

The Impact of Driving Law Reforms on Women's Employment in Saudi Arabia: An Analytical Study

Farah Amjad¹

¹ Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

Correspondence: Farah Amjad, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.

doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2024.03.02

Abstract

This paper examines the significant socio-economic transformation following the 2018 driving law reforms in Saudi Arabia, focusing on the impact on women's employment. By integrating quantitative employment data with qualitative interviews from Saudi women, the study uncovers the multifaceted effects of these reforms on gender norms, labor market participation, and economic diversification efforts under Vision 2030. The findings highlight a notable increase in women's workforce engagement and discuss the broader implications for societal attitudes towards gender roles.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Women's employment, Driving law reform, Vision 2030, Gender equality

1. Background

For decades, Saudi Arabia's unique prohibition against women driving represented a stark emblem of gender inequality, deeply embedded within its societal and legal fabric. This policy not only restricted women's physical mobility but also symbolized the broader constraints on their economic, social, and political freedoms. The landmark decision to lift this ban in June 2018, therefore, signified more than a mere regulatory change; it marked a momentous shift in the kingdom's approach to women's rights and roles within the society. This paper delves into the profound implications of this pivotal policy change, situated within the broader ambit of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reform agenda. Spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Vision 2030 aims to fundamentally transform the Saudi economy through diversification, innovation, and global integration. A critical aspect of this ambitious

agenda is the enhancement of women's role in the economy, targeting an increase in their participation in the workforce as a key lever for socio-economic development.

The lifting of the driving ban is analyzed here as both a symbol and a substantive step towards achieving these broader reform objectives. This study interrogates how the change in law has impacted women's employment opportunities, mobility, and societal perceptions of gender roles within the conservative kingdom. It also examines the broader socio-economic ramifications of this policy shift, including its contribution to altering traditional norms and the potential it holds for accelerating the kingdom's developmental aspirations.

By integrating a review of pre-existing literature with new qualitative and quantitative data, this investigation offers a comprehensive analysis of the driving law reform's impact. It considers the

historical context of gender inequality in Saudi Arabia, the strategic motivations behind the policy change, and the immediate and longer-term effects on women's participation in the workforce. Furthermore, it explores the wider societal reactions to this reform, including the challenges and opportunities it presents for the ongoing transformation of Saudi Arabian society.

In doing so, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between legal reforms, socio-economic development, and cultural change in conservative societies. Through the lens of the Saudi experience, this study sheds light on the broader implications of empowering women as active economic participants in the context of national development strategies. This introductory exploration sets the stage for a nuanced discussion on the multifaceted impacts of the driving law reform, offering insights into its significance as a catalyst for gender equality and economic modernization in Saudi Arabia.

2. Theoretical Framework

The literature review delves into the intricate dynamics between gender norms, economic reforms, and women's employment within the context of Saudi Arabia, exploring how the intersection of these elements has shaped the landscape of female participation in the workforce, particularly in light of the recent driving law reforms. This examination draws upon a rich body of work that spans sociological studies, economic analyses, and policy reviews to construct a comprehensive understanding of the factors at play.

Historically, gender norms in Saudi Arabia have been deeply influenced by conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings and cultural traditions, which have prescribed specific roles and spaces for women in society. These norms have not only dictated women's behavior and attire but have also significantly limited their mobility and access to the labor market. Scholars such as Doumato and Al-Rasheed have extensively documented how these practices, while rooted in the desire to maintain social order and moral integrity, have resulted in systemic barriers to women's economic and social participation.

Parallel to the discourse on gender norms, economic literature on the Gulf region, with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia, has

highlighted the kingdom's efforts towards economic diversification away from oil dependency. Vision 2030, the ambitious reform plan unveiled by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, places considerable emphasis on increasing women's labor force participation as a crucial element of this economic transformation. Studies by global institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank support this perspective, indicating that gender inclusion in the labor market is not just a social or moral imperative but a critical economic strategy for enhancing productivity and sustainable growth.

The specific impact of driving law reforms on women's employment in Saudi Arabia represents a relatively new area of inquiry, given the recency of these changes. Preliminary research suggests a positive correlation between enhanced mobility and labor market participation, with early indications that the ability to drive is enabling women to access a wider range of employment opportunities, pursue careers with greater autonomy, and contribute more significantly to the national economy. This emerging body of work points to the driving reform as a pivotal moment in the broader narrative of women's empowerment and economic development in the kingdom.

