



Bridging the Gap—But How? Young Voices from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Dr. Edit Schlaffer
Dr. Ulrich Kropiunigg
Dr. Fawziah al Bakr

Vienna / Riyadh



Bridging the Gap – But How?

Young Voices from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

**Dr. Edit Schlaffer, Women without Borders
Prof. Ulrich Kropiunigg, Medical University of Vienna
Prof. Fawziah al-Bakr, King Saud University**

Research Team: Elisabeth Kasbauer, Georgina Nitzsche, May al-Jaser, Anita Pratap, Elisabeth Ponocny-Seliger

Vienna /Riyadh
Funded by the Austrian Science Fund

January
2010

Overview

The twentieth century saw what can only be described as a revolution in the status of women around the globe. Experts and leaders worldwide began to recognize that encouraging women and promoting equal partnerships between the genders was key to a stable and prosperous future.

The “Bridging the Gap” survey serves as a contribution to understanding the needs, hopes, and dreams, as well as the setbacks, of the young generation in Saudi Arabia—a country as yet unexplored by social scientists. Based on the premise that gender roles are changing in women’s favour, the research questionnaire focused on the following issues: How can Saudi Arabian women confidently participate in and contribute to their societies, and operate as a visible force for positive change? How do their male counterparts see these changes and how are they adapting alongside the educated women in their rapidly changing societies?

“You have to remember that Saudi women really act like a minority group. And what do minority groups do? They actually increase their efforts to get approval. They improve themselves; they...strive for better knowledge, better skills, because that’s the only way they can make their way up.”

- A young activist on women’s status in Saudi Arabia

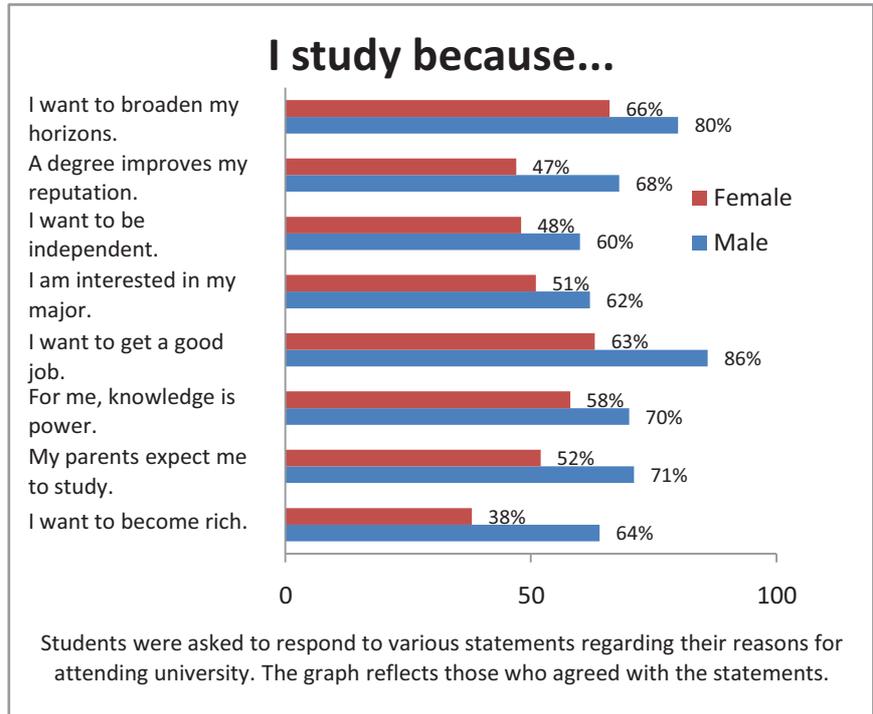
The key question for Saudi women is how much freedom Saudi society will grant them now and in the foreseeable future to utilize their qualifications and to realize their personal and professional aspirations.

Between 2006 and 2008, researchers surveyed a total of 4,400 male and female students across the country, as it can be assumed that the educated generation will be the driving force for debate and change in the coming years. The students came from King Saud University in Riyadh, King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Dar el Hekma University in Jeddah, Al Qassim University in Qassim, and King Faisal University in Dammam.

The results show an impressive common denominator: the female and male voices in the study desire to and feel confident about promoting women’s status in Saudi Arabia. Family is paramount, religion is treasured and tradition is respected.

