

# **Saudi Students' Perceptions of Women's Participation in the Labour Market**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** - Drawing on access to final year students in Saudi universities, this research explores students' perceptions of women's participation in the labour market.

**Design/methodology/approach** - A questionnaire was deployed to garner the views of students across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia using non-probability purposive sampling. Although the questions were closed-ended, the questionnaire design provided opportunities for respondents to explain their selected responses, thereby allowing some qualitative data to be collected.

**Findings** - The findings reveal support for women's participation in the labour market among female students but opposition from the majority of male students. There is an awareness among respondents that women's education and skills are underutilised and they lack opportunities in the labour market due to structural and cultural barriers that limit their agency. Both male and female respondents perceive that women can make a productive contribution to the labour market and are optimistic about future opportunities in the light of recent reforms.

**Research limitations/implications** – The findings are not necessarily transferable to other MENA countries given the unique context of Saudi Arabia, and respondents' views may not necessarily be representative of general Saudi society or of the employed and unemployed.

**Originality/value** – This research has been carried out against the backdrop of major reforms, so it is relevant and timely. Data collected from Saudi students provides valuable insights into perceptions on the issue of women's participation in the labour market among the future pool of human resources.

**Keywords** - Discrimination, Gender, Horizontal Segregation, Culture, Patriarchy, Islam, Social Constructionism, Labour Market Inequality

**Article classification:** Research paper

## **Introduction**

The role of women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has always generated controversy and any discussion on the topic is deemed highly sensitive due to Saudi Arabia's strongly patriarchal society (Al-Asfour *et al.*, 2017). Evidence suggests that women in the Kingdom are significantly underrepresented in the labour market and face notable barriers both in their pursuit of employment and in their experience in work thereby stifling career development opportunities (Syed *et al.*, 2018). In 2018, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) [1] had the lowest rate of female labour force participation in the world at 21% with Saudi Arabia ranked lowest among MENA countries (World Bank, 2019). In recent years, economic challenges facing Saudi Arabia and external pressure to address gender inequalities has promoted moves towards reform that is hoped will allow the Kingdom's economy to take advantage of an educated but untapped pool of female human resources (CEDA, 2016).

Up until now, very little is known about what Saudi citizens and students waiting to enter the labour market think about the issue of women and the labour market in an essentially 'closed' society (Cordesman, 2003). Much of what is known has been gathered from media investigations and data collected by global institutions plus some growing but still relatively limited scholarly research that draws on the views of employed and unemployed women (Al-Asfour *et al.*, 2017; Alfarran *et al.*, 2018; and Hodges, 2017). This research, by gaining almost unprecedented access to Saudi students, investigates a sensitive topic that aims to address this gap by drawing and reflecting on the direct views of students. The research explores the issue of women's participation in the labour market of Saudi Arabia from the perspective of final year university students who represent both the future talent pool of labour and the young generation of Saudi citizens and hence whose views are very relevant. More specifically, the aim of this research is to explore the perceptions held by Saudi

students on the issue of women's participation in the Saudi labour market. Specific objectives to support this aim are:

- To explore views regarding the current situation in relation to women's participation in the Saudi labour market in terms of their level and pattern of involvement;
- To gauge perceptions on the key challenges and barriers women face both in their pursuit of employment and their experience whilst in work; and
- To explore the extent to which the perceptions of participants in the study serve as indicators as to the future prospects for widening female labour force participation and improving women's situation and experience at work in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, the research also makes an important addition to the growing but still relatively sparse academic literature in this field in relation to Saudi Arabia. Underpinned by the framework of social constructionism, the research looks at the role of structure, culture and agency in contributing to our understanding of women's situation in relation to labour market participation.

*Women and labour market participation rates: A global and regional overview*

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2017), the female labour force is defined as the number of women who are employed or unemployed but available for the labour market. Table 1 shows the current male and female labour force participation rates across the world's regions and compares with the situation almost three decades ago in 1990.

**Table 1: Female and Male Labour Force Participation Rates (LFPR) (%) in 1990 and 2017 by Global Region**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Female LFPR 1990 (%)</b>	<b>Female LFPR 2017 (%)</b>	<b>Male LFPR 1990 (%)</b>	<b>Male LFPR 2017 (%)</b>
<b>World</b>	51	49	80	75
North America	56	56	75	68
Latin America and Caribbean	40	52	81	77
European Union	46	51	70	64
Europe (excl. EU) and Central Asia	49	51	71	67
East Asia/Pacific	66	59	83	77
South Asia	33	28	85	79
<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>	17	21	77	74
Sub-Saharan Africa	60	63	77	74

Source: ILO Labour Force Estimates and Projections, 2017.