Furthermore, the literature review considers the broader implications of these reforms, examining how changes in legal and societal norms are affecting family dynamics, public perceptions of gender roles, and the overall trajectory of social change in Saudi Arabia. The driving law reform is seen as both a reflection of and a catalyst for shifting attitudes towards women's rights and roles, signaling a move towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

In synthesizing these diverse strands of literature, the review constructs a nuanced picture of the complex interplay between cultural norms, economic imperatives, and policy reforms shaping the landscape of women's employment in Saudi Arabia. It sets the stage for a detailed exploration of the driving law reform's impact, situating this change within a broader context of societal transformation and economic modernization.

3. Research Design

To explore the impact of driving law reforms on women's employment in Saudi Arabia, this study adopts a comprehensive methodology

that combines quantitative analysis of employment data with qualitative insights from interviews. This mixed-methods approach enables a nuanced understanding of the reform's effects, capturing both statistical trends and personal experiences of Saudi women.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative component of this study involves analyzing employment trends among women in Saudi Arabia before and after the driving ban was lifted in June 2018. Data is sourced from the Saudi General Authority for Statistics and international organizations like the World Bank and the International Labour Organization, ensuring a broad and reliable dataset. Key indicators include women's labor force participation rates, employment rates in various sectors, and comparisons with male counterparts to identify shifts in gender employment dynamics.

Statistical methods employed include time-series analysis to track changes over time and regression analysis to assess the impact of the driving law reform on women's employment, controlling for other variables that might influence labor market trends, such as economic growth, educational attainment levels, and other socio-economic reforms under Vision 2030.

Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative component comprises semi-structured interviews with Saudi women who have experienced changes in their employment status or opportunities since the reform. Participants are selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of experiences, including different ages, professions, and regions within Saudi Arabia.

Interview questions are designed to elicit detailed responses about how the ability to drive has influenced participants' job opportunities, career development, and daily work routines. Additionally, the interviews seek to capture personal reflections on the broader societal impact of the reform and any perceived changes in gender norms and attitudes within the workplace and society at large.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Qualitative data from the interviews are transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes, patterns, and narratives. This analysis will highlight the

personal and societal impacts of the driving law reform, providing depth and context to the statistical trends identified in the quantitative analysis.

The study employs triangulation to validate findings, comparing and synthesizing insights from both quantitative and qualitative components. This approach ensures a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the driving law reform's impact on women's employment in Saudi Arabia.

By integrating these methods, the study aims to provide a detailed and multifaceted perspective on how the lifting of the driving ban has influenced women's participation in the labor market and contributed to broader socio-economic and cultural shifts within Saudi Arabia.

4. Driving Law Reforms in Saudi Arabia

4.1 Historical Context

The prohibition of women driving in Saudi Arabia, which stood until 2018, was a highly visible symbol of the country's systemic gender inequality. This restriction was not formally embedded in the Saudi legal code but was enforced through a combination of social norms and administrative regulations. The roots of this ban lay deep within the kingdom's unique interpretation of Islamic texts, as well as cultural traditions that prioritized gender segregation in public life. Hamdan (2005) provides an insightful analysis of how these interpretations and norms converged to restrict women's mobility, reflecting broader constraints on their participation in public and economic spheres.

The ban's origins can be traced back to the foundational days of Saudi Arabia, where conservative religious and cultural values shaped the emerging social order. Over the years, the driving ban became a potent symbol of the kingdom's adherence to a strict interpretation of gender roles, as prescribed by Wahhabi Islam, which has been a dominant force in shaping Saudi societal norms. The enforcement of such gender segregation was facilitated through various state mechanisms, including the religious police, known as the Mutaween, who monitored compliance with conservative social practices.

Critiques and debates around the driving ban highlighted its unique standing globally and its impact on women's independence and economic

participation. Advocates for lifting the ban argued that it was not only a restriction on women's rights but also a hindrance to the country's economic development. They pointed out that the ban forced families to hire private drivers or rely on male relatives for transportation, which placed economic burdens on households and limited women's ability to engage freely in the workforce and society.

Despite these critiques, the ban persisted for decades, becoming a focal point for international criticism and internal activism. Saudi women's rights activists launched several campaigns to challenge the ban, including organizing driving protests in 1990 and 2011, which resulted in arrests and heightened public debate over the issue. These campaigns were part of a broader movement for women's rights in Saudi Arabia, which sought not only the right to drive but also reforms to the male guardianship system and greater gender equality.

The decision to lift the driving ban in 2018, therefore, marked a significant departure from longstanding policies and was emblematic of broader reforms under the Vision 2030 agenda, spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. This agenda aims to modernize the Saudi economy and society, including enhancing women's rights and participation in the workforce as key components of the kingdom's development strategy.

