

Kingdom Vision 2030 and the Women's Empowerment in Saudi Arabia: An Empirical Investigation

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women is the mirror of a society's civilization and development. It is vital and necessary for the success of the society's comprehensive development. This study aims to explore the role played by the "Kingdom's vision 2030" in empowering Saudi women. The study applied a questionnaire consisting of five axes that express the awareness of empowering Saudi women according to the "Vision 2030". A total of 152 responses were received in two months. The study used both the descriptive and analytical approaches to analyse the collected data. The results showed that there are statistically significant differences in the awareness of empowering Saudi women in the view of Vision 2030 based on the respondents ages, nature of their profession and level of education. The study recommended that more opportunity for women in terms of education and property ownership can encourage women to put more efforts towards the development of the Kingdom.

Keywords: Empowerment of women, the Kingdom's Vision 2030.

Many societies, (especially Arab societies), face numerous challenges in their developmental efforts. Among these challenges is the investment in human resources at their disposals in a way that maximizes the economic and social returns. Women are among the most important elements of human resources in Saudi Arabia, as they constitute more than 50% of the total number of graduates (Al-Juhani 2020). Therefore, neglecting and marginalizing women in development plans and process definitely means wasting half of the country's human resources (Al-Mazer 2015). Currently, global interest in women's empowerment and the imperative of their participation and inclusion in development processes has increased significantly, in addition to what Islamic sharia texts have called for in terms of equality between men and women in rights and duties (Otaiba 2020; Muhammad 2020). The past two decades have also witnessed a remarkable rise in studies on women's empowerment, which reflects the importance of this field of research (Priya et. al. 2021). The study of Elimam et. al. (2014) and Rajwanul & Golam (2013) stressed the importance of seeking of governments and taking the necessary modifications to eliminate discrimination against women and provide more job opportunities for women to enable them give their contributions to various aspects of life.

As a result, the Saudi government devoted a greater attention to women to enhance their role in all aspects of life, and this was evident in "the Kingdom's Vision 2030" (KV2030) announced in 2016. One of its most important goals was to raise the rate of women's participation in the labor market from 22% to 30% (the Kingdom's Vision 2030, 39). Here, Saudi Arabia made headlines by seeking to fulfill the new national reforms, of which the empowerment of women is one of the most important (Abalkhail & Allan 2015; Eagly 2007; Rui & Feng-ying 2021). Different studies conducted on women's

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empowerment shows how qualified females are still underrepresented in various relevant positions (Acker 2009; Blackmore 2010; Tlais & Kauser 2011; Abalkhail 2016).

That is why KV2030 proposed prospects for Saudi women, enabling them to actively participate in practical life, and women have come a long way in obtaining the rights and freedoms they dream of, through culture, education, work and employment, and the elimination of all kinds of women's dependence and subordination socially, economically, and politically. Today the image of Saudi women has shifted from the "cultural repository" of traditional values to the "partners" in building the nation mainly (Muhammad 2020; Abdullah 2021; Eum 2019). It is a fascinating aspect of the KV2030, which describes women as a "great source of strength" (the Kingdom's Vision, 2030). So, the empowerment of women is the primary issue that protects their interests, especially in the comprehensive development of the nation (Agarwal & Mathur 2019), and the way to achieve gender justice which gives women a sense of accomplishment (Sahrakorpi & Bandi 2021). Empowerment seeks to meet the strategic needs of the gender through indirect confrontation as a basis for providing safe support to the humankind (Moser 2014). It is a vital and indispensable tool to advance development, reduce poverty, and improve the prospects of the next generation, thereby enhancing the health and productivity of the entire families and communities (Sharma et. al. 2012; Faborode & Alao 2016). In the short term, increasing women's productivity (Diuro et. al. 2018), employment and profits can contribute achieving the economic growth (Khumalo & Freimund 2014) and in the long term, gender equality is an important factor in preventing transmission poverty and intellectual distortion among generations (Holland & Rammohan 2019; Jones et. al. 2019).

