, and public documents from Saudi institutions. It focuses more on how the hijab and state feminism are discussed in policy. Rather than collecting new data through interviews or fieldwork.

The research is informed by my positionality as a Muslim woman from Indonesia. Rather than claiming objectivity, I embrace a reflexive position, acknowledging that my understanding of the hijab is shaped by my own cultural and religious background. At the same time, I remain open to diverse perspectives—particularly those of Saudi women, whose lived experiences may diverge significantly from my own.<sup>16</sup> Inspired by feminist thinkers such as Saba Mahmood and Homa Hoodfar, I approach everyday acts, such as the decision to wear or not wear the hijab, as deeply embedded in wider socio-political contexts. These acts are not merely personal choices but are often shaped by intersecting

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<sup>14</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–6.

<sup>15</sup> Amélie Le Renard, “Veiling and Visibility in Saudi Cities”, *Contemporary Islam*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2015): 177–194.

<sup>16</sup> Noura Erakat and Lama Abu-Odeh both emphasise the importance of positionality in feminist legal research in the Middle East. See: Lama Abu-Odeh, “Postcolonial Feminism and the Veil”, *Feminist Review* 83 (2006): 37–55.

forces of power, religion, and gender.<sup>17</sup> Although this study does not include primary interviews, it incorporates a range of perspectives drawn from texts authored by Saudi scholars, feminists, and observers. The aim is not to provide conclusive answers, but rather to examine how power operates through discourses of gender and religion in contemporary Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup>

This thesis is organised into six chapters, each building upon the last to explore the complex relationship between veiling, gender, and state power in Saudi Arabia. Chapter One introduces the central themes of the research, providing background context, outlining the research questions and objectives, and discussing the methodology and the researcher's positionality. Chapter Two offers a review of key literature on the hijab, women's agency, and mechanisms of state control, and introduces the theoretical frameworks—such as state feminism, Foucault's concept of biopower, and Islamic feminism—that shape the analysis. Chapter Three traces the historical and legal foundations of veiling in Saudi Arabia prior to the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, highlighting how religious and legal institutions shaped the country's gender norms. Chapter Four examines how veiling practices have changed under the Vision 2030 reforms, focusing on the shifting policies and narratives around the hijab and the broader image the state seeks to project. Chapter Five explores how Saudi women are navigating these changes, analysing how they negotiate visibility, piety, and agency within the evolving political and social landscape. Finally, Chapter Six draws together the main findings, offering a reflection on what these developments reveal about the intersections of state feminism, gender politics, and religious reform in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>17</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–25; Homa Hoodfar, “The Veil in Their Minds and On Our Heads”, *Resources for Feminist Research* 22, no. 3/4 (1993): 5–18.

<sup>18</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism”, *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 629–645.



## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter begins with a review of existing academic work on veiling, gender reform, and state power in Saudi Arabia. It explores how scholars have conceptualised the hijab not only as a religious symbol, but also as a legal and political instrument, particularly in the context of Vision 2030. Following this review, the chapter outlines the theoretical frameworks that guide this study's analysis.

### *Literature Review*

In Saudi Arabia, the hijab is often seen in two very different ways. Some interpret it as a mechanism of control, while others regard it as an expression of religious commitment or political resistance. Scholars have explored how the state shapes veiling and how it relates to women's choices and roles in society. Although the hijab is widely worn throughout the Muslim world, its meanings vary according to historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* shows how the meaning of veiling changed during and after colonial times.<sup>19</sup> Colonial authorities often interpreted it as a symbol of women's subjugation, whereas anti-colonial movements reappropriated it as an emblem of cultural pride and resistance. This historical legacy continues to influence contemporary understandings of the hijab, especially when state reforms are presented as freeing women from tradition. Fatima Mernissi also looks at how Islamic texts have been previously limit women's rights.<sup>20</sup> She argues that real change should come from within Islam—not from outside pressure. Her work challenges the notion that veiling is inherently oppressive.

In the Saudi context, Madawi Al-Rasheed explains how the state has used religion to control women's bodies and identities.<sup>21</sup> For her, the hijab is not only religious—it's also a national symbol tied to ideas about obedience and morality.<sup>22</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, though more focused on politics, shows how the state worked with Wahhabi scholars to use religion as a tool of power.<sup>23</sup> He points out that recent changes, like reducing the role of the religious police and centralising authority under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), are not really about changing religion, but about controlling power and improving the country's global image.<sup>24</sup> These changes are also reflected in Arabic media discourse. In 2022, *Saudi Gazette* reported new school uniform rules for girls that allowed more colour and loosened strict abaya requirements.<sup>25</sup> Around the same time, *Al-Riyadh* published

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<sup>19</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 144-168.

<sup>20</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991), 10-23.

<sup>21</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-91.

<sup>23</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 260-265.

<sup>24</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are a Political Project", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> "Ministry Announces Updates to Girls' Uniform Guidelines", *Saudi Gazette*, July 2022.

stories praising women's new roles in tourism and aviation as part of Vision 2030.<sup>26</sup> These stories show that the state is slowly changing what modesty looks like and linking it to progress.

However, religious rulings (fatwas) still require women to cover fully, including the face.<sup>27</sup> These fatwas previously support strict enforcement. These rulings now coexist with state narratives that frame the hijab as a matter of personal choice. This creates confusion and shows that while reforms are happening, old rules still carry weight.

Islamic feminists like Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Haideh Moghissi have both raised concerns. Mir-Hosseini says genuine reform, according to these scholars, must be rooted in women's lived experiences and their interpretations of Islamic principles.<sup>28</sup> Moghissi warns that the state often uses women's appearance to show progress, without changing deeper systems of control.<sup>29</sup>

Saba Mahmood adds an important perspective. In *Politics of Piety*, she argues that agency does not always mean resisting authority.<sup>30</sup> For many women, wearing the hijab can be a personal and spiritual choice, not something forced. Her idea of "embodied agency" helps us see that women's actions—like choosing to veil—can be meaningful, even if they do not fit traditional feminist ideas of freedom.

Despite these valuable contributions, notable gaps remain in the existing literature. Many studies were written before Vision 2030 and do not look at how veiling is changing now—especially in everyday life, media, and state messaging. There is also little use of Arabic sources, which are important for understanding what people in Saudi Arabia are really saying and experiencing. This thesis tries to fill those gaps. It brings together theory and real-world changes by employing conceptual tools from state feminism, Foucault's theory of biopower, and Islamic feminist scholarship. It looks at the years 2015 to 2020 to explore how hijab is being reshaped—not just through law, but also through social norms, media, and the language of personal choice. Even when control becomes less visible, it does not disappear. Instead, it finds new ways to shape how women appear and move in public life.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

To analyse this paradox, where veiling becomes optional yet remains deeply regulated, this study draws upon three major frameworks: state feminism, Foucault's theory of biopower and discipline, and Islamic feminist insights on agency. In the context of Saudi reform, these theoretical frameworks provide distinct and complementary perspectives on how power functions on and through

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<sup>26</sup> "Saudi Women Lead New Sectors under Vision 2030", *Al-Riyadh*, March 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Ifta', Fatwa no. 17,324, General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, Riyadh.