Table 1 shows that women’s participation in the labour force globally has stayed steady over the past three decades with only a slight decrease from 51% in 1990 to 49% in 2017. However, in the past three decades five regions have witnessed an increase in FLFP rates from 1990 to 2017 thereby helping to narrow the overall gender gap in LFP rates. It was the entry of married women into the workforce which resulted in an escalation of the number of women working for wages, especially in the developed world. For example, the

participation rate of married women in the United States rose by more than thirty percent between 1950 and 2005, compared to single women whose participation rate increased more slowly (DiCecio *et al.*, 2008). In most of the European countries, as a result of including married women in the labour force, women's participation in the labour market has also increased.

Significantly in relation to this research, the MENA region has the lowest rate of FLFP across the globe despite an increase from 17% in 1990 to 21% in 2017. Countries in the MENA region also recorded the biggest gap between female and male LFP rates in 2017. The lowest gender gaps in LFP rates can be seen in North America, Europe and the European Union (Minkus-McKenna, 2009). The key point is that although recent decades have witnessed a significant drop in the gender gap both in the developed and developing countries, the prevalence of gender inequality is still high, especially in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. This gap is present in the labour market, where women typically receive lower wages, and are underrepresented in certain occupations while working fewer hours than men. This is also reflected in other spheres of social and economic activity including education, access to productive inputs, political representation and bargaining power inside the household (ILO, 2017).

Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos (1989) outline the implications of what they call the 'underutilisation of female labour' for economic welfare and growth. Their work emphasises the losses incurred by a country due to lack of involvement of women in the labour market.

#### *Women's labour market participation in the context of Saudi Arabia*

In most countries, the question of whether women should participate in the labour market would not be deemed a matter for debate or discussion. Indeed, feminists and women's activists would be up in arms as to the very thought of questioning whether women should

be part of a country's labour force. However, in the case of the MENA countries especially Saudi Arabia, when exploring the issue of women's participation in the labour market, we need to investigate the factors that influence their level of participation and their experience once in employment given that women's participation in the labour force lags so far behind other regions of the world (see World Bank, 2019; Al-Asfour *et al.*, 2017; Alfarran *et al.*, 2018).

In fact, in the context of Saudi Arabia, the existence of a strong patriarchal system both in society and in organisations appears to have a strong influence on women's ability to participate in the labour market, thereby rendering a debate on the question of whether women should participate in the labour market more than valid. The existence of significant obstacles to women's participation in the labour market both at the point of entry and once in employment suggest that the contribution that women can make to work, and employment has been significantly undervalued (see Syed *et al.*, 2018; Hodges, 2017).

In recent years, realisation of the economic challenges facing Saudi Arabia and external pressure to challenge gender inequalities has promoted moves towards reform and liberalisation that is hoped will allow the country to take advantage of a highly educated but untapped pool of female human resources who could make a lasting contribution to the future economic growth of the Kingdom (Varshney, 2019). This is what makes Saudi Arabia a fascinating case to examine as it is viewed as unique in terms of the restrictions that women encounter and provides a strong rationale for undertaking this research.

### **Theoretical underpinning**

This research uses the theoretical framework of social constructionism to explore gender inequality experienced by Saudi women in relation to labour market participation and which more broadly contributes to our understanding of how gender inequalities surface (Beall, 1993). Social constructionism refers to the way in which individuals and society make sense

of the world around them and how they define and interpret reality (Gergen, 1985). When applying social constructionism to gender, theorists such as Lorber (2011) have noted that gender is a socially constructed category. These theorists maintain that views and ideas about gender differ across societies and cultures. This resonates with this research as Saudi Arabia has a culture very distinct from western culture and a national culture that perceives the role of women and men very differently (Branine, 2012). The components of social constructionism are agency, structure and culture. Agency or action as preferred by Evetts (2000), refers to the extent to which individuals in society have control and free will to act as they see fit (Giddens, 1997). Structure refers to actions and outcomes being the consequence of social factors out with our control. Those factors could include the institutional and organisational forms and patterns in both a family as well as work context. Culture is a broad area and a full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Evetts (2000) refers to the cultural dimensions as people's beliefs and the norms of a society. The cultural dimension encapsulates both national and organisational culture and there is a close connection between the structural and cultural dimensions of social constructionism (Crompton, 1997).

There are some elements of social constructionist theory that are reflected in other frameworks such as Institutional Theory (Scott, 2014) and Syed and Ozbilgin's relational perspective (2009). These frameworks highlight the role of national structures, norms, traditions, social class and regulatory factors in explaining the experience of women and the state of gender equality in countries. When applied to this research, social constructionist theory suggests that Saudi women face systemic barriers which are structural and cultural in nature and which impede their opportunity to exercise their agency. Structure and culture therefore place constraints on women's agency and explain the low participation of women



in the Saudi labour market (Hays, 1994). The views of Saudi students are explored in the context of this theory.

