

# FROM DOMESTIC TO PUBLIC: THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT DISCOURSE IN SAUDI ARABIA'S VISION 2030

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## Abstract

The involvement of women in the public sphere in Saudi Arabia has increased after Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman officially declared the vision of Saudi Arabia 2030. In contrast to Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi clerics who tend to domesticate the role of women, the government in its vision actually encourages women to be involved in the public sphere. This paper seeks to describe the discourse on women's empowerment and reveal the ideology that underlies it and to explain the implications of the construction of this discourse on changes in public policy in Saudi Arabia. The author use critical discourse analysis as an analytical tool. The author concludes, First, the discourse on women's empowerment in the Saudi 2030 vision document is manifested in giving equal roles to women and men to be involved in social and economic activities. Women in Saudi's 2030 vision are positioned as national assets that are open, competitive, hardworking, and able to drive the economy. Second, the discourse that encourages women to be involved in public activities is inseparable from the ideology of the current Saudi Arabian government which tends to lead to socio-economic liberalization. In this context, women's empowerment is used for the benefit of economic growth and the transformation of new, more open religious social conditions (*infitah*). Third, the discourse on women's empowerment in the Saudi 2030 vision influences changes in public policy in Saudi Arabia. The old policies from the rulings of the ulama were replaced with new policies that gave women more freedom to participate in the public sphere.

**Keywords:** Discourse construction; Reform; Socio-economic liberalization; Vision of Saudi Arabia 2030; Women's empowerment.

## A. Introduction

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 document is a blueprint for economic, social, and governance reforms initiated by the Saudi Arabian government under the leadership of

King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (Khan & Khan, 2020; Tlaiss & Al Waqfi, 2020). In this vision, the government encourages women to be more involved in the public sphere. This new vision that campaigns for women's empowerment indirectly contradicts the decrees of Saudi Arabian Salafi clerics who tend to place women in the domestic sphere.

The goals of the government of King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who want to break away from dependence on oil and gas resources, encourage the government to innovate and diversify the economy by involving the contributions of all citizens, including women. It is hoped that women's involvement in the public sector will help realize changes in the social order in the new Saudi era. The government's desire to further empower the role of women indirectly influences the representation of women in Saudi Vision 2030.

The depiction of women in the Saudi Vision 2030 can be traced through illustrations and macro, meso, and micro linguistic structures that construct the discourse of women's empowerment (T. A. Van Dijk, 1977). Linguistic clues in the 2030 vision document can also be used as a basis for uncovering the ideological background that directs the government to produce discourse that promotes women's empowerment (Wodak, 2007).

There are several studies on Saudi Arabia's 2030 vision, including examining the impact of implementing this vision on Saudi Arabia's tourism (Abuhjeeleh, 2019; Alasgah & Rizk, 2023). Other studies looked at the effect of implementing Saudi Arabia's vision on economic policy reform and its impact on the mindset and behavior of Saudi Arabian youth (Jurgenson et al., 2016; Moshashai et al., 2020; Thompson, 2021). Saudi Arabia's vision is also considered as the government's response to the aspirations of the people, especially young people who want reform (Thompson, 2017). Other research saw the Saudi 2030 vision as an ambitious vision that is difficult to realize (Khashan, 2017; Rundell, 2020).

This article examines the construction of the discourse on women's empowerment in the Saudi Arabia's 2030 vision document. The desire of the Saudi Arabian government to empower the role of women in the public sphere indirectly influences the depiction of the image of women in this vision document. In addition, this article also reveals the ideological background that directs the government in constructing a discourse on women's empowerment so that it influences public policy reform in Saudi Arabia which tends to give women the freedom to participate in the public sphere.

## **B. Methods**

This research was qualitative research using critical discourse analysis as a tool for analysis. A critical approach was chosen to make it easier for researchers to explore hidden messages behind the visible text (*virtual reality*) (Badara, 2014). A critical approach also equips researchers to explore the process of discourse production and its impact on social practice (McLoughlin, 2017). Through this approach, researchers can also reveal what information, groups, and events are highlighted by the Saudi Arabian government in its vision (Nicholls, 2003). Through the vision texts produced, researchers can also find out and reveal the dominance of certain actors and institutions (T. A. Van Dijk, 1993). In other words, from the text of Saudi Arabia's vision 2030 document, researchers can trace the representation of ideology and power that shapes and is shaped by the government (Manchin & Mayr, 2012).