<sup>28</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism", *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 629–645.

<sup>29</sup> Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 113–121.

<sup>30</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15–36.

the female body. To understand how the meaning of the hijab is changing in Saudi Arabia, a robust theoretical framework is necessary to examine the intersections of power, gender, visibility, and agency. State feminism, Foucault's ideas of surveillance and discipline, and Islamic feminist literature on agency are the three overlapping frameworks used in this chapter. These frameworks illuminate how Saudi women negotiate their positionality within state and societal constraints. The following sections will elaborate on these three frameworks in turn: state feminism, Foucauldian concepts of power, and Islamic feminist notions of agency.

### *State Feminism and the Illusion of Empowerment*

The concept of state feminism refers to the ways in which governments intervene in or shape gender relations, often claiming to support women's empowerment, while ultimately maintaining patriarchal control. Although the context originated in Western liberal democracies, it's now used more broadly to describe how states use feminist term to push their own goals. In authoritarian regimes, this dynamic is particularly paradoxical: promoting gender reforms as signs of modernisation while at the same time silencing real feminist movements and keeping tight control.<sup>31</sup> This contradiction is very visible in Saudi Arabia. The government has attempted to brand itself as a women's right supporters by creating reforms like allowing women to drive and loosening the male guardian system. Under the *Vision 2030* plan, women are often repositioned as symbol of economic growth and national progress.<sup>32</sup> However, this version of empowerment still comes from the top. Such empowerment is state-orchestrated and contingent upon women conforming to officially sanctioned roles. Feminism is acceptable as long as it does not challenge the system.<sup>33</sup>

Instead of breaking down gender inequality, state feminism in Saudi Arabia simply rearranges it. The hijab, which previously show religious obedience, is now promoted as a personal choice—but only if that choice fits with the government's idea of what modern but modest woman should look like. Women's visibility in public life has expanded, but their voices—especially those who speak out or criticise the government's approach—are still closely watch or silenced.<sup>34</sup> The state thus manages gender through a dual strategy: celebration and silencing. This duality allows the regime to appeal to international audiences while containing internal argument.<sup>35</sup> State feminism in Saudi Arabia functions as a *technology of power* that

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<sup>31</sup> Shirin Rai, *Gender and the Political Economy of Development* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 81–85.

<sup>32</sup> Vision 2030, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>.

<sup>33</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013), 92–95.

<sup>34</sup> Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia: Women's Rights Reforms Mask Continuing Repression", 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 112–116.

absorbs feminist language and aesthetics while neutralising its radical potential. It creates what Lila Abu-Lughod terms a “securitised empowerment”, where women’s freedoms are granted in ways that reinforce state legitimacy and international standing rather than disrupting patriarchal norms.<sup>36</sup>

*Foucault: Discipline, Biopower, and the Politics of the Body*

This study uses Michel Foucault’s theory of power in order to understand how the Saudi state controls women’s bodies nowadays, especially his ideas of discipline, surveillance, and biopower. Modern governments do not just use force to control people, they shape how people behave, think, and use their bodies in quiet, everyday ways that often go unnoticed.<sup>37</sup>

For Foucault, discipline means training people to follow certain rules but still watching them, indirectly setting standards for what is “normal” and correcting them when they step out of line.<sup>38</sup> Such control is not limited to overt legal enforcement mechanisms. It is built into everyday institutions like schools, hospitals, and prisons, and also in the social rules we follow without thinking.

The *mutawwa*’ (religious police) were a clear example of this. They monitored and regulated women’s public appearance and behaviour, making sure they followed strict religious rules. Even though their presence has faded in recent years, the pressure is still there. Women continue to be evaluated and regulated through alternative mechanisms: the way they’re shown in the media, the expectations placed on them in the workplace, and the constant public messaging about what the “ideal Saudi woman” should be.<sup>39</sup> Biopower, a broader form of governance, refers to the way states manage populations by regulating life itself—health, fertility, sexuality, and appearance.<sup>40</sup> Under Vision 2030, the Saudi state deploys biopolitical strategies by encouraging women to join the workforce, to dress in ways that align with global aesthetics, and to embody the values of modernisation without compromising national identity.<sup>41</sup> Women’s bodies are thus sites of both visibility and containment—disciplined not by force alone, but by desires shaped by the state.

Foucault’s proposition that power is productive as well as repressive is particularly pertinent in this context. The new Saudi woman is not simply coerced into visibility; she is invited to desire it, to find fulfilment and prestige in state-

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<sup>36</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–790.

<sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 136–138.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 170–175.

<sup>39</sup> Amélie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 33–36.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 139–145.

<sup>41</sup> Fawziah Al-Bakr, “Women’s Education in Saudi Arabia: The Way Forward”, *Higher Education Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013): 5–15.

sponsored empowerment.<sup>42</sup> This is what Foucault would call *governmentality*—the conduct of conduct—where individuals internalise norms and police themselves. In this context, the hijab becomes a medium through which power circulates, whether worn as a sign of piety, removed as a symbol of modernity, or negotiated somewhere in between.

Foucault's framework also helps explain the state's use of *strategic ambiguity*. While officials declare the hijab optional, social cues and institutional messages suggest otherwise. Women may now face subtle pressure not to wear the hijab in certain sectors, especially in tourism or media, where global representation matters.<sup>43</sup> Thus, choice itself is managed—not through banning or mandating, but through normalisation. What is presented as individual freedom is shaped by institutional expectations.

### *Islamic Feminism and Embodied Agency*

The study's third major theory is derived from Islamic feminism, specifically from Saba Mahmood's writings, whose concept of embodied agency goes against popular Western conceptions of resistance and freedom. Mahmood maintained that we shouldn't limit agency to defying convention or saying "no" to rules. Alternatively, choosing to live within those norms in ways that feel empowering and meaningful can also be considered agency.<sup>44</sup> Mahmood examined women in Egypt's piety movement who practiced Islam and wore the hijab—not because they were compelled to, but because they believed it helped to shape their moral and spiritual identities—in her well-known book *Politics of Piety*.<sup>45</sup> Their religious practice was not seen by these women as mindless obedience. They saw it as a genuine, purposeful approach to leading a decent life. Their sense of agency came from embracing religion with dedication and purpose rather than from rejecting it.

In particular, this mode of thinking is useful for comprehending the relationship between the headscarf and Saudi women. Due to the shifting societal conventions, some women have opted to discontinue veiling. Not because they are being coerced or resisting, but because it represents their identity, their families, and their relationship with God, others continue to wear the hijab.<sup>46</sup> In order to balance their own convictions, public expectations, and official propaganda, some women adjust their practices in response to situational expectations and pressures.