### **Literature on women's participation in the labour market in MENA countries**

The majority of literature and other works related to women and gender are immersed within a western context. However, recent years have seen the emergence of a growing number of studies focusing on gender and MENA countries including Saudi Arabia (see Tlaiss, 2014; Al-Asfour *et al.*, 2017; Hodges, 2017; Syed *et al.*, 2018). Similar to the works related to the position of women in society and employment in western countries, the recent growth in scholarly studies on the MENA countries highlight the influential role of social constructionism in shedding light on the factors that appear to influence the ability, decisions and opportunity for women to enter the labour market (Alfarran *et al.*, 2018).

Whilst very little is known about Saudi citizens' views on gender issues in what is essentially deemed to be a 'closed' society (Cordesman, 2003), emerging studies have reported the views of employed and unemployed women in Saudi Arabia (Al-Asfour *et al.*, 2017; Hodges, 2017; Alfarran *et al.*, 2018). These empirical studies have highlighted the adverse impact of structural and cultural dynamics on women's ability and opportunity to engage in employment and resonate with the situation in other Gulf states (Rather, 2016).

Given the strong influence of religion on society in Saudi Arabia and other MENA countries, some of the current literature also engages with debate and discussion on the extent to which religion influences women's participation in the labour market. There is a broad consensus among authors that whilst religion is a force in society, it is not the only or primary determinant of women's position and status. Haghghat (2005) highlights the connection between religious culture and women's involvement in employment and notes that religion is secondary in shaping women's opportunities with the political climate and level of economic development being significant influencers. A similar view is shared by Caris

and Hayo (2012) who provide evidence suggesting that traditional cultural identity reduces female labour participation more than adherence to Islam. In relation to Saudi Arabia, Al-Asfour *et al.* (2017) also question the influence of religion and argue that the limited choice Saudi women have emanates less from the precepts of Islam, and more from the patriarchal society. According to Al-Munajjed, this view is shared by most Muslim women (2010).

In the Saudi context, gendered notions of what constitutes women and men's role in society are very apparent (Al-Asfour *et al.*, 2017). Linking this to Hofstede's categorisation of national cultures (Hofstede, 2001), Saudi Arabia's classification as a collectivist and masculine country - where group conformity is viewed as important - means that society is expected to conform to cultural norms, which therefore means that individual agency does not have as much influence as it does in western nations.

In general, the narrative in the extant literature focuses on the challenges that Arab women face in relation to employment that were at one time strongly associated with women in the west (Acker, 2006). These challenges include motherhood which prevents women in MENA countries from fully participating in the labour market. Whilst family size is declining in the MENA region, it is still higher than in the developed world (World Bank, 2016). The paradox of highly educated women but low rates of participation among those women in the work sphere is noticeable in relation to Saudi Arabia and is yet another indicator of the role of structural and cultural barriers in stifling women's participation in work (ILO, 2017).

However, there are studies which have noted a more optimistic outlook for women's participation in the labour market in MENA countries (Varshney, 2019). Depending on the right circumstances, Metcalfe (2011, p. 136) has noted that women can use agency 'to mobilise and organise collectively to facilitate social change'. This has begun to happen in some Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, and has led to reforms being initiated by the rulers of those countries (Tlaiss, 2014; Varshney, 2019).

### *Institutional theory in the context of women's participation in the labour market*

Although this research has used social constructionism as the framework for understanding the experience of Saudi women in relation to employment, it is important to acknowledge that other theories such as institutional theory (INT) help to further advance our understanding of the dynamics that influence women's careers and employment opportunities both in MENA countries and in Saudi Arabia (Scott, 2014). The central premise of institutional theory is that organisational and management practices are heavily influenced by social pressures for conformity rather than economic factors (Scott, 2014; Tlaiss, 2014). This theory plays an important role in helping to understand the low rates of participation in labour market activities among women. As reported in the introduction, women in MENA countries have among the lowest rate of labour market participation globally.

If we broaden our discussion specifically to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it is noticeable that the more conservative interpretation of Islamic law when it comes to women's rights means that the cultural-cognitive, normative and regulatory pillars connected with INT are applied more robustly. The end result is that Saudi women's opportunities are even more restricted than those of women in other MENA countries. It is this situation that suggests that the Saudi context is unique with women being subjected to greater restrictions than in other MENA countries (see Al-Afsour *et al.*, 2017).

The impact of the dimensions of INT on women's opportunities in Saudi Arabia is further supported by Alfarran *et al.* (2018) at three levels. Firstly, cultural and regulatory barriers in a conservative kingdom such as Saudi Arabia restrict women's employment opportunities and hence their participation in the labour force. Secondly, unequal treatment and discrimination against women is a hallmark of Saudi society and is almost accepted as the norm, including by women. The end result, once again, is to minimise women's

participation in the labour market. Thirdly, government regulations, cultural constraints and the gendered system of education lead to labour market segmentation especially in relation to the private sector. The consequences of this segmentation leads to inequality for women. Tlaiss (2014) reinforces the link between INT and the barriers related to women's career and employment prospects. INT has striking parallels with the elements of structure, culture and agency associated with the theory of social constructionism. Both are therefore pertinent in helping our understanding of the comparatively low level of women's labour market participation in both MENA countries and the Saudi context.

