

# A Review of Women and Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

Abdullah Saad Alshalawi

Flinders University, Australia

## Abstract

The aim of this study was to review women and higher education opportunities in Saudi Arabia. Various databases were searched for keywords ‘Saudi Arabia & higher education & women’, ‘Saudi Arabia & women & education’, and ‘Saudi women & graduates’. The results were shortlisted as per the year of publication and a few of the studies were selected for a review. The review found that higher education for women in Saudi Arabia has been subject to multilevel and multifaceted challenges. The review of research studies identified that in Saudi Arabia, the opportunities for higher education for women have increased due to changes in government policy. The study also identified that despite these improvements, the level of education required to provide equality of access across the country, has not been met. The findings of the review revealed that it is important to develop both female leadership capacity as well as effectiveness in Saudi Arabia’s higher education.

**Keywords:** Women, Female, Saudi Arabia, Education

## Introduction

For the past decade, the government of Saudi Arabia is actively promoting higher education for women. It has brought in policies which make greater opportunities for higher education available for women. The Saudi government is also setting up institutions which make fields of study available to women which had previously been restricted. Globalization and the spread of Internet has added to the learning opportunities available to women in Saudi Arabia. The demand for higher education of women has been increasing every year, but despite these steps, the opportunities for higher education for women are not sufficient.

## Methodology

In this paper, we will review some of the research studies which have been carried out on the subject of higher education and women in Saudi Arabia. Towards this end, specific search terms were used in Google Scholar search engine, such as ‘Saudi Arabia & higher education & women’, ‘Saudi Arabia & women & education’, and ‘Saudi women & graduates’. The results of these searches were shortlisted as per the year of publication. For the purpose of this study, only studies published after 2000 were used, in order to review the studies on higher education and women in Saudi Arabia.

## Results and Discussion

Religion plays a major role in all aspects of Saudi life. The education system, like the legal system, in Saudi Arabia is also based on religion. According to Smith and Abouammoh (2015), the foundations of the higher education system in Saudi Arabia are: “a focus on the teaching of Islam, a centralized system of control and educational support, state funding (thus education is free at all levels in Saudi Arabia) and a general policy of gender segregation”. As a result, gender segregation is inherent to the Saudi education system.

In Saudi Arabia, educational policies are administered by the Ministry of Education, the General Presidency of Girls' Education, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training (Smith and Abouammoh, 2015). However, the government cancelled the General Presidency of Girls' Education on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2002 and the Ministry of Higher Education in 28<sup>th</sup> January 2015.

According to Alahmadi (2011), as a result of the increasing enrolment of women at all levels of education and in various fields of employment and aspects of public life, the past 10 years have witnessed a growing participation of Saudi women in senior management positions and in the decision-making process in public and private sectors. The government of Saudi Arabia has adopted a clear vision for the empowerment of women as reflected in recent development plans that show a clear shift in the orientation of planning efforts towards the development of women's roles instead of focusing on women's right to education and employment (Alahmadi, 2011). Women have also shown tremendous growth as far as performance in higher education studies is concerned. They have outperformed men in several fields of education. According to Deepak, Al-Umran, Al-Sheikh and Al-Rubaish (2011), there is substantial evidence that female students outperform male students in the majority of surgical disciplines at undergraduate level.

According to Alhareth, Al Dighrir, & Alhareth (2015), in spite of the barriers that stand in front of women's education, their higher education opportunities have increased with the improvement of female higher education provision but the opportunities are still not able to provide the level of education needed to meet the demand of women or to provide equality of access across the country.

### **Current Status of Saudi Women's Higher Education**

According to Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbaum, & Keen (2016), the gender segregation in Saudi society has been so all-encompassing that even the administration of women's education has differed from that of men's until the early 21st century. Until 2002, women's education fell under the Department of Religious Guidance rather than the Ministry of Education (Hamdan, 2005 – as cited in Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbaum & Keen, 2016). This helped make sure that women's education “did not deviate from the original purpose of female education, which was to make women good wives and mothers” (Hamdan, 2005, p. 44 – as cited in Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbaum, & Keen, 2016). The authors say that in Saudi Arabia, a lack of qualified teachers, textbooks, and transportation for women enrolled in institutions of higher education still exists today, which acts as a detriment for women enrolling in institutions of higher learning (Al-Mouhandis, 1986; Hashimilion, 2011).

The government of Saudi Arabia has been allowing women into higher education institutions for some years. According to Alhareth, Al Dighrir, & Alhareth (2015), from 1967, the King Abdulaziz University, in Jeddah, started allowing women to attend campus and the Girls Education College was started in Makkah. Since then, under the Ministry of Education, further institutions have been opened for Saudi women. King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) officially opened on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2009. KAUST is the first mixed-gender university campus in Saudi Arabia. According to Alhareth, Al Dighrir, & Alhareth (2015), numbers have slowly increased along with investment in women's education. The Saudi government has invested heavily in its higher education programme and the Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University offers courses in science that previously were not allowed for female students. Importantly, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia decided to enroll mixed genders

in grade 1, 2 and 3 in 2019. According to Alhareth, Al Dighrir, & Alhareth (2015), the situation regarding women's higher education opportunities has continued to improve as women can now also study abroad with the numbers increasing from approximately 3,879 in 2004/2005 to around 35,700 in 2011/2012, (see Figure 1).