However, despite the above issues raised, the potential impacts of these reformed policies are limited in the end, because they are not the product of a real social development, but stem from the economic and political motives of the State. Therefore, women's empowerment must be based on a sincere desire to integrate them into the developmental participation processes in society, by involving them in decision-making processes, employing them in suitable positions and improving their status to become more able to face the various burdens of life to capabilities. Hence, this research aims to study the Saudi women's awareness on women's empowerment in view of the KV2030.

Literature Review

This section constitutes review of literatures on Women's empowerment related issues. The literature reviewed in this section is classified in four main categories:

1. The Concept of Women's Empowerment: It has been referred to as the process by which those who are deprived the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability (Kabeer 1999) by providing individuals and groups with the skills or the political power to be able to perform and improve their situation (Dubois & Miley 2007). Empowerment concept has different dimensions namely; *Personal Empowerment* which focuses on giving the individual strength and awareness to make a positive impact in life, through efficiency and self-confidence (Anderson et al. 1994). Secondly; *Social Empowerment* involves raising awareness of the customs and traditions that obstruct the performance of women's societal roles, and push them towards civilization (Qahtani 2016; Al-Halabi 2020). Thirdly, *Economic Empowerment* that is achieved by enabling them to engage in economic activities, their full right to own property, their independent financial capacity and ownership, and the possessing, establishment and contribution of companies (Salami 2018). Fourthly, *Political Empowerment* appears to express the empowerment of women to influence either directly through participation in public policy making or its implementation or indirectly through choosing the people who make these policies. Lastly, women can't be empowered in all these fields without the inevitability of *Educational Empowerment*, which is achieved by increasing the educational

opportunities available to women and making them equal with men in these opportunities (Qahtani 2016).

2. Saudi Women between the Past and the Present: Islam has elevated women, honored them with what no other religion has honored them, and given them justice and given them all their rights, without discriminating between them and men. In Islam, women played an important role in all fields. Woman was a poet, warrior, and narrator of the noble hadiths (Otaiba 2020 & Muhammad 2020). Some believed that the recent decisions in support of women are not appropriate for the country but they are corrective decisions for all the situations caused by wrong social cultural legacies, and even return them to their position in society (Al-Zahrani 2011). In the past, the image of Saudi women was strictly controlled, when a fatwa was issued prohibiting the education of girls in the 1940s, and imposing legal restrictions on their economic participation due to fatwas issued on the negative impact of women's work outside home; and restricting her work inside home only (Topal 2019). They were banned from voting or held positions until 2015, also women driving was restricted, and allowed in June 2018 (Eum 2019).

A "new woman" has emerged in view of the KV2030 to empower women (Alotaibi 2020). Many Saudi women have occupied leadership roles, such as the appointment of a vice president for women's affairs in the General Sports Authority, a step that paved the way for women's participation in sports (Alsubaie & Jones 2017). They were employed in the sectors of the Ministry of National Guard, and military women own their houses after retirement, and participated in a large percentage of the labor market (Mohammed 2020). The Saudi Cabinet also issued the first anti-harassment law against women, which requires a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a fine of up to 300,000 Saudi Riyals (Eum 2019). The members of the Shura Council suggested paying compensation to divorced women for their financial difficulties after divorce (Al-Qahtani 2018).

3. The Role of Saudi Women in the Country After KV2030: It has become necessary for women to participate in the work force, as the energy of women is indispensable in building society, which, if it has been developed or its behavior has been changed, the behavior of society as a whole will be changed (Mohammed 2020). Therefore, empowering women is an important component of the social development (Duflo 2012), with its effect on the community and public health and achieving higher degrees of societal sustainability (Badawi & Farag 2021). The great role of Saudi women in society after KV2030 has contributed to highlighting the new face of Saudi Arabia and placing it on the map of modernity and societal development, in which women contributed to draw its frames when they were involved in the joints of decision-making and leadership. Today the arena is full of names of Saudi women who have proven their competence, not only at the internal level; rather, it is in places of global decision-making (Qara 2021). Saudi women have played a great developmental role, as they have won the appreciation of the political leadership for their scientific and practical excellence. Women have made their distinctive mark in education, medicine and many other fields. This opened the door for creative, educated and distinguished women to participate in the renaissance and construction and encourage them to produce (Mohamed 2020). This led to an increase in the fulfillment of programs aimed at promoting women's empowerment.

