



‘Expanding Employment Opportunities and Pathways of Saudi Women’s Agency’

A thesis in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

‘Declaration: I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.’

Mona Al-Munaiey

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my profound gratitude to my mother and all my family members who have always supported and believed in me. I am particularly thankful to my husband, Muhanned, who has accompanied me throughout this journey, taken care of me, encouraged me, and stood by me in the most challenging times. I am deeply thankful to my friends who eased the experience of carrying out a PhD study and made it joyful.

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Abstract

The limited employment opportunities available to females in Saudi Arabia have had negative consequences on their status and empowerment, particularly given that access to employment is considered one of the main resources of women's empowerment globally. Therefore, empowering Saudi women via access to greater opportunities of employment has been a core debate in regard to enhancing their status. The reforms expanding their employment in the Kingdom since 2010 have motivated this research to explore their agency as a main component of empowerment.

This study's aim is to provide detailed insights on Saudi women's perceptions and experiences regarding the influences and limitations of expanding employment opportunities on their agency. It explicitly sets out to answer a twofold research question: how do Saudi women perceive employment to be enlarging their exercise of agency, and loosening limitations on their agency within their social structure?

Qualitative ethnographic methods were employed. This involved conducting fieldwork, individual interviews, and focus groups with 47 employed and unemployed women in Jeddah. To analyse the data a thematic analysis approach was used. To examine agency this research used Alsop and Heinsohn's framework and rested on Naila Kabeer's definition of agency as part of empowerment. This research supports that the practice and the development of women's agency are regulated by different aspects of the social structure surrounding women, in particular patriarchal norms and gender relations. This led to an examination of the legal and social aspects of the 'structure of constraints and opportunities' as a component of this research.

The investigation yielded three main findings. Firstly, it outlined five ways in which employment enabled Saudi women with greater agency. Secondly, it identified five conditions that work as key enablers for fostering their agency via employment according to the participant's experiences. Thirdly, it distinguished three general external influences on Saudi women's practice and development of agency through employment, which concern women in society broadly. The thesis concludes that the extent of practising or fostering agency by employment depends on the context, and individual circumstances. Even so, it deconstructed the particular pathways that lead from employment to agency, elucidating whether and how they are connected. This research allowed profound understanding of the effects of employment on women's practice of agency, and stimulated recommendations which can contribute to policy and practice enhancing women's agency in Saudi Arabia and across other contexts.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Research Problem

Commenting on gender equity and women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia Dr. Jamal Al-Lail the President of Effat University in Jeddah stated "While the world in general considers that Saudi Arabia takes a narrow view of women's place in society, there is increasing global awareness that women's empowerment is enjoying a strong upsurge as more and more women enter the workplace" (Jamal Al-Lail, n.d). Achieving gender equality in economic participation, and increasing women's empowerment through access to resources continue to be central targets of the UN General Assembly's development agendas, namely the Sustainable Development Goals 2016-2030.¹ The policies of this agenda confuse the understanding of women's empowerment as well as the initiatives of diverse countries to empower women, because such policies represent narrow aspects of feminist view to women's empowerment by focusing on economic growth, the provision of opportunities, and access to resources, rather than evaluating the outcomes they bring in women's lives (Esquivel, 2016; Kabeer, 2016).²

In April 2016 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced a new socio-economic development plan named 'Vision 2030', which is led by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman ('Saudi Arabia announces "Vision 2030"', 2016; Vision 2030, 2016). Seeking economic growth, Vision 2030 welcomes women to contribute in the economic and social development of the country and promises them equal opportunities: "our economy will provide opportunities for everyone - men and women, young and old - so they may contribute to the best of their abilities" (*Vision 2030*, 2016, p.37). It also describes Saudi women as a "great asset" and targets to increase women's labour market participation to reach 30%. Since then female employment opportunities have expanded into nearly all domains of employment.

¹ See (Esquivel, 2016; 'Sustainable Development Goals', 2016; UN, 2015). Formerly SDG named as Millennium Development Goals ('Goal 5: Gender equality', n.d., 'Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women.', n.d.).

² "Efforts at empowering women must be especially cognizant of the implications of broader policy action at the household level" (Malhotra et al., 2002, p.5).

Nevertheless, the situation of women has not been very favourable in the past. Since the development of the Saudi Kingdom in the 1970s, women have experienced marginalisation in all domains, both public and domestic. Notably, Saudi women have experienced extensive economic marginalisation. Their employment opportunities had been restricted to certain sex segregated fields in public sector services, education, health care and banking ladies services (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 1999, 2001; Le Renard, 2008).³ Women's economic marginalisation in Saudi Arabia is attributed to two main factors: the abundance of oil wealth,⁴ and the *Wahhabi* religious establishment's control over social and legal matters which enforced patriarchal norms and practices in the laws and in society.⁵

On the one hand, generous oil revenues secured the necessary foreign labour and eliminated the need for women's employment. On the other hand, the interpretation and the application of Islamic laws in Saudi Arabia encompassed customary norms and rules. Consequently, social rules and legal rights imposed women's role as homemakers and care givers, obligated sex segregation in all facets of the public sphere, confined women to their male guardian's permission in all aspects of life, restricted their mobility with the ban on driving, and limited their economic activities and work opportunities.⁶

All these factors have cemented the status of women as inferior to men, limited women's roles and contributions to the public sphere, and in general constrained their choices in life (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 1999, 2003; Jamjoom, 2010; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Metcalfe, 2011; Pharaon, 2004; Le Renard, 2008; Sultan et al., 2011). In particular, these restrictions have contributed to their extremely low employment rate. Statistics from the World Bank show that until 2009 women's labour force participation comprises only 14% of total labour force in Saudi Arabia ('Female Labor Force Participation: Saudi Arabia', 2016). Other sources point to lower rates, indicating that female labour participation was just 7% in 2009 (Abdel-Ghaffar, 2013; The Ministry of Labour, 2009). Moreover, amongst 128 countries in the world, Saudi Arabia ranked as the 127th regarding the gap between men and women's economic participation and opportunities (Hausmann et al., 2007), while Gulf and other Arab countries ranked higher despite cultural and religious similarities (Sidani, 2005; Zuhur, 2003).⁷ Therefore, empowering

³ Employment here means economic participation through having a paid job in the labour market.

⁴ See Al-Khateeb, 1998; Haghighat, 2013; Le Renard, 2008; Moghadam, 2011; Rajkhan, 2014; Sultan et al., 2011.

⁵ See Al-Rasheed, 2013; Commins, 2009; Doumato, 2001, 2003; Fatany, 2013; Jamjoom, 2010; Hammond, 2012; Meijer et al., 2012; Pharaon, 2004; Thompspon, 2015; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004; Vogel, 2011.

⁶ Unemployment impacts the individuals' earnings, as well as their "social cohesion and dignity" (Alghamdi, 2018, p.12).

⁷ Kuwait ranked No. 80, Jordan No. 110, Qatar No. 115, U.A.E No. 119, Egypt No. 120 (Hausmann et al., 2007).

Saudi women via access to larger opportunities of employment, has been a core debate to the question of Saudi women's status (Alghamdi, 2018; Doumato, 2001; Fatany, 2009, 2013; Smith & Abouammoh, 2013).

Nevertheless, since the former King Abdullah Al-Saud came into power in 2005 change has been underway for women (Al-Seghayer, 2015; Fatany, 2013; Thompson, 2015). With reference to employment, he introduced several nationwide reforms aimed at expanding the presence of women in the workforce. These include, amongst others, the introduction of an annual international scholarship program to women in all academic fields for all levels of degrees (Abdel-Ghaffar, 2013; Al-Seghayer, 2015; Fatany, 2009, 2013), and the introduction of series of employment regulations since 2010 to expand Saudi women's opportunities in various fields of the labour market (*Back to Work in a New Economy...*, 2015). Women were allowed to work in law and financial firms, industrial factories, business and trading companies, and in sales and services stores. Their employment was further supported with various labour programs and initiatives from the Ministry of Labour.⁸ These included:

- Compulsory Saudi feminisation of specific jobs such as sales in women's supply stores.
- Funding a percentage of newly employed Saudi females' salaries to assist with covering the cost of training and hiring (HRDF).
- Enforcing quotas on businesses to employ Saudi nationals and women in particular (Nitaqat).

As a result, there has been a considerable expansion in women employment opportunities in the national labour market. According to the Ministry of Labour, these initiatives have created more than 65,000 jobs for women in three years (Alhamri, 2014; Arabnews, 2014). The World Bank indicates that female labour market participation in Saudi Arabia have increased from 14.08% in 2009 to 15.23% in 2014 ('Female Labour Force Participation: Saudi Arabia', 2016).⁹ As per other indicators, it increased to reach 19% in 2013 (Abdel-Ghaffar, 2013; The Ministry of Labor, 2013). In general, Saudi women have reached an unprecedented level of visibility in the public sphere. Some of them even managed to reach executive positions (Fatany, 2009, 2013; Thompson, 2015), especially after the announcement of Vision 2030.¹⁰

⁸ See *Back To Work in a New Economy*, 2015; Rajkhan, 2014; 'Human Resources Development Fund', 2016.