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<sup>42</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Veiled Discourse—Unveiled Bodies", *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 3 (1993): 487–518.

<sup>43</sup> The Guardian, "Saudi Women Not Required to Wear Abaya, Says Crown Prince", March 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–38.

<sup>46</sup> Ibtisam Alamri, *The Hijab Between Men and Women in Saudi Society* (MSc thesis, University of Sheffield, 2022), 12–15.

Thus, a more complex view of choice is encouraged by Islamic feminism. It looks at how women make decisions in certain social, political, and spiritual spheres, challenging dichotomous frames that characterise veiling as either freedom or oppression.<sup>47</sup> Mahmood's work reminds us that autonomy—the ability to act freely—is not the same for everyone. It depends on a person's cultural and emotional background, and their sense of religious purpose.<sup>48</sup>

This poses significant problems in the Saudi context: is a woman genuinely expressing her independence when she removes her headscarf, or is she merely adjusting to a new societal pressure? Is it silent resistance, habit, or faith that keeps her wearing it? There is no singular explanation or uniform experience. Women frequently make decisions for a variety of reasons, and their sense of agency functions inside power rather than outside of it.<sup>49</sup> Other Islamic feminist scholars also warn us to be careful when interpreting reforms. They point out that women's bodies are often used as symbols of progress in state-led projects. For instance, Haideh Moghissi cautions against assuming that seeing more women in public automatically means gender equality, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini argues that real reform must come from the everyday lives and experiences of Muslim women themselves.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism", *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 629–645.

<sup>48</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 195–198.

<sup>49</sup> Amélie Le Renard, "Veiling and Visibility in Saudi Cities", *Contemporary Islam* 9, no. 2 (2015): 177–194.

<sup>50</sup> Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 22–28.

## VEILING, CONTROL, AND THE PRE-REFORM GENDER ORDER IN SAUDI ARABIA

To comprehend the magnitude of change concerning the hijab under Mohammed bin Salman's *Vision 2030*, it is essential to examine how it was regulated. Prior to 2015, wearing the hijab was neither a personal choice nor purely a religious expression—it was a state-imposed obligation for women. The government established veiling as a normative expectation that women had to follow to be considered morally upright and socially acceptable citizens. The government employed powerful mechanisms such as the *mutawwa'* (religious police), the male guardianship (*wilāya*), and the religious leader (*ulama*)—to control how women should dress in public. Thus, the hijab functioned as more than a mere article of clothing. It was a symbol that showed a woman's obedience, religious belief, and loyalty to the state's strict religious system.

Saudi Arabia has long lacked a codified legal system. Instead of treating modesty as a personal or purely religious matter, the state relies heavily on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), particularly the Hanbali school as interpreted through the lens of Wahhabi scholars.<sup>51</sup> As outlined in a fatwa by the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Ifta (Lajnah al-Da'imah) in Saudi Arabia, women are explicitly instructed to wear full hijab:

يجب على المرأة ستر جميع بدنها عن الرجال الأجانب، منها الوجه والكفان، ولا يجوز لها الخروج إلا بالحجاب الكامل

This statement may be translated as follows: "A woman must cover her entire body from unrelated men, including the face and hands. She is not allowed to leave the house without full hijab".<sup>52</sup> This fatwa exemplifies how religious doctrine operated as de facto law, shaping everyday social expectations around female modesty and mobility. These rulings, though not codified in a formal legal code, functioned as instruments of state authority, reinforced through religious policing, educational systems, and public discourse.

Practices such as gender segregation and veiling have been understood not merely as religious injunctions, but as legal imperatives enforced through the state's coercive apparatuses. From the late 20th century through the early 2000s, state-supported religious bodies in Saudi Arabia consistently upheld the view that women were required to fully cover in public. This typically meant wearing a black abaya, a headscarf, and, in many cases, a face veil (*niqab*).<sup>53</sup>

One of the most powerful groups this religious-legal requirement in Saudi Arabia was the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Ifta' (Lajnah al-Da'imah). This group often gave religious opinions (*fatwas*) that women's exposure of the face was impermissible.<sup>54</sup> One such fatwa explicitly declared: "It is obligatory for the Muslim woman to cover her entire body, including the face and

<sup>51</sup> Frank E. Vogel, *Islamic Law and Legal System: Studies of Saudi Arabia* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 45–49.

<sup>52</sup> Al-Lajnah al-Da'imah li'l-Buhuth al-'Ilmiyyah wa'l-Ifta', *Fatwa No. 1723*, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, available at: <https://www.alifta.gov.sa> (accessed August 2025).

<sup>53</sup> Homa Khaleeli, "Why the Abaya Became a Symbol of Saudi Arabia", *The Guardian*, June 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Fatwa No. 4176, Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Ifta', Saudi Arabia, 1981.

hands, when in front of non-mahram men”.<sup>55</sup> In theory, *fatwas* are just advice. However, in Saudi Arabia, they were often treated as de facto law due to the state’s tight relation with the religious leaders.<sup>56</sup> This close alignment meant that the government could control how women dressed—without needing to write official laws. This made it hard to tell where religion ended and government policy began.

These religious opinions were also supported through educational curricula, mosque sermons, and government-sponsored media. All of which sent the same message: that wearing the hijab properly wasn’t just something women were to wear by authorities—it became something many felt they had to wear because of strong pressure from their families, communities, and institutions.<sup>57</sup> In this way, the control came not only through top-down enforcement but also through the micro-dynamics of everyday life. The *mutawwa’*, or religious police, officially known as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), played a significant role in enforcing dress codes and gender segregation in Saudi Arabia. They played a significant role in creating strict dress codes and gender segregation there.<sup>58</sup> *ḥisba*, Islamic concept which stands for promoting virtue and preventing evil, was the basis of their authority. Beginning in the 1980s, they rose to prominence in public life and began to serve as the moral regulators of the state.<sup>59</sup> They did not just deliver advice or reminders, but patrolled public spaces like malls, parks, and even private family events. They had the power to stop people or even arrest and detain individuals who failed to comply with prescribed standards of dress and conduct.<sup>60</sup> Women found to be “improper” dress such as exposing their hair, wearing brightly coloured abayas, or exposing hands or eyes—could be reprimanded, forced to return home, or publicly shamed.<sup>61</sup> Sometimes, they were held until a male guardian came to get them—showing how closely veiling was tied to male authority.<sup>62</sup>

One of the most tragic examples of their excessive power happened in 2002, when a fire broke out at a girls’ school in Mecca. Reports say that *mutawwa’* officials stopped the girls from escaping because they weren’t properly covered. Twelve girls died. The incident caused international outrage and showed how dangerous these extreme rules could be.<sup>63</sup> Although the government promised reforms afterward, the *mutawwa’* continued to act with little accountability for

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<sup>55</sup> Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Ifta’, *Fatwa No. 17,324*, General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, Riyadh.

