



October 2017 – No. 17 Women in Saudi Arabia

The need to extend gender equality and further empower women in Saudi Arabia is one of the main priorities of the bold Vision 2030 reform plan adopted in 2016.

There is no regulation preventing women from holding senior positions and decision-making roles in the private or public sectors. On the contrary, the government emphasizes the fact that *“merit is the basis for selecting employees.”* Saudi women hold senior positions in business conglomerates and financial service groups, in hospitals, research centres, universities, media, arts, cultural and sport activities. The Kingdom wants to boost female participation in the workforce from 22% to 30% by 2030. Participation in political and public life in Saudi Arabia is the right of every citizen (female or male) through their contribution to decision-making and elections.

The status of women in general has improved immeasurably in Saudi Arabia over the years and the Kingdom continues to adopt new regulations and set up the operational conditions that will eventually enable a more widely spread women's empowerment in our society. We look forward to achieving further progress in this domain at a pace that reflects the expectations of our society, in line with our values.



Ambassador

Abdulrahman S. Alahmed

King Salman issues royal decree granting women the right to drive



On Tuesday 26 of September, King Salman issued orders to grant driving licenses to women in the Kingdom. The decision will allow women to play a greater role in the Saudi's economy in line with the Saudi Vision 2030 plan for ambitious social and economic reforms launched in 2016.

The royal decree orders the formation of a high-level ministerial committee that will give advice on the practicalities of the edict by end of October 2017 and ensure the full implementation of the order by June 2018.

In the next 10 months, the authorities will put in place all the infrastructures needed to make this a success, including licensing facilities and driver education programs. The Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University already set the example by announcing the establishment of a driving school for women. Future Saudi marriage contracts will also have to include an additional clause by which a husband respects his wife's decision to drive.

Allowing women to drive will positively impact the country both on social and economic levels. It is a significant step forward in affirming the central role of women in the country and it will help boost the Kingdom's economy. Saudi families will save an estimated 950 euros per month with the end of the ban. Money spent up to now on private drivers or taxi services. Moreover, mobility has been the main obstacle faced by working women. With the end of the ban, an estimated extra two to three million women are expected to join the workforce.

This historic decision was hailed by the international community. Amongst the first to react, the US state department, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, EU special representative for Human Right, Stavros Lambrinidis and Pier Antonio Panzeri, Chair of the EP Subcommittee on Human Rights who all welcomed the decision, calling it a “very positive signal” and an “important step in the right direction”.



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Strongest increase of Saudi women in the workplace

According to recent figures from the Ministry of Labour and Social Development (MLSD), the number of working women has dramatically increased in Saudi Arabia over the last four years. For example, the number of Saudi women working in the private sector has increased by 130 per cent. This number should continue to grow in the coming months in line with the objectives of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 Plan which wants to increase participation of women in the labour market from 22 to 30% by 2030.

The MLSD has already announced that it will soon create about 80,000 job opportunities for women in sales functions in perfumeries, shoe and bag stores, and other shops. More women will also be employed in the civil service: in September a workshop on achieving gender equality was organized by the Ministry of Civil Service in order to discuss the current obstacles and challenges facing women's participation in the Saudi civil service.

Women are not only more present on the labour market, they are also heading a new wave of entrepreneurship.

In fact, nearly 40 percent of all Saudi start-ups in 2016 were owned by women.

This "highlights how the role of women in economic development has flourished" declares the Governor of the General Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Ghassan Al-Sulaiman. In the future, the Kingdom is committed to do even more to promote female entrepreneurship. The Minister of Finance, Mohammed bin Abdullah Al-Jadaan, participated to this effect to a international meeting on the Initiative for the Promotion of Entrepreneurship for Women. This initiative seeks to encourage investment and identify ways to best overcome barriers to women entrepreneurs' access to finance.

At the same time, efforts to boost employment among women and graduates are still ongoing as illustrated by various projects such as the guide prepared by the Saudi E-Government Program to increase the employment of Saudi women in the information technology (IT) sector or the call from the Saudi Shoura Council to the Saudi Industrial Development Fund (SIDF) to adopt initiatives aimed at encouraging women who wish to enter the field of industrial investment.