Meanwhile, the data in this research were the text and images as a discourse used in constructing women's identities in Saudi Arabia's vision 2030 document. Data was obtained through documentation techniques. Next, the text and illustrations discussing women's empowerment were analyzed using the Van Dijk model of critical discourse analysis framework. In this context, researchers sequentially examined macro, meso, and micro text structures, ideological relations, and social contexts that influence discourse construction. In the final part, the researcher explained the impact of the discourse on women's empowerment on changes in government policy after the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030.

## C. Findings and Discussion

### 1. Findings

#### **Saudi Vision 2030: A New Map of Economic and Social Reform in Saudi Arabia**

Before going deeper into the discussion of the discourse on women's empowerment in Saudi's Vision 2030 document and the ideological background behind it, the author first explains the background to the preparation of Saudi Vision 2030, its main discussion topics, and the response of Saudi Arabian society after its declaration. This presentation can help the author find the macro context surrounding Saudi government's Vision 2030.

The initiator of Saudi Vision 2030, Muhammad bin Salman is the crown prince of Saudi Arabia who was previously appointed by King Salman as Minister of Defense of the Kingdom at the age of 29. On June 21, 2017, King Salman announced that he had appointed Muhammad bin Salman as Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia who would replace him in the future (Chara, 2018; Cochran, 2019). This strategic position provides great influence and power for Muhammad bin Salman to oversee and make the implementation of Vision 2030 a success (Habibi, 2019).

The main agenda in the Saudi vision 2030 is economic diversification so that state income does not only depend on oil and gas production (Fadaak & Roberts, 2018). The implementation of the Saudi vision 2030 is expected to reduce the state budget deficit, balance the state budget, and promote long-term non-oil economic revenues (Moshashai et al., 2020). The vision which was officially declared on April 25 2016 was the result of collaboration between the Saudi Arabian government and foreign consultants McKinsey & Company and Boston Consulting Group (Stenslie, 2016). To achieve its Vision 2030 goals, the government is calling for a reduction in subsidies and a series of new economic reforms. Many of these vision agendas are so ambitious that on the one hand, some observers question whether the targets of the Saudi 2030 vision can be achieved (Foley, 2017). However, on the other hand, the Saudi 2030 vision raises expectations and optimism among the younger generation, especially regarding the education reform agenda and increasing the availability of job opportunities (Arabia, 2016).

The economic diversification agenda in the Saudi Vision 2030 requires reform in the economic sector. This includes a long list of economic reforms that emphasize privatization intending to expand the role of the private sector from the current 40 percent to 60 percent to reduce the unemployment rate from the original 11% to 7.6% in 2030 (Khashan, 2017). In addition, the government is seeking to increase non-oil fiscal revenues through tax reform, creating a business-friendly economic and legal ecosystem, and increasing foreign investment. Economic reforms also include educational reforms to prepare skilled and entrepreneurial Saudi students so that large numbers of foreign workers can be replaced by Saudi citizens. Apart from that, the

government is also encouraging small and medium companies to increase their contribution to increasing the country's Gross Domestic Product from 20 percent to 35 percent by 2030 (Habibi, 2019). Saudi economic reforms are projected to make the country the 15th largest economy by 2030 (Khashan, 2017).

To realize the Saudi Vision 2030, the government relies on three important pillars which are the potential of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. First, the potential as a country full of blessings from God because it was blessed with a holy city that is the mecca for all Muslims in the world. Second, the country's potential to become a global investment center. Third, the country's strategic location so that it is able to provide connectivity for the three continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa via land and sea routes (Khan & Khan, 2020; Quamar, 2020).

In addition to the reform agenda in the economic sector, the Saudi 2030 vision also includes a reform agenda in the socio-cultural and governance fields (Habibi, 2019). Apart from moderation, the government also promotes Islamic principles of tolerance, excellence, discipline, and justice as the basis for achieving Saudi Vision 2030 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). In an interview in April 2018, Muhammad bin Salman emphasized that the government would accommodate various schools of thought and religious sects in the modern Saudi era (Freer, 2019).