<sup>56</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 168.

<sup>57</sup> Asma Sayeed, “Women and Islamic Education in Saudi Arabia”, *Islamic Studies* 47, no. 1 (2008): 55–77.

<sup>58</sup> Amélie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 88–91.

<sup>59</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Saudi Arabia’s Religious Police: A Force for Fear”, March 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, “The Salafi Movement in Saudi Arabia”, *International Affairs* 81, no. 1 (2005): 67–79.

<sup>61</sup> Maha Akeel, “Saudi Women and the Religious Police: Between Compliance and Resistance”, *Middle East Journal* 72, no. 1 (2018): 45–62.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>63</sup> Nora Doajji, “Policing the Body in Saudi Arabia”, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 9, no. 1 (2013): 134–138.



many years.<sup>64</sup> Their presence fostered a climate of surveillance and fear where women constantly worried about how they looked in public. The *mutawwa*'s power came not only from religious beliefs, but from full state support. Their role shows how the hijab was used as a tool to control women's bodies and enforce a strict social and religious order.<sup>65</sup>

Regulations regarding the hijab were intimately linked to the male guardianship system, or *wilāya*, in Saudi Arabia prior to the significant revisions implemented by Mohammed bin Salman. A woman's freedom was restricted due to this system. A woman could not get the right to travel, get a job, study abroad, or have certain medical treatments without the official approval of her male guardian, who was usually her father, husband, or even son.<sup>66</sup> This system was based on the belief that men and women had fixed roles given by God. The hijab, in this context, wasn't just about modesty, it was a clear sign that a woman accepted her place in a system led by men.<sup>67</sup> Public spaces were seen as places for men, and wearing the hijab was often the only way women were allowed to enter them.<sup>68</sup> In a way, the hijab acted like a permission slip, it granted conditional access to public spaces, albeit under stringent regulation and continuous surveillance. Government and media often implicitly repeated that wearing the hijab protected women from any harm.<sup>69</sup> This made people assume and strongly believe that if a woman did not cover herself, she was deemed responsible for any instance of harassment she encountered.<sup>70</sup> It placed the blame on women instead of holding men accountable for their behaviour.

Religious scholars (ulama) have played a major role in supporting monarchical authority in Saudi Arabia. In exchange of their loyalty, the government granted them significant influence over social policies, especially when it came to gender and morality.<sup>71</sup> When it came to the hijab, many senior scholars repeatedly said that full-body covering was not just encouraged, but it is required by Islam, and showing the face was considered sinful.<sup>72</sup> Their opinions weren't just about theology—they wielded considerable political and social power. Due to the close connection between the government and the religious establishment, alternative interpretations of Islamic modesty were afforded limited space to develop.<sup>73</sup>

While scholars in other Muslim countries debated what hijab should mean and how it should be worn, in Saudi Arabia, anyone who questioned the dominant

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<sup>64</sup> BBC News, "Saudi Fire Victims 'Dragged Back to Die,'" March 2002.

<sup>65</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Reforms After School Fire: Promises Without Action", April 2003.

<sup>66</sup> Amna Nazir, "The System of Wilayah in Saudi Law", *Arab Law Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2015): 148–167.

<sup>67</sup> Eleanor Doumato, *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam, and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 117–121.

<sup>68</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 98.

<sup>69</sup> Suad Joseph, "Gender and the Public/Private: The Saudi Case", *Social Text* 27 (1991): 59–66.

<sup>70</sup> Ibtiham Bouachrine, *Women and Islam: Myths, Apologies, and the Limits of Feminist Critique* (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 61–63.

<sup>71</sup> Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 134–135.

<sup>72</sup> Nathan Brown, *When Victory Is Not an Option: Islamist Movements in Arab Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 143.

<sup>73</sup> Fatwa No. 17905, Council of Senior Scholars, 1996.

view was often perceived as un-Islamic, subversive, or excessively influenced by Western ideologies.<sup>74</sup> This tight control over religious interpretation was made official through the Council of Senior Scholars (*Hay'at Kibar al-'Ulamā'*), the highest religious authority in the country. Their *fatwas* and public speeches helped define what was considered acceptable religious behaviour.<sup>75</sup> So when women questioned hijab rules, it wasn't just seen as questioning a dress code—it was seen as challenging religion and national identity itself.<sup>76</sup> This religious elite also had a dominant access to TV and radio, especially during Ramadan and other religious periods, where they often repeated warnings about the spiritual danger of not wearing the hijab. It framed the hijab as a divine obligation and the sole path to embodying the ideal of a pious Muslim woman.<sup>77</sup> As a result, the hijab was no longer just a legal issue—it became a moral test. Women who did not follow it were seen not just as disobedient, but as spiritually misguided.

The hijab in Saudi Arabia has not only been a religious or legal matter but has also functioned as a powerful political symbol. The issue intensified following the 1979 attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca. In response, the government strengthened its relation with conservative religious leaders. They created stricter social rules—especially regarding women's dress.<sup>78</sup> This shift was intended to show that the state was protecting Islam and to counter any moves toward secularisation.<sup>79</sup> Over the following decades, the hijab became a symbol of Saudi identity. Although veiling practices vary across the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia promoted itself as the home of “true Islam”, and the hijab became a key part of that image.<sup>80</sup> Whether they agreed or not, women were expected to play a role in projecting this national identity. Even foreign women were subject to these regulations. Until now, all women residing in or visiting Saudi Arabia were required to wear the abaya in public, no matter their religion or nationality.<sup>81</sup> This showed that veiling wasn't just about personal belief. It was also a way of showing loyalty to the state and fitting into its version of national values.

The hijab stood for discipline, obedience, and respect for Saudi norms. Women who choose to remove the hijab were often seen as doing more than simply breaking a dress code. Their actions were perceived not only as a rejection of the nation's moral foundations, but also as a political challenge. Before official reforms began, small symbolic shifts were already made. For example, in 2022, the *Saudi Gazette* reported that the Ministry of Education updated school uniform guidelines, allowing more colourful options and relaxing strict abaya rules for girls—marking

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<sup>74</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Islam and Feminism: Between Reform and Rejection”, *Signs* 42, no. 4 (2017): 986–991.

<sup>75</sup> Lama Abu-Odeh, “Postcolonial Feminism and the Veil”, *Feminist Review* 83 (2006): 37–55.

<sup>76</sup> Anthony Bubalo and Greg Fealy, *Joining the Caravan? The Middle East, Islamism and Indonesia* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2005), 23–25.

<sup>77</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 219–222.

<sup>78</sup> Rana al-Husaini, “Clerics Warn Against Un-Islamic Dress”, *Arab News*, March 2007.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, “Islamism in Saudi Arabia: Lessons from the 1979 Uprising”, *Middle East Policy* 15, no. 4 (2008): 44–58.