Education

Education is a national concern in Saudi Arabia; according to the 2009 Arab Human Development report, the percentage of total government expenditure on education has increased by 10 percentage points between 1991 and 2002 (from 17.8% to 27.6%). However, the young generation is caught between motivation and ambivalence, and they are critically reviewing their reasons for



studying. The vast majority of men—80%—see their university years as a prerequisite for establishing themselves professionally. Only 63% of women, on the other hand, claim to be studying because they want to find a good job. The reality of gendered social limitations may be reflected in these numbers.

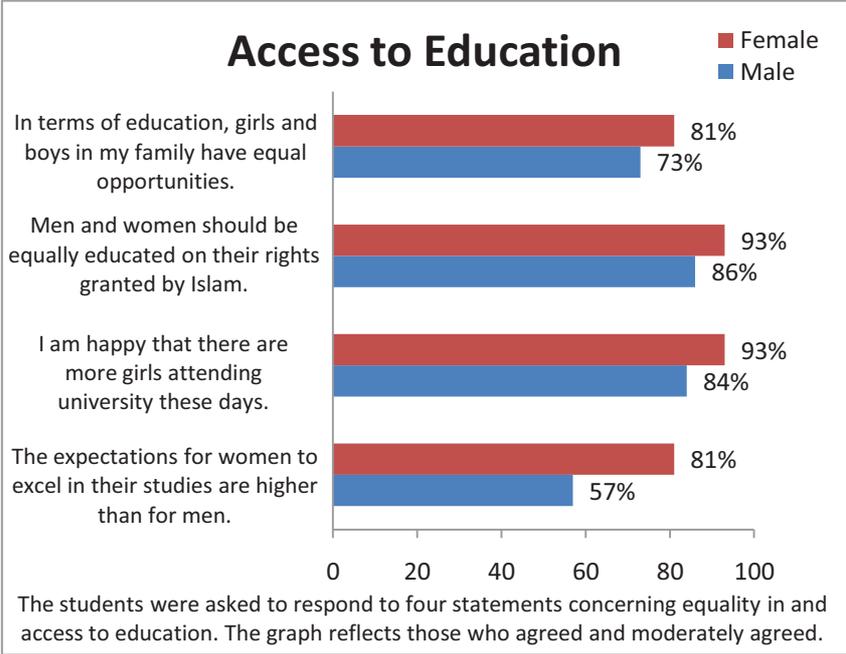
In a country where higher education is relatively new territory for women, the decision to study is already seen as an accomplishment in itself. Men also more frequently have clear career plans at the beginning of their degree and are thus more likely to actively prepare by taking advantage of career counselling and career-oriented literature. Nonetheless, there is a growing group of young women who are eager to employ their newly gained skills in the career market.

The strictures limiting a woman's ambitions are being increasingly weakened by the determination of educated young women. Women's perception of their own potential and their desire for self-realization are stronger than the individual experiences of social exclusion and clearly defined social limits. As these young women's voices cautiously expand the framework of their identities, the gender imbalance will gradually shift. The first step down this path has already been taken: the internal censorship mechanisms have been overridden and young female students now at least dare to articulate their hopes and dreams. A mental shift in social expectations is emerging that is oriented toward a new model of societal roles based on professional options and self-fulfilment.

Access to Education

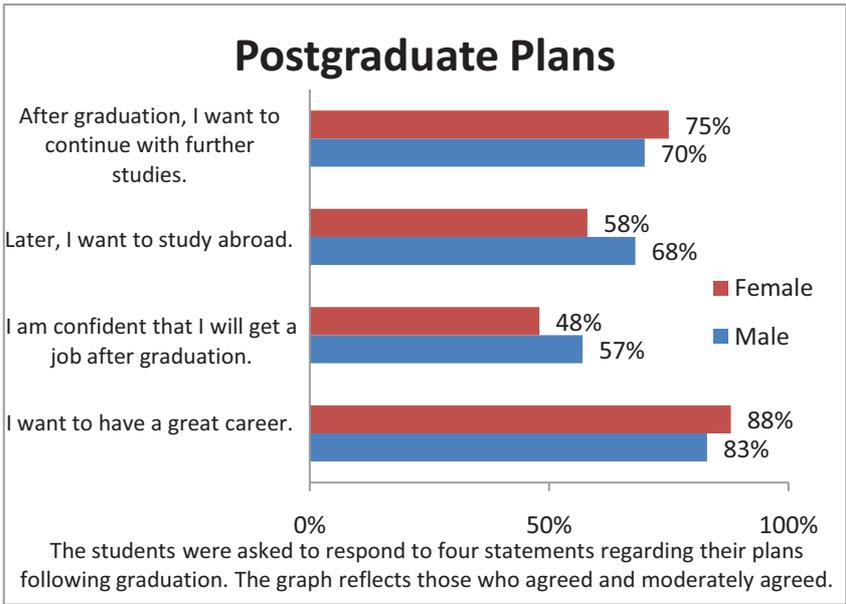
When asked about general access to education, 78% of the students responded that boys and girls are given the same educational opportunities in their families. The vast majority of the students – women and men – also believed that both sexes should be educated in their rights according to Islamic law.

