

## FEMALE IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION IN SAUDI ARABIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *Saudi Arabia is experiencing an era of unprecedented socio-cultural reforms, one of which is the empowerment of women. The Saudi Vision 2030 aim to provide equal opportunity to both genders has necessitated intervention to reformulate the social identity of women, which has long been thought to be subject to the socio-religious domination of men. The descriptive discursive approach of this paper aims to briefly highlight attempts upheld by the Saudi Arabian government to combat the inferior social image of women, and the steps advocated to reconstruct it. Analysis of real-life data has revealed that officials have used the media and the education system to advance their ideology among the wider population.*

**KEY WORDS:** gender, women, men, education media, identity.

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### INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality has often found justification in religious scripts. The representation of women in the Bible and other ancient texts consistently shows them as the agents behind the devaluation of humanity (Lan and Jingxia, 2019). This same image has been passed down through generations and across cultures. According to Place (1998), Western culture considers women to be subservient and inferior to men. They are presented as the dark side of humanity, constituting the lower end of the social hierarchy. This image is widespread not only in Europe, but throughout Eastern culture as well. Khodary *et al* (2020) believe that Eastern women have traditionally been oppressed due to religious and cultural constraints. This is further confirmed by incidents where women are deprived from their rights in education and medical care (Kapur, 2019). Therefore, gender inequality has always been a lively theme of discussion.

As language is thought to be the mental output of how we are perceptually habituated to conceptualize entities and objects (Unal & Papafragou, 2016), and as cultural norms are mediated through language (Xiangyang, 2016), it is argued that languages have reflected this sense of prejudice against women in the way it is delivered and in its inherent features. Many linguistic studies have examined what has come to be called ‘*gendered language*’, and these have aimed to demarcate the facets of language diversification across gender and the diminishing role of women.

According to Jurafsky (1996), diminutive suffixes are attached in almost all human languages to derive a female noun from a male one. Languages with derivations that reverse this morphological process are rarely found. Dressler and Barbaresi (1994) claim that the associated meaning of diminutive suffix, which is smallness, has a pragmatic value implying less importance and lack of seriousness in the society. This relates to the sociolinguistic phenomenon of ‘*anthropocentricism*’; the speech act of endowing both genders with the property of maleness. In other words, it has the pragmatic function of subsuming females into a male centered discourse (Talosa and Temporal, 2018). This prioritization of the male is also reflected in linked structures where male-directed forms

always precede female-directed ones (Mills,1995), which justifies the unconscious ordering of male first, woman last, “*he and she*”, “*husband and wife*” (Farooq,1999).

This derogation of women across different socio-cultural and linguistic dimensions has led to calls for women’s rights and a new understanding of their social identity (Saryal,2014). These attempts have been extended to the strict conservative Saudi Arabian regime, which has passed plans to reshape the women’s social identity among the community members (Alnufaie and Beghum, 2021). This governmental ideology usually takes the form of implicit encouragement via hidden messages passed through multiple channels (Bianco,1987). This paper aims to shed light on Saudi government attempts to reconstruct the notion of female identity in a manner that satisfies the international demand to respect and protect the diversity of possible gender roles.

### **Female Identity in Saudi Arabia**

The mental image and status of women in Saudi Arabia have never been better than the general stereotypical identity cited in the literature; rather, they have always been even worse. Conservative Islam has long been recognized to have a unique influence on the social moral, and cultural beliefs of the Saudi population (Akbaba and Ozdamar,2019). It has further been claimed that the Saudi government is the only regime where such strict religious identity is so fully established (Mustafa,2017).

Islamic law is argued to have kept women under subjugation in the custody of men in Saudi Arabia to an extent that has left them socially marginalized (Alsaleh, n.d.). It has been alleged that the complete absence of females from the social scene has become normal. According to Rajkhan (2014), the Islamic guardianship rule that governs the social behavior of Saudis has long deprived women of their basic needs in comparison to men. This is reflected by the fact that women in Saudi Arabia were seriously oppressed and excluded from participating in a multitude of domains without the approval of a male custodian (Littrel and Bertsch,2013).

Mohammed *et al* (2020) indicated that women have always been cut-off from the labor market in Saudi Arabia. They further claimed that they experience gender discrimination with respect to income level, readiness for leadership, and access to specific professions that lack mixed-sex environments. This lack of visibility was not limited to their professional rights, but also extended to include their appearance in public and interactions with strangers (Jamjoom,2010)

These situations have further reinforced the notion that women are dependent members of the community whose role is to be the bedrock of family structure, housewives who are responsible for raising children in accordance with the regulations of Islam (Alsuwaida,2016).

As a result, the Saudi Arabian constitution has become the subject of much attention of human; in particular, women’s rights activists. It has a top place among the nations where gender discrimination is thought to affect women’s quality of life (World Economic Forum, 2017). Therefore, in one way or another, the Saudi government was forced to try to close this gender gap by passing strategies that mitigate the sense of male domination of the society and raise the status of women (Cerioli, 2019). The next few sections will be devoted to discussing these plans.