⁹ According to Elimam et al. (2014) it increased from 15.8% in 2008 to 16.5% in 2012.

¹⁰ For examples, Reema bint Bandar the first Saudi female ambassador (Mackenzie, 2019), Maram Qokandi a general manager of hotels chain ('The First Saudi Women as a General Manager, 2017), and Sarah Alsuheimi the CEO of a leading Saudi Bank (Alarabiya News, 2017).

However, this research is interested in whether these reforms have done more than simply increase Saudi women's participation in the national labour market, namely whether they fostered the development and practice of Saudi women's agency as one of the main components of empowerment. The next paragraph clarifies the relationship between women's employment and empowerment, before moving forward to discuss and clarify agency as part of empowerment.

The efforts of feminist researchers and activists, governmental and non-governmental organisations, and practitioners of international development to realise women's empowerment were directed toward the provision of women with equal opportunities to men in social recognition, education, healthcare, labour market benefits and in political representation (Beck, 2017; Cornwall & Rivas; 2015; Hausmann et al., 2007, Kabeer, 2005; Mandal, 2013; 'Millennium Development Goals', n.d.; Rai, 2018). With regard to female employment, developmental agendas aim to increase women's participation in the labour market on the basis that it provides them with higher status and better access to various material and immaterial resources (Rai, 2018; Visvanthan & Rai, 2011). Despite the validity of developmental plans and studies that insist on employment as being key in order to overcome gender inequality and to attain women's empowerment,¹¹ the assumption that access to employment will enable women's agency and empower them is a complex one and depends on various overlapping factors.¹² In brief these can be divided into 1) the legal and social structure of opportunity and constraints, and 2) the influence of external factors such as the economic situation of the country or the individual, and 3) the understanding of empowerment and its components.

To illustrate further, even though financial autonomy and accessibility to the advantages that the labour markets offer are necessary tools for women to acquire greater independence and recognition, the access and control of resources and benefits are significantly regulated by the social relation structure and the cultural value system in particular communities (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Kabeer, 2005; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013; Wolf, 2011). Equally, formal laws which regulate employment and control personal status advantages have an impact on the extent to which women can benefit from the opportunity of employment to foster their agency and be more empowered (Benstead, 2016; Kabeer et al., 2016; Miles, 2016a; Moghadam, 2011; Spierings et al., 2010). This is why examining this relationship

¹¹ Ample of research and developmental projects focus on microcredits programs for achieving women's empowerment in developing countries, see (Abouguendia, 2006; Al-Shami et al., 2013; Danish & Smith, 2012; Drolet, 2005; Strier, 2010).

¹² For more details refer to Chapter 3 section 3.3.2.2.

requires scrutinising the structural constraints and opportunities within the particular society under study. In particular, various researchers have emphasised the difficulty of asserting the ability of employment (as a resource) to expand women's agency and their empowerment, especially within a patriarchal society (Bespinar, 2010; Haghghat, 2013; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Kabeer, 2005, 2016; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Marcotte, 2010).

Furthermore, women's empowerment in different developing countries and other Arab countries can be determined by different influential external factors that do not necessarily affect Saudi Arabia, such as harsh poverty and famine, severe illiteracy, and female genital mutilation.¹³ In the same manner, the variation in the financial situation of different women, and their attribution to a certain social class, means that employment impacts their practice of agency and their acquirement of empowerment differently. Additionally, the division of domestic responsibility and employment type are other considerable factors to fostering women's agency and empowerment via employment (Bespinar, 2010; Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005; Sholkamy, 2014).

Finally, a reflective observation of the meaning and components of empowerment might reveal the complexity regarding its link to agency and employment. Employment is understood as one of the main resources of empowerment, and as an asset of agency; both access and control of resources and exercising agency are central constituents of women empowerment (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005). This research draws upon Naila Kabeer's interpretation of empowerment as the process of change and gaining the power to exercise choice, achieve desired outcomes and direct one's life (Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 1999, 2005).¹⁴ To her, empowerment begins from within, and integrates having access and control of resources, together with the practice of purposeful agency, and the achievement of goals.

To illustrate further, resources are monetary and non-monetary tools that enable the practice of agency, such as skills, knowledge, well-being and income. Accordingly, employment is classified as a resource of empowerment. Agency, however, is putting a purposeful choice into act, and it involves challenging the constraints that face this choice in the prevailing social structure or within the hierarchy of gendered power relation (Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005, 1999). In her view, agency that is empowering is "transformative", and entails the occurrence of

¹³ See 'Demographic Health Surveys', n.d.; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Sholkamy, 2014; World Economic Forum, 2015; Yemen National Health and Demographic survey, 2015; Zuhur, 2003, 2011.

¹⁴ I use Kabeer's definition of empowerment as a basis of analysing agency, yet I followed Alsop and Heinsohn's framework explained later in this chapter as an approach to investigate agency.

change in: 1) consciousness, to question subordination and injustice, and 2) in the patriarchal structural limitations (Kabeer, 2005, 2011; Kabeer et.al, 2016).¹⁵

While adopting this understanding of empowerment, it becomes clear that widening opportunities of female employment is only one tool, amongst others that can foster agency by helping women to acquire more decision-making abilities to achieve their purposes and gain control over their life (Kabeer, 2005, 2011; Kabeer et.al, 2016). In addition, there are other influences to take into consideration in this sequence. Most importantly, there is the social structure, which includes norms and laws that regulate the distribution of resources and benefits in the society. Accordingly, it either facilitates women's practice of agency and achievements or restricts it (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Kabeer, 2005; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Wolf, 2011). Therefore it is inadequate to evaluate women's empowerment only by looking at measurable indicators such as rates of literacy and labour market participation, and neglect women's agency as part of the empowerment process. Rather the analysis should focus on the limitations within the socio-cultural surroundings, so as to identify which elements of empowerment are more important to particular women (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Haghghat, 2013; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Kabeer, 2005; Malhotra, 2003; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Moghadam & Senftova, 2005; Nikkhah et al., 2012). While some international statistical reports that focus on women's quantitative growth, such as the Global Gender Gap and the UN Human Development, include information on Women in Saudi Arabia (Jahan & United Nations Development Programme, 2015; *The Global Gender Gap Report*, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2016),¹⁶ profound qualitative and contextual analysis of Saudi women's agency and empowerment through employment is lacking (Benstead, 2016; Elimam et al., 2014; Jamjoom, 2010; Le Renard, 2008).

Thus, this research focuses on two aspects of empowerment: resources (represented in employment) and agency (Figure 1). This choice is motivated by the fact that a number of research have criticised the Saudi society for being patriarchal, in a way that negatively influences various aspects of women's life, in particular their capacity to make purposeful decisions; which is a major inequality in power between men and women (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 1999; 2001; 2003; Fatany, 2009; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Pharaon, 2004; Le Renard, 2008; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Furthermore, previous research that examined Saudi

¹⁵ See Chapter 3 (3.2.1.1) for a detailed explanation of Kabeer's understanding of agency.

¹⁶ Demographic Health Surveys are available for most developing countries and look at different aspects of women's empowerment, however it is not available for Saudi Arabia. See: <https://dhsprogram.com/data/available-datasets.cfm>. Also, the ILO's website shows global gender equality in women's employment, but it does not provide information on Saudi Arabia, although it provides it for surrounding Arab countries such as: Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, and Oman ('Explore the Gender Labour Gap ...', 2016).

women's rights, their positioning and status of power; have pointed to the limited opportunities of employment as a main obstacle for their independence and as a key area of gender inequality in the country (Alfarran et al., 2018; Daghistani, 2007; Doumato, 1999; 2001; Fatany, 2009; Hammond, 2012; Jamjoom, 2010; *The Global Gender Gap*, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2016). It was only after 2010 that Saudi women had the opportunity to work in a variety of employment options; therefore, it was not possible to fully examine aspects of empowerment prior to that, as the issue of limited female's employment opportunities will always arise. The reforms of employment regulations since 2010 and the recent national policies encouraging Saudi female employment prompted this research to explore how these are viewed and experienced by different women with regard to agency.

1.2 Knowledge Gap

Although employment opportunities for Saudi women have expanded, and data about quantitative indicators of empowerment resources are available, information on their agency remains lacking. In fact, very limited research has examined Saudi women's choices, and they explored the choices of appearance and education not employment (Quamar, 2016; Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013; Yakaboski et al., 2017). Broadly, academic research on Saudi women's employment are dated prior to the reforms discussing women's social and economic marginalisation,¹⁷ while more recent research adopts quantitative approaches and discuss employment with reference to education or economic development only.¹⁸ Others research explores men and managers' perceptions regarding women's work, neglecting the opinion of women (Bursztyn et al., 2018; Calvert & Al-Shetaiwi, 2002; Elamin & Omair, 2010). There exist some exceptions of qualitative studies of Saudi women's employment, yet they focus on leadership but not agency (Al-Ahmadi, 2011; Hodges, 2017; Thompson, 2015).

All this calls for contextual research reflecting upon the expansion of women's employment in Saudi Arabia and reevaluating it as a means for fostering the exercise of agency of Saudi women. Contextual and qualitative information can be useful in matching the statistical reports on Saudi women and their employment with the social reality of their ability to make purposeful choices.