Women strongly opposed the notion that boys’ education is more important for social development than girls’. The students also do not think that today, an uneducated man has more power than an educated woman.



Postgraduate Plans

Eighty-three percent of men and eighty-eight percent of women agreed with the statement "I want to have a great career." That 88% of the female students see a successful career as part of their life plan—in the context of a society operating on rigid perceptions and role allocation—is a small revolution.

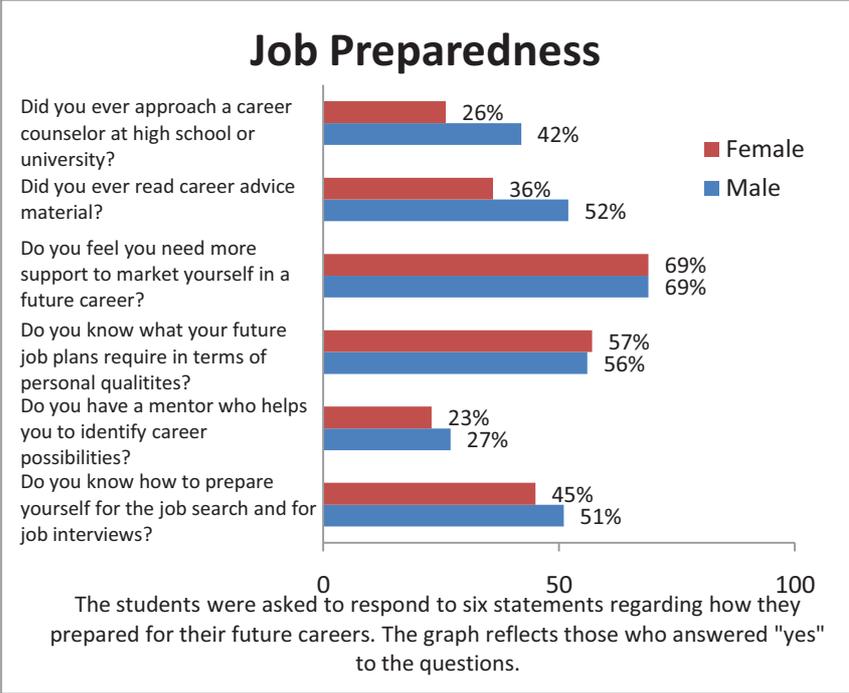


The high unemployment rate, however, is a serious problem and presents a significant risk factor to the country’s inner stability and security. The most recent Arab Human

Development report states that there is a 26% youth unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia, a figure that is even higher among female youth. The young generation is acutely aware of the actual rate of unemployment, and their lack of confidence in finding a job corresponds with this awareness; less than one third of the polled men and only 21% of the women feel certain that they will find a job after graduation.

Job Preparedness

The majority of male and female students believe they know what personal qualities they need to have to realize their career plans. Simultaneously, however, a lingering sense of insecurity underscores their desire for more coaching prior to their entry into the job market. In general, Saudi students do not consider themselves to be well prepared for launching their career. Only



approximately one half of the students know how to prepare for the job search and interview process, and over two thirds would like more support in marketing themselves for their future careers. The call for better preparation is at least partially directed at the educational system.

In the 1960s, simply enrolling in university guaranteed future success. Today, however, experts agree that students should avoid “soft sciences” like the Arabic language, religious studies, and geography. Career preferences for men and women while in university currently differ in only three areas: significantly more male students want to work in engineering and technology, while women prefer to pursue a career in psychology.

