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Enhancing Women's Corporate Leadership in Saudi Arabia: A Legal and Policy Analysis under Vision 2030

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Abstract:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has implemented considerable socioeconomic reforms under Vision 2030, with women's empowerment positioned as a primary strategic goal. This study uses a legal and policy analysis approach to look at the emergence of women in corporate leadership. This research assesses labor law improvements, corporate governance processes, and governmental efforts targeted at increasing women's leadership opportunities. Despite significant increases in female labor participation, women remain underrepresented in executive and board positions. The study uses doctrinal legal analysis and institutional policy review to identify structural, institutional, and socio-cultural limitations to women's advancement. While legal reforms have successfully facilitated workforce access, organizational inertia, pipeline obstacles, and cultural norms continue to perpetuate leadership disparity. The research concluded that reaching gender parity in corporate leadership requires greater governance enforcement, structured leadership pipelines, and institutional reform in line with Vision 2030.

Keywords: Women Leadership; Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030; Corporate; Gender Equality; Policy Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The role of women in economic development is receiving more emphasis in global policy discussions, particularly in emerging economies that are undergoing structural transition. Saudi Arabia is an intriguing case study in this regard. Historically marked by low female participation in public and economic life, the Kingdom has implemented significant reforms over the last decade to improve gender inclusion. These measures are primarily motivated by Vision 2030; a broad national strategy announced in 2016 to diversify the economy and modernize society. The Vision 2030 is Saudi Arabia's Grand National Plan, which aspires to diversify the country's economy, reduce dependency on oil earnings, and encourage social changes that include gender equality in the labor market (Abuhjeeleh M. 2019). Women's empowerment, particularly in leadership roles in various sectors, is one of the fundamental improvements encouraged by Vision 2030 (Moshashai et al., 2020). Women's labor-force participation in Saudi Arabia has expanded dramatically, from roughly 17% in 2016-2017 to 35-36% by 2024 (General Authority for Statistics [GASTAT], 2024; World Bank, 2024).

This rapid expansion reflects both policy measures and shifting societal attitudes. However, while women's participation in the workforce has increased, their representation in corporate leadership positions such as board membership, executive responsibilities, and senior management remains lopsided. Over the past two decades, many countries have implemented policies to address the glass

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ceiling. Some, like Norway, have enacted "hard" laws that set gender quotas for boards and impose penalties for noncompliance (Stainback, K., Roberts, H., & Biswas, P. K. 2024).

Corporate leadership diversity is widely acknowledged as a factor influencing organizational performance, innovation, and governance quality (OECD, 2022). Improving women's leadership in Saudi Arabia is a strategic economic priority as well as a matter of social equality. Vision 2030 emphasizes boosting women's contributions to national development, including leadership positions in both the public and commercial sectors.

This research seeks to critically examine the legal and policy frameworks that influence women's corporate leadership in Saudi Arabia. It aims to address the following research questions:

1. What legal measures have been undertaken to increase women's participation in business leadership?
2. How effective are Vision 2030's policy actions for boosting leadership opportunities?
3. What hurdles hinder women's advancement to senior corporate positions?

METHODS

In order to investigate women's corporate leadership in Saudi Arabia in light of the Vision 2030 reforms, this study uses a qualitative doctrinal research design. The method is mainly analytical and interpretive, concentrating on the analysis of institutional frameworks, policy documents, and legal texts that regulate women's economic participation. The study combines a policy assessment of Vision 2030 initiatives and the National Transformation Program with a legal analysis of Saudi labor laws, corporate governance rules, and gender-related reforms. Secondary data is also used to support the analysis and offer comparative and contextual insights from reliable international sources like the World Bank, OECD, International Labour Organization, and World Economic Forum.

The methodological framework, which is based on institutional analysis, enables an analysis of how formal legal structures, organizational practices, and sociocultural norms interact to affect women's leadership outcomes (Scott, W.R. 2014). Particularly in transitional economies going through fast socioeconomic change, this method is suitable for capturing the complexity of structural and non-structural factors influencing gender representation in corporate leadership (World Bank, 2023; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022).

RESULTS

Legal Framework for Women's Corporate Leadership

In recent years, the legal framework that governs women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia has undergone a significant transformation, particularly under the Vision 2030 reform agenda. This agenda is designed to improve gender inclusion as part of a broader socio-economic modernization. The modernization of labor legislation, which now incorporates principles of non-discrimination, equal opportunity, and enhanced workplace protections for women, is a critical component of these reforms. The revised labor laws explicitly prohibit gender-based discrimination in employment practices and establish protections related to wages, working conditions, and maternity rights, thereby strengthening women's formal legal position in the labor market (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2021). These reforms represent a transition from restrictive regulatory frameworks to a more inclusive employment system that is in accordance with international labor standards as advocated by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022).