¹⁷ For examples, see Alkhateeb, 1987; Doumato, 1999; Fatany, 2009; Le Renard, 2008; Miller-Rosser, Chapman, & Francis Karen, 2006; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004; 'Arab Barometer: Saudi Arabia', 2011.

¹⁸ See Alghamedi, 2016; Baki, 2004; Calvert & Al-Shetaiwi, 2002; Doumato, 2001; Elimam, et al., 2014; Miller-Rosser et al., 2006; Nasseef, 2004; Riedy, 2013; Saqib, Aggarwal, & Rashid, 2016; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004.

This particular analysis is unprecedented for Saudi women, although it has been examined in many different Arab and developing countries.¹⁹

1.3 The Research Objectives and Question

In the light of the discussion above, this research seeks to explore Saudi women's agency, an essential component of empowerment, after the reforms expanding their employment opportunities. It attempts to do so by shedding light on their perceptions and experiences regarding employment (or non-employment) interlinked with their practice of agency, understood as the capacity to actively make purposeful decisions. It aims to understand the dynamics of fostering agency via employment by gaining bottom-up qualitative data from Saudi women, and to explore the influences and limitations of expanding employment opportunities on their agency. It endeavours to obtain information on the effects of employment reforms through the eyes of Saudi women as the main beneficiaries, and to explore ideas on the usefulness of employment as a means to develop agency as part of empowerment according to a segment of women who have never been given the chance to express their opinion in this regard.

In particular this research explores: how do Saudi women perceive employment 1) enabling them with greater agency, and 2) loosening limitations on their agency within their social structure.

Placing women and their experiences individually and collectively at the centre of the analysis, this project aims to gain nuanced insights into lived realities, moving beyond stereotypes of either oppressed or pampered ladies that media coverage of Saudi women is often subjected to. It aspires to provide a space where the voices of these traditionally invisible and previously marginalised women can be heard,²⁰ acknowledged and evaluated in order to gain meaningful insights into the specific implications of women's employment on enhancing agency as a main component of empowerment.

In taking a specific and in depth focus, this research gains a well-rounded understanding of Saudi women's exercise of agency, shedding light on the complexity of the social structure and

¹⁹ See Alriyami, Afifi, & Mabry, 2016; Dildar, 2015; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Marcotte, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2015; Sadaquat & Sheikh, 2011; Sholkamy, 2014; Wolf, 2011.

²⁰ As Al Munajjed clarifies "Saudi women are misunderstood, misconceived, and distorted in much of the Western media" (Al Munajjed, 2006, p.33).

gendered power relations within the Saudi society. A society that has been governed by patriarchal norms and laws for a long period, which justifies the research's focus on a main factor of Saudi women's long-standing marginalisation and lack of agency. Such examination addresses an important knowledge gap and complements the existing statistics on Saudi women, the previous studies on their employment where their perspective is missing, and the limited research on their agency and empowerment.

1.4 Research Design and Methodology

To address the twofold research question, this research takes a constructivist stance and employs qualitative ethnographic methods to collect the data. In keeping with the research aim, although this research is not a typical ethnographic work, qualitative ethnographic methods are particularly useful when data on the topic is lacking, and for gaining and understanding in-depth information, detailed insights, and bottom-up data. Furthermore, it is specifically beneficial to comprehending the different aspects related to women's agency and non-measurable attributes of empowerment.²¹ More importantly, the chosen method allows accentuating the voice and the perspectives of Saudi women, which is a main objective of this research.

Empirically, to gain in-depth contextual information, I collected data by conducting ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, as well as semi-structured individual and group interviews of 47 Saudi women who vary in age, social class, marital status, unemployment and employment status and sectors. The informants were selected based on purposive theoretical sampling.

In order to learn about Saudi women's agency this research benefits from recognised international surveys of DHS and the UN, which include indicators of women's empowerment components.²² The purpose was to identify strategic decisions and evaluate the women's practice of agency by asking how and why they make those choices (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013). Theoretically, to inquire about agency with the structure of opportunity and constraints, the study partly applies Alsop and Heinsohn's (2005)

²¹ See Adato, 2008; Bartlett, 2013; Enck & McDaniel, 2015; Fisher, 2012; Hausner, 2006; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013; Schuler & Rottach, 2010; Tsikata & Darkwah, 2014. Chapter 5 elaborates on the suitability for using the chosen methods.

²² See *Egypt Demographic Health Survey*, 2014, *The Global Gender Gap Report*, 2017, *Yemen National Health...*, 2015; Jahan & United Nations Development Programme, 2015.

framework, which evaluates empowerment qualitatively, based on Naila Kabeer's definition (Figure 1).

The original framework is a proposal for the World Bank and covers diverse aspects, domains, and levels of empowerment. This research uses it only to gather information and assess the opportunity of employment as a resource of empowerment, the agency of women, and the limitations and advantages of the structure. This entails asking if an opportunity to make a choice exists (to inquire about the availability of the opportunity or the resource), and if the participant acts upon choice and takes the opportunity (to inquire about agency). Moreover, to ask what were the influences on their choices, and whether the participant faced any legal or social limitations to act upon the choice? This framework matched the position of this research to analyse employment and agency (in the process of empowerment) in a holistic manner, by examining the opportunity structure and power relation, besides the accumulation of material and non-material assets (Cornwall, 2016, Kabeer, 2011, Kabeer et al., 2016). These aspects have been taken into consideration to examine the topic, interpret the data and produce the findings of this study. However, the analysis relied on Naila Kabeer's explanation of agency besides considering other understandings of agency. Regardless, methodologically the analysis of the collected data was thematic analysis.

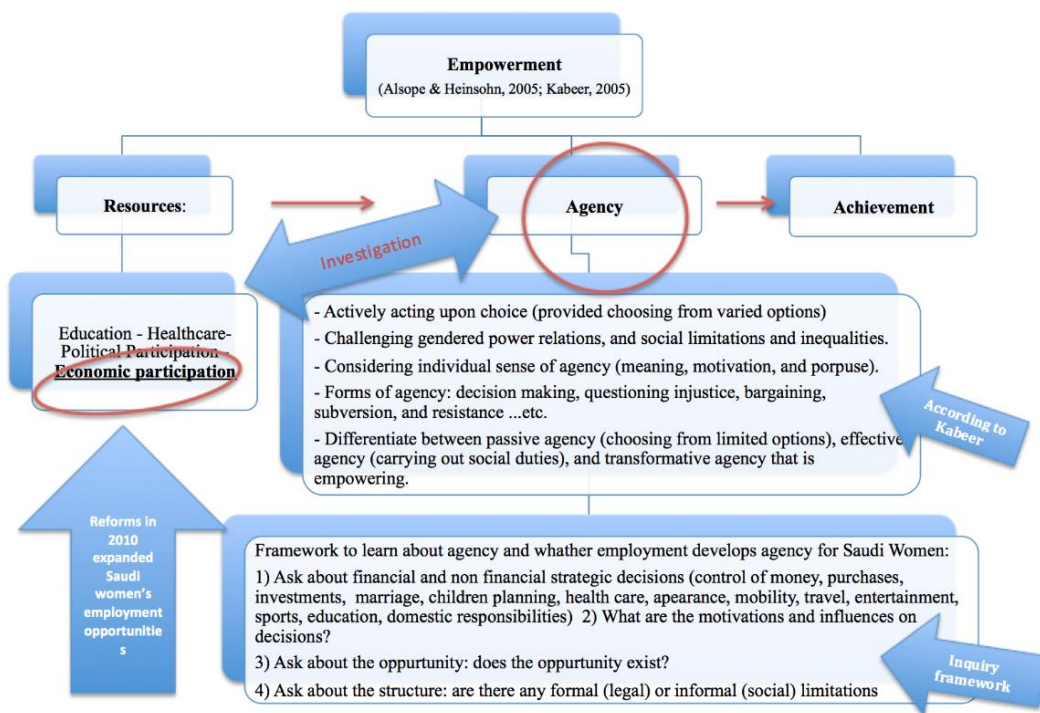


Figure 1: Rationale and Framework

Source: Author

1.5 Research Findings and Contributions

This research provides a profound understanding of employment as a resource to enable women with greater agency in the process of empowerment, in a particular society, with a particular social structure, that has never been previously studied from this perspective. It distinguished five ways in which employment has helped Saudi women acquire or develop agency. These include: 1) compensating for the flaws of previous education; a significant finding of this research, 2) offering exposure to real life experiences hampered by segregation and limited freedom of mobility, 3) awakening women's 'power within', represented in self-confidence, self-worth, bargaining abilities, and ambition 4) allowing financial independence and security, 5) forwarding change in society and the public perception in favour of women. Furthermore, the analysis identified and explained five conditions for employment to enable women's agency as per the informant's experiences: 1) the control of earnings, 2) help with domestic responsibilities, 3) the support of a family member, 4) possessing or developing inner strength, and 5) having motives. Over all, the findings listed thus far allow us to understand the process through which the opportunity of employment translates into larger agency, and explore assets of agency according to Saudi women. In addition, the final part of the findings addressed broad external influences on fostering agency by access to employment that affect women in society more generally such as the socio-cultural environment surrounding women, their financial situation, and the laws regulating women's employment in Saudi Arabia.

