

# Gender Inequality in Saudi Arabia: Myth and Reality

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**Abstract.** For decades, Western media, scholars, and activists, have discussed the lack of equality that Saudi Arabian women face. They also think that Islam plays an important role in this kind of inequality between men and women. This research shows that their discussions are apparently based on unreliable information gathered from people who perceive the proverbial glass as half-empty. Women in Saudi Arabia, like women in any country, have their perception of equality. They have a pre-eminent role not only within their families but also outside their households. The development of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has brought with it increasing opportunities for women in education, employment, and in political participation, as will be seen in the up-coming elections for Shura Council and municipal councils.

**Keywords:** Gender inequality, gender studies, equality between men and women, male and female differences.

## 1. Introduction

Gender inequality commonly revolves around three meanings: first, men usually experience better opportunities, more freedom, and higher social regard than women who share the same social characteristics (such as class origins, race, nationality, and age); second, men usually hold sway in marriages and other direct relationships between genders; and third, men occupy a preponderance of the social positions that possess significant political, economic, legal, or cultural power. [14] [12]

The principle of equality applies to gender and productive rights in two main areas: relations between men and women (gender division) and relations among women (conditions such as class, age, nationality, or ethnicity that divide women as a group). [5] The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlights some facts about gender equality on its website. It also states that despite many improvements in the status of women, there are still many inequalities. Some of these inequalities include but are not limited to the following:

- Two thirds of people in the world who cannot read are female
- Nearly seventy percent of the world's poorest people are female
- In only 16 countries in the world are women's representation in national parliaments above 25 percent
- Women's contributions to the global economy are growing rapidly, but their labor remains undervalued and undercounted in national accounts
- An estimated one-quarter to one-half of all women have suffered physical abuse [17]

Western activists argue that women in Saudi Arabia, whether at home or in the work place, are subjugated persons and that they have no say in decision making. They think that moving toward achieving equality, in the home, in the workplace, and in positions of education, health and political power, remains one of the most important challenges facing the Saudi government in the twenty-first century. [13]

Some western scholars and intellectuals view Islam as a major factor that determines women's condition in society. Whether or not their argument is correct, it seems that they are ignoring major factors such as social, economic, and political factors that also play major roles in women's status.[22]

Women in Saudi Arabia, like women in any country, have their perception of equality. They play an important role not only within the family but also outside their families. The development of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has brought with it increasing opportunities for women in various disciplines.

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## 2. Gender Inequality: Definition and Background

The concept of gender inequality emerged during the 1980s, and by the mid-90s, a number of international conferences had been held to discuss gender equality in developing countries in all fields in general, and in healthcare organizations in particular. In June 2000, representatives from 180 countries met at the United Nations, and confirmed the centrality of gender equality and sustainable development in advancing women's health worldwide. [25]

Gender inequality refers to the unequal valuing of the roles of women and men. [11] Thus, gender equality can be defined as, equal treatment of women and men in laws and policies, and equal access to resources and services within families, communities and society at large. [26] To achieve equality, it means that the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favored equally. It does not mean that women and men have to become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. [18]

Moreover, gender inequality has many implications for people's lives, but one of the most consequential is that it acts as a basis for bias between persons. According to Ridgeway, a system of gender inequality persists in many countries, including Saudi Arabia, despite major reforms in the way that gender has been entwined in various economic and social organizations. [19]

Byrne argues that the educational system is responsible for women's subordinate status. She believes that girls are encouraged to study languages, secretarial skills, and arts, while boys are directed toward engineering, physics, mathematics, military studies, or chemistry. She contends that different qualifications mean different opportunities in work, which lead, either by force or by system, to gender inequality. [4] Western scholars also contend that in some societies, girls are educated as often or to the same extent as boys, so women on average are less qualified to hold jobs requiring education. Such discrimination produces income differences between adult females and adult males. [23]



Fig. 1: The ten examples of gender inequality

The different levels between women and men lead us to determine the most extreme examples of gender inequalities that can be found currently practiced, and sometimes state-sanctioned, in the world today. These examples can be one of the ten cases in Fig. 1 above.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Gender Equality According to Islamic Principles

Islamic principles promote the concept of human brotherhood and the equality of all humans. The Holy Quran asserts that all humans are the children of one man (Adam) and one woman (Eve) and that we all

<sup>1</sup> These examples have been developed by the researcher.