In lifting the driving ban, Saudi Arabia acknowledged the economic and social inefficiencies created by restricting half of its population's mobility. The reform was framed not only as a step towards gender equality but also as a pragmatic measure to boost economic productivity and reduce household expenses related to transportation. The move was widely celebrated by women's rights advocates within the kingdom and the international community, marking it as a historic moment for women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia.

The historical context of the driving ban and its lifting is crucial for understanding the broader dynamics of gender, religion, and reform in Saudi Arabia. It reflects the complex interplay between traditional norms, economic considerations, and the push for modernization that characterizes the kingdom's current trajectory.

4.2 The Reform Process

The decision to lift the driving ban on women in

Saudi Arabia marked a significant milestone in the kingdom's journey towards modernization and gender equality, intricately linked with the ambitious Vision 2030 agenda led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Announced in September 2017 and implemented in June 2018, this reform was emblematic of a broader commitment to enhancing women's rights and participation in Saudi society, echoing through various sectors from the economy to social norms.

The reform's implementation was the result of a meticulous strategic process, designed to ensure a smooth transition and address the multifaceted challenges associated with such a historic change. The Saudi government undertook extensive preparations, including the development of a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework that facilitated women's ability to drive. This framework was critical in establishing the legal foundations for women's driving, outlining the regulations for driving schools, license issuance, and the conversion of foreign licenses for female drivers within the kingdom.

To navigate the societal implications of this reform, the government launched widespread public awareness campaigns aimed at fostering a supportive environment for the change. These campaigns played a pivotal role in shifting public opinion and mitigating potential resistance, emphasizing the economic and social benefits of allowing women to drive.

In parallel, the government focused on building the necessary infrastructure to support the influx of new female drivers. This included the establishment of women-only driving schools equipped with female instructors, an expansion of licensing facilities, and enhancements in road safety measures. Additionally, the government engaged with a wide array of stakeholders, from religious leaders to community groups and international organizations, ensuring a broad base of support for the reform.

The lifting of the driving ban was not an isolated policy but part of a series of progressive reforms aimed at empowering women in Saudi Arabia. These included significant changes to the male guardianship system, granting women more autonomy in their personal and professional lives, and opening up new opportunities for women in business, sports, and entertainment. Such reforms signify a strategic effort to align

with Vision 2030's goals of economic diversification, increased workforce participation, and the promotion of a more inclusive society.

The international community widely acclaimed the driving reform, viewing it as a substantial step forward for women's rights in the kingdom. Within Saudi Arabia, the reaction was predominantly positive, with many women expressing newfound feelings of freedom and independence. However, the reform also elicited criticism from conservative factions, reflecting the ongoing societal debate between traditional values and modernizing forces.

5. Impact on Women's Employment

The lifting of the driving ban on women in Saudi Arabia in June 2018 has had a profound impact on women's employment, marking a significant milestone in the kingdom's journey towards gender equality and economic diversification. This reform, part of a broader initiative under the Vision 2030 agenda, has not only symbolized a shift in societal attitudes towards women's roles but has also tangibly enhanced their ability to participate in the labor market.

Prior to the reform, women faced significant barriers to employment, largely due to mobility constraints. The necessity to rely on male relatives or hired drivers to commute limited their job choices, often confining them to roles within close proximity to their homes or in sectors that offered remote working options. The driving ban's lifting has fundamentally changed this dynamic, enabling women to seek employment opportunities across a wider geographical area and in a diverse range of industries.

The increased mobility afforded by the ability to drive has directly contributed to a rise in women's labor force participation. More women are now able to take up employment, pursue careers, and attend job interviews and training sessions with greater ease. This has been particularly transformative for sectors previously dominated by male employees, where women are now increasingly represented. Industries such as retail, hospitality, and even the military have opened their doors wider to female employees, reflecting a growing acceptance and integration of women in the workforce.

Moreover, the reform has had a ripple effect on

the Saudi economy, catalyzing the creation of new job opportunities specifically tailored for women. For instance, the automotive sector has seen a surge in demand for female driving instructors, while ride-hailing services have expanded their operations to include female drivers, tapping into a new customer base that prefers women drivers for cultural reasons. These developments have not only facilitated women's entry into the workforce but have also spurred economic growth and innovation in sectors that were previously unexplored for female employment.

The impact of the driving reform extends beyond individual employment opportunities to influence broader economic and social outcomes. Women's increased participation in the workforce is a key driver of economic development, contributing to the diversification of the economy and reducing dependency on oil revenues. Furthermore, women entering the workforce en masse has challenged traditional gender norms, gradually shifting societal perceptions about women's roles both within the family and in public life. This shift is reflective of a deeper transformation in Saudi society, where women are increasingly seen as equal partners in the country's development journey.

