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Gender Politics and Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah Scholarship Program

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Introduction

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has introduced significant gender reforms and major changes to its traditionally conservative society. In line with the monarchy's Vision 2030 plan, these reforms seek to modernize the kingdom's socioeconomic landscape and enhance its global image by promoting progressive social values and inclusive development.¹ Legal reforms—including lifting the ban on women's driving, allowing women to travel without a male guardian, and changing personal status laws to grant women more autonomy in marriage, divorce, and child custody—have ostensibly provided better protection and rights for women.² Women's political representation has increased; more women are participating in municipal elections and serving in high-ranking government positions.³ Reforms in education have led to more women pursuing higher education and traveling abroad to obtain their degrees from international institutions.⁴ In the workforce, women's employment has increased as well, especially in traditionally male-dominated industries such as finance and technology.⁵ The entertainment sector has also seen a radical liberal shift, with the opening of cinemas, concerts, and sporting events that are accessible to women.⁶

While top-down decisions like these are critical, they do not alone define the lived experiences of Saudi women or capture the complexity of gender reform within the kingdom. Apart from a number of studies, studies on women and gender reform under monarchies have tended to focus on the actions of defiant activists challenging the monarchy and state-driven reforms by the royal family that primarily benefit privileged elites. These studies are important in tracing the trajectories of change and reform; however, this framework overlooks how ordinary women's everyday actions engage with these top-down reforms

and shape the gender landscape. Using the case of women recipients of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) in Saudi Arabia, this study investigates how women situated between the realms of activism and patronage navigate these reforms and experience transformations and changes in their gender norms and personal biographies following their participation in the program.

As the largest scholarship initiative in Saudi Arabia's history, the state-led KASP program significantly increased educational opportunities for Saudi women. Before its introduction, opportunities for women to study abroad were limited and less formalized. By 2017–2018, women made up 31 percent of study abroad students on state scholarships.⁷ Participants in the scholarship represent diverse sections of Saudi society, making them ideal subjects for analyzing the consequences of state-led reforms.

In order to illustrate changes in the realities of Saudi women following their participation, this paper focuses on the decision by some KASP recipients to remove the hijab. The hijab, a fluid symbol laden with religious, political, and gendered meanings, serves as a visible marker of the changing dynamics in women's lives upon their return from the program.

By investigating the biographical consequences of women's participation in KASP, this paper demonstrates how state-led reforms intersect with women's personal agency and shape their experiences and opportunities in a constricted sociopolitical context. It shows the limits of top-down gender reforms and the boundaries of women's ability to negotiate with the regime, and argues that in addition to state policies and activists' demands, the ways ordinary women challenge or extend the limits of top-down decisions are integral to understanding the evolving gender landscape of Saudi Arabia.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part surveys the history and development of women's education in Saudi Arabia. The second part situates this research within the literature on social "nonmovements"—uncoordinated everyday actions of subaltern groups under autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa—and the biographical consequences of movements. The third part provides the crux of the analysis, building on interviews with former recipients of KASP scholarships to identify the effects of women's participation on their decision to change their veiling practices. The case of Saudi women's participation in the program shows that nonmovements can take place even under regimes that are relatively closed off against political and social reform, and in such contexts the biographical changes from nonmovements happen internally but are only expressed externally when the regime allows a space for them. By unpacking these nuanced dynamics, this paper seeks to redefine the narrative surrounding gender reforms and Saudi women and present Saudi women not merely as reactive subjects to state projects but as active contributors who are shaping the gender landscape in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