The legal autonomy of women has been significantly improved by the relaxation of the male guardianship system, in addition to labor law reforms. Previously, women were restricted in their ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities, travel, and access employment opportunities due to guardianship restrictions. These limitations have been substantially alleviated by recent legal reforms, which now permit women to independently determine their employment, business registration, and mobility without the need for guardian approval (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This reform is widely acknowledged as a critical institutional change that has facilitated the integration of women into both public and private sector employment and expanded their economic agency.

Additionally, the implementation and reinforcement of anti-harassment legislation have fostered more inclusive and secure work environments. The objective of these legal safeguards is to prevent workplace misconduct and to establish accountability mechanisms for reporting and addressing harassment cases. These regulations have promoted increased female participation in a variety of sectors, including those that were previously male-dominated, by improving workplace safety (Alhareth & Alharthi, 2022). Collectively, these legal reforms illustrate a deliberate endeavor to harmonize national labor policies with global gender equality frameworks, including those delineated in the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law report, which underscores legal equality as a foundation for economic empowerment (World Bank, 2023).

Nevertheless, the formal access to employment has been significantly enhanced by these legal reforms; however, their implementation in the realm of leadership equality is still restricted. Institutional and organizational barriers that continue to influence women's career trajectories are not automatically eliminated by the existence of progressive legal frameworks. Therefore, the legal framework in Saudi Arabia is a fundamental but insufficient prerequisite for the attainment of substantive gender equality in corporate leadership.

Policy Framework under Vision 2030 and Women in Corportae Leadership

The policy framework for women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia is primarily organized around Vision 2030, which emphasizes gender inclusion as a strategic economic and developmental goal rather than a purely social reform initiative. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2016) underscores the importance of Vision 2030 in promoting women's participation in the labor market, facilitating their access to leadership roles, and facilitating their contribution to national economic diversification. As part of the Kingdom's transition from an oil-dependent economy to a diversified knowledge-based system, this strategic direction reflects a broader shift toward the integration of women into productive economic roles. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2022).

The National Transformation Program operationalizes these objectives by transforming them into measurable targets, institutional reforms, and sector-specific initiatives that are designed to enhance female employment rates and leadership representation in both public and private sectors. Entrepreneurship is a critical component of this policy framework, as it serves as a means of fostering the economic empowerment and leadership development of women. Women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia has experienced a significant increase in recent years, with women now owning approximately 40–45% of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This shift in economic participation is indicative of a significant structural change (OECD, 2022). Targeted policy interventions, such as the elimination of legal requirements related to male guardianship for business ownership, reduced regulatory barriers, and simplified business registration procedures, have facilitated this growth. These reforms have substantially improved the capacity of women to establish enterprises in a variety of sectors and engage in independent economic activity (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

In order to advocate for women-led entrepreneurship, the Saudi government has implemented a variety of financial and institutional support mechanisms in addition to regulatory reforms. Institutions such as Monsha'at (Small and Medium Enterprises General Authority) and a variety of government-backed funding programs offer female entrepreneurs access to capital, advisory services, and incubation support. These initiatives are intended to improve the sustainability and scalability of women-owned enterprises, in addition to promoting the formation of new businesses. Additionally, capacity-building initiatives, such as accelerators, business incubators, and entrepreneurship training, are essential for the development of managerial and leadership skills among female entrepreneurs, thereby enhancing their long-term involvement in the national economy.

The entrepreneurial participation of women has been further bolstered by the role of digital transformation. The proliferation of e-commerce platforms, digital payment systems, and remote business models has eliminated conventional obstacles associated with workplace segregation and mobility, thereby allowing women to operate businesses more independently and adaptably. In sectors such as retail, education services, consulting, and technology-based enterprises, where physical presence is less restrictive, this digital shift has been particularly significant in enabling women to participate. Digitalization has emerged as a critical enabler of inclusive economic participation in Saudi Arabia, particularly for female entrepreneurs, as per the OECD (2022).

It is crucial to note that entrepreneurship in the Saudi context also serves as an indirect pathway for leadership development. Women acquire strategic decision-making skills, financial literacy, organizational leadership experience, and market-oriented thinking by managing businesses, all of which are essential competencies for corporate leadership roles. In this regard, entrepreneurship functions as an alternative pathway for leadership development, which augments formal corporate career progression structures. Nevertheless, the transition from entrepreneurship to corporate leadership remains restricted, suggesting a disparity between entrepreneurial success and integration into top-tier corporate governance structures, despite these advancements.