share the same lineage; there are many verses addressed directly to women and men that explain their rights and duties. Islam explicitly maintains that as human beings, both sexes have the same origin and, therefore, are given equal rights. [15]

Islam views women as playing an integral role in all aspects of society, including the workforce. According to the tradition of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh), no ruling exists forbidding women to seek employment. According to Younos, if an Islamic government prohibits women from working, that government has violated Islamic Law. [28]

Moreover, Islamic principles give Muslim men and women the same duties and the same rewards. The Muslim woman does not abandon her name when she gets married, and Islamic law guarantees a woman her economic independence. [10] Whether a Muslim woman is single or married, she has the right to maintain her own property without any interference from anyone, including her father, husband, or brother. Islam, also, gives a Muslim woman the right of choosing her spouse, and the marriage contract is not valid without her acceptance and approval. According to Islamic principles, both men and women are equal before the law, and receive the same punishment for wrongdoing. [16]

Younos asserts that many Quranic verses reveal to us that women are part of the political decision-making process. He believes it is obvious through the direct study of the Quran, and the tradition of the Prophet, that men and women in Islam are allowed to have equal access to knowledge. Additionally, learning and education are mandatory for both genders. In this regard, Younos contends that women participate in the socio-political system in many Islamic countries, and there are many verses revolving around this kind of participation. [28]

#### 4. Gender Inequality in Saudi Arabia

Gender inequality in Saudi Arabia has been discussed widely in recent years without taking into consideration the unique cultural history of a society like Saudi Arabia's. Cultural impact is one of the main factors affecting gender equality in any society. Islam, as a religion, and the fact that the Saudi society is blessed with conservative rules and regulations is what is meant by the cultural impact that affects every aspect of Saudi life. [14] It is important to note that when we discuss gender inequality in this context, it affects almost half of the population, as it appears in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Population totals in Saudi Arabia by Gender

Year	Total Population	Percentage of Men	Percentage of Women
2004	16527340	% 50.1	% 49.9
2007	17493364	% 50.4	% 49.6
2011	18707576	% 50.9	% 49.1

Source: Central Department of Statistics and Information, Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has developed a reputation for being more restrictive of women's mobility and public activity than other Arab or Muslim societies due to the implementation of Islamic principles in the society. Yet, many women in Saudi Arabia participate in the creation of culture by acquiring a powerful voice, while remaining physically invisible. [1] Many authors and scholars think that the restriction on women is based on Islamic principles, which encourage gender inequality. Whyte emphasizes that among all Muslim countries, the lowest rates of female education are found in countries that enforce Islamic restrictions. He also claims that women belonging to religious minority groups in Middle Eastern countries enjoy more freedom and occupy better jobs than do Muslim women in conservative countries. [27]

Moreover, Doumato believes there are no specific laws addressing violence against women, nor adequate protection for victims. She states that incidents of domestic violence are rarely reported or even talked about publically. She finds that women have fewer rights than men in family matters, that their freedom of movement is restricted, and their economic opportunities and rights are very limited. [8] Cosby states that although Saudi women will be allowed to vote in the 2015 election, "their significantly limited mobility could prevent them from making it to the polls." She contends that the struggle of reducing discrimination against women in Saudi Arabia is one of many gender equality struggles across the globe. [6]

Al-Mohamed states that although the Saudi government has improved educational opportunities for women, the next step is to boost the number of Saudi women in the workplace. She says that “Currently, roughly 300,000 Saudi women work, comprising five percent of the Saudi national labour force. Ironically, the constraints on female employment mean that women in the workforce are generally much better qualified than men, with half of working women possessing a college degree, compared to only 16 percent of men.” [2]

However, between 2001 and 2011, the net enrolment rate of boys at the primary education level increased from 84% to 96.7%, compared to an increase from 82% to 96.5% for girls. These rates demonstrate the success of the Kingdom’s policy to achieve gender equality in education and the increased absorption capacity of all stages of education for males and females. [20] It is relevant to note in this regard, that the Ninth Development Plan (2010-2014) published by the Ministry of Economics and Planning (MEP), has selected policies and targets to alleviate gender inequality. [21]

## **5. Research Questions and Hypotheses**

### **5.1. Statement of the Problem**

Following the summit held at the United Nations in 2000, the “Millennium Declaration” emphasized the commitment of member states to achieving a world with less poverty, hunger and disease through providing better healthcare for mothers and infants, developing universal primary education, fighting gender inequality, creating a healthy environment for all citizens, and working for an effective global partnership for development. [24]

This paper is going to focus primarily on gender inequality in Saudi Arabia. Based on this research, the researcher deems that there is a huge misperception from many scholars and researchers when it comes to gender studies in Saudi Arabia.