Women's Education in Saudi Arabia

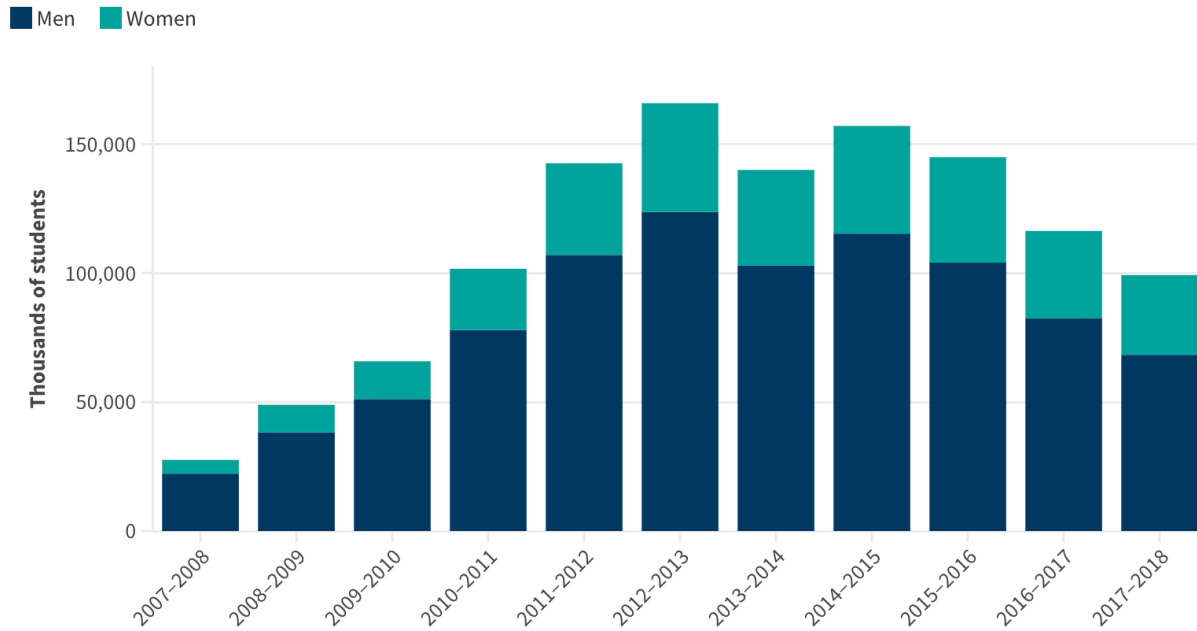
Gender inequality has historically been a focal point of criticism against the Saudi monarchy's social and political policies. The kingdom's approach to gender politics has traditionally positioned it as an ultra-conservative state, setting it apart on the international stage. During the early 2000s, however, Saudi Arabia moved toward limiting the influence of religious scholars and advancing women's rights, particularly in education. This shift towards curtailing the influence of ulema— Islamic scholars and religious councils—and expanding women's rights, especially in the domain of education, was a function of two significant developments.

First, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, the Saudi monarchy faced intense global criticism for its religious extremism and its restrictive conditions for women. The international community criticized Saudi religious extremism in the political and social domain and viewed it as responsible for breeding the terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks. In response, the state moved to curtail the control of religious authorities and introduced advancements in women's rights, especially in education, to project a more progressive image internationally.⁸

Second, the state moved to further curtail the influence of ulema over women's education and public behavior following a devastating fire that ravaged a school in Mecca in 2002 and claimed the lives of at least fourteen girls.⁹ Media reports blamed the religious police, as they allegedly prevented girls who were not adhering to the prescribed Islamic dress code from escaping to safety.¹⁰ The Saudi government, in 2003, transferred the responsibility of girls' education from the General Presidency for Girls' Education to the Ministry of Education.¹¹

Reforms in women's education further expanded as the state reinstated scholarship programs for women, allowing them to pursue higher education abroad. One of the key study abroad scholarships that benefited women was KASP, which funded the education of hundreds of thousands of undergraduate and graduate Saudi students at universities in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and other countries.¹² Figure 1 shows the total number of Saudi students on study abroad scholarships between 2007 and 2018. While KASP provided unprecedented opportunities for women, women's participation was initially subject to several gender-based restrictions. Married women needed to have their husband's consent to participate in the program. For women to participate in the program, they had to travel with a male guardian, or *mahram*, such as a father, brother, husband, or son. In 2019, these requirements were relaxed and women participants could travel for their studies more independently as the Saudi government announced reforms to the guardianship system.¹³ Under the new reforms, women over the age of twenty-one were allowed to travel without the need for a male guardian's permission. This policy shift in the guardianship system was also a result of decades of Saudi feminist activists calling for abolishing male guardianship, among other reforms in the agenda of women's rights.