In general, the policy framework of Vision 2030 illustrates a multifaceted strategy for women's empowerment that integrates economic diversification strategies, institutional support, and regulatory reform. Nevertheless, the implementation of these policies has substantially increased the participation of women in economic activities. However, the conversion of this progress into sustained corporate leadership representation remains a persistent challenge, necessitating a more robust structural and institutional alignment (World Bank, 2023; OECD, 2022).

Women in Corporate Leadership: Current Status and Analytical Perspective

In Saudi Arabia, the number of women in corporate leadership positions has gone up over the past few years, but it is still much lower than the number of women working overall. Women are getting into the workforce more often since Vision 2030's changes, but they are still underrepresented in senior executive positions like CEO, board member, and top management committee positions. According to data from the IFC and the World Bank, women are more likely to be in mid-level management positions, especially in areas like education, healthcare, human resources, and administrative services. However, their numbers drop sharply at higher decision-making levels. This pattern shows that there is a structural imbalance between getting into the workforce and becoming a leader. It shows that access to jobs has grown faster than access to power and making decisions.

According to the leadership pipeline theory, this difference can be explained by the idea that people become leaders by taking on more and more challenging roles that help them develop their managerial and strategic skills over time (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2011). That being said, this pipeline is still in its early stages for women in Saudi Arabia because they have only recently started working full-time. Because of this, a lot of women don't have the long-term work experience needed for senior executive positions yet. Also, women don't always have easy access to roles that involve profit-and-loss or strategic decision-making, both of which are usually necessary to get to the top leadership positions. This causes a "time-lag effect" in leadership representation, which means that improvements at entry-level jobs have not yet led to equal representation at executive levels (World Bank, 2023).

The institutional theory adds to our understanding of this phenomenon by pointing out the disconnect between official changes to the law and their actual implementation by organizations. Even though Saudi Arabia has progressive labor laws and Vision 2030 policies that encourage women to work together, companies don't always follow through on their official promises (Scott, 2014). Diversity principles are mostly adopted voluntarily by corporate governance structures, which means that they are not always applied equally across industries. Also, hiring and promotion decisions are still affected by normative institutional pressures, such as culturally embedded expectations about leadership roles. These changes in institutions show that even though formal barriers have gone down a lot, informal institutional constraints are still affecting the results of leadership (OECD, 2022; Metcalfe, 2011).

The glass ceiling theory gives us more information about why there aren't more women in executive positions. Even if they are qualified and do a good job, women often face invisible obstacles that stop them from moving up to senior positions (Cotter et al., 2001). Some of these barriers are unequal access to promotion opportunities, a lack of executive sponsorship, and implicit bias in the way leaders are evaluated. Because of this, women may move up to mid-level management positions but may not be able to get to the top levels of leadership. This separation along the levels of an organization shows that the lack of women in leadership positions is not just a problem of getting in, but also of moving up in the structure.

Tokenism theory also says that women being in leadership positions may sometimes be more of a show than a real thing. Kanter (1977) says that women can be put on advisory boards or other non-executive positions without having full decision-making power or strategic influence in companies. Representation like this makes things clearer and shows progress, but it doesn't always lead to structural empowerment unless it comes with real power over corporate governance and strategic decision-making (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011).

This difference between symbolic representation and real leadership is still very important for figuring out how much gender equality exists in Saudi corporate structures. The social role theory also helps us understand differences in leadership by showing how gendered expectations affect how capable leaders are seen to be (Eagly, 1987). In the past, masculine traits like assertiveness, dominance, and authority have been linked to leadership, while women have been socially linked to caring for others and supporting them. These norms are slowly changing under Vision 2030, especially among younger people and people who live in cities, but they still affect how organizations act and how leaders are chosen in some areas (Al-Ahmadi, 2019).

In addition, organizational culture has a big impact on how well leadership works. Formal policies don't always have as much of an effect on career advancement as informal networks, sponsorship systems, and internal promotion practices. In many companies, getting to the top levels of management depends on joining professional networks, which have historically been dominated by men (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). Because of this, women may have a harder time getting mentorship, sponsorship, and other informal ways to move up in their careers, even if there aren't any explicit discrimination policies in place.

Last but not least, problems combining work and personal life are still a major structural limitation. Even though Saudi Arabia has made flexible work arrangements available, senior leadership positions often need people to be available a lot, travel a lot, and work longer hours. When added to social expectations about women's housework and caregiving duties, these things can make it harder for women to move up in their careers and get executive positions (ILO, 2022).

