

PERMISSION NEEDED TO TRAVEL. STRICT LAWS about what to wear. Driving forbidden. Those were a few of the norms for Saudi women in the Kingdom—until recently.

I was born and raised in Saudi Arabia as an expat. I had an incredible childhood there, a fact very much at odds with people’s expectations: “Didn’t you feel oppressed as a young girl growing up in Riyadh?” As many expats did, I lived in a compound that sheltered me from the outside world, but it also exposed me to many cultures and other foreign nationalities living there. The freedom within the compound walls was comforting, but of course it hid a much darker reality. Growing up in the 1990s, I saw my mother and her friends navigate a society where their roles were largely confined to the private sphere. Women had limited opportunities for education and employment, and their freedom was restricted by strict guardianship laws. Saudi Arabia was a place where the guardianship system cast a bleak shadow over the lives of its women and their dreams were often muted by these limitations.

Today, the Kingdom is engineering a revolution to raise the status of its women. Under Vision 2030, an ambitious plan to diversify the Saudi economy and promote social and cultural reforms, Saudi

WOMEN & SAUDI ARABIA

Arabia has witnessed a surge in women’s participation in the workforce, with women taking up roles in sectors that were previously unthinkable. From entrepreneurship to tech, Saudi women are making their mark and contributing significantly to the country’s development. Launched in 2016, the plan already has had significant impact.

Hawazen Nassief, a member of the Board of Directors and Chair of the ESG Committee at Tanmiah Food Company, recounts the positivity of this change: “Today in Saudi, if you are a working woman, you can become a pilot, an engineer;

Female rights and opportunities may have been a long time coming in the Kingdom, but now they are coming at remarkable speed. By **YOUNNA NAUFAL.**



Young women help organize an educational event on driving in Jeddah, 2018—the year Saudi Arabia lifted its ban on women driving.

PHOTOGRAPH: CRAIG RUTTLE/REDUX

you can become so many things that in the past, for example when I graduated from college, were not on the table. We've seen so many improvements in labor laws, in diversity and inclusion laws and maternity laws ... mothers now have more rights in relation to their kids. For example, in the past women could not issue their own family card or IDs for their kids; only the father could do that; but now mothers can."

According to a recent report from S&P Global, there was significant progress in expanding the female workforce in Saudi Arabia, reaching 36% of the total human capital in 2022, up from only 19% in 2016, surpassing Vision 2030's target of 30%.

Echoing that sentiment is Dina Alnahdy, Chairwoman of the Circular Economy Company, a sustainability consultancy firm with international and national expertise to unlock new business potential for private sector and government partners in KSA: "I feel proud of the tremendous change and very relieved to know that future generations will not have to struggle as we did. The doors of opportunity have opened. Every aspect of Saudi society was impacted. In the workplace for example, we witnessed it firsthand. We went from walking into a ministry with no women at all, to walking into the same ministry a month later with mixed gender employees working side by side."

Many believe this change was long overdue and saw signs of hope in the 2000s with the gradual loosening of restrictions on women's participation in the workforce. With each passing year, additional opportunities opened up for women in Saudi Arabia. One of the most significant milestones came in 2011 when King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud announced that women would have the right to vote and run for office in municipal elections. In 2013, the Shura Council, Saudi Arabia's consultative assembly, welcomed its first female members—women would now be able to contribute to the policymaking process and represent the interests of Saudi women at the highest levels of government.

The year 2018 marked another turning point with the lifting of the ban on women driving. Many women celebrated this as a momentous occasion of independence. In 2019, the Ministry of Justice announced that women could now travel abroad without the permission of a male guardian. In 2021, Saudi Arabia introduced laws to combat domestic violence and protect the rights of women. This was a crucial step toward ensuring the safety and well-being of women in the Kingdom. These legal reforms sent a clear message that violence against women would not be tolerated, and it was

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a significant stride in safeguarding women's rights.

One of the most heartening aspects of this transformation is the profound impact it has had on younger generations. Young Saudi women have much greater access to opportunity, and they are seizing it with enthusiasm. One example is Basma Bouzo, CEO at &bouqu and Co-Founder and Director at Saudi Design Week. Basma started the Kingdom's first arts and culture publishing house and developed the first event for Design: "With Vision 2030, we're definitely moving the needle in the right direction. Women's participation in the workforce and economic activities at multiple levels has taken massive strides already. Now it's a matter of building on that and hitting the milestones. We now have our seats at the table."

Women in Saudi Arabia are now active participants in the cultural scene, whether it is as musicians, artists or filmmakers. Haifaa Al Mansour became the first Saudi female filmmaker to have her movies featured at the Cannes Film Festival in France and to compete for the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival.

In May 2023, Rayyanah Barnawi, a stem cell and breast cancer researcher, made history as the first Saudi woman to venture into space, inspiring a new generation of aspiring astronauts.

Alnahdy stresses that, "Today, nobody can have excuses anymore. It is difficult to sympathize with anyone who says that things cannot be achieved. Back in the day, you needed to find ways to go in and around things, but that is no longer the case. Our Crown Prince raised the bar locally and internationally and we as a nation have a responsibility to achieve with excellence."

Women worldwide have fewer opportunities for economic participation than men, less access to basic and higher education, less political representation, fewer leadership positions, less autonomy, less access to justice and overall, less equality. Gender equity and inclusion still has a long way to go globally. But in a country that 20 years ago was cited as one of the worst for gender equality, there is substantial progress to report.

For me—expatriate or not—Saudi Arabia still feels like home. I'm proud of its women, and I'm fortunate to have witnessed their resilience and determination. As Hawazen Nassief said: "Today, the sky is no longer the limit in Saudi. Saudi women have made it to space. We can go beyond the skies and dream big." ♦

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