Figure 1. Saudi Students on Study-Abroad Scholarships

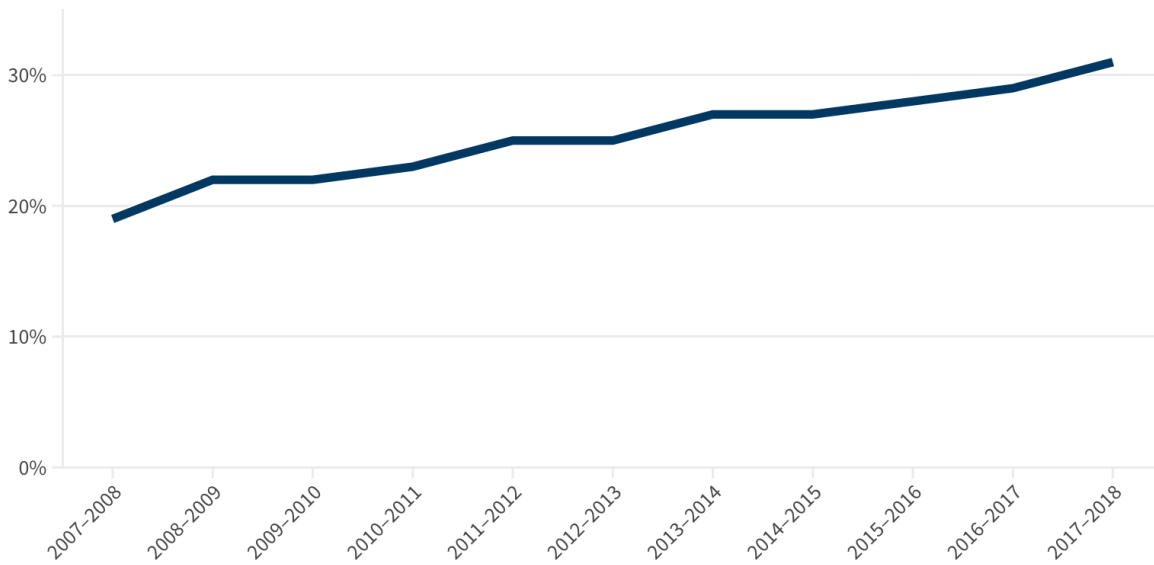


Source: Data compiled by author from Saudi Ministry of Education, “Higher Education Statistics,” 2024, <https://departments.moe.gov.sa/Statistics/Educationstatistics/Pages/HEStats.aspx>.

KASP, the largest scholarship program in Saudi history, significantly increased educational opportunities for Saudi women, aligning with broader social reforms in the kingdom. Before the introduction of KASP, opportunities for women to study abroad were limited and less formalized. Figure 2 shows the proportion of women participating in study abroad on state scholarships over the past three decades; by 2017–2018, women made up 31 percent of state scholarship study abroad participants. The program was restructured over the years to offer job opportunities for graduates and to align with kingdom’s changing labor market needs and economic development goals. According to the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau, the kingdom has now rebranded the program as the King’s Scholarship Program (KSP).¹⁴

Women’s inclusion in the scholarship program is important for the Saudi state modernization project, Vision 2030. The Vision 2030 framework aims to increase women’s participation in the workforce and public life.¹⁵ KASP has supported this vision by creating a pipeline of highly educated women who are apt to take on leadership roles. Students generally and women specifically who receive the scholarship also play an important role in polishing the regime’s international image. Yasmine Farouk and Andrew Leber rightly note how Saudi students in the United States became “the main standard-bearers for public diplomacy.”¹⁶ The monarchy often positions women participants as ambassadors to bridge the gap between Saudi society and the global community and reshape international perceptions of Saudi women and their society.¹⁷

Figure 1. Saudi Women in Study-Abroad Scholarships as a Percentage of Total Students



Source: Data compiled by author from Saudi Ministry of Education, “Higher Education Statistics,” 2024, <https://departments.moe.gov.sa/Statistics/Educationstatistics/Pages/HEStats.aspx>.

The above discussion shows how women’s education in Saudi Arabia reflects a complex interplay between top-down reforms, religious-nationalist politics, and international pressures. Women’s education specifically and gender equality issues broadly, Madawi al-Rasheed eloquently illustrates in her book, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia*, have been playing fields for religious nationalism, political bargains, and international tokenism.¹⁸ To secure the religious elites’ loyalty during critical moments of state-building, the monarchy granted the ulema the ultimate authority in arbitrating women’s rights, including the place of women’s education in society, and in exchange the ulema tolerated the monarch overlooking their religious opinions in other political and economic areas.¹⁹ When its modernization agenda and international image required it, the monarchy was willing to reverse restrictions on women’s rights and promote itself as a champion of women’s education by enacting programs and elevating royal female figures like Princess Effat Al-Thunayan—renowned for her legacy in education reform—as symbols of progress.²⁰

While these policies underscore the top-down nature of gender reform in Saudi Arabia, they also show how Saudi women, like other women, often operate in interstitial spaces, neither against nor under the regime. In these spaces, Al-Rasheed notes, “women engage in both resisting patriarchy and bargaining with it whether they are liberal, Islamist, or simply un-politicised.”²¹ Thus, in addition to state-driven policies, political bargains, and activists’ contestations, the transformative potential of these reforms emerges through women’s everyday actions, their active contestation and navigation of these new rights.