Women allowed in a stadium for the first time

Hundreds of women have been allowed for the first time inside a sports stadium to participate in the celebrations on Saudi Arabia's national day on 23 September 2017. Festivities across the kingdom included concerts, dance performances and fireworks displays.

It was the first time that Saudi women could assist in the celebrations with their families. Until now, the rules on gender separation in public spaces prevented this. To ensure that women and their families could enjoy the festivities together, single men were seated in dedicated sections of the King Fahd international stadium in Riyadh.

Beyond sports, the government also wants to encourage men and women to attend more cultural events in Saudi Arabia.

In line with this orientation renowned singer Abdul Majeed Abdullah has announced that his next concert in Jeddah would be open for both men and women for the first time.

Women authorised to issue legal opinions on religious issues in Saudi Arabia

A vote in the Shoura Council, approved by 107 votes, has confirmed the authorization for Saudi women to issue "fatwas" (legal opinion by qualified Muslims on religious issues) in the Kingdom. The vote followed a recommendation by one of the Shoura Council's members to open independent sections for women. The female muftis will be chosen by a royal decree.



Women members of the Council had demanded last March that the issuing of fatwas should not be limited to men, but that in light of the growing number of female academics specialized in the study of jurisprudence, they should also be allowed to issue fatwas. The Shoura Council's decision was welcomed by specialists in Islamic law and jurisprudence, and enjoys popular support.

Women and Sport

- ❖ Sport at school: Saudi public schools will begin to offer physical education for girls in the coming academic year. Schools will arrange sports halls and hire qualified female physical education staff before introducing the program. The education ministry said the decision was part of the Saudi Vision 2030 objectives to raise the percentage of those practicing sports and physical exercise by introducing more sports and recreational activities also to women. A supervisory committee will determine the program's goals, performance indexes, and a concrete implementation plan. It will work with universities to train women specialists qualified to implement the program at schools.

- ❖ Bliss run: Saudi women of all ages gather every week in Jeddah for a running session along the sea. This group named « bliss run » is a not-for-profit organisation promoting women's health through different sports programs that help women change their daily habits and curb inactivity. The program also aims to create a healthy, physical and psychological environment through the spread of a fast-walking or running culture in the open air.

Some profiles of Saudi women contributing to the political and economic life of our society



Kowther Musa Alarbash

Member of the Majlis alshura, she is also currently member of the Saudi Parliamentary Friendship committee with the European Parliament, NATO PA, Belgium and Luxembourg.

Kowther Musa Alarbash is a Saudi writer and journalist. She is one of the 29 women elected in the Shoura Council, the kingdom's consultative body, during the 2013 election.

She is the mother of a son who was killed while preventing an ISIS suicide bomber from attacking a mosque in Dammam last year.



Salma Bint Hizab Al-Oteibi

Salma Bint Hizab Al-Oteibi, a Bedouin teacher, was the first woman ever elected in Saudi Arabia in the 2015 municipal elections. She was elected Municipal Counsellor in the town of Madrasah, near Mecca, by beating her male opponent by 20 votes.



Mishaal Ashemimry

Mishaal Ashemimry is the first Saudi woman to join the US space agency, NASA. She is an aerospace engineer, who serves as CEO of MISHAAL Aerospace based in Florida. Mishaal previously worked for Raytheon Missile Systems' Aerodynamics Department and contributed to 22 different rocket programs.

She has a Bachelor of Science Degrees in Aerospace Engineering and in Applied Mathematics and a Master of Science Degree in Aerospace Engineering



Fatimah Baeshen

Fatimah Baeshen is the first woman to be appointed as spokesperson for the Saudi Arabia's embassy in the United States. Prior to that, Fatimah was a director at the Washington-based Arabia Foundation which she joined after working with the Saudi Ministry of Labour and the Saudi Ministry of Economy and Planning in Riyadh from 2014 to 2017. She earned her master's degree with a focus on Islamic finance from the University of Chicago and her Bachelor of Arts in sociology from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.



Hanadi Zakaria Al Hindi

Hanadi Zakaria Al Hindi was the first Saudi female pilot to get her piloting licence in 2013.

Since then she has been awarded a 10-year-contract to fly Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal's private jet. She also instructs a new generation of male aviators in a flying academy in Jeddah.