Based on the review of literature and the theoretical framework adopted for this research, this study has the following set of hypotheses:

*H1: Saudi students acknowledge that women's level of participation in the labour market is low*

*H2: Saudi students oppose women's participation in the labour market*

*H3: Saudi students are aware of the barriers that women face in the labour market*

*H4: Saudi students are optimistic about women's employment opportunities in the future*

These hypotheses will be revisited at the end of the findings section to ascertain which of them is proven.

## **Methodology**

### *Data collection method and sampling*

The research was carried out prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The research deployed a survey strategy involving the distribution of a questionnaire as the main data collection tool. A large sample was recruited for the questionnaire using non-probability purposive sampling. In terms of the selection of respondents, this process involved targeting final year male and female students who would be eligible to enter the labour market and whose views

were therefore most appropriate to elicit. This cohort of students are closest to entering the labour market and therefore had the capacity to inform the research (Quinlan, 2011).

In order to ensure representativeness, the sample was drawn from seven universities spanning all the Kingdom's main five regions (Northern, South-Western, Eastern, Western and Central) and with whom the researchers had established contacts that facilitated access. Questionnaires were handed to teaching staff at the seven universities. These were then distributed by staff to students. The researchers prepared a participant information sheet that briefed participants about the purpose of the research and emphasised the voluntary nature of the research. Those students who agreed to take part in the research were then required to complete a consent form.

Although the nature of the research and its objective is ideally suited to deploying a qualitative research strategy involving interviews and/or focus groups, the researchers opted to use a questionnaire as it was difficult to conduct interviews or arrange focus groups with female students given the country context. To mitigate against this limitation, the researchers introduced the opportunity for respondents to explain their selected responses to questions which allowed some qualitative data to be collected and reported. Given the nature of the topic being explored, the qualitative data generated from the additional comments are as important as the quantitative results. A total of 5,928 respondents out of 6,000 targeted completed the questionnaire generating a response rate of 98.8%. Of those, 3,268 were male and 2,660 were female (see Appendix 2).

### *Questionnaire design*

The questionnaire consisted of closed ended questions for which nominal and ordinal scales were used (see Appendix 1). As stated above, respondents were given the opportunity to elaborate on their selected response allowing some qualitative data to be collected. A selection of interesting comments from respondents are reported where appropriate in the

findings section. A short pilot study was undertaken to test the validity of the questionnaire and the use of the questionnaire as a relevant data collection method (Quinlan, 2011). This was done by getting a sample of 10 male and 10 female students to complete the questionnaire. Carrying out a pilot study also ensured that the questions and themes were clear and would not influence the responses towards a particular direction. No major issues were noted from the pilot study, so it was decided to adopt the questionnaire for the purpose of data collection. As non-Saudi nationals, the researchers gave careful thought as to what questions or themes might be viewed as sensitive by respondents on a personal and/or political level. This included avoiding questions/themes that would elicit hostile, critical or disrespectful comments about the Kingdom's rulers.

#### *Data analysis*

The software package - SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) - was used for analysing the responses to the closed-ended questions. This generated descriptive statistics in the form of percentages that were used to describe and make sense of the data gathered (Zikmund *et al.*, 2010). The results from the questionnaire are presented in tabular form (see Appendix 2). No further statistical analysis of the quantitative data was undertaken because the nature of the data gathered, and research objectives meant that a more complex approach would not yield anything of further value. In addition, the researchers are of the view that a descriptive approach to the analysis and reporting of the data would appeal to a wider readership. The qualitative data generated from the additional comments was useful in supporting the analysis of the quantitative data.

#### **Findings**

In this section, the results from the questionnaire are reported. A table with the full results can be found in Appendix 2. Due to the large volume of respondents who completed the questionnaire, it is not feasible to assign a number to those respondents whose offered

additional comments to questions and whose comments have been selected in the reporting of the findings. Instead, only their gender is noted given the topic of investigation.

*Whether female students/women in general should participate in the labour market*

Respondents were asked to register their response to what can be considered a theme central to this research: whether women should participate in the labour market. Specifically, they were asked: “Do you believe female students and women in general should participate in the labour market after completing their studies”? The majority of respondents, albeit a small majority, are in favour of women participating in the labour market with 54.7% registering ‘yes’ and 45.3% registering ‘no’ (Appendix 2).

The response to this question revealed a significant divergence in views between male and female students. Whilst the majority of female respondents (69.9%) were in favour, in contrast, the majority of males (57.5) indicated ‘no’. Respondents were given the option to elaborate resulting in numerous comments, including the following from those who registered ‘yes’:

I believe that in future women will be a coherent part of every sector and will represent every profession in the labour market (Female respondent).