Inside-Out Change: Quiet Transformations Within State-Led Reforms

The KASP program can be understood as a top-down initiative aimed at expanding opportunities for Saudi women while safeguarding traditional gender structures. The analysis in this paper views participation in the scholarship program as a form of nonmovement. Asef Bayat coined the concept of social nonmovements to capture the actions of marginalized groups in societies—namely the subaltern, urban poor, women, and youth—and their potential to introduce change under autocratic regimes in the Middle East. At the most basic level, social nonmovements are characterized by “the collective actions of noncollective actors”²² who engage in “inaudible, individualized, and elusive acts of claim making.”²³ While these acts do not aim for overt defiance, they nevertheless reshape everyday practices and expand life choices within constrained spaces.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, scholars have observed how similar forms of nonmovement quietly challenge societal norms within the monarchy’s control. In Amelie Le Renard’s study of the gender dynamics in Saudi new urban spaces, she shows how educated Saudi woman challenge sex segregation in public by strolling in traditionally male-only spaces.²⁴ Similarly, Bayat notes how young men and women defy sex segregation by spending time in malls, observing each other, and exchanging messages in otherwise prohibitive spaces.²⁵ In my own research, women describe using the photo messaging app Snapchat in public urban spaces to communicate with men or turning on Bluetooth to receive messages. In Pascale Menoret’s study of joyriding in Saudi Arabia, he traces how young people reclaim public spaces in a seemingly mundane, but nevertheless subversive, manner.²⁶

These examples demonstrate how nonmovements often reshape everyday practices and challenge societal boundaries in public spaces. Yet nonmovements can also spark biographical shifts—internal, personal transformations, such as those that eventually manifested in changes to veiling practices among women who had participated in KASP. These shifts are personal, but when they affect many people at once, they represent societal transformations in outlooks, choices, and gender norms.

The literature on the biographical consequences of traditional social movements suggests that participation often leads to increased gender consciousness and identity shifts for women. Studies of traditional movements, such as Doug McAdam’s work on the Freedom Summer Project or Nancy Whittier’s study of radical women’s movements,²⁷ show that women participants often develop new interpretations of themselves and their environments, sometimes leading to changes in career paths or social roles. In the context of the Middle East and North Africa, in my own work on the biographical effects of women’s participation in the 2011 Egyptian uprising, I show how women’s encounters with gender-based violence in protests and exposures to new social and political networks influenced the decision by some protesters to change their careers and work in the area of women’s rights.²⁸

While biographical changes in traditional movements are often visible and externalized in public life, nonmovements, such as participation in KASP, produce similar internal transformations but with key differences. Nonmovements can lead to shifts in personal outlooks and practices—such as changes in veiling—but these transformations can sometimes be largely confined to more permissive venues unless the regime signals approval. This distinction highlights a key limitation of nonmovements under authoritarian regimes: the regime’s conditional approval determines how and when these internal changes can be publicly expressed. Women’s accounts in this study show that their participation in the KASP program produced biographical effects on them; however, participants only expressed these changes when the monarchy signaled its approval.

The case of Saudi women’s participation in KASP thus reveals the paradox of top-down reforms. While the program facilitated incremental shifts, these shifts were limited by the state’s tolerance. This nonmovement fostered internal transformations that were expressed externally only when sanctioned by the regime. Saudi women’s participation in KASP demonstrates both the potential and the limits of nonmovements within an authoritarian system, where biographical changes occur but remain confined within boundaries set by state approval. It suggests that while nonmovements can provide a space for quiet resistance, the extent of their impact on broader social structures is restrained by the inherent limits of top-down reforms.

Women’s Experiences with KASP, Unveiling, and Returning to Saudi Arabia

To trace the personal transformations among women who participated in KASP and illuminate the pathways to these changes, this paper draws upon nine interviews with women recipients of the scholarship in addition to formal reports, media coverage, and official statements by Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman. Data from interviews offer only a glimpse of how women’s participation affected their personal biographies. Their experiences illuminate the unintended consequences of women’s everyday actions and complicate observers’ understanding of the dynamics of gender reform in the kingdom beyond the binary framework of activism and patronage.