Social reform is absolutely necessary because it is an important basis for supporting reform in the economic sector. Muhammad bin Salman in this context needs a stable atmosphere in his country to reassure international investors who are worried about the risk of instability in socio-religious and political conditions in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, moderate religiousness that can accept diversity is the right choice in the socio-religious reform agenda. This socio-religious reform is also indirectly aimed at reducing the negative international image of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has long been considered a country that is anti-diversity (Quamar, 2020).

In this socio-religious reform agenda, Muhammad bin Salman also assured the public that he was able to control the religious discourse developing in Saudi Arabia. In other words, the highest authority in making socio-religious policies can be exercised by MBS without being influenced by the Wahhabi clerics who have had the authority to control the socio-religious sphere in Saudi. In this way, MBS indirectly reduces the authority of religious authorities in controlling the social and religious behavior of society (Chara, 2018).

Included in social reform is the government's agenda to provide wider opportunities for women to participate in the public sphere (Moshashai et al., 2020). Wider involvement of women in the public sphere will have an impact on development in the social, economic, and political fields. The contribution of women's roles will add real value to national economic growth in both the public and private sectors (Thompson, 2015). Apart from that, the Saudi 2030 vision in the social realm also includes development in the health, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism sectors (Nurunnabi, 2017).

Meanwhile, reforms in government governance focus on improving the state governance system. The main objectives of this reform are transparency, accountability, and eradicating corruption (Topal, 2019). In addition, the government targets to reduce waste and expenditure in the fiscal budget. Vision 2030 also calls for corporate social responsibility and improved corporate governance. In addition, the government is trying to expand non-profit organizations and civil society institutions. However, in the context of reform plans in the field of government governance, the government did not mention reforms in the realm of royal politics (Habibi, 2019).

Saudi Vision 2030 is also the government's answer to the demands of some people who want social reform, especially Saudi Arabia's youth. The Saudi Vision 2030 promises a better future, raising hopes and expectations among Saudi youth. They believe Vision 2030 is important in the long term because it shows the extent to which the authorities are interested in advancing the Kingdom by taking into account the aspirations of its young citizens. The majority of Saudi youth are loyal constituents in supporting the success of this vision. Therefore, there are efforts by the government to continue to get support from young people for the reform agenda (Thompson, 2017). It should be noted that the youth population in Saudi Arabia is more than 50% of the total population (Khan & Khan, 2020).

Apart from that, the Saudi Vision 2030 also responds to the demands of women activists who have long wanted freedom and equality (Alsaif, 2013). Thus, the Saudi Vision 2030 is also a crystallization of the government's promise to women which has long been discussed. King Abdullah bin 'Abdul 'Aziz al-Saud (2005-2015) has started discussing and carrying out social reforms in society by giving women the right to work. King Abdullah also planned to open new job opportunities for 70,000 women even though this policy was widely opposed because it was not in line with the ulama's fatwas (Alhargan, 2012). However, after leading Saudi Arabia for four years, the reform efforts initiated by King Abdullah had little real impact on society (Meijer, 2010).

## 2. Discussion

### **Women's Empowerment Discourse in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: Representation and Structure Mapping**

The Saudi Arabian government's Vision 2030 is also designed to empower women to participate more in the public sphere, including in the realms of education and work. Increasing women's participation in the world of work is expected to have an impact on increasing Saudi Arabia's economic growth (Almathami et al., 2020). However, the discussion of forms of women's empowerment is not discussed in detail in the Saudi Vision 2030 document. The government only provides an outline of the broader agenda for increasing women's participation in the realms of education and employment. However, the implementation of women's empowerment was evident after the emergence of various social reforms that took place in Saudi Arabia which led to the granting of freedom and rights for women to be able to participate in the public sphere. The following is the construction of the women's empowerment discourse in the Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 document.

#### **a. Women are equal to men as drivers of social and economic development**

There is recognition of equality between men and women in the Saudi Arabian government's Vision 2030. The government provides equal opportunities for everyone, both men and women, to access the economic sector. Women and men are encouraged to develop their abilities by participating in training to create a workforce that can be absorbed in various work sectors. The following is an excerpt from Saudi's vision which provides equal opportunities for men and women to access the realm of work. *"We will continue investing in education and training so that our young men and women are equipped for the jobs of the future"*(Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

The quote in Saudi Vision 2030 shows the government's attention and support in providing opportunities for women and men to develop their abilities so they can participate actively in the economic realm. The empowerment of Saudi Arabian women will continue to be improved. The government targets women's participation

from 22% to 30% by 2030. In this context, the government recognizes the equal roles of men and women in accessing economic resources. Apart from the economic sector, women are expected to contribute to the development of the social realm (Tlaiss & Al Waqfi, 2020).