This thesis makes a key contribution to knowledge by addressing a research gap, accessing a particular sample in country where research access is limited as well as providing an original analytical contribution. In addition, this research contributes with recommendations for national policies and global development strategies targeting women's empowerment. More specifically, this research contributes to knowledge by attempting to fill an important gap in the existing literature on women's agency and Saudi women's employment. In addition, this study introduces data on Saudi women, a segment that is difficult to reach and considered to be reserved with regards to sharing information about their personal experiences, and located in a country where research access is difficult.²³ Furthermore, the gathered data distinguish this study from the majority of research on agency and empowerment which provides information on rural areas or impoverished women, whilst this study is located in Jeddah, the second largest city in oil-rich

²³ See Alfarran et al., 2018; Hodges, 2017; Meijer et a., 2012.

Saudi Arabia.²⁴

Analytically, this research moved beyond the simple application of an existing framework; it combined Naila Kabeer's understanding of agency with Alsop and Heinsohn's framework of studying empowerment. Moreover, the analysis provided situates this research as interdisciplinary between the fields of feminism, political economy and international development, increasing the significance of its contribution. A further particularity of this analysis is that it does not consider every part of the norms or gender roles disempowering or influencing women's agency negatively. The accounts of researchers that completely oppose customs and social norms overlook their benefits to women. Despite this study's reliance on Naila Kabeer's understanding of agency, the findings go beyond Kabeer's interpretation of agency by not treating social norms as constraints in all cases. It respects women's views regarding social arrangements when they consider them as benefits or supportive to their agency, and embraces agency as embedded in practices and values (Charrad, 2011; Korteweg, 2008).

Finally, by bringing forward the narratives of Saudi women, this research can be instrumental to providing bottom-up recommendations for local and international policies aimed at women's empowerment. At the national level, by focusing the investigation on women's employment this research examined a recent public policy and a new political direction that attempt to enlarge women's inclusion and participation in the public sphere. Although Vision 2030 does not explicitly include women's empowerment amongst its goals, it aims to increase women's economic participation and improve the quality of life in Saudi Arabia for all individuals as main goals of the 'National Transformation Program' of this vision. It clearly attempts to increase the number of women in leading positions, and encourages them to seek out an active role in society. The findings of this study inform the Saudi government with a number of factors that make women's employment advantageous to advance their empowerment. In addition, they can inspire future initiatives and policies to target women's empowerment in parallel with economic development.

Also, by learning about the Saudi experience, this research can help to understand more about the advantages and flaws of current international attempts to increase women's empowerment

²⁴ Saudi Arabia is considered a world economic power, and it is the second largest Arab country in space after Algeria (Sallam, 2013). "The GDP in Saudi Arabia was worth 683.83 billion US dollars in 2017" representing 1.10% of the world economy ('Saudi Arabia GDP', 2017).

via increased economic participation, even if the findings represent a small-n in-depth case study. In fact, the findings relate to number of the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals seeking to progress women's empowerment,²⁵ such as introducing reforms to ensure women equal rights to economic resources, recognising the value of domestic work and promoting the share of responsibilities, and offering public services, infra structure and social protection. This research provides qualitative fieldwork information regarding these aspects amongst others for the case of Saudi Arabia. In so doing, it also responds to the invitation of the World Bank study "On Norms and Agency" for more qualitative investigation of agency in different countries (Munoz Boudet et al., 2013).

1.6 The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is broadly divided into two parts - the first is theoretical and the second is empirical- and comprises nine chapters in total (this chapter being is the first).

Chapter 2 presents a general feminist analysis of gender roles and patriarchy, and reveals how they produce women's marginalization and inferiority, and constrain their power and choices. It reviews relevant feminist scholarship and highlights feminists' input into the fields of political economy and development. Most importantly, it clarifies how women's employment and their economic participation have become central to the global quest of women's empowerment. The chapter provides an essential opening to review the core literature in the following chapter.

Chapter 3 assesses the literature on the concept of women's empowerment, and discusses its domains and indicators. It justifies the choice of adopting Naila Kabeer's definitions of 'empowerment' and 'agency'. Furthermore, it makes an argument for the importance of considering gender norms, opportunities, and constraints of the particular social structure under study, whilst examining empowerment in general and agency in particular. Moreover, this chapter introduces the framework which this research followed to inquire into Saudi women's agency and their perceptions on employment as an asset of agency. In addition, it reviews research which scrutinises employment as a means for developing agency and fostering empowerment, and it underlines the factors that influence the success or the failure of this relation. Finally, the chapter reviews studies on Saudi women's employment and/or agency, and demonstrates their limitations and the gap filled by this research.

²⁵ See Esquivel, 2016; 'Sustainable Development Goals', 2016; 'Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women.', n.d.

Chapter 4 offers an in-depth analysis of both social and legal constraints, and opportunities of the context surrounding Saudi women, based on secondary research. It demonstrates the determinants of their lack of agency, and their social and economic marginalisation (the structure of constraints). Furthermore, the chapter discusses the reforms introduced since the former King Abdullah Al-Saud, which gradually changed the situation for women in Saudi Arabia. In particular, the discussion focuses on the development and the reforms of female employment opportunities. In other words, it examines the structure of opportunity.

Chapter 5 establishes the methodological approach of this inductive, qualitative research, and justifies the decision to employ ethnographic methods for data collection. It provides details on the tools utilised for gaining data: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Moreover, it clarifies how thematic analysis was implemented to analyse the data, and also outlines the challenges and the limitations of adopting this research method.

Chapter 6 discusses the first part of the findings. It outlines the five ways by which employment allows the agency of Saudi women to grow and how employment reduces some of the social constraints on agency that are particular to the Saudi context. To rationalise these findings, the chapter relates them to Naila Kabeer's reflections on agency as well as other relevant studies.

Chapter 7 completes the discussion of the findings related to fostering agency via employment. It distinguishes and explains the five conditions or key enablers for Saudi women to acquire or develop agency by employment. In addition to comparing the finding to corresponding research, the chapter illustrates how those aspects serve in fostering Saudi women's agency, and why their deficiency can hinder the practice or development of agency.

Chapter 8 contextualizes the findings in the "opportunity structure" of female employment in Saudi Arabia. It draws out three significant external influences on women's agency in relation to employment as per participants. These are the social surrounding, the financial situation, and the laws and regulations of employment.

Chapter 9 concludes revisiting the findings and the main arguments. It reviews the contributions of this research, their implications for policy and practice, and includes recommendations for future research as well as an overview of the study's limitations.

Chapter 2: Gender and Women's Empowerment from Feminism to Global Development

2.1 Introduction

This chapter covers feminist scholarship, which relate to this research examining Saudi women's agency interlinked with expanding employment opportunities as a resource of empowerment.²⁶ Feminism is a political and a philosophical movement dedicated to ending sexist oppression (Hirschmann, 2003; Kemp & Squires, 1997). It focuses on analysing gender power relations that have been socially constructed based on acknowledging differences between sex and gender (Kemp & Squires, 1997; Krook & Childs, 2010). Critically engaging with relevant broad debates of feminist scholars regarding gender inequality and women in patriarchal societies is a significant beginning; to clarify the concept of empowerment and agency in relation to women's work for various reasons.

Feminist theories include extensive reasoning behind women's inequality issues regarding their position of power, in addition to their struggles and barriers to achieve empowerment, which can provide a solid grounding for understanding means of empowerment (such as employment) and their implications on different women and their agency (Johnson, 2005; Lindsey, 2016; Moghadam, 2007; O'Reilly, 2010; Scanlon, 2009; Snyder-hall, 2010). Firstly, in general feminist scholars scrutinised gender relations and have emphasised how patriarchal norms and values assign women an inferior position of power to men domestically and publicly across societies, which limit their practice of agency and attainment of empowerment (Johnson, 2005; Kandiyoti, 1988; Lindsey, 2016; Moi, 1997).²⁷ Furthermore, the acknowledgement of women's rights, their participation in the public sphere, and their role in employment were the key requests put forward by feminist movements for women's emancipation; aiming to end sexism and beat patriarchal norms belittling women's existence, abilities and choices (Jule, 2008; Kemp & Squires, 1997; Lindsey, 2016). These requests later became international indicators of

²⁶ Feminism is a broad theory comprising diverse mainstreams. In this chapter the use of the term feminists refers broadly to researchers under the umbrella of feminism, it doesn't suggest the attribution to a particular school, or that all feminists constitute one group.

²⁷ In the literature of women's empowerment this is understood as gender related structure of constraints (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 2011, 2016).

women's level of empowerment.²⁸ Feminists' analyses of gender have inspired policymakers and international organisations concerned with gender inequality, and they were included in developmental agendas to empower women around the globe (Beck, 2017; Parpart et al., 2003; Peterson, 2005; Visvanthan et al., 2011; Sato, 2008; Struckmann, 2018). Finally, related feminist literature embraces women's differences in their cultural backgrounds, desires and circumstances (Bowden & Mummery, 2014; Hirschmann, 2003; Jackson, 1998; Kemp & Squires, 1997; Lykke, 2010; Walby, 1990). These feminist discussions are necessary for outlining the specific determinants of women's empowerment in a particular society, hence they are significant to understanding and theorising how employment can provide Saudi women -in particular- with greater agency; a central component of empowerment.