<sup>80</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 212.

<sup>81</sup> Al Arabiya, “Saudi Arabia to No Longer Require Foreign Women to Wear Abaya”, August 2019.

a gradual visual softening of modesty expectations.<sup>82</sup> Thus, the hijab has been used in Saudi Arabia as a means of demonstrating and preserving authority as well as a religious requirement. It is situated where faith, gender, and governmental authority converge. These subtle shifts suggested that the state was beginning to craft a new narrative—one that reimagined modernity and modesty not as opposites, but as compatible ideals. This process would become far more visible and deliberate under the sweeping reforms of Vision 2030, led by Mohammed bin Salman.

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<sup>82</sup> “Ministry Announces Updates to Girls’ Uniform Guidelines”, *Saudi Gazette*, July 2022.

## VEILING, REFORM, AND THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE UNDER MBS

Public life in Saudi Arabia changed after 2015, especially in how women appear and participate in public. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the government launched a series of reforms aimed at reshaping the country's image. This transformation aims to reframe Saudi Arabia from a strictly religious state into one that appears more modern and approachable. These changes, however, affected many aspects like entertainment, work, tourism, etc. Among these shifts, few issues have been as symbolically significant as women's dress—especially the hijab. In the past, wearing the hijab was strictly enforced by the religious requirement and social pressure. Now, the state promotes it as a personal choice and as a sign of openness rather than a religious obligation. However, this change is not as simple as it seems. Behind this apparent liberalisation, the media remains tightly controlled, with the state playing a dominant role in shaping narratives. Thus, the idea of “choice” remains unclear. What appears to be liberalisation is still shaped by the state, in order to uphold its goals through a deliberate ambiguity regarding what “choice” truly entails.

One of visible changes in how women dress in Saudi Arabia appeared in 2018. It happened when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) publicly declared that women no longer needed to wear the abaya—as long as they dress modestly.<sup>83</sup> Although no official law was issued, this statement marked as a turning point. For the first time in decades, women had unofficial permission to appear in public without the black cloak. This change reflected a broader loosening of social rules, partly enabled by the weakening of the religious police and the emergence of new state institutions focused on entertainment and culture.<sup>84</sup>

Previously, the religious police were ubiquitous in Saudi Arabia, whose mandate was to monitor public behaviour and dress. But since 2016, their powers were taken away—they could no longer arrest people. Their job was reduced to only giving advice to people.<sup>85</sup> Even though the official rules about the dress did not change, this made a big difference. Many women felt more confident to dress how they wanted, without the fear of being stopped or socially punished in public.<sup>86</sup>

This change was particularly visible in major cities like Jeddah and Riyadh. Women started wearing more colourful dresses or even Western-style outfits in public places.<sup>87</sup> Saudi fashion influencer began sharing outfits through social media like Instagram and Snapchat. While such appearances were once considered inappropriate, they were now either overlooked or subtly endorsed by the authorities.<sup>88</sup> However, this new “freedom” still had its limits. The idea of “modest” clothing was never clearly explained, so no one really knew where the line was. The government still retains the authority to determine what is acceptable in online

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<sup>83</sup> *The Guardian*, “Saudi Women Not Required to Wear Abaya, Says Crown Prince”, March 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, “Repression and Reform in the Kingdom”, *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 3 (2018): 92–104.

<sup>85</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Saudi Arabia: New Law Limits Religious Police”, April 2016.

<sup>86</sup> Maha Akeel, “From Compliance to Change: Dress and the Saudi Woman”, *Arab News*, July 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Lina al-Hathloul and Mélissa Godin, “Fashion and Freedom in Saudi Arabia”, *Time*, October 2020.

<sup>88</sup> Leila Trabelsi, “Instagram and the Rebranding of Saudi Women”, *Middle East Critique* 30, no. 2 (2021): 127–143.

spaces.<sup>89</sup> Thus, despite the appearance of openness, the state is still in control. As Stéphane Lacroix observes MBS's reforms are not driven by theological liberalism but by political pragmatism: weakening the ulama's authority while centralising power and controlling the reform narrative.<sup>90</sup> This allowed MBS to reshape the public sphere—not by abolishing religious norms, but by appropriating them to project a modern yet obedient national image.

These changes in how women dress are part of a new message the Saudi government tries to share about women and the country. Officials and state media started to promote the image of the “New Saudi Women” as someone who is confident, stylish, works outside the home, and is proud to be Saudi.<sup>91</sup> Women are portrayed as the perfect embodiment of both progress and tradition. But this image is carefully transformed: a woman may wear designer clothes and participate in modern life, but she is still expected to respect state-defined norms and values.<sup>92</sup>

Here, Foucault's notion of *governmentality* is highly relevant: the state no longer coerces directly, but produces subjects who discipline themselves according to shifting norms of visibility, respectability, and patriotism.

*Vision 2030*, Saudi Arabia's national reform plan, links women's empowerment to economic goals. In other words, gender reform is not seen as a human rights issue, but rather as a tool to promote national development and achieve its own goals in global markets.<sup>93</sup> Yet, the underlying motivations behind these reforms remain contested and merit closer examination. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has never publicly framed his gender-related reforms, including the hijab, as stemming from a theological re-interpretation. Rather, the available evidence suggests that these shifts are politically and economically motivated, serving to consolidate power and rebrand the Kingdom on the global stage. As Stéphane Lacroix argues, *Vision 2030* represents not a challenge to religious orthodoxy, but a strategy to centralise authority by weakening the traditional religious establishment.<sup>94</sup> The hijab reforms, along with other changes affecting women's visibility, appear less as outcomes of liberal religious thinking and more as part of a broader attempt to present Saudi Arabia as “open”, “moderate”, and “investable”.

This aligns with what scholars call “authoritarian liberalism”—a selective and top-down liberalisation that allows the state to appear progressive while retaining tight control over political expression.<sup>95</sup> The lack of any significant fatwa supporting unveiled public dress, and the continued presence of contradictory

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<sup>89</sup> Zahra Ali, *Women and Gender in Iraq: Between Nation-Building and Fragmentation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 88–89.

<sup>90</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms under Vision 2030: Between Authoritarian Control and New Nationalism, Brookings Doha Center, 2021.

<sup>91</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, “The New Saudi Woman: From Reform to Propaganda”, *New Lines Magazine*, 2020.

<sup>92</sup> Amélie Le Renard, “Femininity and the Saudi State”, *Gender & Society* 33, no. 4 (2019): 571–593.

<sup>93</sup> Vision 2030, “Empowering Women for a Thriving Society”.

<sup>94</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are a Political Project,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 25, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/25/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-political-project-pub-84893>.