Approval of Changing Gender Roles

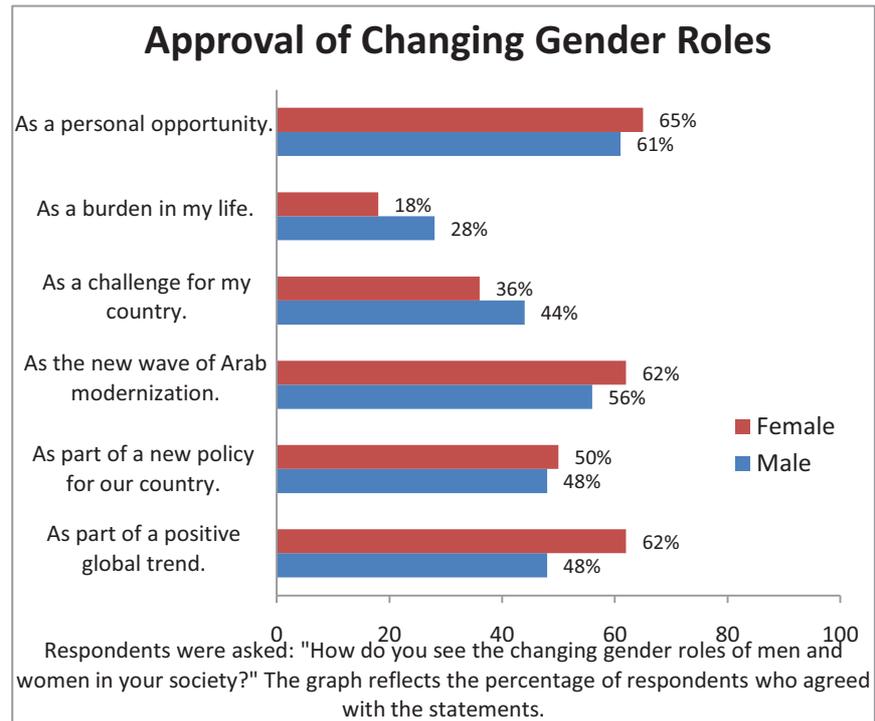
How do young Saudi men and women feel about the challenges that are arising from the changing gender dynamics in their country? Attitudes are critical to paving the road to equality, so how do the youth look at the changes and challenges?

Women see the changes optimistically, because they view them as a personal opportunity.

Men define the challenges as more of a burden, but 61% of the men support moving toward increased gender equity. This majority proportion of the young male population could be an important ally in effecting change.

In the light of Saudi Arabia's pronounced respect for tradition, it is particularly relevant that 57% of all respondents hold that changes in gender roles are part of a positive global trend.

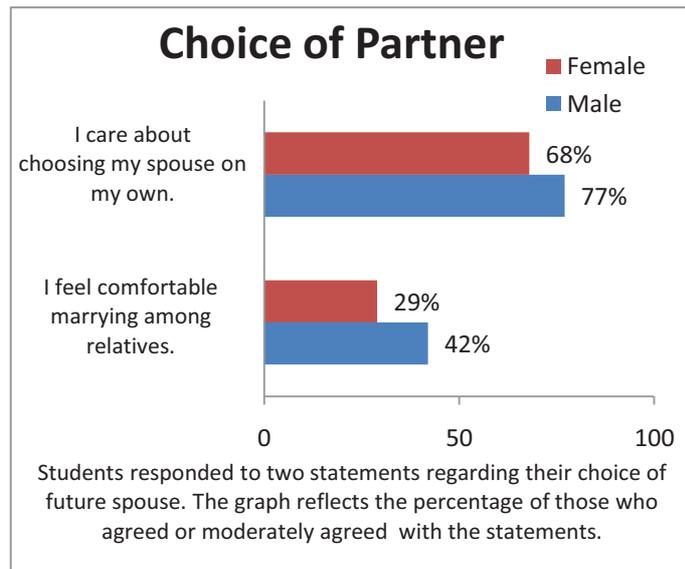
The strict separation between public and private and the consistent separation of genders, which includes beliefs about how "a good Muslim" must lead her life, form the complicated social fiber that dictates daily life for Saudis. The majority of the young women are convinced that working and practicing their religion are completely in accord with each other; only about 15% assume that there is a conflict between these two areas. This percentage is almost three times as high among men.



Views on Family and Private Happiness

The family is the most important organizing structure in everyday life. Individual identity is inseparable from one's position in the family, an arrangement that has its roots in tribal loyalty. Almost no decisions are left to chance or beyond the purview of the male family members; marriages are frequently arranged irrespective of emotional considerations.

It is important to note, however, that 71% of the students want to be able to choose their partner themselves.