Participants in the study pursued postgraduate studies in Canada and the United States, except for one interviewee who attended an undergraduate program in Canada. The age of interviewees ranged from late twenties to late forties, and none had a history of political or feminist activism. All the interviewees had completed their studies and returned to Saudi Arabia between 2019 and 2023. They were based in Jeddah, Mecca, Medina and Riyadh. Compared to other parts of the kingdom, these urban centers enjoy relatively relaxed social norms. While segments of these cities remain conservative, they are undergoing rapid modernization and social change and their landscape is changing with the introduction of entertainment venues, concerts, and mixed-gender events.

The interviews were carried out between March and August 2024. They were carried out predominantly in Arabic (with cited quotes translated to English for this paper). To protect the privacy and security of participants, pseudonyms are used in place of their real names. The interview guide included questions on participants' experiences applying to KASP, their experiences studying abroad, and shifts in their personal decisionmaking that they could trace in part to their participation in the scholarship program.

Participants' accounts underscore both the limits of state-led reforms and the ways these women challenge and transgress gender expectations. The analysis focuses on the decision by some recipients to change their veiling practices and/or remove the hijab upon their return to Saudi Arabia after studying abroad. I encourage readers to withhold moral judgment over the hijab. Instead, the aim is to understand this choice as a visible reflection of the changes in women's biographies. As I argued in "Women's Unveiling in the 2011 Egyptian Uprising: Political Opportunities and Modesty Politics," the hijab, like other religious symbols, is a fluid symbol.²⁹ It can be interpreted in a variety of different and shifting ways, and each interpretation is encoded not only by religious but also by political and gendered meanings. These meanings can coexist together, but under certain circumstances, some meanings become more prominent and overshadow the others.³⁰ The analysis presented here does not aim to celebrate or condemn veiling or unveiling. Its objective is to explain the pathways that lead to changes in women's behavior, particularly the shift that results in the decision to change their veiling practices. This analysis focuses on the hijab as a visible manifestation of the changes in women's biographies due to the significance of women's public appearance in Saudi Arabia, especially over the past few decades and since the 1979 Grand Mosque seizure crisis.

Following the 1979 Grand Mosque seizure, the Saudi state moved to expand the authority of religious groups over matters related to women. An Islamist opposition, led by Juhaiman al-Otaybi, had carried out the seizure in an attempt to oust the regime and the Al-Saud family, accusing the monarchy of inciting moral decay and corruption in Saudi society.³¹ The state's response was influenced by the need to counteract the influence of political Islam and Islamist oppositions, address internal dissent following the attack, and mitigate threats posed by the neighboring Iranian Revolution.

During this period, women's appearance in public became a critical visible sign of adherence to Islam, controlled and promoted to assert the character and image of a pious nation. As Al-Rasheed explains, "[F]rom 1980 onward, the pious nation was dependent on the visible signs of piety, which women in particular were doomed to represent."³² The hijab became central to this project, and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) actively enforced strict rules for women's appearance in public by patrolling public spaces and monitoring compliance. Women had to cover their hair and faces, and the black abaya was elevated to the rank of a religious obligation.³³

While veiling was not the only topic discussed in the interviews with KASP participants, it represents key aspects of the conversation and participants' experiences. Women's decisions to take off the veil are related to the effects of mobility and their experiences during the study abroad program, as well as the internal opportunities available within the kingdom. The analysis demonstrates how these factors contributed to shifts in their biographies and illustrates both the possibilities and limitations inherent in top-down reforms in Saudi Arabia.

Unveiling and Mobility

In recent years, women in Saudi Arabia have been driving new forms of self-expression and shifts in women's public appearance, including changes around their veiling practices. There are no official figures to track the number of Saudi women who have taken off their hijabs. However, the shift in women's public appearance in Saudi Arabia is increasingly discussed by public figures and news media.³⁴ It is also evident in images from recent entertainment venues, concerts, and mixed-gender events,³⁵ where women can be seen wearing various styles of abayas, alternative modest fashion, and less restrictive hijab, with some choosing not to cover their hair at all. In interviews, participants also consistently claimed that many women in their social circles were increasingly opting for less traditional hijabs—such as the styles popular in the United Arab Emirates with colorful, open abayas—or forgoing the hijab or niqab entirely. They further stressed that women who participated in KASP and studied abroad were more likely to take off their hijabs or dress more liberally in public upon returning from their studies abroad. This does not imply that all participants removed the veil; rather, it points to a broader pattern and trend of shifting practices among some participants.