Women should be given their roles to participate in building the society and fulfilling the dire needs of the labour market in Saudi Arabia (Male respondent).

The following comments were from those in the ‘no’ camp:

Women should only guarantee a safe future for herself and her kids at home (Male respondent).

*Women had been created for home and I don’t like them to work outside and mix with men* (Male respondent).

*Level of opportunities available for women to participate in the Saudi labour market*

Respondents were asked: “How would you rate the level of opportunities available for women to participate in the labour market in Saudi Arabia? Ratings were based on Likert scale type choices and can be viewed in Appendix 1. ‘Average’ was the rating selected by more than a quarter (26.7%) with a similar number (27.9%) registering ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. Less than a third (30.7%) selected ‘very good’ or ‘good’ (Appendix 2). The following are

some comments received from those who rated the level of opportunities as ‘very poor’ or ‘poor’:

There are no vacancies; even men struggle to find jobs (Female respondent).

Family disapproval, social pressure, cultural issues and male-centred society are the main issues (Female respondent).

We hardly see any women in the labour market and even educated women stay home after finishing their studies as there are no jobs or their education is not fit for the jobs (Male respondent).

Those indicating ‘very good’ or ‘good’ noted the following:

Women are working in education and health sectors and soon they will make their way into other fields (Female respondent).

Female participation is increasing but they need segregated places to work in accordance with the Saudi cultural requirements (Male respondent).

When deciphering the responses by gender, there was little difference between the ratings selected by both sexes. Similar numbers of female and male students viewed the level of opportunities available for women to participate in the labour market as ‘average’, ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. The same applies to the number of males and females who registered ‘good’.

Overall, there is greater negativity than optimism among respondents when it comes to rating the level of opportunities for women to participate in the labour market, if we interpret ‘average’ to be closer to ‘poor’ than to ‘good’.

#### *Responsibility for improving women’s participation in the labour market*

Those respondents who registered ‘poor’, ‘very poor’ or ‘average’ on the rating of the level of opportunities available for women to participate in the labour market were then asked “Whose responsibility do you believe it is to improve women’s participation in the labour market”? The results from the respondents who were eligible to register a response revealed that a quarter (25%) felt that the onus was on the state/government to improve women’s participation in the labour market, whilst almost a third (31.3%) said it was society’s duty (Appendix 2). A smaller percentage (14%) felt that everyone was responsible. In terms of responses by gender, almost equal numbers of both sexes felt that the government or state was responsible for improving women’s participation in the labour market, and a slightly



higher number put the onus on society. The only difference that stood out between the responses of both sexes was that more males (13.6%) than females (8.1%) believed that it was the responsibility of men to make improvements. Given the role of societal perceptions in shaping gender roles in Saudi Arabia, it is not surprising that almost a third of the overall sample eligible to answer this question and of both sexes indicated that society had a role to play in improving women's participation in the labour market.

#### *Perceptions on barriers faced by female students in the pursuit of employment*

Respondents were asked "Do you think that female students are likely to face any challenges or barriers if they choose to pursue a job in the labour market"? This was a pertinent question given the well-documented problems women face in their pursuit of employment and their experience whilst at work in MENA countries such as Saudi Arabia. A huge majority (73.6%) registered 'yes' (Appendix 2). Some of the respondents provided the following comments:

Social barriers, customs and traditions and mixing of both genders will not allow women to work (Male respondent).

It is very hard for a Saudi woman to manage job and family at the same time (Female respondent).

The ultra-conservative society, male-oriented jobs, religious misinterpretations in regard to working women and social/familial pressures are the main reasons (Female respondent).

When isolating gender differences, the results mirror those of the overall sample with large majorities of both sexes subscribing to the view that female students would face barriers, with more than three quarters (77%) of females, and over two-thirds of males (70.1%) registering this viewpoint.

#### *Whether women can make a contribution to the labour market*

Respondents were asked "To what extent do you agree with the statement: Women can make an important contribution to the labour market"? The results reveal a large majority (72.8%) registering 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with only 14.9% disagreeing strongly or otherwise

(Appendix 2). When comparing the results by gender, there are some differences. Whilst both male and female students agree that women can make an important contribution to the labour market, considerably more females ‘strongly agree’ than their male counterparts. Furthermore, around four times as many males (23%) as females (5.1%) disagreed that women can make a contribution to the labour market.

#### *Future opportunities for women in the labour market*

In recent years, the authorities in Saudi Arabia have been keen to portray a more positive attitude and image towards gender equality in light of criticism, particularly from the Western world. Respondents were therefore asked “To what extent do you agree with the statement: opportunities for women’s participation are likely to expand or improve in Saudi Arabia in the future”? The findings reveal a vast majority of respondents registering a positive response with around two thirds (67.8%) registering ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’. When exploring gender differences, female students have a more optimistic outlook than male students with almost 80% registering ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ in comparison to around 60% of their male counterparts. Some interesting comments from those who registered ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ include the following:

Though it needs a big change in the perceptions of society, but we can see a gradual progress (Female respondent).