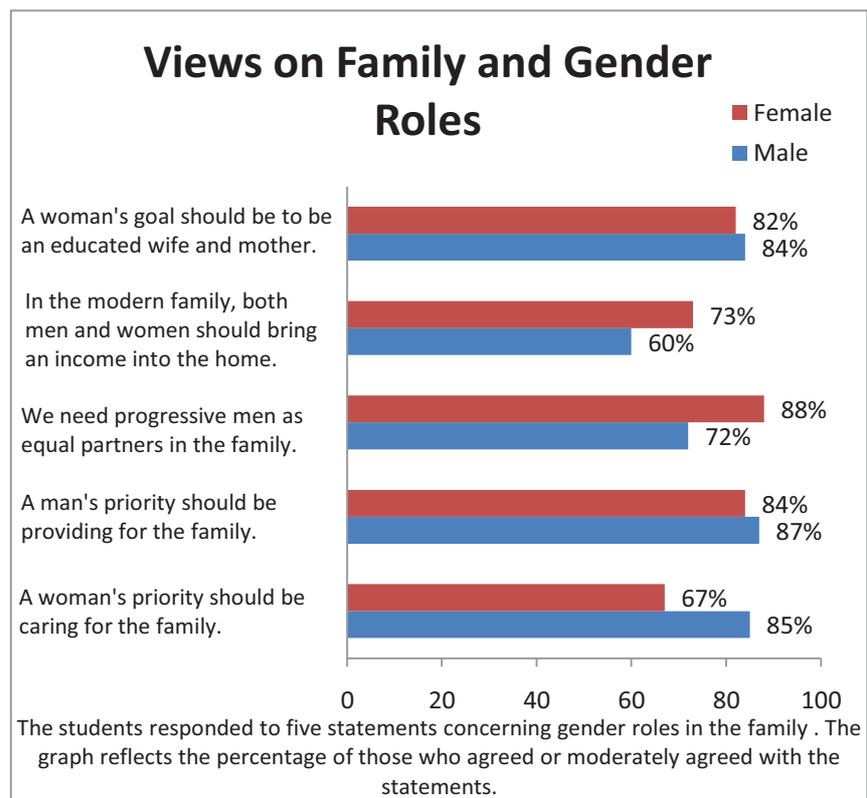


Men on Board?

A glimpse into the future: 85% of the young generation now want to have both a family and a career. The young women desire this life-model more strongly than do the men, but how does one reconcile these results with earlier findings that half of the male respondents do not support greater female participation in leadership and politics?

As would be expected considering social

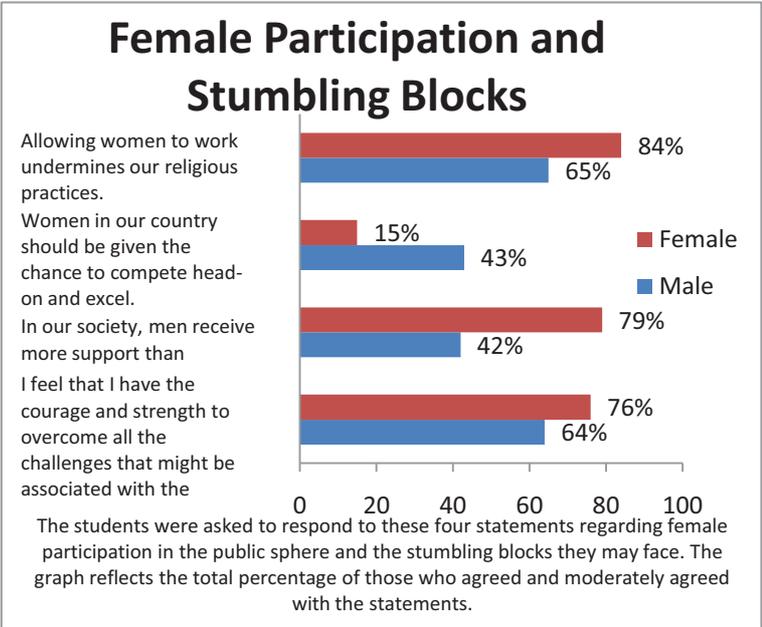
mores, young Saudis still want to start families at an early age, citing the sense of belonging and security it provides. A third of the respondents want to start a family immediately after graduating, whereby 59% of the respondents "moderately agree" that



they want to start a family immediately. Above all else, this strong endorsement for the family derives from the restriction of sexual relationships to matrimony.