4. The Future of Saudi Women in View of KV2030: Previous studies analyzed and forecasted the trend of Saudi women in the near future, for instance, Al-Bahous (2009) argued that Saudi women have succeeded in the social work and membership of charitable associations as successful businesswomen and active members in the parliament. This motivates more women to advance and improve their status, especially in the view of the country's support for this trend. In the same vein Eum (2019) posited that currently, women who were working just at home and were invisible, have emerged as visible participants in the public arena, while increasing their contribution to the national

prosperity and security of Saudi Arabia. However, despite the effort of the current government policy towards women emancipation, women hope is much more than that, especially in the field of women's rights, and their absolute ability to express their opinion freely (El-Sirgany & Clarke 2018) as well as in increasing their participation in the field of higher education and in the labor force especially those sectors that are more suitable for them (Samargandi et. al. 2019).

Methodology

This section explains the sampling size and techniques, sources of data and tools of data analysis used in the study.

1. Sources of Data: To achieve the goal of the study, questionnaire was used by the researcher on Saudi women's awareness of women's empowerment in the view of the KV2030. The questionnaire consists of two main sections: the first section consists of socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents such as: age, education, work and social status. The second section of the questionnaire was prepared to identify issues such as: women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, Saudi women between the past and the present, the developmental role of Saudi women after KV2030 and the perception of the future of Saudi women in 2030. This research adopted the questionnaire method because it is more practical and economical than most other data collection techniques. Furthermore, information can be solicited easily from many respondents within a short period of time (Danlami 2017; Kofarmata & Danlami 2019). Moreover, this method of data collection has been widely used by previous studies (Danlami & Applanaidu 2021; Danlami 2019; Danlami et al. 2018; Tsauni & Danlami 2016; Danlami 2014).

2. Sample Size and Sampling Technique: An online survey was designed through *Google Form* and distributed on the WhatsApp social networking platform. Using the snowball sampling procedure, participants were randomly selected because it was the most appropriate approach for this analysis. It reduces sampling bias and facilitates initiation of interaction with a small group of the population especially when reaching unknown persons (Taherdoost 2016; Creswell & Creswell 2017). The questionnaires were distributed to the researcher's contacts who fulfilled the age and residency requirements (over 18 years old and living in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia). A total of 152 questionnaires were filled and returned back within the period of two months (June-July, 2021).

3. Tools of Data Analysis: The descriptive analytical approach was used to analyze the quantitative data, in order to give an accurate picture of the extent of women's empowerment in the view of the KV2030. To answer the study questions, the program (SPSS.) and statistical methods of weighted average, *Cronbach's alpha coefficients*, *Pearson*, *One Way ANOVA*, *Isd*, *Stepwise* were all used to analyse the data.

Results and Discussions

The results in Table 1 show that among the respondents, 36.2% were in the age range of 30-45 years, 48.0% had a university degree, 77.6% worked in eminent professions, and 77.6% were married. Higher levels of female education mean that they acquire similar skills and knowledge as men. Hence both need to be educated in order to contribute towards national development (Samargandi et al. 2019). This is an indication of the country's interest in education, as one of the main motives for expanding the horizons of young women and empowering them (Hung et al. 2012; Dhar et. al. 2019). The high percentage of female workers in eminent professions is an indication of the involvement of women in economic and social development plans. According to Alsubie & Jones (2017); Al-Bakr et. al. (2017), the Kingdom has achieved an improvement in closing the labor gap between the two

genders, and the participation of women in the labor market has nearly tripled during the past decade. This would confirm the efforts of Saudi Arabia to empower women in the view of KV2030 (Abalkhail 2016; Alotaibi 2020).