The inclusion of women in the social and economic fields in Saudi Vision 2030 reflects a change in government orientation. The government gives women a greater role in the public sphere. The government's orientation in increasing the role of women in Vision 2030 is different from the orientation of the ulama in their fatwas. Women, in ulama fatwas, are more directed to play roles only in the domestic sector. This can be seen in the ulama regulations which have limited the role of women in public spaces. Thus, women in the Saudi Vision 2030 are represented more actively in the public sphere when compared to the representation of women in the fatwas of Saudi Arabian Salafi clerics.

**b. Women and men are given equal opportunities to access education and employment**

In his introduction to Vision 2030, Muhammad bin Salman said that he would provide equal opportunities for everyone (men and women) to be able to access education, training, and other service sectors such as employment, health facilities, housing, and entertainment (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Muhammad bin Salman used the phrase "for all" three times and fifteen times used the word "us" to show that the reform agenda contained in the Saudi vision is for the benefit of all society and can be achieved with the work of all parties, both men and women (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

Equal opportunities in accessing education are also contained in the contents of the Saudi Vision 2030. In this vision, the government promises to equip the young generation with knowledge and skills to support their careers in the future. The government will reform the education sector by changing the education system and curriculum as well as increasing training so that the skills of alumni match the needs of the job market (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The orientation of education in Saudi Vision 2030 is education whose output can contribute to economic growth. Therefore, educational orientation must adapt to the job market (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

The formulation of the educational orientation contained in Vision 2030 is different from the educational orientation determined by the ulama. In their fatwa, the ulama outlined that education aims to build a spirit of loyalty to Islamic teachings so that Muslims rise and achieve their glory again (Prokop, 2003). Curriculums in special schools for girls which are more directed by Salafi clerics towards learning Arabic, home economics, caring for children, and religious education also conflict with Saudi Vision 2030 which places greater emphasis on curricula that suit the needs of the job market (Jawad, 1998). Thus, reform in the education sector is necessary so that the younger generation can compete to enter the job market (Allmnakrah & Evers, 2020).

Apart from education, through Vision 2030, the government opens up opportunities for women to be able to access the widest possible public space according to their interests and talents. The government will continue to develop the interests and talents of women so that in the future women will be able to contribute to social and economic development. This empowerment of women cannot be separated from the fact that more than 50% of university graduates in Saudi Arabia are women. The following is an excerpt from the 2030 vision which states that women are an important asset who can contribute to social and economic development:

“Saudi women are yet another great asset. With over 50 percent of our university graduates being female, we will continue to develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities, and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

It can be seen in the quote that the Saudi government, through its Vision 2030, depicts women in a more active role, women are depicted as participating a lot in the public sphere. Women are expected to expand in public life. The discourse on women's empowerment places women on an equal footing with men in accessing the public sphere. This is different from previous government policies which tended to place women in a role at home as wives and housewives who devoted themselves to caring for their children and husband. The Saudi Arabian government's previous policy of domesticating women was inspired by the fatwas of Wahhabi clerics who wanted women to play a significant role in the domestic sphere.

**c. Women are depicted as open and competitive workers**

One of the interesting things contained in the official Saudi Vision 2030 document is the use of visual images of Saudi women working at computers. The Saudi woman wearing a headscarf and black clothes without wearing a face covering was seen greeting and serving male clients in a friendly manner (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). This image of a woman working indirectly shows a portrait of a modern Saudi woman who is able to participate in the economic world as desired by the government. Women do not just stay at home to take care of domestic work but are depicted as figures who actively participate in the public sphere.



Figure 1. A picture of a woman in Saudi Vision 2030 document.