Female Participation and Stumbling Blocks

This generation of educated young women is the first that, in contrast to their mothers, does not see education in itself as a valuable and decisive step forward. Paid employment is a new priority for young female Saudi students: they want to realize their full potential and to succeed in the public sphere. However, the social regulatory capacities still lie firmly in men’s hands, and access to the job market is tightly regulated and limited for women. In



response to the statement “the women in our country should have the chance to compete directly and to excel,” two thirds of the respondents answered in the affirmative. However, women agreed with this statement twice as often as did the men.

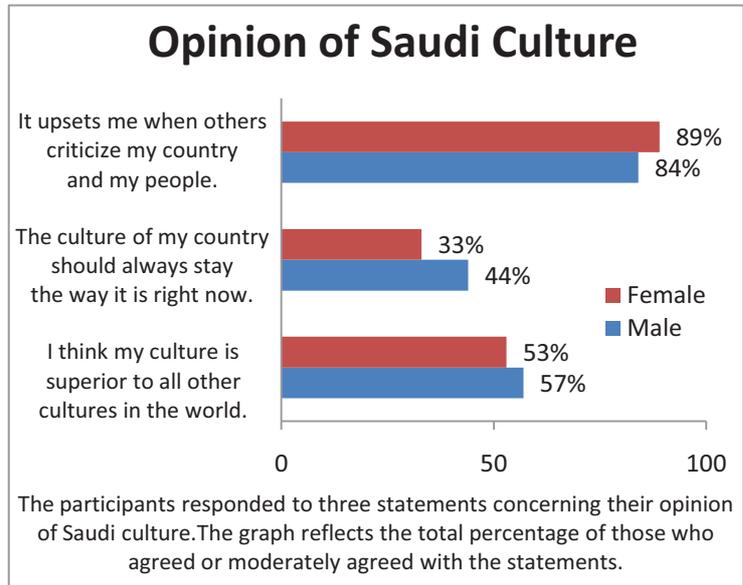
The complex of religious practices in Saudi Arabia is about more than praying and reading the Koran: it is the foundation of organized society. Young men’s enduring traditional value systems, however, could prove to be the most pervasive barrier to gender equality in the public sphere, and could counteract the growing female-driven empowerment strategies and official attempts at reform. Yet awareness of the asymmetrical gender status quo is very pronounced in the young, educated generation. Seventy-one percent feel that men receive more support in society than do women. It is apparent among both genders that the more cosmopolitan and modern they are, the more likely the students are to see a need for a change in gender roles.

How will the young generation approach the challenges that await Saudi women in the workplace today? Female students are optimistic and determined to overcome the expected hurdles. The majority of both men and women feel that “[they] have the courage and the strength to overcome all the challenges that might be associated with the working life of women.” Nearly two thirds of the men have a notably positive outlook on the prospect of women’s employment, or else do not feel challenged by it. The manner in which the young men deal with the demands of this newly educated generation of women,

and how they approach the limitations and inconsistencies in societal rules, will be decisive for women’s integration into the job market.

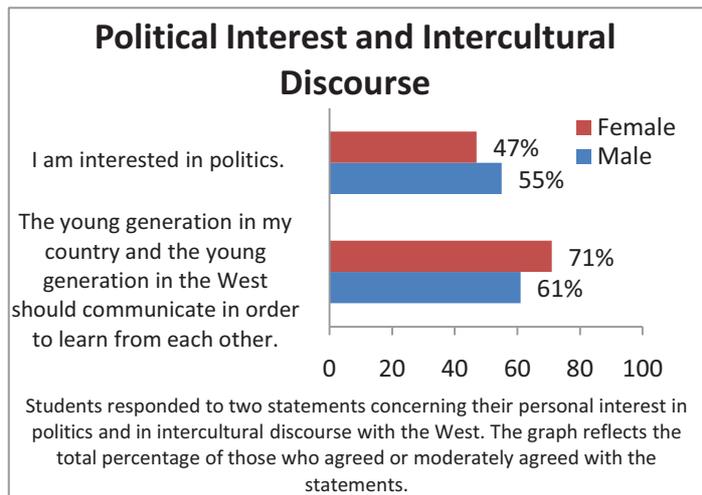
Cultural Sensitivity

The vast majority of the students consider foreign criticism of their country and its people to be unacceptable. They are acutely aware of outside criticism and take pains to present a positive image of their country and culture to the outside world. Female participants both in the study and in the associated workshops often mentioned how weary they were of Western media portrayals of women in veils and as second-class citizens. They longed to be more positively and accurately represented.