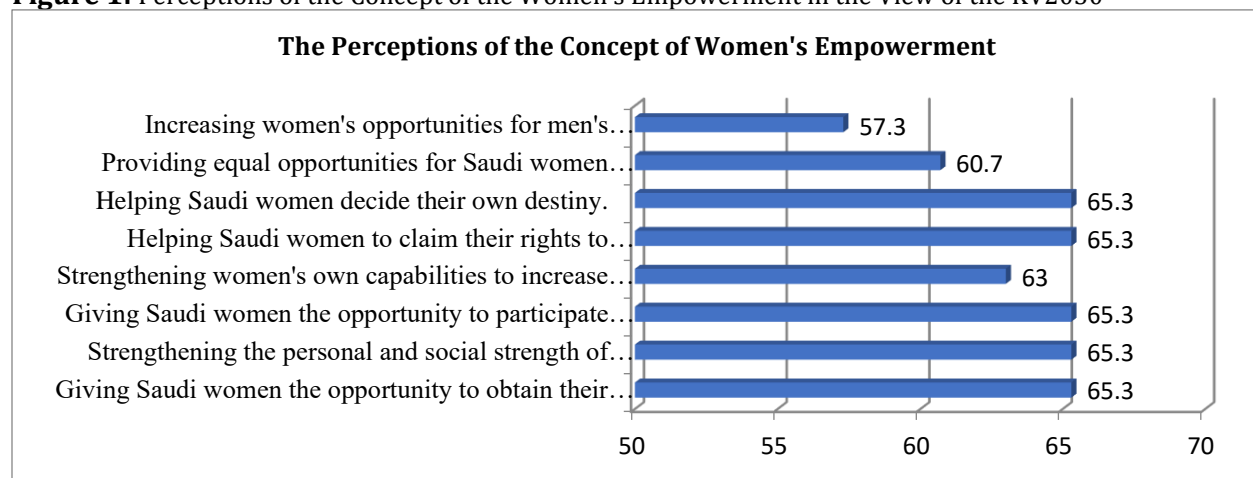
Table1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents' Data

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Age		
Under 30 years old	47	30.9
30-45 years old	55	36.2
Over 45 years old	50	32.9
Education		
Intermediate certificate (secondary)	27	17.8
University degree	73	48.0
Certificate (Masters - phd)	52	34.2
Profession		
Administrative work (Secretary...)	24	15.8
Eminent professions (doctor- engineer - university professor - teacher)	118	77.6
Free professions (contracting - businesswoman...)	10	6.6
Social Status		
Not married	34	22.4
Married	118	77.6

Women's Perceptions of the Concept of Empowerment in the View of the KV2030

-Figure 1 shows that majority of the respondents have their perceptions about the concept of women's empowerment as providing the opportunity for Saudi women to obtain their legal rights in the country, enhancing their personal and social power, giving them the opportunity to participate in various decisions, and assisting them in claiming their rights to community services, and self-determination with a weighted average of 65.3 degrees for each of them.

Figure 1: Perceptions of the Concept of the Women's Empowerment in the View of the KV2030



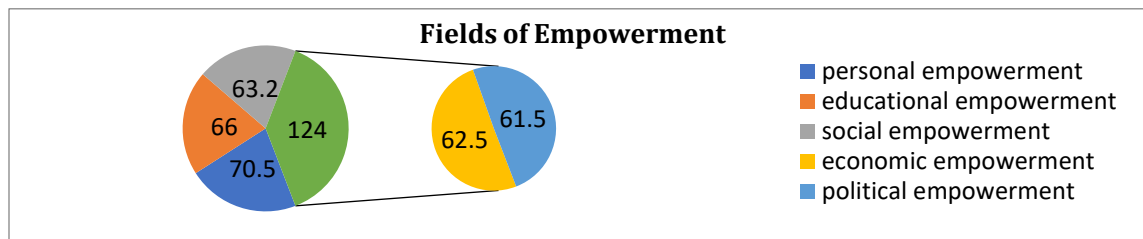
The Change Women Status from the Past

In this case, the weighted average was used to determine the most fields in which the KV2030 contributed in the women's empowerment, and to monitor the most important positive and negative changes that occurred in the status of women in the view of this vision, as shown in the following headings:

The Most Fields in Which the KV2030 Contributed to the Saudi Women's Empowerment

Figure 2 shows respondents' different opinions on the fields in which the KV2030 contributed to the empowerment of Saudi women, based on the weighted average. This disparity in itself is a general indication of the Saudi government's gradual support for women's rights (Al-Razgan et.al 2021), where the majority mentioned that personal empowerment is the most important field in which the KV2030 contributed to empowering women. The first step for women's empowerment is that they need to support their personal capabilities and skills to achieve higher status and success in the society. In the second order, is the educational empowerment, because it is a focal point that contributes to the empowerment from other opportunities and providing women with knowledge, competence and the ability to deal with various problems (Shoaib et. al. 2012; Elsheikh & Elamin 2013). The lack of education and awareness-raising programs would limit women's contribution to development (Elimam et. al. 2014). The third order, constitutes the social empowerment, while the fields of economic and political empowerment came in the last order. According to World Economic Forum (2018) that the economic participation of Saudi women still lags behind empowerment of education, so the empowerment of women economically should be a necessary (Safiya et al. 2011).

Figure 2: The Main Areas in Which KV2030 Contributed as far as the Empowerment of Saudi Women is Concern.



Positive and Negative Changes of Saudi Women as a Result of the KV2030.

Table 2 and Figure 3 observe the most important positive and negative changes that have occurred in the status of Saudi women in the view of the KV2030. It highlights that the most important positive changes from the respondents' point of view based on the weighted average as follows: Travel allowance for Saudi women without the guardian's approval, enabling them to decide their own destiny in their various life affairs, increasing the state's support for them and allowing them to drive with a weighted average of 70.7, 67.7, 67.7, and 67.3, respectively. In the past, barriers were imposed for women to join the workforce (Williams et al. 2019) but now the KV 2030 has enhanced women's mobility. Women are allowed to drive, guardianship laws in the business sector are reduced, and women employment rates have expanded (Eum 2019).

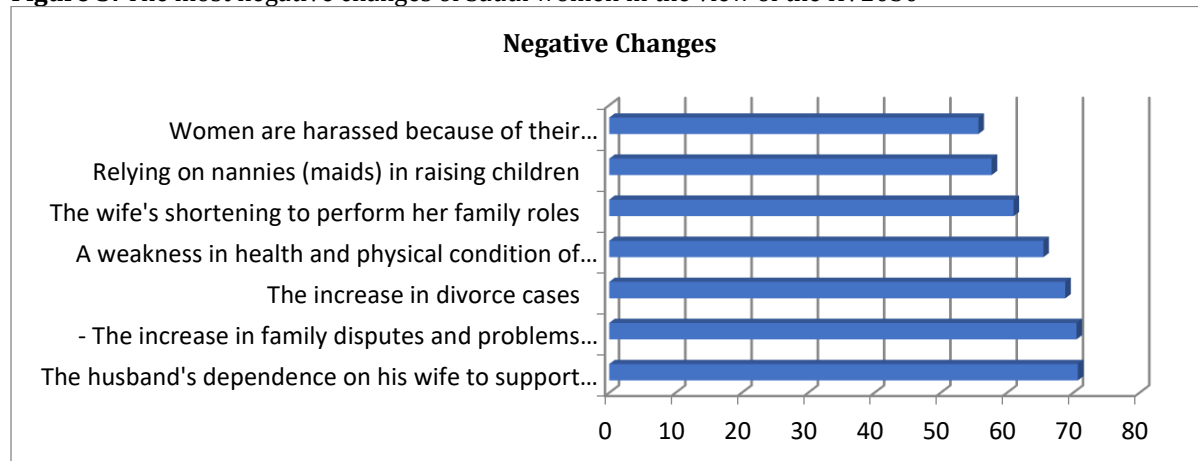
About the negative changes, we conclude from Figure 3 that the husband's dependence on his wife to support the family economically, the increase in family disputes and problems and their severity, the increase in divorce cases with a weighted average of 70.7, 70.5, 68.8 degrees, all of which represented the most negative changes that occurred in the status of Saudi women in the view of the