The figure of the working woman depicted in the Saudi vision is very different from the figure of the woman depicted by senior Wahhabi clerics in their fatwas. Although Wahhabi clerics advise women to stay at home and play roles only in the domestic sphere, in other fatwas the clerics also allow women to work or leave the house, but with certain conditions, including obtaining permission from their guardian, must still pay attention to their needs. husband, children, and household matters (ad-Darwīsy, 2003), must cover their private parts, wear normal clothes, and must not use perfume (ad-Darwīsy, 2003). Apart from that, women must also wear the Islamic hijab, cover their faces and palms, and cover all their body parts (ad-Darwīsy, 2003; Bin Bāz, 2016). Working women are also prohibited from *ikhtilat* and *khalwah* in the workplace because this causes slander and is dangerous (Bin Bāz, 2016).

On the one hand, the portrait of women in the Saudi Vision 2030 document is clearly against the legal provisions that have been *fatwad* by senior Salafi scholars. It appears in the picture that the female Saudi worker shows her face and palms as well as *ikhtilat* and *khalwah* with a man. On the other hand, the picture implies the desire of

the government to carry out social reforms that change the provisions of moral rules that have been set by scholars with new norms that make women free from the shackles that hinder their careers so that Saudi women can more freely participate in the public domain and can help improve the country's economy.

The discourse on women's empowerment in Saudi Vision 2030 indirectly reflects the government's ideology which is the perspective and basis for acting so that women are depicted in such a way in the Saudi vision document. The vision text also provides a narrative framework and actions that the government wants to persuade and mobilize women through discourse presented by the government (Hameed et al., 2020). In addition, discussing the representation of women in the vision can help researchers map the differences between the government's representation of the role of women and the representation of the role of women according to the Wahhabi ulama which was discussed in the previous chapter.

Exposures on the representation of women in Saudi Vision 2030 show that women are presented by the government as figures who are able to play an active role in the public sphere. Women in the Saudi vision are imaged as actors who are able to contribute to social and economic development in society. In other words, women are depicted with a more active image in this vision. The depiction of women as figures who are directly involved in public space is the core idea that the government wants to convey in Saudi Vision 2030, especially regarding women's empowerment in the modern Saudi era. The core idea that images women as figures who are directly involved in the public sphere in the Saudi Vision 2030 is called the macrostructure, namely the most important part that the actor (government) wants to convey through the Saudi Vision 2030 is related to women's empowerment (Eriyanto, 2001). This core idea is a general description of depicting women which is extracted from the construction of images of women in the structure of interrelated meanings in the text (T. A. Van Dijk, 1977). In this context, through Vision 2030, the government emphasizes the importance of women's involvement in the public sphere, including in the fields of education and work.

The core ideas in Saudi Vision 2030 are supported by supporting ideas that lead to increasing women's participation in public spaces. In this case, the government is planning to provide the same training for men and women so that they can be absorbed in the world of work market. Apart from that, women and men are also given equal opportunities to access wider public spaces. The government, through its vision, also plans to develop women's interests and talents so that in the future women will be able to contribute to social and economic development. These ideas are part of the supporting ideas that support the core discourse structure that directs women's role to be more involved in the public sphere. Supporting ideas that support the core idea are called superstructure or mesostructure.

Apart from the core ideas and supporting ideas, analysis of the depiction of women's figures and roles can also be explored through the smallest parts of the structure that form discourse, such as words, sentences, propositions, clauses, paraphrases, and images. In Saudi Vision 2030, women are represented through visual images as workers who are friendly, open, energetic, and talented and play an active role in public spaces. Women are also depicted as potential, talented resources capable of competing and side by side with men. Apart from that, women are said to be an important part of the country's social and economic drivers.

The following is a table of women's representation in the Saudi Vision 2030 which includes macrostructure (core ideas), superstructure (supporting ideas), and microstructures which are intertwined with one another to form a complete discourse



related to the government's representation of women's roles. in the Saudi Vision 2030 document.