Political Interest

How political are Saudi Arabia’s young and educated? It would appear that the level of political interest in this generation is remarkably low, but this finding must be put into the appropriate context. Women do not have the right to vote in Saudi Arabia and men’s electoral participation is not assured; political participation is only conceivable in extremely limited and controlled situations, and is therefore an exclusive and nearly unattainable privilege. The low level of responses to the question of political interest could, therefore, be a reflection of the lack of opportunities to participate in the decision-making process.



The young educated generation eschews external pressures and prefers treading its own path to modernization. Seventy-one percent of the women and sixty-one percent of the men “agree” or “moderately agree,” nonetheless, that there are possible benefits to engaging in intercultural discourse with the West. Generally, there is a positive correlation between the perceived need for change in gender roles and openness to intercultural dialogue (women: $\rho = .310, p < .001$; men: $\rho = .354, p < .001$). Those who value such interactions also tend to see changes in gender roles as a positive global trend, and do not assume that they are vulnerable to Western influence.

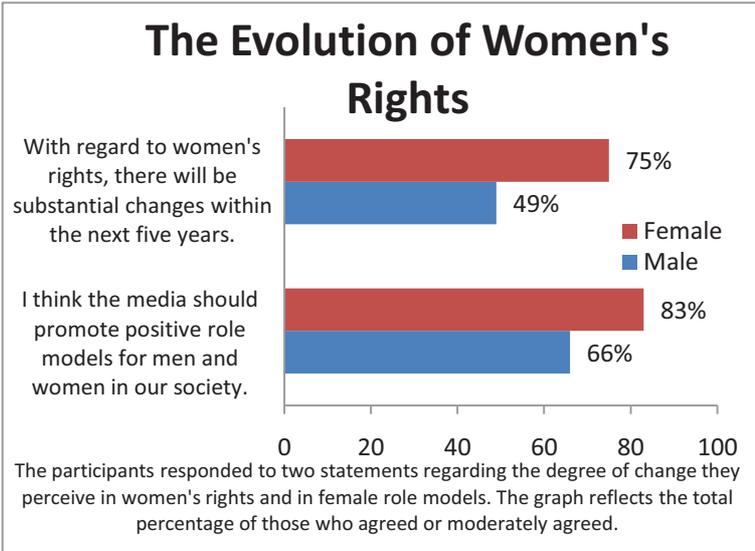
Authority Structures

Official authority in the Kingdom as well as in the home is the exclusive domain of men. How does the educated young generation view this fact? Close to one third of the women clearly feel that mothers and daughters should enjoy the same authority as fathers and sons. By taking into consideration the “moderately agree” responses, this segment grows to 60% of women who oppose exclusive male authority, representing a group that, in the given context, must be considered almost revolutionary.

Men apparently find it more difficult to distance themselves from tradition and the privileges associated with it – at least conceptually. Only 11% are willing to share authority with their female family members, whereby the percentage increases to 29% if the weaker response category (“moderately agree”) is added.

Women and Media

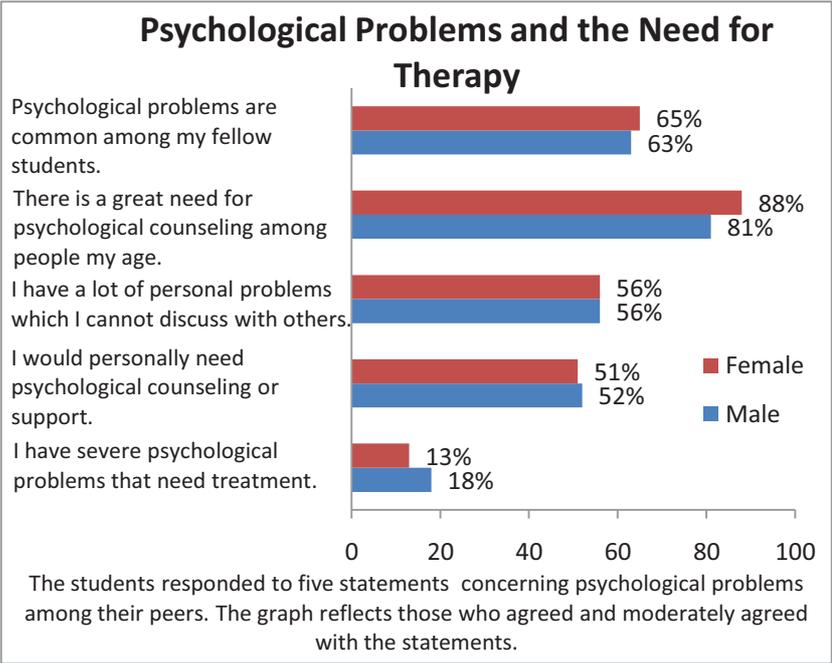
How do young Saudis perceive women’s changing status in their country? A third of the respondents are confident that significant changes will occur in this area in the near future. The women, however, are more confident than the men, for 75% of the women moderately agreed that this change will occur, as opposed to only 49% of the men. There is a statistical link between the women’s level of self-confidence and their responses to this question.