KV2030. This requires the enactment of more laws regulating the relationship of women with men, in addition to raising awareness for working women on how to harmonize their jobs with their family duties.

Table 2: The Most Positive Changes of Saudi Women in the View of KV2030

Statement	Agree		Neutral		Not agree		Weighted Average
	number	%	number	%	number	%	
Access to eminent leadership positions in the society	87	57.2	65	42.8	Zero	Zero	65.2
Expansion in private professions (medicine - law - building engineering)	87	57.2	65	42.8	Zero	Zero	65.2
Expansion of private work and establishing projects	87	57.2	50	32.9	15	9.9	62.7
Winning various memberships (Journalists Syndicate - Chambers of Commerce - Municipal Councils)	62	40.8	65	42.8	25	16.4	56.8
Success in volunteer work and membership in charitable organizations	87	57.2	65	42.8	Zero	Zero	65.2
Winning an increase in the number of seats in the Saudi Shura Council	62	40.8	90	59.2	Zero	Zero	61
Work in the diplomatic service	87	57.2	65	42.8	Zero	Zero	65.2
Empowering women to decide their own destiny in their various life affairs	102	67.1	50	32.9	Zero	Zero	67.7
Increasing the state's support for women (the alimony fund for divorced women - preventing the marriage of underage girls...)	102	67.1	50	32.9	Zero	Zero	67.7
Removing images of economic discrimination between men and women without breaking the provisions of Sharia	87	57.2	40	26.3	25	16.4	61
More participation in family decision-making	87	57.2	65	42.8	Zero	Zero	65.2
Allowing women to drive	110	72.4	32	21.1	10	6.6	67.3
Travel allowance for Saudi women without guardian approval	120	78.9	32	21.1	Zero	Zero	70.7
A clear increase in female education and its quality	102	67.1	40	26.3	10	6.6	66

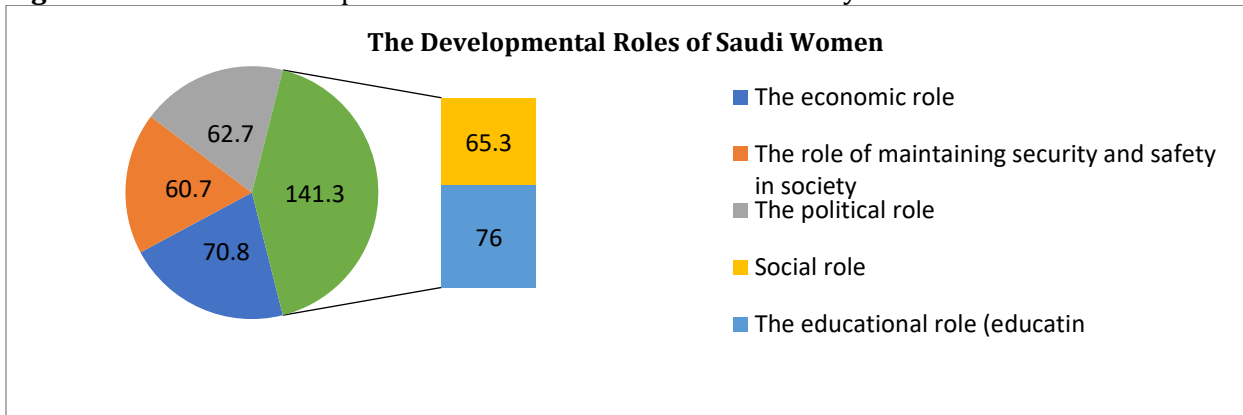
Figure 3: The most negative changes of Saudi women in the view of the KV2030



The Developmental Role of Saudi Women in Society after the KV2030.