Table 1. Women's Empowerment Discourse in the Saudi Vision 2030

No	Text Structure	Women's Empowerment Discourse in the Saudi Vision 2030
1	Macro Structure	Women are encouraged to play an active role in the public sphere
2	Super Structure/ Meso Structure	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The government provides equal opportunities for men and women to obtain education and training.</li> <li>2. The government will develop women's interests and talents so they are able to contribute to social and economic development.</li> </ol>
3	Microstructure	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Women as workers (economic drivers)</li> <li>2. A talented woman</li> <li>3. Women are potential resources</li> <li>4. An open woman</li> <li>5. An energetic woman</li> <li>6. An active female figure</li> </ol>

The government through its 2030 vision emphasizes the importance of women's participation in the public sphere, women are welcome to participate more in the public sphere, including in the education and work sectors. The government provides equal opportunities for women and men to develop their potential so that they are able to contribute in the social and economic fields. The government through the Saudi 2030 vision indirectly recognizes equality between men and women to participate in the public sphere. Women in Saudi Arabia's 2030 vision are depicted as talented, workers, active, energetic, able to compete, and able to participate in public spaces. In summary, it can be concluded that the Saudi Arabian government, through its vision, presents women as active figures in public spaces. Women are given the same rights as men to be able to access education, training, and employment so that they are able to contribute to social and economic growth.

### **Ideological Relations Behind the Discourse on Empowering the Role of Women**

The depiction of a more active role for women in the public sphere in Saudi Vision 2030 is inseparable from the current Saudi government's goals which are more focused on reform in the economic and social fields. The government of King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman want their country's economic income not only depend on oil and gas resources (Fadaak & Roberts, 2018). The Saudi Arabian government does not want to fall into the trap of large oil revenues (*high oil-income trap*) (Moshashai et al., 2020). Therefore, the government is trying to diversify the economy so that the country avoids the economic deficit caused by falling oil prices. In 2015 the Saudi economic deficit reached almost \$ 100 billion, while in 2016 the Saudi budget deficit reached \$ 79 billion (Hvidt, 2017). At the same time, the costs of the Saudi Arabian government's military campaign in Yemen increased so the government was forced to spend reserve funds to cover the budget deficit (Habibi, 2019).

In addition, increasing population growth causes the subsidy burden to increase. It should be noted that the population of Saudi Arabia increased 600% from 1960 to 2015 from 4.09 million in 1960 to 31.54 million (Nurunnabi, 2017). The decline in oil prices has had a significant impact on the power of the state budget to provide subsidies so that the government is more focused on various economic reforms,

investment, tourism projects, and entertainment (Allmnakrah & Evers, 2020). An important element in this agenda is encouraging the private sector to play a much larger role in the economy, especially in job creation to reduce the state's burden (Hvidt, 2017).

The social and economic reform agenda initiated by the government must involve the active participation of women. Women are encouraged by the government to be involved in all economic and social activities. Women in Saudi Vision 2030 are positioned as an important part of society who are expected to be able to become locomotives of economic and social growth. Empowering women to participate in all economic sectors is very important to help achieve the country's vision goals by 2030. Therefore, women's potential resources must be developed and encouraged to be involved in the public sphere so that women's participation can increase further. In other words, the Saudi Vision 2030 has an agenda to strengthen and promote women's participation, especially in the economic sector.

The government's target to involve women in the wider public sector is expected to increase the percentage of the female workforce from only 22% to 30% by 2030. This cannot be separated from studies that state that the involvement of women in the labor market can increase a country's economic growth. Countries with high female participation in the labor market show significant increases in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Thus, women's success in education and work can indirectly reduce poverty (Saqib, 2016). For this reason, the Saudi Arabian government is planning to increase women's participation in the labor market. This cannot be separated from the potential resources of women whose population in Saudi Arabia is more than 50% of the total population.

It is hoped that women's participation in the economic sector can also reduce dependence on foreign workers, who account for 32% of total workers in Saudi Arabia (Cochran, 2019). The program of Saudisation (prioritizing Saudi workers over foreign workers) has long been on the government's agenda. However, this program does not consider the potential of women to be involved in filling public jobs. Women in Saudi Arabia are more associated as resources who are more suited to playing a role in the family world so women's participation in the public sphere is still limited, especially their involvement in the workforce. Apart from that, alumni of educational institutions that emphasize religious knowledge are unable to meet the needs of the job market, especially in the field of technology and other secular economic fields (Cochran, 2019).

Saudi Arabia, through its Vision 2030, also plans to provide equal rights for women and men to be able to access education, training, and other public service sectors such as employment, health facilities, housing, and entertainment (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). This is in line with the spirit of women's empowerment initiated by the United Nations (UN) council which provides women with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in the political and economic decision-making process. This empowerment aims to increase women's capacity by ending all forms of discrimination and violence against women (Topal, 2019).