The environment in the kingdom is changing rapidly regarding women issues and they will be in good roles sooner (Male respondent).

The steps of the new government show a positive change and women are motivated to see their role in the labour market increasing soon” (Female respondent).

Of course, we can see the demands and women graduates will no more be confined in their homes in future (Male respondent).

In the introduction, a set of hypotheses were laid out for this study. Having undertaken the research, what do the findings reveal in relation to these hypotheses?

H1: *Saudi students acknowledge that women’s level of participation in the labour market is low*

The findings reveal that this hypothesis has been proven. Students acknowledge the low level of participation in the labour market among Saudi women.

*H2: Saudi students oppose women's participation in the labour market*

The findings do not prove this hypothesis. Whilst the majority of male students oppose women's involvement in the labour market, the majority of female students do not. Furthermore, the overall sample of respondents do not oppose women's participation in the labour market.

*H3: Saudi students are aware of the barriers that women face in the labour market*

The findings prove this hypothesis. They show that students are able to identify a range of barriers faced by women in the labour market such as structural, cultural, normative and regulatory in line with the theory of social constructionism and INT.

*H4: Saudi students are optimistic about women's employment opportunities in the future*

The findings essentially prove this hypothesis with almost two-thirds of respondents indicating a sense of optimism that women will be able to play a greater role in employment in the coming decades.

## **Discussion**

The findings broadly concur with what we already know about the situation facing women seeking employment in Saudi Arabia (see Al-Asfour *et al.*, 2017; Syed *et al.*, 2018,). Overall, only a small majority of the cohort of student respondents support women's participation in the labour market. Among male respondents, the majority are opposed with many males expressing traditional views. This aligns with research carried out by Elamin and Omar (2010) who highlight that Saudi males view women's role as being primarily that of homemaker rather than breadwinner. Indeed, some of the comments from male students would be deemed sexist and discriminatory from a western equality perspective, and very much in conflict with western values (Kirton and Greene, 2016).

The majority of both male and female respondents acknowledge the likelihood that female students attempting to enter the labour market would be subjected to barriers and cited structural and cultural constraints as significantly limiting the ability of women to exercise their agency. This perception was further echoed by the majority of both male and female students in their categorisation of current opportunities for women to participate in the labour market as being *average*, *poor* or *very poor*. This links to studies by Al-Munajjed (2010) and Metcalfe (2011) which cite the narrow opportunities women face in the labour market with women tending to be concentrated in a few sectors such as education and health leading to a high degree of horizontal segregation. These studies also provide further credence to the framework of social constructionism as a guide to understanding the experience of women in Saudi Arabia and other male dominated societies.

Comments offered by respondents demonstrate an awareness of recent developments in relation to reforms being initiated by the rulers that aim to open the economy for greater women's involvement in employment and acknowledged in the work of Varshney (2019). However, this awareness does not translate into support for women working among male respondents with the majority indicating lack of support for women's participation in the labour market as noted earlier. It is also apparent from the findings that whilst the majority of male students believe that opportunities for women seeking employment are likely to improve, this is based on an awareness of changes that are taking place rather than support for women's participation.

Interestingly both male and female students viewed the collective responsibility of both society and the state to address the lack of women's participation in the labour market. However, it is not clear the extent to which students' awareness of the current reforms announced influenced their view that the state should have joint responsibility for improving women's labour market opportunities.

In discussions involving social issues in Saudi Arabia, there is often reference to religion given the Kingdom's strong Islamic conservative roots (Mogahadam, 2004; Al-Munajjed, 2010). In this research, both male and female students allude to culture rather than religion as the chief impediment. The findings of this research therefore substantiate previous works which indicate that culture rather than religion is cited as being the root cause of the challenges and restrictions encountered by women (Elamin and Omair, 2010; Caris and Hayo, 2012).

The analysis of the findings suggests some further gender differences in addition to the greater support for women's participation in the labour market noted earlier among female students. There is a higher majority of female respondents citing that women could make a contribution to the labour market compared to their male counterparts thereby supporting Varshney's recent research that noted a sense of empowerment and determination towards employment among Saudi women (2019). In addition, there is greater optimism among female students about the future outlook for women and employment opportunities compared to men. The response of female students in this research demonstrate that they hold less traditional values towards women's role in society than male respondents. This substantiates recent research into the views of female Saudi employees conducted by Syed *et al.* (2018) that noted a passion for work and a desire to exercise agency.