Overall, the current situation of women in corporate leadership in Saudi Arabia shows that the country's institutions are still in a state of change. Legal reforms have made it easier for women to get jobs, but leadership equality has not yet been fully achieved. Despite efforts to make progress, women still face significant barriers in their ascent to senior leadership positions. These barriers include limited access to leadership positions, gaps in institutions, cultural norms, and the way organizations are set up (World Economic Forum, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

Challenges and Barriers to Women’s Corporate Leadership in Saudi Arabia

Despite significant legal, institutional, and policy reforms implemented under Vision 2030, women's advancement into corporate leadership in Saudi Arabia continues to face structural and socio-cultural barriers. While reforms have successfully increased women's labor force participation, these gains have not yet resulted in proportional representation in senior executive and board positions. This demonstrates a growing gap between formal inclusion and substantive leadership authority, where employment does not always imply decision-making power (World Bank, 2023; International Finance Corporation [IFC], 2023).

One of the most significant barriers is the persistence of the glass ceiling effect, which refers to invisible but structural barriers that prevent qualified women from advancing to senior leadership positions, regardless of competence or experience (Cotter et al., 2001). In the Saudi corporate context, this is reflected in the sharp drop in women's representation at executive levels compared to mid-management positions. Even when women meet formal qualifications, they frequently face slower promotion paths, limited access to strategic roles, and less exposure to profit-and-loss responsibilities, all of which are necessary for executive advancement (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). This suggests that gender inequality in leadership is caused by progression barriers rather than entry barriers.

The institutional gap between formal reforms and organizational practice is also closely related. According to institutional theory, formal rules, informal norms, and cultural-cognitive structures interact to shape outcomes. Although Vision 2030 has removed many explicit barriers to women's employment in Saudi Arabia, gender diversity initiatives are largely reliant on voluntary compliance within corporate governance systems.

This results in uneven implementation across sectors, with some organizations actively promoting women to leadership positions while others maintain traditional hierarchical structures (OECD, 2022). Normative institutional pressures, including long-held perceptions of male-dominated leadership, continue to influence recruitment and promotion decisions (Metcalfe, 2008).

Another significant challenge is tokenism in leadership representation. Tokenism occurs when women are given symbolic leadership roles but lack decision-making authority or structural influence (Kanter, 1977). In some organizations, women are appointed to advisory or non-executive positions that increase visibility but do not provide true strategic control. While such representation represents progress, it may create the illusion of equality without addressing structural imbalances in corporate governance (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011).

The leadership pipeline constraint contributes to women's underrepresentation in senior positions. According to leadership pipeline theory, executive leadership develops over time through the accumulation of managerial experience (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2011). In Saudi Arabia, women's relatively recent large-scale entry into the workforce has created a time-lag effect, limiting their advancement to top leadership positions. Furthermore, women are frequently concentrated in functional areas such as human resources, education, and administration, which offer fewer opportunities for strategic decision-making than finance, operations, or investment roles (World Bank, 2023).

Socio-cultural factors continue to have an impact, particularly through social role theory, which asserts that culturally constructed gender expectations shape occupational outcomes (Eagly, 1987). Although Vision 2030 has resulted in significant cultural transformation in Saudi Arabia, leadership remains associated with masculine traits in some contexts. Women are frequently expected to prioritize family responsibilities, which can shape perceptions of their suitability for executive positions. However, these norms are gradually changing, particularly among young people and urban professionals (Al-Ahmadi, 2019).

Organizational culture and informal networks influence leadership opportunities. Access to mentorship, sponsorship, and informal professional networks can all help you advance in your career. According to research, executive sponsorship is critical for leadership advancement, but women frequently face barriers due to historical male dominance in senior structures (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). This creates a "invisible barrier" even when formal equality policies are in place.

Work-life integration issues continue to impact women's leadership careers. Although flexible working arrangements are available, senior executive positions frequently require long hours, travel, and constant availability. When combined with socially embedded caregiving expectations, this results in a double burden that disproportionately affects women's career advancement (ILO, 2022). Career interruptions due to maternity and family responsibilities exacerbate slower advancement into leadership positions.

Finally, these barriers are best understood through an intersectional lens, which emphasizes the interaction and reinforcement of institutional, cultural, organizational, and structural factors (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, pipeline constraints interact with organizational bias, and cultural expectations reinforce institutional inertia, resulting in persistent inequality in leadership outcomes.