### **5.2. The Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This research strives to answer the following questions:

- How do Saudi women, who study and work in a healthcare organization, view gender inequality?
- Do they believe that there are adequate programs to educate the people of Saudi Arabia about gender inequality?
- Do they believe there is strong leadership in the country to alleviate gender inequality in case of its existence?
- Do they believe that Islam be a major cause of inequality between males and females?

While the hypotheses of this research are:

**H1:** The greater the notion that the eight kinds gender inequality does exist in the Saudi society, the greater the disappointment that will prevail among Saudi women.

**H2:** The greater the perception that factors such as inadequate programs, support of Islamic principles, and weak government leadership encourage gender inequality, the greater the likelihood of problems within the society.

## **6. Research Methodology**

### **6.1. Research Approach**

This study uses two different research approaches. The primary research method was the use of surveys distributed to 70 female students, and 330 female employees studying and working in King Abdulaziz Medical City. The survey was intended to provide insights into issues such as social, managerial, and cultural issues. Several kinds of survey formats were included. Many of the items were statements that participants had to respond to by indicating whether they agreed or disagreed and to what degree. Other questions were written in the form of a checklist; respondents were given a variety of possible answers and asked to check those that applied. [7] [9]

Secondary resources such as books, government statistics, articles on gender inequality, and unpublished documents and articles from both Western and local scholars were also used. These gave an idea of how Westerners perceive gender inequality among Saudi women, and how local scholars discuss gender

inequality in general and with regard to Islamic principles in particular. Use of secondary sources also enhanced the validity and reliability of this study. [3]

## **6.2. Pretest**

In order to determine the reliability and clarity of the survey and the length of time needed for completing it, a draft was pre-tested by several male and female colleagues. Based on the outcome of the pre-test, the researcher modified the survey. A second pre-test was done and based on this; the researcher modified the survey for the second time and this final version was used for the research.

## **6.3. Data Collection**

After determining the population and the sample being studied, the data collection procedure involved distributing the survey and waiting for them to be returned. 15 surveys were eliminated because of incomplete answers.

The data was entered using the SPSS program, and the accuracy of entry was cautiously verified. The SPSS procedures for cross-tabulation and correlation analyses were used.

## **7. Data Analysis and Results**

### **7.1. Cross-tabulation Analysis**

The first question in the survey was whether respondents are very familiar, slightly familiar, or not familiar at all with the issue of gender inequality. 297 respondents said that they are very familiar with the issue of gender inequality, while 3 respondents said they are slightly familiar.

On the second question, respondents had to answer (YES) or (NO) to whether or not they suffered from gender inequality at school, work, or home. Their answers were quite astonishing: 35 women (11 percent) said that they suffered from gender inequality in the eight kinds of gender inequality provided, while 285 women indicated that they did not. On this question, women answered that they did not face gender inequality in the access to education, clothing requirements, and citizenship. Regarding being forbidden to drive, 13 women saw this as gender inequality, while 27 did not. The other kinds of inequality mentioned, custody rights and the right to divorce, were very sensitive issues for women to discuss.

The second question included an option for the respondent to make comments. Most respondents explained why they thought that a woman should not be prohibited from driving her car to work. Respondents also spoke negatively about the right of custody (8 answers) and the right to divorce (8 answers), indicating there should be no difference between men and women in these areas. All the answers related to custody and divorce came from married students and employees.

On the third question, respondents were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement regarding four different statements related to gender inequality.

On the first question in this section, respondents were asked whether gender inequality in Saudi Arabia is caused by events that have occurred outside the country; 121 respondents agreed, while 86 strongly agreed. On the other hand, 73 disagreed and 40 strongly disagreed.

On the second question in this section, respondents were asked if they agree that there is strong leadership in the country to alleviate gender inequality. Their answers were quite surprising: the number of respondents who strongly agreed was close to 233, while 62 respondents agreed. On the other hand, 17 respondents disagreed and 8 strongly disagreed.

On the third question in this section, respondents were asked whether there are adequate programs to educate the people of Saudi Arabia about this issue. 89 respondents strongly agreed and 74 agreed that there were adequate programs to educate people about this issue, while 93 disagreed and strongly disagreed.