As stated in the introduction, it is worth reiterating that Saudi Arabia represents a unique setting because despite sharing some similar values to other Gulf Arab states and Muslim nations, the Kingdom is considerably more conservative and in relation to this topic, data shows that it has the lowest rate of labour force participation among females in MENA countries (World Bank, 2019). Furthermore, as noticed in the literature, Saudi Arabia is particularly unique because the impact of structure and culture as elements of the theory of social constructionism is far greater in the Kingdom than in other MENA countries when it comes to having a detrimental outcome on women's participation in the labour market. As reported in the literature, women's

ability to exercise their agency is particularly constrained in Saudi Arabia due to cultural and structural dynamics in ways that you do not see in other MENA countries. The unique context of Saudi Arabia is what attracts greater interest among scholars and researchers and greater controversy in equal measure.

### **Implications and recommendations**

This research has implications at a number of levels and from which recommendations can be derived. At the political level, if the plans of rulers and policymakers to address gender inequalities as outlined in the VISION 2030 programme (CEDA, 2016) are to be successful they need to ensure there is buy-in from the male population. The majority of male respondents in this research oppose women's participation in the labour market suggesting that the state must work to influence the social narrative on this issue. The findings from the research also suggest that there is support for women's participation in the labour market especially among female students, but women's educational qualifications and skills are being underutilised. Given the government's desire to reduce reliance on expatriates, reduce unemployment among Saudi youth, and its commitment to women in the VISION 2030 Programme, there is significant onus on the state to ensure that more women in employment can become a reality and women can maximise their human potential (HKS, 2019). A partnership approach may be required where the state works with other stakeholders such as the clergy and employers. The findings indicate that there is an expectation among students that together with society, the state should bear responsibility for improving women's opportunities in relation to employment.

There are implications for religious institutions. Given the important role that religion plays in Saudi society (Kelly, 2014), it is recommended that religious scholars use their influence to educate society about the rights afforded to women in Islam but often ignored. Clerics should encourage society to reflect upon social and cultural norms which are not supported

by religion and which are used as a pretext to limit women's agency (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Given that the majority of female students in this research express a desire to pursue employment, it is important that religious leaders ensure that women are not ostracised for choosing to work and for exercising their agency. It should be acknowledged however that in an ultra-conservative society where the boundary between religion and culture can often become blurred, this will be challenging. Existing studies have touched on the concerns that subjective interpretations of religion and their link with culture are detrimental to women's rights (Altorki, 2000; Al-Rasheed, 2013).

There are implications too for employers and organisations. The findings suggest that women are educated and have skills that are not being utilised especially in the private sector (Young, 2017; HKS, 2018). Research by the Brookings Institution reaffirms the opportunity cost of not taking advantage of women's human capital in MENA countries (Masri, 2017). Given the Kingdom's desire to lessen reliance on foreign workers and tackle unemployment, women represent qualified, skilled and willing indigenous human resources that employers should recruit. There is an appetite among the female students in this research to pursue employment. Employers should therefore work to satisfy that desire by engaging with recruitment firms that identify and prioritise female recruitment. Furthermore, it should be noted that the male students in this research represent a cohort which will imminently enter the labour market where they will not only become employees but may later go on to occupy leadership and management positions. Considering that the majority of male respondents in this research believe that women should not pursue employment, there is a possibility that these views may be reflected in recruitment practices and limit female recruitment as well as lead to negative experiences for women already in work. The challenges associated with structural and cultural barriers encountered by Saudi women in employment has been well documented in recent studies by Al-Asfour *et al.* (2017) and

Alfarran *et al.* (2018). Overall, there are implications for employee relations if the views of male respondents are reflected in practices within organisations. Given that the majority of males believe that women should not pursue employment may lead to strained employee relations within the workplace between male and female employees and between various actors within the employment relationship such as management and female employees. We know from our understanding of employee relations that various participants in the employment relationship - managers, owners, employees, trade unions - come into the relationship with particular ways of viewing the world, especially the world of work, and the relationships that take place within that sphere. These differing views can have a bearing on the state of employee relations and can lead to conflict if not managed effectively (Salamon, 2001).

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this research are that the findings are not necessarily transferable to other MENA countries as Saudi Arabia is unique in terms of its strong patriarchal system and the complexity generated by the blurring of Islamic principles with cultural practices. Furthermore, this study is about students' perceptions on the issue of women's participation in the labour market and not about actual experiences of women working in Saudi Arabia. There is no guarantee that the views reported are therefore representative of the general Saudi population or indeed of working people or the unemployed.

### **Conclusions**

This research explored the views of final year Saudi students thereby representing an opportunity to engage a unique cohort of Saudi citizens. The findings broadly substantiate what has been revealed by current literature. However, this study represents the insights of a participant cohort that has been under researched. Therefore, in addition to the contribution of the research noted in the implications, the research adds to the limited but growing literature



on the issue of gender equality in relation to Saudi Arabia that is directly based on the views of a cohort of Saudi citizens that is part of the Kingdom's future human resources.