<sup>95</sup> Zahra Ali, *Feminism and Authoritarianism in the Middle East* (London: Verso, 2021), 82–84.

rulings from the religious establishment,<sup>96</sup> reinforce the conclusion that these reforms are strategic rather than ideological. Women are now told they have a choice, but that choice remains within the performative boundaries of the “New Saudi Woman” as constructed by the regime. In this sense, the hijab becomes less a religious obligation and more a symbol of managed empowerment and image control.<sup>97</sup> This reflects what Valentine Moghadam calls “state-managed modernity”. Moghadam argues that women’s rights are promoted only when it’s in line with government’s plan, not when they question inequality.<sup>98</sup> In this system, the hijab becomes a flexible symbol: women can wear it, take it off, or style it in new ways—as long as it fits the state’s modern image.<sup>99</sup>

The media plays a significant role in shaping and spreading this narrative. These changes are also visible in state media. A 2022 article in *Saudi Gazette* highlighted how fashion and modesty now coexist: “Today’s Saudi woman is confident and stylish, wearing colour and working in sectors once closed to her—yet she remains loyal to her values and identity”.<sup>100</sup> Such portrayals reinforce the message that women’s empowerment is compatible with state-defined modesty, subtly pressuring women to fit the “ideal modern Saudi woman” image. State-run outlets like *Al Arabiya* and *Saudi Gazette* often show women as leaders, models and even athletes—focusing less on religion and more on success and productivity.<sup>101</sup> Yet these images rarely depict women who disagree or want a different path. On social media, many posts praise women who stop wearing the abaya—framing this decision as a symbol of modernity. While those who continue to wear the veil are often shown as passive, traditional, or unwilling to change.<sup>102</sup>

This shift is not just in the media, but also in schools and mosques. The Ministry of Education has changed school curricula; which now describes the hijab as a Saudi cultural practice rather than a religious requirement.<sup>103</sup> Even Friday sermons have changed. They previously focus on modesty and obedience, now emphasising moderation, innovation, and loyal to the nation.<sup>104</sup> In short, the state has effectively rebranded what it means to be religious—not by removing the religion, but aligning it more closely with the state’s reformist agenda.

The hijab no longer has a single meaning in Saudi Arabia. At least on the surface, what was formerly viewed as an obvious indication of religious commitment and state-imposed morality is now being repackaged as a statement of individual choice and self-expression. More than simply a legal change is reflected in the move from required veiling to what is sometimes referred to as a “social

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<sup>96</sup> Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Ifta’, *Fatwa* no. 17,324, General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, Riyadh.

<sup>97</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 156.

<sup>98</sup> Zahra Babar and Suad Joseph, “The Politics of Dress and Visibility”, *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2020): 33–45.

<sup>99</sup> Valentine Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013), 73–75.

<sup>100</sup> “Saudi Women Balance Fashion and Tradition”, *Saudi Gazette*, April 2022.

<sup>101</sup> *Al Arabiya*, “Women Take Centre Stage in Riyadh Fashion Week”, November 2019.

<sup>102</sup> *Gulf News*, “The New Look of the Saudi Hijab”, December 2020.

<sup>103</sup> Fawziah Al-Bakr, “Educational Shifts in the Saudi Classroom”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 2 (2020): 165–180.

<sup>104</sup> *Arab News*, “Imams Shift Focus to Innovation and Moderation”, March 2021.

option”. It demonstrates a more profound shift in the nation’s ethos, where state devotion has surpassed religious observance.<sup>105</sup> This transformation remains deeply complex. The government now frequently uses the language of freedom when stating that women are free to choose the way they dress, emphasises it as “modest”. However, this freedom has limitations. Women are still expected to dress in a manner that reflects state-defined values. For instance, when they represent Saudi Arabia overseas or work in government offices.<sup>106</sup> Whether or not they wear the hijab, women are still subjected to state-imposed expectations, even when it is presented as a personal choice. Not everyone is affected by this shift in the same way, traditional rules are still in place in conservative areas or smaller towns. Wealthy and educated women, however, have more freedom to try new styles or to completely abandon the abaya in places like Riyadh or Jeddah.

Traditional rules are still in place in conservative areas or smaller towns.<sup>107</sup> A woman’s background, including her residence can affect whether taking off the hijab is viewed as brave and contemporary or as disrespectful. Consequently, these reforms have produced unequal experiences among women. While some women are criticised for sticking to traditional styles of dress, others are celebrated for fitting the image of the “modern Saudi woman”.<sup>108</sup> “Strategic ambiguity” is a common term commonly used to describe the government’s approach in this area. Different interpretations are allowed by the state by eschewing explicit legal regulations about what is required or permitted.<sup>109</sup> This maintains the instruments of control in close proximity while creating the appearance of freedom. Authoritarian regimes frequently use ambiguity as a strategy to split public opinion, prevent open opposition, and incite self-policing.<sup>110</sup>

Lastly, there is a worldwide benefit to this change in the hijab’s image. Saudi Arabia now positions itself as “moderate” and adaptable, in contrast to nations like Iran where compelled veiling has triggered protest movements.<sup>111</sup> The administration aims to disassociate itself from radicalism and draw in visitors and foreign investment by permitting women to wear a variety of outfits.<sup>112</sup> Despite their apparent progressiveness, these portrayals fail to capture the full reality. Women activists who call for true political freedom can nevertheless be punished by the same system that honours fashion gurus.

Today, control does not come mainly from police patrolling the streets—it’s moved online. Posts about women’s clothing, especially ones that challenge the official narrative, are closely watched.<sup>113</sup> Technology, loyal government supporters,

<sup>105</sup> Saba Mahmood, “Religious Freedom, the Minority Problem, and Geopolitics”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 2 (2012): 418–446.

<sup>106</sup> *Saudi Gazette*, “New Guidelines for Public Workers on Dress and Conduct”, 2021.

<sup>107</sup> Nora Doaiji, “Unveiling Class in Saudi Dress Codes”, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 12, no. 3 (2016): 289–309.

<sup>108</sup> Zahra Ali, *Feminism and Authoritarianism in the Middle East* (London: Verso, 2021), 145–147.

<sup>109</sup> Stéphane Lacroix, “Ambiguity as Strategy in Saudi Politics”, *MERIP*, Issue 297 (2020).

<sup>110</sup> Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 25–27.

<sup>111</sup> Sanam Vakil, “Saudi Arabia’s Geopolitical Gender Pivot”, *Chatham House Briefing Paper*, 2022.

<sup>112</sup> World Bank, “Saudi Arabia Tourism Sector Overview”, 2021.