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## METHODOLOGY

This paper follows the descriptive qualitative approach. Qualitative research uncovers and interprets hidden meaning by pairing the linguistic to its cultural context (Palmer and Bolderston,2006). Under this method, data are collected via multiple routes. This research adopts an observational technique, which allows researchers to explain cases found in a real-life naturalistic setting by attending to the indirect implied meanings (Ciesielska *et al*,2018). This pattern of indirect meaning is the best practice by which ideologies might be exposed (van Dijk, 2002). Moreover, observation data are reliable enough in framing a generalization about a linguistic behavior. This paradigm is traditional in sociolinguistics and is widely used to obtain valid results in studies of spoken language, conversational practice, language variation (Altuna and Basurto,2013), and ideology (Biondo, 2019).

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### Identity reshaping in media

Because media mirrors society, Saudi women used to be widely excluded from media representation. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has witnessed an age of religious revitalization where women were restricted from being shown in public or on the screen (Aljuaid,2020). According to Sakr (2009), the religious power of scholars in the country has fed the sense of prohibition against women's participation in media. This has even extended to images of women in printed media, which used to be strictly banned (Taher, 2019).

According to Altohami and Salama (2019), the Saudi regime has been pressurised by international bodies to free Saudi women from the patriarchal model that conceptualizes women as subordinate to men. Therefore, empowering women to overcome such socio-cultural barriers has recently become part of Saudi politics (Alotaibi,2020).

Followers of unofficial media platforms in Saudi Arabia can easily sense the shift in the social image of women. The previous elimination of women from representation in media has been turned on its head. Women's issues are now dominating headlines across different domains with a language that conveys a sense of glorification (Elyas *et al*, 2020). Picture1 shows an image published by an unofficial media platform where a female Saudi judo player cheered before her match, a situation that radically contradicts the social image of women in the conservative community and traditional media in Saudi Arabia.



Picture1: An example of female identity reshaping in Saudi media, where a female athlete dominates the headings of media platforms.

The new direction of media discourse, addressing females rather than males, is readily evident. Female-directed language has become normal for the conservative community of Saudi Arabia to encounter. This has also been started to be upheld in governmental communication. For example, road signs offering advice and information have been addressed to men, which is in line with the social tendency toward female subordination. However, with the historical decree by which Saudi Arabian government lifted the ban on women's driving, official media language has made a radical shift in the way messages are delivered. Pictures 2 and 3 below illustrate how official driving signs issued by governmental bodies have been reformulated away from male-directed to female-directed language.

Although this might be claimed to be a normal initiative to help making the new phenomenon of women's driving acceptable to most community members, a closer inspection of the psychology of media would reveal the hidden attempts of the government to enhance the social image of women. This can be best understood in light of the psychological impact of media.

Pacho (2014) defines that politics as the set of ideas and ideologies advocated by government that reflect the perspective of policymakers and official individuals. These views are believed to be

passed to the community members through different tools that have the capacity to cognitively train receivers to normalize certain behaviour (Beck,1979). In this vein, Affolter (2017) claimed that an individual's perception of the world could be formed under the influence of media broadcasts. This is further attested to by the fact that there is a correlation between media exposure and the unconscious mental acceptability of its content (Gerbner and Gross,1976). Cheng *et al* (2015) have elaborated on the 'mainstream effect of media', by which the more individuals are exposed to media information, the more likely they are to change their attitudes and beliefs. Consequently, media platforms are among the best channels where the power of governmental ideology is put forth (Yuksel, n.d.).



Picture2: An awareness message published by the Authority of Traffic where language is directed to male audience.  
Translation: Verify your account for renting cars (the syntax is male-gendered).



Picture3: An awareness message published by the Authority of Traffic where language style is directed to a female.  
Translation: Dear driver, we wish you a safe journey (the syntax is female-gendered).