Using the theoretical framework of social constructionism, the findings from both male and female students reveal that cultural and structural barriers limit the agency of Saudi women when it comes to labour market participation. Whilst the impact of these barriers is not endemic to Saudi women, their repercussions are greater in collectivist societies such as Saudi Arabia as societal attitudes have been slow to evolve and the equality agenda is not sufficiently advanced as in the Western world. In the West in particular, cultural and structural norms in relation to gender have been diluted over the past 30 years allowing women to exercise greater personal agency manifesting itself among other things, in increased participation in employment. Furthermore, this research also acknowledges the similarities between the social constructionist framework and other theories such as INT. INT sheds further light on the factors that influence women's participation in the labour force.

This research is timely and has been conducted against the backdrop of political reforms and change which have caused a stir within Saudi Arabia and raised eyebrows in the West. The measure of success of reforms will depend on overcoming the social constructed views of gender that have dictated the running of Saudi society and organisations for generations. For Saudi women, change is not going to happen overnight. The implications for the career development of Saudi women is clear: if they cannot gain entry to the labour market they cannot start careers let alone develop them. Finally, there are a number of questions which future research could consider: How will society digest the reforms announced by the Kingdom's rulers that are designed to give women more autonomy and control? In particular, will the male population accept the transition in female roles including their greater participation in the world of work? Will women have the courage to exploit the new opportunities that emerge?

## Notes

1. The term MENA – Middle East and North Africa - refers to approximately 22 countries stretching from Morocco in northwest Africa to Iran in southwest Asia down to Sudan in Africa. See: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena.asp>

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## Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?
  - a) Male
  - b) Female
2. Do you believe female students and women in general should participate in the labour market after completing their studies?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No

***Please explain your answer***

3. How would you rate the level of opportunities available for women to participate in the labour market in Saudi Arabia? ***Please select one of the following:***
  - a) Very good
  - b) Good
  - c) Average
  - d) Poor
  - e) Very poor
  - f) Don't know

***Please explain your answer***

4. If you registered *average*, *poor* or *very poor* to the previous question then whose responsibility do you believe it is to improve women's participation in the labour market? ***Please select one of the following:***
  - a) Women's
  - b) Men's
  - c) Government/state
  - d) Society
  - e) Everyone
  - f) Other: please specify
5. Do you think that female students are likely to face any challenges or barriers if they choose to pursue a job in the labour market?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No

***Please explain your answer***

6. To what extent do you agree with the statement:  
"Women can make an important contribution to the labour market". ***Please select one of the following:***
  - a) Strongly agree
  - b) Agree
  - c) Disagree
  - d) Strongly disagree
  - e) Don't know/no view

7. To what extent do you agree with the statement: “opportunities for women’s participation are likely to expand or improve in Saudi Arabia in the future”.

***Please select one of the following:***

- a) Strongly agree
- b) Agree
- c) Disagree
- d) Strongly disagree
- e) Don’t know/no view

***Please explain your answer***



## Appendix 2 – Questionnaire results\*

Question/theme	Categories/options	% response all	% response female	% response male
What is your gender?	Female	44.9	-	-
	Male	55.1	-	-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	-	-
Do you believe female students/women in general should participate in the labour market after completing their studies?	Yes	54.7	69.9	42.5
	No	45.3	30.1	57.5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
How would you rate the level of opportunities available for women to participate in the labour market in Saudi Arabia?	Very good	14.7	18.7	11.4
	Good	16	16.8	15.4
	Average	26.7	28.6	25.2
	Poor	19.7	17.8	21.3
	Very poor	8.2	7.2	9.1
	Don't know	14.7	10.9	17.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	
If you registered <i>average</i> , <i>poor</i> or <i>very poor</i> to the previous question then whose responsibility do you believe it is to improve women's participation in the labour market?	Women's	14.4	14.8	14.1
	Men's	11.1	8.1	13.6
	Government/state	25	25.9	24.4
	Society	31.3	30.9	31.7
	Everyone	14	16.1	12.3
	Other	4.2	4.2	3.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	
Do you think that female students are likely to face any challenges or barriers if they choose to pursue a job in the labour market?	Yes	73.6	77	70.1
	No	26.4	23	29.9

	<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
To what extent do you agree with the statement “Women can make an important contribution to the labour market”.	Strongly agree	31.2	45.2	19.9
	Agree	41.6	40.5	42.4
	Disagree	10.5	3.8	16
	Strongly disagree	4.4	1.3	7
	Don’t know/no view	12.3	9.2	14.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
To what extent do you agree with the statement: “Opportunities for women’s participation are likely to expand or improve in Saudi Arabia in the future”.	Strongly agree	21.6	33	12
	Agree	46.2	44.8	47.4
	Disagree	11.8	7.2	15.7
	Strongly disagree	7.3	5.2	9.3
	Don’t know/no view	13.1	9.8	15.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

\*Overall sample size was 5,928 of which 3,268 were male and 2,660 were female