<sup>113</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Digital Authoritarianism in the Gulf”, October 2022.

and even everyday people acting as informants all play a role in monitoring what's said.<sup>114</sup> Because of this, many women start watching themselves. Women carefully consider what they post or share online, fearing repercussions even for seemingly minor actions. Drawing from Foucault, this shows a shift from disciplinary power (external enforcement) to governmentality, where women self-regulate in response to evolving norms about modernity, visibility, and patriotism.<sup>115</sup> This reflects Michel Foucault's concept of "governmentality"—a kind of control where people do not need to be forced to obey; they end up policing themselves out of fear.<sup>116</sup> As a result, the notion that women are free to choose what they wear is not as accurate as it first appears. Only if a woman takes off her hijab in a manner that conforms to the government's standards for what modern Saudi women ought to look like is this acceptable. If she keeps wearing it, she must also be careful not to come across as unduly religious or as subtly opposed to change.<sup>117</sup> The hijab is no longer exclusively a religious practice in this situation, but it is also not wholly a question of taste. It has become a symbol shaped by power, image, and the state's desired public perception.

Nonetheless, some women engage in subtle and imaginative forms of resistance. Instead of removing the hijab entirely, some women subtly resist by adopting lighter fabrics, brighter colours, or more relaxed and expressive styles. The notion that women must be fully veiled or unveiled is challenged by these modest actions.<sup>118</sup> However, these subtle forms of resistance are typically overlooked. Since the polished, state-approved image of the "empowered" Saudi woman, one who satisfies the official definition of progress, continues to dominate public discourse. There is little space for alternative expressions of strength and autonomy.

These developments echo Saba Mahmood's challenge to liberal conceptions of agency, which often equate freedom with resistance or rebellion. In the context of Saudi Arabia, many women may choose to wear or not wear the hijab not as an act of opposition or submission, but as part of a deeper ethical self-formation. Mahmood argues that agency can be expressed through embodied practices that align with internalised moral and religious goals.<sup>119</sup> Thus, even under the regime's attempt to promote a "New Saudi Woman" through loosening dress codes, the decision to continue wearing the hijab for some women may not represent state control, but rather their own cultivated piety. Yet, this interpretation must be approached with caution. In Saudi Arabia's current climate—where state propaganda promotes choice while silencing dissent—such "agency" can become

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<sup>114</sup> Marc Owen Jones, *Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 111–112.

<sup>115</sup> Michel Foucault, "Governmentality", in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87–104.

<sup>116</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 87–94.

<sup>117</sup> Rana al-Husaini, "Redefining Modesty in Saudi Culture", *Arab News*, August 2022.

<sup>118</sup> Ibtisam Alamri, *The Hijab Between Men and Women in Saudi Society* (MSc thesis, University of Sheffield, 2022), 45–48.

<sup>119</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15–16.



co-opted, blurred, and instrumentalised. Mahmood's framework helps unpack this complexity: agency is not absent, but it operates within a landscape heavily structured by the state's moral and political economy.

## BETWEEN EMPOWERMENT AND CONTROL: INTERPRETING THE REFORMS

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) recent modifications to veiling in Saudi Arabia raises a critical question: do these changes truly give women more freedom, or are they just a new way of controlling them? The Saudi government presents itself as modern and aligned with global ideas of women's empowerment by framing the headscarf as a personal choice rather than a religious requirement.

However, a closer look proves that this so-called freedom is far from absolute. It is constructed in alignment with state interests through authoritarian control. It works differently depending on a woman's background—her class, where she lives, and her social position. To truly understand what's happening, the next section looks at how the Saudi state manages this careful balance between control and liberation. It uses feminist, postcolonial, and political theories to unpack what's really happening beneath the surface of these shifting gender policies

Reform that makes the hijab optional in Saudi Arabia are frequently interpreted as a sign of women's liberation. However, what we call "liberation" is not always simple and it does not always imply the same thing. In certain contexts, what appears to be freedom might yet feel like control. Women are not always free when religious restrictions are relaxed, feminist academics like Saba Mahmood have stated. Instead, she encourages us to consider how women find ways to shape their lives—even within systems of power.<sup>120</sup>

Even though the hijab is no longer mandatory in Saudi Arabia, does not mean all women have the real same freedom to choose. Wealthy women, particularly those working in government sectors, tend to have greater freedom in their fashion choices. However, there is still a lot of pressure on women from conservative society, low-income families, and rural areas continue wearing it.<sup>121</sup> This illustrates that not all women have the same ability to decide. A woman's social class, residence, family expectations, and government support are often factors that impact her freedom to express herself.<sup>122</sup>

The Saudi government reforms the hijab rules as a sign that women are becoming more empowered. This serves to enhance its global image. By showing the participation of women as a country's development, the government can respond to international criticism—especially in women's rights—without really changing how power works.<sup>123</sup> In many cases, the idea of "freedom" is more like a performance. It seems like progress, but conceals the persistence of strict political control and restriction.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–25.

<sup>121</sup> Suad Joseph, "Patriarchy and Development in the Arab World", *Gender and Development* 4, no. 2 (1996): 14–19.

<sup>122</sup> Amélie Le Renard, "Urban Femininities in the Gulf", *Gender, Place & Culture* 20, no. 3 (2013): 340–356.

<sup>123</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism", *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 629–645.

<sup>124</sup> Mervat Hatem, "Gender and Authoritarianism in the Arab World", *Third World Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1993): 769–787.

Agency under authoritarian regimes often defies liberal definitions. It may manifest not in overt resistance, but in adaptation, negotiation, and silent rebellion. Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of "bargaining with patriarchy" is particularly helpful here: women strategise within the constraints imposed on them to optimise their positions, even if that means upholding certain norms.<sup>125</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, women have responded to hijab reforms differently. Some are enthusiastic about the newfound freedom to express themselves and explore fashion, while others feel the change is not really meaningful.<sup>126</sup> Many women try to balance both old and new expectations. They might still wear the hijab on specific occasions, such as at work or in family settings, and take it off while they're with friends. Rather than a contradiction, this reflects a thoughtful way of dealing with moral, social, and legal pressures.<sup>127</sup> Saba Mahmood's concept of "embodied agency" is particularly relevant here. Rather than seeing agency only as resistance, Mahmood suggests that women's actions—such as choosing to continue veiling—can reflect ethical self-cultivation, even within patriarchal contexts.<sup>128</sup> This kind of adjustment is what Asef Bayat calls "non-movements", it refers to small, everyday actions by people that gradually lead to broader social change.<sup>129</sup>

These actions should not be interpreted as passive compliance. In fact, they show that women are making their own choices, even within limits. As Homa Hoodfar explains, when women wear religious clothes in new and creative ways—like using different colours, styles, or materials—they are showing control over how they look, while still respecting social expectations.<sup>130</sup> These small acts blur the line between following the rules and quietly pushing back against them.

Yet, it is important to note that not all adaptation is empowering. Rema Hammami's critique of "NGOisation" in the Palestinian context reveals how institutional frameworks can co-opt and depoliticise women's activism.<sup>131</sup> Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, state-led feminism creates a carefully circumscribed space in which women can operate, but only in manners that reinforce state legitimacy.<sup>132</sup> Thus, strategic compliance often reflects structural coercion rather than free will.