Participants often explained their decisions to change their practices around the hijab as the result of a shift in their views and opinions around modesty discourses and women's bodily rights. For some interviewees, this shift was a function of mobility. Leaving behind the familiar and “the immediate” gave some women the space to rethink certain taken-for-granted gender norms and expectations. Reem, a Saudi professional in her late twenties, experienced living between Saudi Arabia and Canada. She spent several years in Canada while her parents completed their graduate degrees, returned to Saudi Arabia, and later went back to Canada to complete her undergraduate studies. She explained:

I see removing the hijab [as] an example of the transformations that mobility catalyzed among recipients. We seek out what we are missing, whether what you are missing is more religion or more freedom. Moving away from the immediate, there's something there. It's not necessarily where you go or the destination, because keep in mind that the [King Abdullah Scholarship] program is, it's not just [open to the] U.S. and Canada, it was open to almost the entire world. Mobility gives you the opportunity to fill that gap that you have been missing.³⁶

Through mobility, Reem explained, “we seek out what we are missing.” Mobility, she emphasized, does not guarantee a specific set of outcomes or answers, and what comes out of mobility is intimately tied, among other things, to what a particular woman misses. For example, she also observed how some of her non-Saudi friends who had lived all their lives in Canada became more conservative when they moved to Saudi Arabia. She explained the shift as a reflection of how her friends were missing “more religion in their life” and sought it out when they moved to Saudi Arabia.

Mobility also opened space for new forms of self-expression. For example, during the interviews, participants shared how the CPVPV harassed women—some even described the CPVPV hitting women using a stick—if the women were deemed not to be diligently wearing their veils.³⁷ One Saudi physician described how upon returning from her studies abroad, she began to wear her hijab more loosely.³⁸ As a result, she was frequently harassed by the CPVPV and eventually she could not tolerate the humiliation that she and her husband experienced at the committee’s hands. She relocated to another Arab country for a few years, and only moved back to Saudi Arabia recently. She described a different experience after her return, saying she was then able to go out in public without the veil. Other participants’ experiences were different from hers; they did not have the option of relocating, whether because of family or professional ties, and their timelines for removing their veils were different.

State-Led Reforms

Most interviewees said they did not often take off the hijab in the first year upon their return to Saudi Arabia and noted that this was a general trend among women in their friend circles. They would slowly move to less strict forms of covering before they embarked on a more dramatic change a few years after their return.³⁹ Women’s journeys and trajectories are different, but this common timeline reflects that while women’s mindsets had changed by the time they returned to Saudi Arabia, they could not express this change by taking off their hijabs without securing social acceptance and political buy-in. Women often needed to gauge social acceptance, and many did not take action until the regime also signaled its openness to these changes.

Some participants contended that their willingness to adopt certain changes in behaviors depended on observing others in their social sphere engaging in those behaviors beforehand. For instance, Reem explained, “if people around you wear colorful abaya, show their hair,”⁴⁰ you are more likely to embrace such behavior. Her comments assigned significant weight to securing some form of social acceptance.

Conversely, other participants asserted that merely witnessing such behaviors was insufficient; rather, the endorsement by the monarchy was crucial for them to express these changes in their lifestyle. In the language of social movements, they needed a political

opportunity—an opening in social, political, and economic conditions that allows movements to emerge, expand, and resonate.⁴¹ Thus, while social acceptance may catalyze change, it is often endorsement and institutionalization by political authorities that solidify it.

One key endorsement was the change in how the monarchy viewed women’s public appearance and dress code. In 2018, bin Salman emphasized that coverings for women were “not mandatory.”⁴² During an interview with CBS News, he said:

The laws are very clear and stipulated in the laws of Sharia: that women wear decent, respectful clothing, like men. This, however, does not particularly specify a black abaya or a black head cover. The decision is entirely left for women to decide what type of decent and respectful attire she chooses to wear.⁴³

Bin Salman’s statement was unconventional and significant, as it was the first to openly redefine the strict dress code expectations. Furthermore, since 2018, the monarchy has introduced a series of laws and directives that have enabled women to exercise their newly acquired freedoms. For instance, the enactment of the 2018 Anti-Harassment Law contributed to the establishment of a safer public sphere for women to exercise their choices around veiling.⁴⁴ Samar, a Saudi professor and interviewee, argued that the monarchy’s public position “opened the door for women who had previously feared public backlash to openly express and display changes in their veiling practices.”⁴⁵ Samar shared how she had often taken off her veil while traveling outside of Saudi Arabia and during her studies in Canada. Another KASP recipient, Abeer, further explained how the crown prince’s statement “catalyzed new changes” and “legitimized existing societal transformations.”⁴⁶ Bin Salman’s position on women’s public appearance, the monarchy’s new women-friendly laws, and participants’ views of the monarchy’s stance show the dynamic interplay between political opportunity and social change. This shift aligns with a broader pattern of Saudi policy adjustments intended to reshape the kingdom’s international image and domestic policies, as highlighted by Yasmine Farouk and Andrew Leber, who note how public diplomacy and engagement with the international community have become essential in navigating the complex narratives surrounding the monarchy’s reforms.⁴⁷