Overall, the challenges confronting women's corporate leadership in Saudi Arabia reflect a transitional institutional environment in which legal equality has advanced faster than organizational and cultural transformation. While Vision 2030 has removed many formal barriers, substantive equality in leadership is still limited by deeply embedded structural and institutional dynamics that necessitate long-term systemic change (World Economic Forum, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The literature on gender and leadership identifies persistent global disparities in women's representation in corporate governance. According to studies, women hold less than 30% of board positions globally, with even lower representation in executive roles (World Economic Forum, 2022). Women's leadership participation in the Middle East has historically been limited by cultural norms, legal restrictions, and institutional barriers (Metcalfe, 2008). However, recent reforms in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have begun to address these issues. Scholars studying Saudi Arabia have observed significant progress in women's economic participation following the Vision 2030 reforms (AlMunajjed, 2010). Legal changes, such as labor law amendments and the relaxation of guardianship restrictions, have helped to increase female employment (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Nonetheless, the transition from workforce participation to leadership remains a significant gap.

The corporate governance literature emphasizes the role of regulatory frameworks in promoting gender diversity. Countries with gender quotas, such as Norway, have seen increased female representation on corporate boards (Teigen, 2015). In contrast, voluntary approaches result in slower progress. This paper adds to the literature by combining legal analysis and policy evaluation, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of women's corporate leadership in Saudi Arabia.

The findings of this study show that Saudi Arabia has made significant progress in increasing women's economic participation under the Vision 2030 reform agenda; however, this progress has yet to translate into proportional representation in corporate leadership. The main takeaway is that legal and policy reforms have been extremely effective in removing formal barriers to women's employment, but less effective in transforming organizational structures and leadership dynamics. This reflects a larger global trend in gender equality reforms, in which legal inclusion takes precedence over substantive leadership equality due to deeper institutional and cultural inertia (World Economic Forum, 2022).

From a theoretical standpoint, the Saudi case highlights a clear distinction between formal institutional reform and informal institutional persistence. While labor laws, guardianship reforms, and anti-discrimination policies have significantly increased women's labor market access (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2021), long-standing organizational norms and informal power networks continue to influence corporate leadership structures. Institutional theory explains this gap by emphasizing the importance of aligning formal regulations, normative expectations, and cultural-cognitive systems, all of which evolve at different rates (Scott, 2014).

Formal legal reforms in Saudi Arabia have advanced rapidly, while normative and cultural dimensions are still in transition. The persistence of the glass ceiling effect helps to explain why increased participation has not resulted in leadership parity. Although women are increasingly represented in mid-level management positions, their advancement to executive leadership roles is hampered by limited access to strategic responsibilities and executive sponsorship (Cotter et al., 2001; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). This suggests that inequality is now concentrated within organizational hierarchies that govern advancement rather than at the entry level of the labor market.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that entrepreneurship has emerged as a significant alternative leadership development pathway. Women-owned businesses are growing significantly, thanks to regulatory simplification and financial inclusion initiatives (OECD, 2022). However, the translation of entrepreneurial success into corporate boardroom representation is still limited, indicating a structural gap between private enterprise leadership and corporate governance systems.

Overall, Saudi Arabia is currently in a transitional institutional phase, with legal equality largely achieved but substantive equality in leadership hampered by organizational culture, pipeline constraints, and informal institutional obstacles. This is consistent with global research indicating that gender equality in leadership necessitates not only legal reform but also profound structural and cultural change within organizations (Metcalfe, 2008; World Bank, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study examined women's corporate leadership in Saudi Arabia within the legal and policy frameworks of Vision 2030. The analysis shows that Saudi Arabia has made significant strides in promoting women's economic participation through comprehensive legal reforms such as labor law modernization, guardianship system relaxation, and workplace protection policies (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2021).

These reforms have greatly increased women's access to employment and entrepreneurship, signaling a significant shift in the country's socioeconomic structure. Despite these advances, women remain underrepresented in corporate leadership roles. The study discovers that this disparity is not primarily due to legal exclusion, but rather to structural and institutional constraints such as leadership pipeline limitations, organizational culture, informal networks, and persistent sociocultural norms. The use of institutional theory, glass ceiling theory, and social role theory demonstrates that leadership inequality is embedded in interconnected systems that go beyond formal legal frameworks (Scott, 2014; Cotter et al., 2001; Eagly, 1987).

The study concludes that achieving gender parity in corporate leadership necessitates a shift from formal to substantive equality, in which women not only participate in the labor market but also hold decision-making power in corporate governance structures. This necessitates integrated reforms that include legal enforcement, corporate governance restructuring, leadership development systems, and cultural transformation in line with Vision 2030 goals (World Bank, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2022).

In essence, Saudi Arabia is in a transitional phase of gender institutional transformation, with significant progress made in workforce inclusion, but full leadership equality remains a long-term development goal.

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Conflict of Interest

All the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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