The chapter begins with feminist analysis of gender roles and patriarchy in order to elucidate how culturally embedded beliefs and practices contribute to women's inferiority to men, and how they restrain women's choices and power. This part includes an overview of gender roles and patriarchy, the characteristic of patriarchal societies focusing on Arab countries, and the consequences of such social norms on women's positioning. The following part engages with broad feminist deliberates that relate to this research topic and demonstrates aspects of relevance. It highlights related feminist ideas which evolved from demanding equality between men and women in rights and opportunities in western societies to recognise the diversity of local women's views and experiences regarding women's issues around the globe including Intersectional, and Muslim feminism.

After that feminist research in the fields of political economy and development will be accentuated, in order to illustrate how women's work and their economic participation became fundamental to the discussion and the pursuit of women's empowerment today. This discussion begins with feminist scholars' explanations of the link between the household and the labour market, how women's domestic activities contribute to the economy, and how their rights and opportunities in the public sphere influence their choices and their bargaining power in the household. The final section examines women's empowerment inclusion in development agendas, clarifying how in the beginning it relied on utilitarian approach, which focused on measurable indicators of women's access to opportunities. Then it developed to include targeting long-term achievements, comprehensive analysis of women and gender relations, and changing embedded patriarchal norms, an approach that this research embraces.

²⁸ See Kabeer, 2005; Mandal, 2013; The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017, 'Women's Empowerment Principles', 2010.

2.2 Gender Roles and Patriarchy: Key Concepts in Feminism

2.2.1 An overview of Gender Roles

Distinguishing between gender and sex is an important preliminary clarification to comprehend gender roles and their implication in determining women's positioning, abilities, and choices in a society. In numerous societies, the biological belonging to a certain sex destines the individual for a certain gender, which implies a predetermined sociocultural gender identity and a pre-given place in the hierarchical gender order of society. Therefore, there has been a common confusion between the words gender and sex, which feminist researchers worked to clarify by arguing that gender and sex are different and must not be related to one another (Kemp & Squires, 1997). They maintained that claiming the existence of women's nature according to their biological bodies reinforced 'women' as social category, and hence tied them to certain undermining gender roles (Jule, 2008; Kemp & Squires, 1997; Krook & Childs, 2010). In relation to this research topic, the importance of this discussion relies on understanding how determining gender roles according to sex created a division between labour in the private and the public spheres. Accordingly, women were tied to the domestic role; thereby they were economically dependent on men, and inferior to them socially and legally.

To illustrate, traditionally due to their reproductive ability the common role attributed to women is caring, and hence they are associated with domestic activities related to their role as mothers. Patriarchal societies subject women to that role arguing that being a mother is the nature of every woman (Jarvie et al., 2015; O'Reilly, 2010). Women's alignment with domestic activities because of their maternal nature is harmful for them, as it leaves them subjected to never-ending amount of work that is undervalued, and constrains them to ideal standards that are unachievable (O'Reilly, 2010). Men, on the other hand are characterised as breadwinners for their physical strength, which entitled them to work outside the house and earn money, accordingly they are assigned a higher authority by controlling finances and setting the rules of the house (Johnson, 2005; Perrone et al., 2009).

Asserting and maintaining these gender roles allocated men a higher level of power over women leading to gender inequality,²⁹ which feminists have continuously clarified and challenged.³⁰ In other words, feminists theorists denied that care giving is the nature of women, or that women being inferior to men is acceptable (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). For example, Allyson Jules asserted that women's subordination is a result of gender inequality, she stated that males and their associated roles have set the determinants of being a female, which in turn gives way to male dominance over women (Jule, 2008). This statement is important to consider when carrying out analysis of women's empowerment because it shed lights on the origin of women's lack of power.

Feminist analysis further underlined a key issue regarding gender roles and the division of labour. They clarified that gendered predefined roles are maintained and reproduced through a social processes known as social construction (Hirschmann, 2003; Kemp & Squires, 1997; Moser, 2012). Asserting that gender is a socially constructed concept of women and men, illuminated how it determines their tasks, functions, and roles both in the public and the private life (Kemp & Squires, 1997; Krook & Childs, 2010). Furthermore, it explained how these roles are reproduced continuously and preserved at different levels of social formation; political, economic, cultural and religious, interpreting the cause of unequal opportunities available for men and women in the public sphere (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010b; Juschka, 2014; Segal, 2008). This explanation prompts the analysis of formal and informal structures of constraints and opportunities as part of examining women's agency and empowerment, as the next chapter will elaborate.

Altogether, in different societies women are commonly attributed to roles or characteristics that are considered inferior to those of men (Krook & Childs, 2010; Moghadam, 2007). As a result of these attribution women have endured an inferior status, limited access to opportunities of material and non-material resources, a lower ranking in society, and consequently less decision

²⁹ International organisations such as the World Bank and the UN evaluate gender inequality by capturing differences between men and women in education, poverty, health (life expectancy, maternity care, and psychological wellbeing), social attributes (marriage, housework and leisure), legal rights, work and economic participation, and political representation. Women's global status appears to be inferior to men in all areas of concern (Department of Economic and Social Affairs in UN, 2015; UN Women, 2015; UNDP, 2015; UNIFEM & Goetz, 2008; World Bank, 2012).

³⁰ Gender inequality began with agrarian societies and the division of private-public labour, in contrast with gathering-hunting societies where women were economically sufficient from their role as gatherers (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010b).

making authority and control over life matters.³¹ These societies are described by feminists as “Patriarchal” and will be discussed in the following section.

2.2.2 Understanding Patriarchy: Focus on the Middle East

Patriarchy is the most essential concept feminists have inspected under gender analysis (Kandiyoti, 1988), and it remains core to the examination of Saudi women’s empowerment. The reason for this is because the Saudi society is classified as patriarchal, and patriarchy is argued to be the main constraint in the face of women’s empowerment (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 2001; Elamin & Omair, 2010; Haghigat, 2013; Joseph, 2010; Moghadam, 2007; Spierings, 2014). Feminist theory depicts patriarchy as an oppressive system that enforces gender roles including any social mechanisms that reinforces male dominance over women (Walby, 1990). It clarifies that males’ dominance that is rooted in the culture, whereby men hold primary power and control over women and resources; and therefore outweigh women in social privileges and legal rights (Haghigat, 2013; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010b, Johnson, 2005). In the private sphere, fathers hold authority over women and children, while in the public sphere they also control positions of authority in all domains (Haghigat, 2013; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010b). Hence, in patriarchy men possess both social and legal power.

Arab countries in particular are classified under the “classic patriarchy” (Kandiyoti, 1988; Moghadam, 2004; Spierings, 2014). Such societies are characterised by the extended (three-generation) family,³² of which elder men hold ultimate power over the rest. Young women and children are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy, and are subservient to men and older women as well. Conjointly, the head of the family also controls joint economic resources such as money, land, and animals. Furthermore, strict gendered division of labour is implemented. In Arab and Muslim families patriarchy is supported by kinship and religious values (Moghadam, 2004; Spierings, 2014). Endogamy marriages are popular and elder men are financially accountable for women and juniors even if they are working. In this family system, senior women have control over domestic affairs and younger women including daughters in law.³³

³¹ See Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 1999, 2010; Elamin & Omair, 2010; Hammond, 2012; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001.

³² Marrying young girls is a characteristic of this society because it is key to building extended families (Haghigat, 2013; Kandiyoti, 1988).

³³ This offer women a form of compensation for their subordination to men (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Therefore, having a son is key for a woman's status and for her exercise of power in the domestic sphere (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Distinctively, in Arab countries the woman's family can exert control and remain a substantial source of financial support to her even after marriage. Another distinctive feature of such families is their high concern with their reputation and honour that are represented in women's preservation of virginity, domesticity, and showing conducts of piety (Haghighat, 2013; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Kandiyoti, 1988; Moghadam, 2004; Spierings, 2014). Therefore, women's choices regarding appearance, behaviours, mobility and social connections are restricted on the basis of preserving honour. Such patriarchal norms have influenced the legal system and regulation to a large extent during the development of the Arab states. In the era of modernity, women's roles remain a symbol of tradition, therefore even governments preserve patriarchal practices through laws and institutions reinforcing women's inferiority (Charrad, 2011; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Moghadam, 2004). Constitutions of these states, like in Saudi Arabia and Morocco,³⁴ stress on the significance of the family as the core of the society, and the laws consider women minors and dependent on men as well. They legally require male's guardianship over women of the family in certain aspects such as marriage, employment and travelling (depending on the country) (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Moghadam, 2004). Only men have the right to divorce with out a reason, and to confer citizenship to their children. In Saudi Arabia for example, the law has controlled the appearance of women according to the norm, and in some countries men receive reduced sentences for committing an honour crime (Moghadam, 2004).³⁵

Consequently, patriarchy affects women's roles, choices, and positioning of power both socially and legally (Elamin & Omair, 2010; Haghighat, 2013; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Kandiyoti, 1988; Moghadam, 2004). Dignity, prestige, and control over economic resources constitute factors of achieving a higher status, which with the existence of such norms women are deprived. By contrast men are associated with valuable characteristics of social privileges. These norms require women in the name of honour and dignity to avoid building a career and to identify themselves and their abilities within the domestic sphere, restraining their options and access to the benefits of the public sphere (Spierings, 2014; Sultan, Weir, & Karake-Shalhoub, 2011). As an indication, the 2004 World Bank's report on gender development in MENA identified the

³⁴ See https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Morocco_2011.pdf and http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sa00000_.html.