Figure 4 shows that women played axial roles in the renaissance of society, and they demonstrated their ability to the changes in the Saudi society. Majority of the respondents are of the view that the educational, economic, and social role is one of the most important developmental roles for women in the society, with a weighted average of 76.0, 70.8, and 65.3 degrees. Thus, it becomes clear that the participation of women in shaping the future is a necessity to profit from their multiple qualifications especially in many angles that the women are in the better position to perform. Educated women working in formal jobs can increase the influence in society by creating an informal labor market for low-skilled, low-educated women (Samargandi 2019).

Figure 4: The Most Developmental Roles of Saudi Women in Society After the KV2030



The Perception of the Saudi Women's Future in 2030

Table 3 shows that majority of the respondents' opinions represented in the expansion of women's membership in international organizations, increasing the female workforce in oil businesses and projects, occupying more leadership positions in the country and complete liberation that reduce women's developmental roles are among the most hoped-for future visions to be achieved in 2030 with weighted average 71.0, 68.0, 62.8, 56.7 degrees. Despite the positive improvements made by the government and policy makers over the past few years, women still aspire to higher degrees of empowerment in Saudi Arabia (Alghofaily 2019). Thompson (2015) attributes this to the main structural challenges: the lack of women's participation in formulating strategies, the centralization of the decision-making process and the lack of power. Therefore, empowerment of the Saudi women isn't a special requirement just for them, but it is an urgent societal necessity in order to build a strong, cohesive and integrated homeland.

Table 3: Respondents' Opinions on the Perception of Future for the Saudi Women in 2030

Statement	Agree		Neutral		Not Agree		Weighted Average
	number	%	number	%	number	%	
Increasing the social skills and abilities of women	59	38.8	14	9.2	79	52	47.3
The increase of women's scholarships abroad	73	48	26	17.1	53	34.9	54
The increase of women's membership in international organizations	132	86.8	10	6.6	10	6.6	71
occupying more leadership positions in the state	83	54.6	59	38.8	10	6.6	62.8

liberation from laws that distinguish men from women without breaking the Islamic law	74	48.7	25	16.4	53	34.9	54.2
Increasing the female workforce in the oil business and projects	104	68.4	48	31.6	Zero	Zero	68
Equality between women and men's wages	40	26.3	44	28.9	68	44.7	46
Complete liberation from futile habits and heritages that reduce the developmental role of women	78	51.3	32	21.1	42	27.6	56.7
The involvement of women in the investigation of traffic accidents	59	38.8	41	27	52	34.2	51.8

This study examines various phenomena such as women's perceptions of the concept of empowerment, the positive and negative changes in their status according to the KV2030, their developmental role in society after the KV2030, and their perception of the future of Saudi women in 2030. It was found that the personal empowerment is the most important field with which the KV2030 contributed to the empowerment of women, and that the positive changes from the respondents' point of view were the travel permit for Saudi women without the condition of the guardian's approval, and the permission to drive a car. These two events had a high resonance in local and international communities. The results also highlighted that age was the most influential variable in women's awareness with the empowerment, so young women were more aware with the gained achievements and more ambitious to gain more. These results give an indication to the Saudi government that the profits of empowerment operations are achieving their goal. Thus, the study recommends the Saudi government to continue exerting its utmost energies in supporting Saudi women to be able to play their full developmental role, by increasing the female workforce in delicate jobs and in all the sectors that are more suitable for management by women in the country. Furthermore, the government should try to expand the participation of young women in the country's comprehensive development plans and follow up and support this role by analyzing the data periodically, because of what will overshadow on the progress and advancement of the entire society.

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