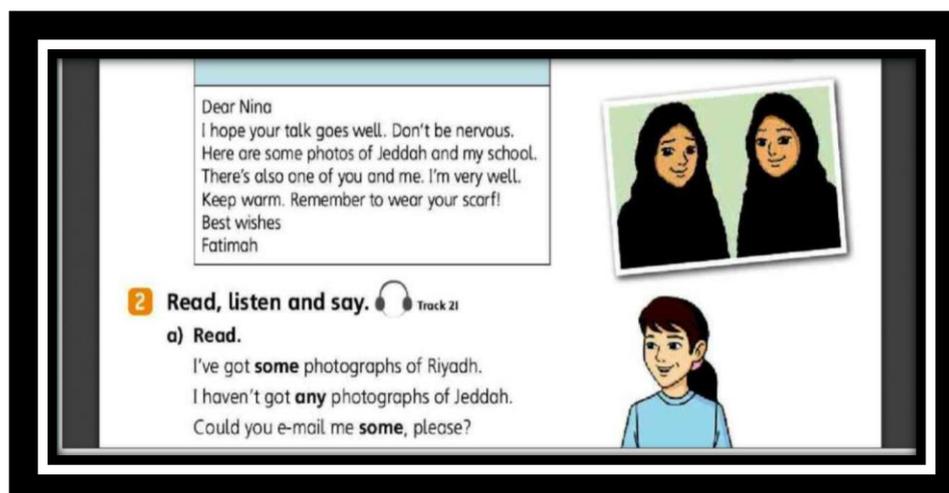
### A- Gender roles in textbooks

The biased image of women was further endorsed by the educational system. The conservative perspective of clergymen and religious scholars has been thought to be a barrier against women's education in Saudi Arabia (Alabbasi, 2016). It has been claimed that exposing girls to educational opportunities might put them under the sway of an ideology that aims to devastate the religious identity of the community by passing on Westernized values to women, who were believed to be the pillar of Islamic adherence (Al-Ghamdi, 2020). Consequently, launching female education was tailored to satisfy the conservative socio-religious background of the community members. This has been put into practice with the provision of gender-segregated education that offers separate classes for females, allowing them to be educated while still avoiding direct contact with the opposite gender (Alhothali, 2020).

Moreover, schoolgirls used to be exposed to different school curricula from boys, curricula whose teaching materials were directed towards keeping a good household and promoting the virtues of Islam (Alharbi, 2014), irrespective of other fields of inquiry. Therefore, the aim of females' education has always been to build the ideal character of an Islamic woman (Van Eck, 2020). Accordingly, this educational philosophy has been accused of hindering women from being well prepared for the labor market rather than merely their social or familial duties (Alsweel, n.d.).

The start of the shift in females' education came as an aftermath of the events of 9/11. The involvement of mostly Saudis in the attacks has been directly linked to the school curricula's violent perspectives against minorities and diversity (Prokop, 2003; Stalinsky,2003), one of which is the Islamic contents which has been thought to encourage the disparagement of women. Since then, despite strenuous objections from conservative and religious scholars (Jamjoom,2010), the educational system has passed plans to obliterate content deemed offensive to women, developing curricula that instill the concept of women's individual freedom (Hudhayri,2021).

After analyzing instances of primary school student textbooks, Hudhayri (2021) claimed that the official education body has proliferated teaching materials that aimed to normalize the social presence, public appearance, and liberty of women choice in the new generation. According to him, school children are now bombarded with visualities that raise the awareness of women's rights. For example, it was found that youth are confronted with pictures and teaching conversations that are held by both women with the *hijab* (veil or headcover) and without (Picture4), a move that sponsors equality between men and women, amid stigma, and removes the social restraints of women's dress-code that is associated with the religious *hijab* and *abaya* (Quamar,2016).



. Picture4: An example of educational material that aims to reshape the social image of women among school children. Source:[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356175430\\_IDENTITY\\_LOSS\\_IN\\_THE\\_STRICT\\_RELIGIOUS\\_CONTEXT\\_OF\\_SAUDI\\_ARABIAN\\_SCHOOLS](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356175430_IDENTITY_LOSS_IN_THE_STRICT_RELIGIOUS_CONTEXT_OF_SAUDI_ARABIAN_SCHOOLS)

The subtle plan to raise the social position of women was further advanced with the invention of new school subjects that had been banned during the period of religious enlightenment. According to Alruwaili (2020), social norms have long restricted women in Saudi Arabia from participating in physical activities across the public or private spheres, despite the health advantages of physical effort. This restriction significantly changed with the announcement of the educational system's intention to introduce formal sports classes into female curricula (Independent,2017). Although practicing sports is not prohibited in Islam, the content of the materials contradicts traditional Islamic gender roles.

Scrutiny of a textbook for such a subject reveals explicit encouragement of women's leadership, physical power, and serious behavior; attributes that characterize masculinity and go against the

natural Islamic upbringing of women that emphasizes shyness, softness, and emotions (General Directorate of Religious Services, 2019). More surprising is the fact that lesson materials that are conventionally thought to be more feminine have been introduced into boys' curricula. Analysis of one social skills textbook has revealed chapters on subjects such as cooking, house management, or food delivery etiquette that are more tailored to females rather than males. Picture5 offers a typical example of female-related lesson material inserted into a boys' curriculum.



Picture5: A lesson from a boy's textbook that focuses on preparing salads.

### Research Implications

The analysis section revealed the indirect means by which the Saudi regime aimed to purify the social image of women. This encouragement is thought to be critical for the government politics for varied reasons. First, it helped the policymakers satisfy the international calls for gender equality. Second, this implicitness, somehow, preserves the socio-religious identity of the community. The outcome of this research might open the door to further understanding the new media representation of females in discourse studies, as the traditional devalued character has started to change. Moreover, this research may help in the social absorption of new teaching philosophies, where the policy of gender equality paves the way for gender-mixed education, for example.

### CONCLUSION

Adopting a descriptive discursive paradigm, this paper has shed light on the attempts by the Saudi Arabian government to refashion the social identity of females, an issue that has long been of interest to young Saudis. The focus here was on the sudden change of media discourse regarding how women are presented on both official and unofficial platforms. Further, examples of school curriculum modification were presented and argued to have been invented by policymakers to reduce instances of discrimination against women and improving their social status. Despite such ample evidence, this research has its limitations. First, the background presented here does not necessarily reflect the perspective of the entire community. Second, the given arguments are not exhaustive, relying as they do solely on the domains of media and education. Therefore, further studies might be needed

to support the author's claims.

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