On the fourth question in this section, respondents were asked if Islamic principles are to blame for gender inequality or not. All of the respondents, except four, rejected this notion; 173 strongly disagreed and 43 disagreed that Islam principles is a main factor for gender inequality. Many respondents rejected this notion and wrote on a separate sheet of paper condemning this false idea and stressing that Islam is the solution for any issue facing either gender and cannot be blamed for gender inequality whatsoever.

## 7.2. Correlation Analysis

The purpose of this section is to test the hypotheses of the study by correlating independent and dependent variables.

Table 2 below is prepared to test the first hypothesis. As the table shows, the independent variables are three kinds of gender inequality chosen among the overall kinds of inequality, which are correlated respectively with the dependent variable, ‘Alleviating gender inequality.’ These variables are set in order to test them to see if they affect gender inequality or not.

Table 2. Correlation between the right to travel, being forbidden to drive, and the right to divorce, and alleviating gender inequality in Saudi Arabia

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable
	Alleviating Gender Inequality
Right to travel	.043*
Forbidden to drive	.009**
Right to divorce	.015

\*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

In Table 2 above, we reject the first hypothesis because there is no correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The sample population believed that the three factors chosen can be considered major factors in gender inequality, but they do not consider that the factors play any major roles in alleviating gender inequality in Saudi Arabia.

Table 3. Correlation between adequate programs, Islamic Principles, and government leadership, and alleviating gender inequality in Saudi Arabia

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable
	Alleviating Gender Inequality
Adequate programs	.116*
Islamic principles	-.072**
Government leadership	-.188

\*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

Table 3 above is prepared to test the second hypothesis. As the table shows, the independent variables are adequate programs, Islamic principles and government leadership, which are correlated with the dependent variable, ‘Alleviating gender inequality.’ These variables were set to test if they can be employed to alleviate gender inequality in Saudi Arabia or not.

As seen in Table 3, we have mixed results between the sample population’s perceptions. Statistically, we partially accept the hypothesis because there are significant relationships between adequate programs and government leadership with alleviating gender inequality. At the same time, there is no correlation whatsoever between Islamic principles and alleviating gender inequality. It seems that the sample population does not think Islamic principles play any role in gender inequality in Saudi Arabia.

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The researcher did not expect that Saudi women would so boldly reject the assertions of many Western scholars to say that women in Saudi Arabia live a normal life like other women in the world. This interaction with female colleagues opened the doors to many unanswered questions. The researcher is extremely glad that he concluded this researcher without leaving any question unanswered.

The research concludes by stating that the government of Saudi Arabia has achieved remarkable progress in the status of gender equality in education, employment and health. Clearly, the direction of the Ninth Development Plan represents the efforts made to promote improvements in the status of women and in enabling them to participate in economic, health, and social development.

The brave historic announcement of the Saudi King last September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, giving women the right to vote, to run in future municipal elections and to be appointed to the all-male influential advisory Shura Council, has been seen as strong leadership to alleviate gender inequality in Saudi Arabia. These initiatives are considered to be major advancements for the rights of women in a conservative society such as the Saudi society.

The other conclusion of this research revolves around the important role that Islamic principles play in the lives of all Muslims, especially women. As reflected in the survey responses, the notion that Islamic principles are the cause of gender inequality was shown to be utterly false and it was rejected by the sample population. Moreover, Islam does not forbid or discourage the education of women; in fact, it authorizes women to have careers in fields such as teaching and medicine. Islam also gives the woman the most essential responsibility, which is to educate her children and raise a sound family. Raising children is a key social function; for a society's future and efficient functioning depends on educated generations. Thus, from this perspective, a woman's responsibility is rather significant and challenging.

In terms of the recommendation of this research, based on what the respondents suggested and recommended in their surveys, they include but are not limited to the following:

- Respondents confirmed that Islamic principles are in favour of gender equality and not considered to be a barrier whatsoever.
- The study concludes that there are adequate programs and policies from the government to alleviate gender inequality in Saudi Arabia.
- It also concludes that there is strong leadership from all government agencies to remove all barriers of gender inequality at all levels.
- Many respondents asserted that the Saudi society is blessed with conservative rules and regulations. Hence, such rules play an important role in equality between men and women.
- According to five respondents, the Saudi woman will, sooner or later, be allowed to drive her car, and therefore, a major reform for the road system should be implemented and strictly followed.

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