³⁵ A women's inferior status socially and legally is reflected by their need to waive their patrimony to their brothers in case they may require support and protection in the future, while tradition and Islam obligate men to support women of the family financially, and offer women inheritance rights (Haghighat, 2013; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Moghadam, 2004).

prevalence of gendered ideology about women's role as a main constraint on their employment.³⁶

In addition, under patriarchal authority women neglect their physical and psychological oppression, and the impression that their lives are dependent on the existence of men controls their actions and preferences (Haghighat, 2013; Joseph, 2010; Kandiyoti, 1988), which influence or inform their agency. The latest demographic health survey for Yemen states that 49% of women accept husbands' beating for various reasons such as refusing to have sex, arguing, or going out without permission.³⁷ With the laws supporting and reinforcing such norms, women in these societies choose to protect the continuity of this social structure regardless of the fact that it's abusive; because their options to choose other paths are restricted by their need for the protection and the support of their families (Kandiyoti, 1988; Zuhur, 2003).³⁸ This point underlines the important influence of such patriarchal values and structures on women's view and practice of agency (Cornwall, 2016; Folbre, 1994; Kabeer, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2016), and it explains why change in gendered power relations and in patriarchal structural constraints are necessary conditions for women's empowerment (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 2005, 2011). Also, the fact that choices could be motivated and practiced differently according to different cultures and circumstances, validates this research interest in comprehensively understanding how particular women viewed and experienced employment as an asset to develop their agency.

In order to explore women's agency as part of empowerment it was therefore necessary to demonstrate the effects of gender norms on women in general, and Arab women in particular, prior to addressing issues regarding women's employment. According to the United Nations reports women's status around the world is unequal to men in all aspects (Department of Economic and Social Affairs in the UN, 2015; UN Women, 2015).³⁹ Albeit women internationally have demonstrated continuous progress in education attainment they remain underrepresented in government seats and managerial positions, in formal employment and in high-paying jobs. The majority of women are working in informal sectors or insecure jobs and receive low income. Furthermore they dedicate a great deal of their time to childcare and housework while men have more time for leisure and formal work (UN Women, 2015; UNIFEM

³⁶ See chapter 4 in (The World Bank, 2004).

³⁷ See *Yemen National Health and Demographic survey*, 2015.

³⁸ Even when the law offers alternative opportunities, maintaining familial relations is considered more important to Arab women (Gallagher, 2007).

³⁹ The reports however indicate progress in adopting maternity leave and anti-sex discrimination at work policies.

& Goetz, 2008; World Bank, 2012).⁴⁰ Until 2013 the MENA region presented the largest gender gap in labour participation and their inheritance laws were classified as the most discriminatory. The UN Women emphasised on the importance of legal reforms addressing discriminating gender social norms, which continues to affect the social, health, economic, and lower political positioning of women (UN Women, 2015), an aspect of which this research pays attention by scrutinising how the reforms of women employment in Saudi Arabia foster their agency and influence the social structure to enable their empowerment.

On completion of this exploration the fact that gender relations and patriarchal norms can be a highly influential factor on woman's positioning of power and ability to exercise choice will have been made clear. That is the reason why analysing patriarchy produced core conceptions and proposals of feminist thinkers that will be discussed in the following subsection (Krolokkr & Sorensen, 2006).

2.3 Waves of Thinking in Feminism

Patriarchal norms have generated harmful consequences for women all around the globe, which created diverse paths of feminist theory to challenge patriarchy and to empower women overtime (Evans & Chamberlain, 2014; Kemp & Squires, 1997; Kotef, 2009; Krook & Childs, 2010; Lindsey, 2016; Visvanthan et al., 2011). The following paragraphs will synthesize broad feminist deliberates which relate to this research topic. The selected positions of feminist intellectuals explore notions of; challenging patriarchal norms, questioning women as a social category, expanding women's rights, integrating them in the public sphere and valuing women's work in the domestic sphere. The discussions included embracing women's different perspectives and backgrounds, and most importantly allowing women the freedom to make their own life choices.

These deliberations are directly related to the centre of this investigation, which aims to understand women's agency in a patriarchal culture interlinked with expanding their opportunities in the labour market. Such discussions – which will be explored in this section- are significant as they serve to clarify the delicacy of gender relation's hierarchy of power and the key role that the socio-cultural context plays in shaping women's functions, abilities, and choices

⁴⁰ According to the reports women in developing countries suffer from insufficient day- and health care facilities while they are more likely to be exposed to domestic violence.

(Bespinar, 2010; Jackson, 1998; Kandiyoti, 1988; Kemp & Squires, 1997; Lykke, 2010; Malhotra & Mather, 1997).

The challenge of feminist thinkers against patriarchy and gender inequality began with efforts to expand women's legal –civil and political- rights, relying on their intrinsic right to equality with men, such as rights to vote, access to education, property ownership, sexual freedom, and employment (the focus of this study) (Evans & Chamberlain, 2014; Jule, 2008; Kemp & Squires, 1997; Kotef, 2009; Krolokkr & Sorensen, 2006; Krook & Childs, 2010). To explicate, feminist scholars illuminated that patriarchy impose male domination and women's marginalisation, as well as influence laws to discriminate against women. Politically, this argument formed the basis of requesting social recognition as well as equal rights and access to resources and opportunities (Krolokkr & Sorensen, 2006). One of the notable writers of this mainstream is John Stuart Mill, who is frequently quoted for his ideas on "The subjection of women"; known for demonstrating the arbitrariness of patriarchal structures and for challenging what was considered women's nature (Lindsey, 2016, p.17).⁴¹ This wave of thinking is associated with the movements of liberal women's rights and early socialist feminism (Krolokkr & Sorensen, 2006).⁴² For what it matters, this wave accentuates the importance of looking at women's legal rights in a country first in order to ascertain their position regarding empowerment. It emphasises on legal rights as a key source of women's opportunities, choices and power; echoing this research investigating agency in relation to the expansion of women's employment as a legal reform, and encouraging the analysis of this study to include the influence of the legal structure on Saudi women's agency in Chapters 4 and 8.

Feminist researchers debates after that, dating back to the 1970s, developed to challenge the dominance of white, western, middle class, and heterosexual ideas. For example, cultural feminism related female empowerment with their inherited mothering capabilities, instead of viewing women's role as mothers subordinating (Kemp & Squires, 1997; Krook & Childs, 2010; Lindsey, 2016). This approach valued the ability to bear children as a source of power for women (O'Reilly, 2010), yet it considered women's mothering as a right for women to accomplish only when their conditions allow them to (Jarvie et al., 2015). This understanding provides a larger room to this research for rethinking the sources of women's power, and

⁴¹ Mill explained, "the infectious evil of legal subordination of women to men was the germinal idea of the *Subordination of Women*, especially its critique of any marriage that is not a partnership of equals" (Mill, 2001, p. viii).

⁴² Liberal feminists challenged women's social and legal marginalization by requesting equal opportunities in the public sphere. Similarly, socialist or Marxist feminists also requested equal rights but concentrated on working-class women (Krolokkr & Sorensen, 2006).

respecting their views about their choices in life. Furthermore, this view is reflected in policies of international organisations concerned with women's development and human rights (such as UN entities, DHS program, the World Bank), which stress on expanding women's role in different domains without compromising their desire to become mothers or their wellbeing. In fact, such institutions place emphasis on mothers' health and maternity requirements, as well as the provision of supporting services and legal rights as main principles for narrowing gender inequality. This has been promoted through support for paid maternity leave, day care facilities, health insurance, social financial allowance, and the use of contraception (UN Women, 2015; UNIFEM & Goetz, 2008; World Bank, 2012).

After the declaration of UN Decade of Women (1975-1985), women in developing countries began questioning their association to western feminism (Gurel, 2009). Approaches like 'Multiracial' feminism emerged; concerned with women's issues in postcolonial and developing countries because their needs, challenges, and circumstances are different and consequently so is their view of feminism. Their debates are based on recognising gendered power differentials according to race, ethnicity, and class focusing on social justice rather than equality (Hirschmann, 2003; Lindsey, 2016; Thompson, 2002). Nevertheless, multiracial feminist discussions disagreed on whether to tolerate cultural specificities while empowering women, or to run against these cultures that maintain women's subordination and abuses their basic human rights (Hirschmann, 2003; Lindsey, 2016; Thompson, 2002). This research, however, supports understanding local interpretation of women's circumstances, and needs. It argues for discovering pathways of improving women's status through considering the aspects of support which exist already within the culture, as well as correcting aspects of restraints on women's power.