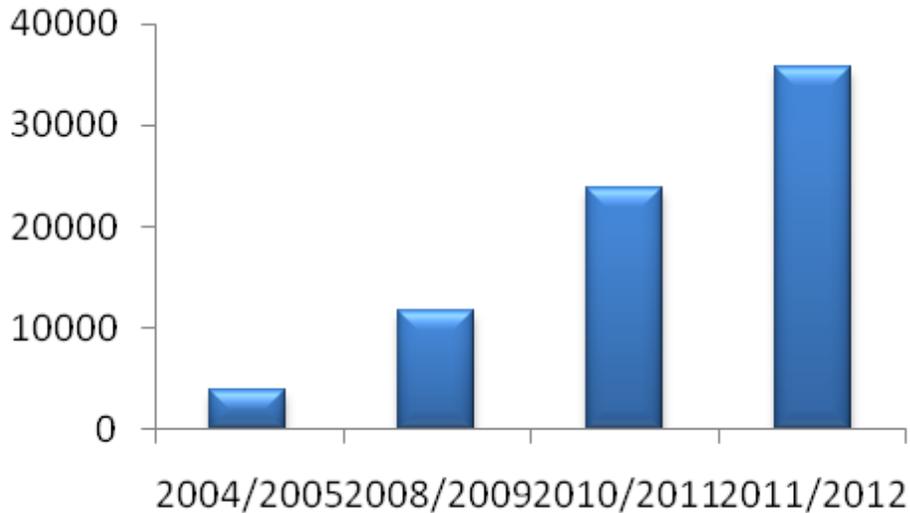


Figure 1. Saudi females studying abroad for a bachelor degree and above for the year 2004/2005, 2008/2009, 2010/2011 and 2011/2012. (Source: Ministry of Higher Education, (2013a) Higher Education Statistics Centre [online], Saudi Arabia, Available at <http://www.mohe.gov.sa/ar/Ministry/Deputy-Ministry-for-Planning-and-Information->)

### Regional Disparities

According to Alhareth, Al Dighrir, & Alhareth (2015), despite all efforts being made, women living in the Northern and Southern regions of Saudi Arabia continue to have less opportunities to for higher education compared to those living in other regions due to the uneven distribution of universities and their branches across regions and provinces. This is coupled with the barrier of traditional culture with prohibits women to opt for higher education. Because of the increasing number of secondary school graduates each year, there has also been an increase in the demand for higher education institutions. For example, in 2008, 73 percent of female secondary school graduates were offered higher education places by Saudi universities, but the Najran and Northern Border regions showed the lowest rate of offering university seats to female, compared to other regions, with only 1.4 percent offered a place at the universities in these regions. According to the authors, this means that women's opportunities to access higher education in these regions is lesser than women living in the country's major areas such as Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam.

### Fields Previously Restricted for Females

As a result of the changing policies of the government, the increasing levels of education and the social change brought about due to globalization and the spread of Internet, new opportunities for higher education are being made available to Saudi women. As a result, new fields of study, some of them previously restricted for females, are now being open to women. For example, traditionally in Saudi Arabia, nursing has been an unacceptable for women. According to El-

Gilany & Al-Wehady (2001), some of the reasons for this has been the low image/status of nurses, traditional, cultural and social values, and inadequate financial remuneration. Their study gives evidence that decreasing of working hours, scheduling one-shift duty and segregation of the sexes in work places are factors which will improve the working conditions and development of job satisfaction provided by nursing field.

### **Differences between Demand and Supply**

According to Alhareth, Al Dighrir, & Alhareth (2015), the number of female lecturers in Saudi universities has risen from 4,700 in 2003/2004 to approximately 19,600 in 2008/2009, whereas male instructors have increased from about 7,200 to around 48,800 in the same period. However, since there are more female students compared to males, there is still a lack of female instructors in higher education. This shortage of female instructors, along with the growth in number of females graduating from secondary school every year, causes excess demand. According to Alhareth, Al Dighrir, & Alhareth (2015), it is very difficult for women to attend university since they need a male guardian. Consequently, opportunities for women to access higher education in Saudi Arabia are hampered. However, in August 2019, the government lifted the guardianship law, which allows women to travel without male guardian's approval.