It can be seen in this vision that the government's orientation towards empowering women is aligned with the concept of empowerment formulated by the international community (UN). King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman as the highest authorities in Saudi Arabia have full authority in determining state policies related to strengthening the role of women in education and work. In this empowerment agenda, the government wants women not to just stay at home, women are encouraged to be involved in all economic activities so that they can increase the country's economic growth.

McKinsey & Company as the main foreign consultant in the formulation of Saudi Vision 2030 vision also had a big influence on the discourse on strengthening the role of women in the public sphere in Saudi Arabia. This non-government company which operates in the field of economic consulting often campaigns on the importance of equality between men and women. In several research reports, the McKinsey Global Institute stated that strengthening the role of women in the realm of work will have direct implications for improving the global economy and can reduce the gender gap (*How Advancing Women's Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth* | McKinsey, n.d.). McKinsey also continues to encourage and campaign for the development of women leaders and promote gender diversity (*Next Generation Women Leaders* | McKinsey & Company, n.d.). Therefore, the influence of the perspective of the economic consulting company McKinsey in strengthening women's empowerment is evident in the equality discourse initiated by the government through Saudi Vision 2030.

The inclusion of women in the public sphere in Saudi Vision 2030 implies a shift in the government's perspective which tends towards liberalization (Sonnenfeld & Taylor, 2018). The royal elite has long wanted liberalization in Saudi Arabia to accelerate the country's economic growth (Al Rajhi et al., 2012). However, the nodes of liberalization became increasingly apparent during the time of King Salaman bin Abdul Azis and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. The government's perspective is used as a reference for acting and responding to the issue of women's empowerment in accordance with the rules, values, and knowledge that underlie this ideology (T. Van Dijk, 2014). The government's liberal perspective in responding to socio-economic problems is reflected in various policies, including those related to strengthening the role of women in the public sector. The liberalism perspective relies on the freedom of individuals and groups to develop their potential. However, the liberalization initiated by the government remains within the corridors of Islamic principles. In this context, Muhammad bin Salman emphasized that Islam remains the main basis for carrying out social and economic reforms in the modern Saudi era.

A perspective that leads to liberalization encourages the government to carry out reforms aimed at enabling women to participate in the public sphere without being constrained by shackled regulations. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's return to a moderate Islamic religious model will make it easier for the government to carry out its liberalization agenda. The reform agenda that leads to liberalization aims to increase economic growth, including the entertainment and tourism industries. Liberalization also targets reforms in the education system and women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia (Sabir & Zenaïdi, 2019). This is done because there is a gap between the qualifications of graduates of educational institutions and the needs of the employment sector so many women are not absorbed into the workforce (Prokop, 2003). For the government, the aim of these reforms is none other than the interest of rapid economic growth and creating lots of jobs, especially in the private sector, so that the country can slowly get rid of dependence on oil resources (Khan & Khan, 2020).

Regarding the discourse on increasing the role of women in the public sphere, the Saudi Arabian government is carrying out reforms that have never been carried out before. After the launch of Saudi Vision 2030, the government allowed women to drive their vehicles, travel, and work without the consent of their guardians, women were allowed to fill strategic public positions such as deputy ministers, chancellors and ambassadors. Apart from that, women are also allowed to participate in the military as national soldiers, women are welcome to attend stadiums, and the government is also diversifying jobs for women so they are equal to men. All these reforms are in line with the discourse of women's empowerment contained in Saudi Vision 2030 (Hameed et

al., 2020). In the context of women's empowerment, liberalization not only influences the form of discourse in Saudi Vision 2030 document but also controls and directs the government to carry out reform actions that are in line with this vision. This is intended so that Saudi Arabian women can participate more widely in the world of work. Thus, the aim of women's empowerment on the agenda of the Saudi Arabian government is none other than the interest of accelerating the country's economic growth.

Liberalism in the Saudi context referred to here is understood as a limited term denoting a reformist ideology originating from the practice of Western liberalism, although without reference to its basic principles. So, what is called the Liberal Trend (*al-tayyar al-libralia*), here are the government's efforts to carry out reforms at the level of the social and economic order as seen in efforts to modernize, increase women's participation in public spaces, recognize human rights, and loosen control from religious groups. In short, Saudi liberalization is an alternative vision in the development of Saudi society that is independent of the Islamic framework that has been formulated by the ulama so far.