Rather than acting as a progressive force, the Saudi state under MBS can be understood as a rebranded patriarchal authority. Although it has changed its approach—moving from strict control to promoting appearance of freedom—it still indirectly controls how women appear and behave in public. Things may look different on the outside, but the way power works inside has not really changed.

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<sup>125</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy", *Gender & Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274–290.

<sup>126</sup> Nadjé Al-Ali, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 174–178.

<sup>127</sup> Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds and On Our Heads", *Resources for Feminist Research* 22, no. 3/4 (1993): 5–18.

<sup>128</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 22–23.

<sup>129</sup> Asef Bayat, "The Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary", *Development and Change* 39, no. 6 (2008): 949–973.

<sup>130</sup> Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds", 10–12.

<sup>131</sup> Rema Hammami, "NGOs: The Professionalisation of Politics", *Middle East Report* 214 (2000): 16–19.

<sup>132</sup> Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 115–118.

Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod warns about what she calls “securitised empowerment”. This means that the government supports women’s right only if it benefits national law and in line with their security or the economy.<sup>133</sup> In this way, women’s freedom depends on how useful they are to the state—not on the belief that they deserve freedom for its own sake. This is visible in Vision 2030’s portrayal of women: active in business and media, but silent in politics and protest.<sup>134</sup>

The government also uses media to show its version of what a “modern woman” should look like. In an interview with *Al-Riyadh*, a female Saudi entrepreneur stated, “We are free to choose how we present ourselves, but we also understand the honour of representing our nation’s values”.<sup>135</sup> On TV and in official publications, it often highlights images of unveiled women who are stylish, hard-working, and supportive of the government.<sup>136</sup> This creates the idea that this is the “right” kind of woman. At the same time, other ways of being a women such as following religious traditions or being involved in activism are marginalised or rendered invisible.<sup>137</sup> Through such symbolic exclusion and the monitoring of public discourse, the government decides which kind of women are acceptable and which are not.

Visibility has emerged as both a tool and a trap in the post-2015 era. Women’s increased presence in the workforce, media, and public spaces is often presented as evidence of empowerment. Yet Frances Hasso warns that visibility does not always translate into voice.<sup>138</sup> In many authoritarian contexts, women are made visible as symbols of state progress but denied the power to shape their own narratives. Saudi Arabia offers a stark example. The state selectively amplifies certain stories—like the female entrepreneur or the fashion influencer—while silencing dissident voices.<sup>139</sup> This curated visibility constructs a national identity that appears modern while muting critiques of the state’s patriarchal foundations.

Fatima Mernissi, in her seminal work, argued that control over women’s bodies is a central feature of Arab political systems.<sup>140</sup> While the tools of control have evolved—moving from police patrols to media campaigns—the objective remains the same: to define, contain, and instrumentalise femininity for political ends. Even when granted public platforms, women’s participation is often tightly scripted. In state-curated platforms such as televised interviews or policy forums, they are encouraged to speak about business or family—but not about legal

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<sup>133</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–790.

<sup>134</sup> Vision 2030, “Women’s Empowerment”, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>

<sup>135</sup> “Saudi Women Entrepreneurs Share Vision of Modern Values”, *Al-Riyadh*, May 2022.

<sup>136</sup> Frances Hasso, “Empowering Women? Feminist Visions, Neoliberal Frames”, *Middle East Law and Governance* 5, no. 1 (2013): 34–45.

<sup>137</sup> Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Surveilled Bodies”, *British Journal of Criminology* 49, no. 1 (2009): 64–79.

<sup>138</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 85–87.

<sup>139</sup> Frances Hasso, “Resistance, Representation, and Gender in the Arab Public Sphere”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 1 (2012): 23–41.

<sup>140</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Gender, Islam and the Legal Tradition”, in *Islam and Human Rights* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 39–41.

inequality or political detention.<sup>141</sup> This regulation of speech illustrates how representation can become another site of discipline rather than empowerment.

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<sup>141</sup> Al Jazeera, “Saudi TV Interviews: Carefully Scripted, Tightly Controlled”, 2021.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to explore how the hijab in Saudi Arabia has moved from being a symbol of religious obligation imposed by the state, to a tool of national branding and managed empowerment under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030. The findings of this study point to a deeper truth: while the language of "choice" has replaced that of enforcement, this shift does not necessarily reflect greater freedom for all women.

First, what is now presented as personal choice is still shaped by the state—especially for women who are not part of the urban elite. The space to choose is uneven, fragile, and often shaped by one's social class, location, or proximity to state-approved norms. Second, the loosening of dress enforcement is not grounded in a commitment to gender equality, but in strategic political and economic goals. Third, although women have become more visible—in media, in fashion, in workplaces—this visibility does not automatically translate into voice, power, or autonomy. Lastly, drawing from the theories of Saba Mahmood and Michel Foucault, we can see that adaptation, negotiation, and even quiet conformity are not signs of weakness but ways in which women survive and respond to structures of control.

The reforms of MBS are not a break from the past but a repackaging of older forms of authority. The hijab, once enforced through religious police and public surveillance, is now managed through softer forms of power—through the language of modesty, modernity, and nationalism. What looks like freedom is often a new form of pressure. Women are no longer watched by patrols on the streets, but by the weight of public expectation, government messaging, and self-monitoring. As Foucault teaches us, the most effective form of power is not one that forces people, but one that makes them regulate themselves.

Through Mahmood's theory of embodied agency, we also learn that not all resistance is loud or visible. Saudi women are not just accepting or resisting—they are navigating, adjusting, and making space within limits. For some, the new rules create opportunities for self-expression. For others, they bring new expectations to perform the "ideal" modern Saudi woman. In both cases, the line between freedom and control is blurry. Vision 2030 uses the language of empowerment to improve Saudi Arabia's global image, attract investment, and silence critics. But this empowerment often only includes those who fit the official script: the entrepreneur, the fashion influencer, the smiling diplomat. Those who speak up—like Loujain al-Hathloul and Manal al-Sharif—face punishment. In this context, visibility becomes complicated: it offers recognition, but only if it stays within approved boundaries. This thesis shows that the hijab in Saudi Arabia is more than a piece of clothing. It is a site of power, identity, and negotiation. It cannot be reduced to a private religious choice, nor dismissed as mere state control. Instead, it sits at the intersection of faith, politics, gender, and nationhood. The reforms under MBS do not mark the end of control—they simply reinvent how that control is exercised.

Going forward, it is essential that future research centres the voices and lived experiences of Saudi women themselves—especially those outside elite circles. Their stories can reveal how reforms are felt, accepted, challenged, or reshaped on the ground. Comparative studies with other Muslim-majority contexts could also shed light on how different regimes negotiate veiling and gender reform.

Only by listening to women—not just watching them—can we begin to understand what real empowerment might look like in an age of strategic modernity.

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