### **Online Learning**

Online learning and spread of Internet have changed the manner in which education is imparted across the world. In many countries, the globalization of higher education has led to an increased climate of competition and modified the way universities face the market (Carvalho & Mota, 2010; Ng & Forbes, 2009 – as cited in Parahoo, Harvey, & Tamim, 2013). The culture of learning is currently going through a huge transformation worldwide, for example online learning. This is also true for Saudi Arabia. According to Hamdan (2014), Saudi Arabian students have begun to participate in communications exchange. Hence, according to the author, the Saudi culture of learning is changing in ways that could not have been imagined even a couple of years ago. Both male and female Saudi students are today being able to access learning resources such as journals, magazines, periodicals, and intercultural communication forums which are solely the result of the Internet; had it not been for their connection to the Internet, these students would not have access to such facilities. Hamdan (2014) says that “the unprecedented openness to new educational resources and cultural perspectives is leading Saudi Arabia’s younger generation to become less traditional and strict in their views”. Other Saudi scholars such as Alenezi (2012) and Al Seghayer (2013) have said that online learning is providing new opportunities for the Saudi students to question traditional assumptions of what learning is. According to Hamdan (2014), “the implications of this process for the Saudi culture as a whole are reinforced by the fact that the youth component of the Saudi population (i.e., those under age 35) currently stands at 65% of the total”. This also has implications for the future of higher education and Saudi women. Since more students, including women, are more aware of international trends in education, the demand for higher education in Saudi Arabia is only going to increase in the coming years. With the government policy geared towards providing women with greater avenues of higher education, it bodes well for women and higher education.

### **Change in Women’s Goal**

With globalization, spread of Internet and changes in policies related to women in Saudi Arabia, the goal of education for women is also changing alongside. According to Alhareth, Al Dighrir, & Alhareth (2015), the goal of education for women needs to be changed to suit modern

requirements. As per the authors, today's requirements for women are totally different than the traditional Saudi society had dictated. There have been social changes as women have become more educated, more knowledgeable about their rights and more active than before. According to Alhareth, Al Dighrir, & Alhareth (2015), Saudi women have had a chance to be educated abroad and have come back about fresh ideas about life and about what they want from their government. The authors say that hence, the government needs to do more than just increase spending on women's education; it also needs to involve women in decision making on issues which impact their life. According to Alhareth, Al Dighrir, & Alhareth (2015), the Saudi government's actions appear to be good, but if women are not involved in determining what kind of education is appropriate for them, it will not be any good, since men will make decisions which do not impact their balance of power.

Other authors have also talked about the model of education in Saudi Arabia and the inherently discriminatory policies which exist. According to Rajkhan (2014), "even though the government has made substantial progress on female literacy and education in the previous 50 years, there is still much to do. The general model of education preserves the discriminative gender roles in which women are given class status, which is below that of men. The Kingdom's policy on education stresses that a girl's education target to give her the appropriate Islamic education that will equip her with the necessary set of skills to become a good wife and an excellent mother".

### **Women in Management**

Although greater number of women in Saudi Arabia have joined the labour force, their numbers in management are limited, partly due to the limited opportunities for higher education available to them. As reported by Al-Lamki (1999), one of the main obstacles facing women managers was limited opportunities to higher education along with other factors such as discriminatory appointment and promotion practices, traditional attitudes of male bosses towards working women, male-dominated sectors, male resistance to women in management, absence of policies and legislation to ensure participation of women in management positions, a lack of professional networking, a lack of female role models, a lack of professional management development programs, a lack of a sufficient number of quality day care centres, dual responsibilities of traditional and professional roles, balancing traditional and professional roles and family obligations as a wife and a mother for childbearing and child rearing (as cited in Alahmadi, 2011). Hence, despite greater opportunities for higher education being made available to Saudi women, the challenges stacked in front of them restrict their numbers in management.

### **Mixed Gender Environment**

Gender segregation is a defining element of Saudi political and religious life. Hence, one of the challenges international students from Saudi Arabia face is the moving away a gender segregated environment towards mixed gender environments (Alhazmi, & Nyland, 2015). There is also a perceived threat from western ideas as the Saudi population engages with the global community through international education and digital technology. This is also one of the major challenges for higher education for women, whether domestically or internationally. The idea of a mixed gender environment acts as a detractor for Saudi women who want to pursue further studies abroad and their families.

According to Hamdan (2013), although the Saudi government is responding to a part of the growth in demand for higher education by selected students to study overseas (especially in Western institutions), the essential priority is to expand the domestic university and college

sector, through the creation of new institutions. The initiative to expand this sector has led to a sharp increase in both the number of higher education institutions as well as the enrolments (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011 – as cited in Hamdan, 2013). The enrolment rate in 2011 was 37.8%, which is higher than the world average of 26%. This rate is even higher than the average of 21% within the Arab countries taken as a whole (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011 – as cited in Hamdan, 2013).

According to Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbaum, and Keen (2016), Saudi student enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities has nearly tripled since 2009-2010, mainly due to the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. The authors say that the representation of Saudi females is also increasing due to the loosening of Saudi Arabia's long-standing restrictions on women's travel and acceptable fields of study and careers.

## Conclusion

From the review of studies related to women and higher education in Saudi Arabia, it is clear that despite government policy to promote higher education for Saudi women, the demand is more than the supply. Limited opportunities for higher education for women in Saudi Arabia has meant that women get fewer opportunities to work alongside men in management positions. In the future, there are bound to be greater changes in policy in order to improve the opportunities for higher education.

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