Interviewees emphasized the intertwinement between biographical changes, social acceptance, and regime endorsement. When asked what came first—the change in mindset, the social acceptance, or the political opening—interviewees often asserted the “circular nature”⁴⁸ of the relationship between social acceptance and political openings and stressed that both were necessary for many of them to outwardly express their changes in mindset. For example, Ghadeer, a Saudi professional, explained in her interview that the scholarship program was a way to “prep” Saudi society for the shifts and reforms, while government reforms gave a “green light” to women to display behavioral changes, such as taking off or reducing their hijabs.⁴⁹

Ghadeer: I do not know what came first, because you can say for the society to accept these reforms and changes, the monarchy needed to prep them. So, you look at the sponsorship [scholarship] program as one way of prepping them.

Interviewer: So is it the regime catching up to the changes in society, or society changing to catch up to the changes introduced by the regime?

Ghadeer: There is some of this and some of that. There were changes in the mindset, but women could not express these changes until they got the green light from the monarchy. But you could also say that the monarchy could not enact these reforms until they saw that the people, or at least large segments of the people, are ready for it.

This nuanced view of the nature of societal changes in Saudi Arabia underscores that shifts in gender norms and their expressions are often the result of a dynamic interplay of personal transformations, social changes, and state-led reforms.

The question of the veil and women's public appearance in Saudi Arabia has long been a subject of discussion, but the veil should not be viewed as a universal symbol of repression or a lens to oversimplify the broader spectrum of women's issues in the kingdom. Many Saudi women continue to wear the hijab or niqab, even as they access professions and educational opportunities that were previously unavailable to them. The core issue lies in the historical lack of choice and autonomy; women were denied the right to choose their attire, pursue careers, or move freely. Interviewees noted that even prior to the recent state-led reforms, many Saudi women would remove their hijabs while traveling abroad and don them again upon returning to Saudi Arabia. Reem recounted how "some would literally leave their abayas on the floor of the flight."⁵⁰ Other participants remarked a common joke that "as soon as the flight took off, the abaya came off." Changes in women's practices of veiling were thus taking place outside the country's borders. The recent shift, however, lies in the widespread scale of these changes and their open expression within Saudi Arabia itself.

The pathways to women's decisions to take off their hijabs following their participation in the KASP scholarship program are thus multiple and intertwined. Women experienced a change in mindset, but to express this change in concrete behavior, they required social and political support.

The Limits of State-Led Reforms and the Significance of Non-State Actors

The centrality of the state in the analysis of Saudi women's biographical changes does not negate the limits of state-led reforms and the significance of non-state actors, such as women's groups and feminist activists in Saudi Arabia. Emphasizing the centrality of the state over other social and political factors and actors reproduces the orientalist disposition that frames autocratic regimes as the sole agents of reform in the Middle East. Despite the kingdom's tightly controlled political environment and its severe crackdown on dissent, since the 1990s, women's groups and independent activists have been calling for gender reforms and women's rights in the monarchy.

For example, in November 1990, in what came to be known as the 1990 driving protest, forty-seven women drove in Riyadh to demand that the government lift the ban on women driving.⁵¹ The protest was met with severe backlash, including arrests and job suspensions, but it planted the idea of challenging restrictive norms. In the 2010s, a dynamic independent feminist movement,⁵² expressed through various media (including academic writings, lectures, arts, literary works, and films),⁵³ further raised important societal demands for change. One of its most notable campaigns was the Women2Drive campaign that sought to challenge and ultimately end the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia.⁵⁴ Activists faced significant repercussions, including arrest, harassment, and social ostracism. While the regime has implemented a number of the demands raised by the movement—such as lifting the ban on driving in 2017 and relaxing the guardianship system in 2019—the monarchy has simultaneously repressed the movement, portrayed it as a threat to national security, and imprisoned its members.⁵⁵ The crackdown on women's rights groups prevents reforms from permeating all segments of society. It introduces changes to public but not private gender relations. In the absence of women's rights groups, the changes and reforms remain top-down and distant from their grassroots basis.