Shedding light on the contribution of Arab and Muslim feminists, they challenged their inclusion under that umbrella, and rejected being portrayed by feminists in the west as victims of their culture and of Islam (Charrad, 2011; Gurel, 2009; McDonald, 2008). In the late 1980s, Muslim female scholars participated in gender analysis by underlining how patriarchal practices shaped women's status in Muslim societies (Seedat, 2013). They distinguished between two sides of Islam: 1) the moral, which is egalitarian and permits women's empowerment and, 2) the political, which is restrictive and patriarchal (Seedat, 2013).

Muslim feminists key contribution is represented in their efforts to re-interpret the religious texts and re-explain gender equality in Islam according to their voice and experience, moving away from patriarchal bias of the dominant interpretation of male scholars (Seedat, 2013; 2016). Besides developing interpretations in favour of women's rights, they documented women's rights and opportunities in Islam (Charrad, 2009). These included women's right to work and to be active socially and economically. For example, they highlighted the role of Khadija the first wife of Prophet Muhammad as a businesswoman, and other women's economic accomplishments (Sidani, 2005). In other examples, the role of Aisha (another wife of the Prophet) as a religious scholar and a political advisory was accentuated (Alkhateeb, 1987).⁴³ These models formed the ground for the demand for expanding Muslim women's rights and the scope of their participation in the public sphere.

Nevertheless, the views of feminist intellectuals in the 1990s became more inclusive of diversity, they argued for strengthening self-identification, elaborating choice and embracing women's plurality (Cocca, 2014; Evans & Chamberlain, 2014; Jule, 2008). They disputed the existence of "universal womanhood and embrace(d) ambiguity, diversity, and multiplicity in transversal theory and politics" (Krolokkr & Sorensen, 2006, p. 2). They were more comprehensive of differences and understanding personal choices without judgement, they are as diverse as their ideas (Evans & Chamberlain, 2014; Jule, 2008). Snyder Hall explains while recognizing different women's perspectives that "no common identity or experience... each feminist must make a conscious decision about how to determine her own path" (Snyder-hall, 2010, p. 259). Feminists who adopted this approach welcomed all identities and they embraced the idea that femininity is empowering (Scanlon, 2009; Snyder-hall, 2010). This way of thinking permitted and valued different outlooks of women's issues, including empowerment and agency, an opinion that this thesis supports and adopts in its analysis. Revisiting reflections of different waves in feminism relevant to this research topic, demonstrated the principal efforts that paved the way for expanding women's economic participation and their inclusion in different domains. However, for the benefit of this study the following segments will expand on feminist researchers' contributions to the fields of political economy and development.

⁴³ Fatima Mernissi illustrated that the reason behind the inadequacy of Muslim women's rights doesn't originate from the Quraan; rather it is an issue of modern Muslim men who protect their privileges (Sidani, 2005).

2.4 Feminism in the Field of Political Economy

Feminist contribution is fundamental to the progress of political-economy's scholarship (Peterson, 2005).⁴⁴ The temptation to dedicate a particular focus of their debates in political economy emerges from the direct relation of this field and feminist discussions to the topic of this research. Feminist work on gender in this area relates to national and international economy and development policies (Waylen, 1997). Feminist researchers utilised gender analysis in the political economy as a tool for demanding more rights for women, and for expanding their roles to the labour markets, in addition to explaining inequality in decision-making and bargaining power within the household.

In relation to this study, Cook, et al., (2000) summarised the importance of feminists' contributions to the field of political economy and to the improvement of development policies.⁴⁵ Principally, feminist scholars analysis of gender highlighted the interrelationship between the household and the market, it bridged between the public and the private spheres by regarding women's work in the household as reproductive economy. Concretely, their analysis demonstrated that women via their biological reproductive ability and unpaid house labour supply the markets with the people who produce physical work, and who possess intangible properties such as skills and ethics (Cook et al., 2000; Waylen, 1997).⁴⁶ This argument accentuates the significance of women's care work and its contribution to the economy, which was not considered as an economic activity prior to that. Regardless, restricting women's activities within the domestic sphere, excluded them from the rights and the benefits allocated in the public sphere. Therefore, rethinking the division between public and private spheres established a point of departure for challenging women's exclusion of rights, and claiming equal citizenship rights as men. This included the right to work and to access equal opportunities as men in the public domain, as well as requesting labour related rights such as paid maternity leave

⁴⁴ "Feminist political economy is an approach that critiques mainstream economic theory and policy, suggests alternative modes of analysis that put centre-stage both productive and reproductive economies" (Rai, 2018, p.142).

⁴⁵ See Peterson (2006) for explanations of feminist debates in the field of political economy and their contribution to women issues in international development by influencing policy-making, research and strategies.

⁴⁶ Feminist researchers gave significance to women's unpaid work and household production of goods and services that were not considered as part of the economic activities (Beneria, 1995). They considered household activities as an extension to the 'Productive economy': the formal and regulated economic activities that are associated with primary, secondary and tertiary production (Peterson, 2005).

(Cook et al., 2000).⁴⁷

Moreover, feminist reflections on the private/public dichotomy looked at the nature of women's labour market participation as an indicator of gender inequality. Specifically, they examined how women's work choices and positions in the labour market are influenced by their primary role as carers, which explains their concentration in part-time, low-skilled, and low-paid employments (Cook et al., 2000). That situation preserved gender inequality in labour markets. Nevertheless, this outlook allowed reflection upon the structure of the labour market, and review of the traditional neoclassical agency model. That model regarded individuals in the market as autonomous agents making rational choices that are immune from societal influence (Cook et al., 2000; Waylen, 1997). Feminist scholars in the field, like Nancy Folbre, challenged such explanations of how decisions are made, and disputed the denial of the social construction formation of desires and preferences (Waylen, 1997). Their negotiations located the concept of bargaining as fundamental in explaining decision-making in economy and within the household between genders (Waylen, 1997). "Decisions are therefore made through a bargaining process, and the bargaining power of different members of the household is a product of their location in the intersecting hierarchies of gender, lifecycle, and class" (Waylen, 1977, p. 211).

Operating this idea of bargaining, feminist economists have studied how the labour market is organised in a way that offers opportunities and power for men and women differently,⁴⁸ and how gender activities and roles in the household impact their economic participation (Cook et al., 2000; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010a). In this regard Iversen and Rosenbluth (2006, 2010a) showed how the balance of power between men and women in the domestic sphere depends on the options available in the public sphere. They analysed how the economic and political organisation of the public sphere (economic and legal opportunities at the macro-level), define the bargaining and decision-making power within the household (division of domestic responsibilities, fertility, expenses, consumption ...etc.). That is because institutions at the macro-level (political, economic and social) provided different opportunities to men and women,

⁴⁷ The right to work, earning an income, equal pay, and social insurance; are basics of economic citizenship for men and women. However, women need additional social rights like maternity leave and child care services (Moghadam, 2011).

⁴⁸ For example, companies prefer to hire and invest in men rather than women because their career can be interrupted by their reproductive nature.

political power, and finances. By way of illustration, they sustained that the economic and legal options available to unmarried or divorced women shape the balance of power between men and women domestically; they found that legal barriers to divorce result in women avoiding opportunities in the public domain even if they exist. At the same time, increased rates of divorce result in a growing interest for employment instead of being housewives (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2006, 2010a).⁴⁹

Similarly, in her examination of gender equality and economic growth, Kabeer explained that women in Arab countries bound themselves by their gender role as mothers and housewives as a result of heavy restriction on their mobility and public participation (Kabeer, 2016). Such deliberates validates this research position to examine the social organisation and the structural constraints and opportunities whilst evaluating women's agency, and to inspect the influences on the relation between employment and agency (Chapters 4, and 8).

2.5 The Birth of Women Empowerment in International Development Policies

“‘Gender equality’ and ‘women’s empowerment’ was mobilised by feminists in the 1980s and 1990s as a way of getting women’s rights onto the international development agenda... The international development industry has fully embraced these terms. From international NGOs to donor governments to multilateral agencies the language of gender equality and women’s empowerment ... takes pride of place among their major development priorities” (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015, p. 396).

Feminist debates outlined thus far are central to comprehend how women's empowerment became a goal of international development policies. Feminist researchers have broadened the scholarship and the practices of international development by comprising women's and gender issues to be at the core of developmental policies, in particular development research carried out formerly neglected women as active economic agents (Beck, 2017). Their analysis inspired global mobilisations concerned with issues of women's status as a result of gender inequality, thus they were included in developmental agendas aiming to adjust gender gaps in all aspects and empower women around the world. Accordingly, there was a shift in focus that redirected feminists' efforts from fighting for gender equality toward advancing women's empowerment,

⁴⁹ Shaksi (2015) maintained, women's ability to shift power relations in the household depends on the type of employment that a woman works and it's social recognition in society.

which will be explored subsequently. This explains why research on women empowerment, such as this thesis, is directly related to development policies. This section will explain the insertion of women in international development strategies, and its progress to become women's empowerment; a global goal of states and non-states actors.