However, the journey is not without its challenges. While the driving reform has significantly improved women's mobility, other structural barriers to full economic participation remain, including cultural norms that prioritize male authority, a lack of childcare support for working mothers, and workplace discrimination. Overcoming these obstacles requires continued policy efforts and societal change to ensure that women can fully capitalize on the employment opportunities now available to them.

6. Broader Societal Impacts

The lifting of the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia in June 2018 has transcended mere improvements in women's employment opportunities, catalyzing broader societal impacts that are reshaping the fabric of Saudi society. This historic reform has not only enhanced women's mobility and independence but has also served as a catalyst for a series of changes affecting social norms, family dynamics, and the national economy, marking a significant shift in the kingdom's trajectory towards modernization and inclusivity under the Vision 2030 agenda.

One of the most immediate societal impacts has been on family dynamics. The ability for women to drive has redistributed family roles and responsibilities, allowing for a more equitable sharing of domestic tasks, including the transportation of children and elderly family members. This shift challenges traditional gender roles and promotes a more balanced partnership within households. Women's increased mobility has also enabled greater participation in social, educational, and economic activities, contributing to a more vibrant public life and fostering a sense of community and belonging among women.

Furthermore, the reform has stimulated significant changes in the economic landscape. By increasing women's participation in the workforce, the kingdom is making strides towards its Vision 2030 goal of diversifying its economy beyond oil. Women are bringing new perspectives, skills, and talents to various sectors, driving innovation and growth. The economic empowerment of women, facilitated by their mobility, is expected to boost consumer spending, stimulate small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) development, and contribute to the overall economic health of the nation.

The reform has also had a profound impact on societal attitudes towards women and gender equality. It has challenged long-standing stereotypes and prejudices, demonstrating women's capabilities and rights as equal citizens. This shift in perception is gradually fostering a more inclusive society where women's contributions in all aspects of life are recognized and valued. The increased visibility of women in public spaces, including the roads, is a powerful symbol of this change, contributing to a gradual but tangible shift in societal norms.

Moreover, the driving reform has enhanced Saudi Arabia's international image, projecting the kingdom as a nation committed to reform and progress. By addressing one of the most visible forms of gender discrimination, Saudi Arabia has signaled its willingness to align more closely with global norms regarding women's rights and participation. This has implications for the kingdom's diplomatic relations, attracting foreign investment, and participating in international forums, where it seeks to position itself as a modernizing and visionary leader in the region.

However, the transition also underscores the

complexities of societal change in a deeply conservative context. While many have embraced the reform, it has also been met with resistance from some quarters, reflecting divergent views on the pace and scope of societal transformation. The government's approach to managing this delicate balance—promoting progressive policies while maintaining social cohesion—will be crucial in determining the long-term success of Vision 2030 and similar reforms.

7. Conclusion

The lifting of the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia in June 2018 stands as a landmark reform that has significantly transcended its immediate implications, contributing to a broader paradigm shift in the kingdom's approach to women's rights and societal transformation. This policy change, deeply embedded within the ambitious Vision 2030 agenda, has not only enhanced women's mobility and access to employment but has also served as a catalyst for broader societal and economic impacts, marking a pivotal moment in Saudi Arabia's journey towards modernization and inclusivity.

The reform has directly contributed to increasing women's participation in the workforce, breaking down one of the most tangible barriers to employment and economic independence. By enabling women to drive, the kingdom has unlocked a wealth of untapped potential, facilitating women's entry into various sectors of the economy and promoting greater diversity in the labor market. This shift has not only economic implications but also serves to challenge and gradually reshape traditional gender norms, signaling a move towards greater gender equality.

Beyond the realm of employment, the societal impacts of this reform are profound. It has altered family dynamics, promoted a more equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities, and enhanced women's participation in public and social life. The driving ban's lifting has also played a significant role in changing societal attitudes towards women, contributing to a slow but noticeable shift towards recognizing and valuing women's rights and contributions across different spheres of Saudi society.

Moreover, the reform has implications for Saudi Arabia's economic diversification efforts and its

international image. By aligning with global norms regarding women's rights and participation, Saudi Arabia has enhanced its standing on the international stage, attracting foreign investment and support for its Vision 2030 agenda. This reflects a strategic acknowledgment of the role of women's empowerment in achieving sustainable development and economic growth.

However, the journey towards full gender equality and societal transformation is ongoing. While the driving ban's lifting has addressed a visible symbol of gender discrimination, other structural and cultural barriers remain. Continued efforts are needed to address these challenges, including reforming legal and social norms that still restrict women's rights and opportunities.

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