Interviewees noted this paradox between state-sponsored gender reforms and the crackdown on independent feminists. While acknowledging the significance of state-led reforms, they also highlighted their limitations, particularly in terms of scope and accessibility. For example, Ghadeer emphasized during her interview that while the reforms represented progress,⁵⁶ “the regime gave you some freedoms but kept them in a closed box, you cannot oppose the regime, you cannot ask for more rights, you cannot start a political party to pressure for more rights.” The regime meticulously delineated the parameters within which these freedoms could be exercised; it also dictated which rights were permissible and which were not.

These newly acquired rights are related to the regime's broader modernization agenda because they align with the ostensibly progressive image that the regime seeks to project. For example, though many women from the middle and lower middle classes who work in service industries still wear the niqab, Saudi media increasingly avoids portraying women in niqabs, favoring representations that make Saudi society look more modernized. This

selective representation also amplifies the visibility of socioeconomic differences, as more widespread removal of niqabs and abayas by some upper-class women has created a visual distinction between economic classes. The shift in veiling practices—particularly the decline in wearing niqabs and abayas—has brought these distinctions into sharper focus.

Access to these new rights was further restricted by geographical location. The *hadar/badu* (urban/nomadic) divide had important implications for which women could access these rights. Most interviewees were based in urban centers with relatively relaxed social norms, so their experiences were different from those of women living in rural areas. Reem, for example, described how her cousins who lived in the north of the country had to move to Jeddah to be able to take off their niqabs.⁵⁷ They would not have been able to exercise this choice in their northern town, where tradition—not just religion—still holds a firm grip on communities. It is important to note, though, that while the *hadar/badu* divide helped shape the choices of women around veiling, Saudi Arabia remains a conservative religious society, so some families are and remain more conservative regardless of their geographical locations.

The experiences of interviewees were also mediated by the gender dynamics and gendered morality structures within their families. Another interviewee, Noor, described how she was only able to take off her hijab after her divorce. Her former husband had adamantly refused her decision to take off her hijab upon their return to Saudi Arabia after studying under KASP in Canada. When she shared her decision to take off the hijab, he was “mad” and started to “enforce”⁵⁸ an even stricter dress code on her. This escalation of control, she explained, underscored the oppressive dynamics within their relationship, and ultimately influenced her decision to pursue a divorce.

Women’s biographical changes and personal transformations were thus conditioned by social and political opportunities as well as the paradox of state-sponsored gender reform in Saudi Arabia, where advancements in women’s rights are granted within tightly regulated boundaries and the government simultaneously cracks down on women’s groups and independent feminists. While the state has implemented reforms that encourage women to make their own choices about veiling, these changes exist within a controlled framework that represses women’s groups and limits further demands for rights and broader societal participation. Women’s access to these choices has therefore remained uneven and contingent upon additional factors such as personal impetus, geographical location, familial dynamics, and societal norms.

Conclusion: Women's Choices and Gender Reforms in a Controlled Sociopolitical Context

In their decisions to take off their veils following their participation in KASP, women have negotiated complex intersections of personal transformation, social dynamics, and state directives. Their decisions around veiling practices upon their return exemplify how their choices were influenced by mobility, personal imputes, social acceptance, and political currents.

Interviewees' accounts of their experiences of removing the veil highlighted how mobility catalyzed changes in their self-perceptions and understandings of gender norms. The decision by some women to remove their hijabs was also influenced by broader shifts in gender norms within Saudi society, and by societal cues—such as changing degrees of social freedom in urban settings. Women often needed to gauge social acceptance, and many did not take action until the regime also signaled its openness to these changes. Thus, while mobility allowed women to explore new forms of self-expression and question traditional gendered modesty structures, the ability to manifest these perspective changes outwardly was contingent on the social and political context.

The experiences of Saudi women further highlighted the complexity of navigating these personal transformations within the paradox of state-led reform. While the monarchy has introduced reforms aimed at empowering women to make decisions regarding veiling practices, these reforms operate within a tightly controlled framework that restricts broader demands for women's rights. The concurrent repression of independent women's groups further complicates this landscape. As a result, women's access to rights—including different choices around veiling—has remained uneven and influenced by factors such as geographical location, familial dynamics, and prevailing societal norms.

Women's accounts thus underscore the dynamic and complex nature of social change and gender reform in the kingdom. As women continue to negotiate their identities and rights, their stories offer valuable insights into the broader processes of gender reform and societal transformation in Saudi Arabia. They help us understand the nature and the contours of gender equality and societal change under the monarchy. Such insights are important for understanding how gender reform policies will evolve and which direction they may take in the future.

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