A majority of the respondents also agreed that the media should promote positive role models for men and women, although the women were more vocal in voicing their acknowledgement of the key role that the media play in promoting certain types of role models than the men. A higher estimation of the need for change is statistically correlated to a higher value placed on the role of the media in presenting and promoting such change (women: $\rho = .260, p < .001$; men: $\rho = .371, p < .001$).

Psychological Problems and the Need for Therapy

In societies with dominant shared convictions and religious values as well as federally sanctioned authority (prayer facilities, public education, marriage laws), the question of the status of the individual always arises. The question is particularly important when there is a conflict between individual lifestyle choices and those which are collectively sanctioned. The question of individual identity is problematic, since the concept is often misunderstood.



Sources of psychological illness are described with modern terminology; therapy, however, is not sought in the context of psychotherapeutic methods. While the majority of Saudi youth believe that their generation is in need of psychological counseling, only half would seek out counseling themselves. Rather, they are encouraged to heed advice gleaned from Koranic verses or the hadiths.

Conclusion

A mental shift is emerging out of social expectations and the notions of conformity that have framed Saudi Arabian women's lives. The shift is oriented toward a new model of societal roles based on professional options and self-fulfillment. The young women's perspective on life planning is remarkable, for their perception of their own potential and their desire for self-realization are stronger than their individual experiences of social exclusion and clearly defined social limits.

However, the results of the survey in Saudi Arabia show that despite male students' general support for equal opportunities for women under Islam and in education, women still encounter resistance to change and participation. A large majority of the respondents remain visibly against the involvement of women in politics and governance. Though the negative male response to female political participation is higher than women's, the overall resistance to political involvement may prove to be a barrier yet to be overcome in the future. This finding is an important red flag for young women and the policy makers in Saudi Arabia today, as the country continues to shape its social landscape.

Men are willing to support and are interested in change, but are not fully aware of how the lives of women and men would need to be altered to accommodate such adjustments. At this stage in their lives, they have not yet made the transition from theoretical support to practical support. Young men may need more education to prepare them for the functional aspects of role sharing. This task will pose a significant challenge to the individuals involved and will hopefully be supported by educational and government policies.

In the future, it will be fascinating to observe how the growing group of educated women positions itself in this difficult situation. They are only half as confident as the male student interviewees that they will find a job, but as is the case with every pioneering group, they seem especially engaged, smart and motivated. The fact that so many female students now view a successful career as part of their life plans – in the context of a society operating on rigid perceptions and role allocation – is a small revolution. These women are an interesting resource for national and international companies, which are feeling the pressure of globalization in Saudi Arabia and the resulting higher competition.

In addition, an overwhelming majority of women think that progressive men are desirable as equal partners in family life and a large percentage of men share this opinion. There thus seems to be a strong desire to move forward in the midst of existing mental and emotional barriers to change, which form a gap between optimism and reality.

Women may be beholden to the constraints of Saudi society, but they balance the obligations of their private lives with the requirements of the modern working world. And they challenge the prevailing mindset, but are not necessarily proponents of a modern era.

Young graduates would clearly benefit from ethical support in this rapidly changing society in order to utilize their investment in education to make a collective impact. Young men will need to be presented with more convincing arguments to identify a constructive bargain for them in the new Saudi Arabia. Young women will need to be prepared to face resistance and invisible barriers. The arguments for gender equity need to be put forward more effectively so that Arab men feel they have something to gain from giving up their traditional privileges, while young women will need vigorous training and strategic tools to help them become better positioned in the challenges ahead.

The individual experiences of social exclusion are still a central theme, but egalitarian tendencies that will hopefully create a new reality are gaining importance in the life of young Saudis. Young university women's subjective hopes are likely to positively influence the professional terrain and to reshape Saudi Arabia's image from within and without, fulfilling the aspirations of the young generation for whom this reality is a given.