Liberalization which leads to strengthening the role of women in the public sphere in Saudi Arabia cannot possibly be achieved if the role of women is not equal to that of men. Therefore, in the text of Saudi Vision 2030, the government several times emphasizes equality between men and women in participating in realizing the country's ideals. Women are also portrayed as open, competitive, and dynamic figures so that they can play a maximum role in society and be able to drive the country's economy.

The liberalization initiated by the government of King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in directing women's roles to be more involved in the public sphere indirectly contradicts the views of conservative Wahhabi ulama who tend to direct women's roles to be limited to the domestic sphere. In this context, the role of women in Saudi Arabia is contested by two authorities, namely the ulama and the royal government. However, the government as a more dominant elite group can have more freedom to spread and establish its ideology so that it can influence the actions and behavior of society, especially young Saudi Arabians who are optimistic about the programs initiated by the government.

Although Saudi Arabian ulama were previously able to freely issue legal fatwas regulating the role of women because they had the authority to control religious, social, and cultural affairs in Saudi Arabia (Al-Atawneh, 2009; Yamani, 2009) however, during the reign of King Salman and Muhammad bin Salman the authority of Wahhabi ulama was increasingly reduced. Reforms that lead to the granting of freedom to women show that indirectly the kingdom has taken over the authority of the ulama in determining moral rules in society, especially those related to women's empowerment (Chara, 2018). In other words, there is a shift in state policy in granting authority to ulama. This is because the ulama's fatwas that regulate the role of women in the public sphere are considered to inhibit women's participation, thereby having a negative impact on the country's economic growth. The increasingly dominant role of the government in the era of Muhammad bin Salman has resulted in the increasingly marginalized authority of the Wahhabi ulama. The replacement of several conservative Wahhabi clerics with clerics who tend to be more moderate indicates a shift in the state's orientation in managing the socio-religious sphere. This change resulted in the issuance of new ulama fatwas which tended to support women's empowerment initiated by the government. Saudi Arabia is entering a new, more open era (*infinite*) including in the context of women's empowerment.

The discourse of women's empowerment in Saudi Vision 2030, which was followed by reforms that provide freedom to women, has had a significant impact in increasing the role of Saudi Arabian women in recent years. The participation of women in higher education and the workforce is increasing. This increase is in line with reports from various international organizations. A report from the World Economic Forum, for example, shows an increase in scores in all governance indicators in 2017 in Saudi Arabia (Habibi, 2019). Currently, Saudi Arabia's female labor force participation reaches more than 20%. Saudi Arabia also recorded the fastest-growing female labor force participation rate among other G20 countries (Samargandi et al., 2019).

#### **D. Conclusion**

Women in Saudi Vision 2030 are described as a social group capable of participating in the public sphere. Women are portrayed by the government as open, energetic, talented, and active. The representation of women as more empowered figures cannot be separated from the government's interest in involving women in the economic and social reform agenda in Saudi Arabia. The government, which is trying to reduce dependence on income from oil and gas, is trying hard to encourage its citizens, including women, to be more actively involved in the labor market. On the one hand, through the Saudi 2030 vision document, the government is trying to persuade women to be more actively involved in the public sphere. On the other hand, Saudi Vision 2030 is a guideline for the government to act in responding to all social and economic problems, including responding to issues of women's empowerment.

The discourse initiated by the government in Saudi Vision 2030 to campaign and encourage women to be involved in economic activities cannot be separated from the government's perspective which tends towards the principles of liberalization, especially related to the issue of women's empowerment. In this context, the aim of empowering women is none other than the interest of accelerating economic growth and creating new social conditions that are open to women. The government's perspective towards liberalization is increasingly visible in government reform programs which tend to promote women's freedom to engage in the world of work market. Through the government's Vision 2030, Muhammad bin Salman is reforming the rules that have been formulated by the Ulama because they are considered to be hampering economic growth and social change.

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As the two authors of this article, all processes starting from data collection, analysis, display, narrative delivery, conclusions, and translations are fully carried out by the authors.

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