This discussion is important to this research because feminist intellectual inquiry in the field of international development were the seeds of reflections on women's agency as part of empowerment. Substantively, this research focusing on Saudi women's agency in relation to expanding their employment opportunities; draws upon theories that discusses women empowerment in relation to developmental strategies. Essentially, the incorporation of women empowerment in development plans was a result of demands for expanding women's opportunities which employment was one of them. Therefore, the following paragraphs form a necessary background to clarify why access to opportunities and resources is necessary yet it is not enough for understanding or improving women's status and empowerment. The discussion however will continue in the next chapter. Thereby, the following discussion lays the ground for the next chapter, and for this research which endeavour to deliver bottom-up data and recommendations for international development policies aiming to increase women's empowerment by boosting women's economic participation.

Development initiatives through the UN began as reconstruction plans in the 1950s,⁵⁰ where high-income states provide knowledge, financial, and technical aid to reduce the disparities between developing and industrialised countries (Parpart et al., 2003; Visvanthan & Rai, 2011; Visvanthan et al., 2011).⁵¹ Unfortunately early development projects failed to achieve their goals; as a matter of fact the International Labour Organisation criticised their inefficiency to reduce poverty and unemployment and promoted the Basic Needs Approach in 1976 (Rai, 2018; Visvanthan et al., 2011). This approach called for the provision of opportunities for individuals to reach full development, by allocating specific resources to groups who lack them (Streeten, 1979). It aimed at fulfilling basic human needs rather than seeking growth only (Rai, 2018; Streeten, 1979). These include material needs besides non-material needs like security, freedom, life purpose, and decision making that were neglected before (Streeten, 1979). Those aspects were later considered as facets of agency in the scholarship of women empowerment, discussed in the next chapter. However, the inclusion of women and gender equality in developmental

⁵⁰ Such top-down policies began post World War II (Beck, 2017). Nevertheless, social and economic development has been seen as integral to post-conflict peace building (Porter, 2013).

⁵¹ The concept of development emerged in international policy after US president Truman's speech determining the west as a developed zone whilst other parts are considered underdeveloped (Parpart et al., 2003).

goals began in the 1970s, and was motivated by different feminist researchers debates criticising the failure of earlier projects.

Feminists maintained that the exclusion of women impaired developmental goals, and harmed women, influenced by Boserup's arguments that women's subordinated status and their economic marginalisation are a consequence of gaining less than men and depriving them from property ownership (Beck, 2017; Beneria, 1995; Peterson, 2005).⁵² That idea formed the foundation of the 'Women In Development' (WID) movement in the 1970s, targeting the advancement of women's status through their inclusion in development activities and benefits. Activists of WID emphasised on the significance of including women in the development process, as a factor of efficiency (Beck, 2017; Peterson, 2005; Rai, 2018). Therefore, they targeted the progress of women's education and skills', and the increase of their participation in labour markets; associating higher status with work and access to resources (Rai, 2018). As a result women's inclusion in the realm of international development was regulated through a practical utilitarian approach that required measurable indicators to trace changes in women's status (Beck, 2017; Nikkhah et al., 2012; Parpart et al., 2003; Peterson, 2005; Visvanthan et al., 2011).

International actors also began to support women's inclusion in development. For example, the UN declared the Decade for Women (1975-1985) and organised important women's conferences that comprised government delegates and NGO representatives beginning with Mexico City in 1975 -until Beijing in 1995. Gender then became key to aiding programs and international organisation such as the World Bank and the UN (Beck, 2017). This was a good start towards offering women equal opportunities to men of access to knowledge and participation in labour markets. However expanding access to opportunities alone doesn't resolve the issue of gender equality or enhances women's position of power, as this study will keep establishing.

In fact placing emphasis on women's integration at the micro level (generating income, health, and education) without considering contextual factors didn't improve their conditions. Women's status was attached to development quantitative measures; thereby they were used as a tool to achieve developmental goals, and became target of export companies looking for cheap labour (Beck, 2017). The Basic Needs approach led by ILO questioned the focus on quantitative achievements and growth rather than aiming for quality of life, forming another approach based

⁵² These discussions are found in her publication "Women's Role in Economic development" (Sato, 2008), she criticised early models of development (Rai, 2018).

on social justice. This approach complained about women's status and wellbeing being affected by the burden of labour and abuse in a way that hadn't been considered before. Therefore it proposed ensuring basic human rights and needs (mental, physical, and social) while targeting developmental and economic outcomes (Streeten, 1979; Visvanthan et al., 2011).

Furthermore, in the 1980s feminists criticised neglecting the influence of gendered relations on women's subordination and entitlement of rights and opportunities. Nussbaum and Sen then established the 'Capabilities' approach that acknowledged freedom as a fundamental tool for development, and considers the complexity of lived realities and different values, circumstances, and abilities of people in development plans.⁵³ This approach is more gender related in terms of challenging women's entitlement to rights and development opportunities according to their cultural context; a vision that this study embraces in its analysis and that overlaps with the chosen framework (see Chapter 3). Nevertheless, Sen's capability approach included in particular the analysis of gender relations within patriarchal households and highlighted women's bargaining for power in that sphere.⁵⁴ Sen argues against limiting indicators of wellbeing to resources, but rather evaluating the quality of life through comparing interpersonal opportunities for achieving wellbeing between household members. That is because human's desires are shaped according to their circumstances, and their preferences are formed according to the hierarchy of power within the households especially in patriarchal cultures (Iversen, 2003; Sen, 2001; Visvanthan et al., 2011).⁵⁵

Therefore, a new direction named 'Gender and Development (GAD)' arose in the 1980s which questioned the global structures, and aimed for the improvement of gender equality (Beck, 2017). Feminist scholars suggested that policies shall include practical short-term solutions for gender distribution in both the public and private spheres', in addition to strategic long-term plans for access and control of developing resources (Rai, 2018; Visvanthan & Rai, 2011). GAD theorists have led to the move from merely including women in development plans, to placing the focus on gender relations and women's positioning in their societies at the centre of the political activities (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Rai, 2018). The previous explanations highlights the

⁵³ This approach enabled interpersonal comparisons for realizing well-being determined by looking at the set of functioning (what an individual can do or be) available to the person. The arrangement of these functionings occurs in the household where conflicts and cooperation coexist (Iversen, 2003).

⁵⁴ To Sen the family is a space of contested desires and making decisions within that space depends on the bargaining power of the member. This power and resources are distributed according to gendered patriarchal terms (Rai, 2011).

⁵⁵ Research on patriarchal communities affirm that women prioritize the family's advantage over their own interest (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Kandiyoti, 1988; *Yemen Health and Demographic survey*, 2015; Zuhur, 2003).

significance of concentrating on the household and gender relations to understand, analyse, and improve gender equality and women's development interlinked with expanding their integration in labour markets, which supports the approach of this study.

Building on the debates of WID and GAD, realising gender equality continued to be central in international developmental projects, which were consolidated in the UNDP's Human Development Index in 1990 and the Gender Development index in 1995 (Nikkhah et al., 2012; Visvanthan et al., 2011). Women and gender equality have remained a priority in international development projects until today, but the progress of relevant feminist theories redirected efforts toward realising women's "empowerment" instead. Feminist advocates from the global south in particular played a major role in accentuating the significance of women's empowerment for challenging the larger scope of patriarchal structures, such as politics and economy. Most importantly, they highlighted that "the personal is political" wrecking the division between the private and the public sphere, and called for moving beyond quantitative measures (Beck, 2017). As a result, empowerment since the 1990s became prevalent amongst NGOs, researchers, and international organisations (Beck, 2017).⁵⁶ In particular, since then altering deeply rooted gender norms became meaningful for policies of development within the UN, the IFIs and many other agencies (Visvanthan & Rai, 2011).

For example, the UNDP tied Women's Empowerment to Gender Equality as the 2nd principle after Human Rights.⁵⁷ Hence, the concept became fundamental in resolving gender inequality in developing countries, but especially after the 1995 UN women's conference in Beijing and after proclaiming the year 2001 as the international year of women's empowerment by the United Nations (Grabe, 2012; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Mandal, 2013; Visvanthan et al., 2011).⁵⁸ Additionally, the UNDP announced the Millennium Development goals in year 2000, which promoted women's empowerment further then created a separate entity to realise women's empowerment goals; the UN Women.⁵⁹ For example, in terms of economic empowerment, UN recommendations suggest larger access for women to all

⁵⁶The World Bank have conducted and supported a variety of research on women empowerment, see (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Malhotra, 2003; Narayan, 2005; Uphoff, 2005).

⁵⁷ "The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women are central to the mandate of UNDP and intrinsic to its human rights-based approach to development programming" ('UNDP Social and Environmental Standards. Principle 2', n.d.).

⁵⁸ See recommendations 13 and 24 from Beijing declaration ('Fourth World Conference on Women', 1995).

⁵⁹ See 'Millennium Development Goals', n.d., 'Women's Empowerment Principles', 2010; UN Women & United Nations Global Compact, 2011.

opportunities for decent formal employment, and productive resources (such as properties), in addition to financial resources, and social security (Visvanthan & Rai, 2011).⁶⁰ Different action plans were set to achieve these goals and various programs were introduced, such as the establishment of Self-help-groups and microfinance initiatives for women in numerous developing countries.⁶¹ The former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan (1997-2006) stated in 2005 “study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women”(Porter, 2013). Relatedly, the next chapter will provide detailed information on the concept of women empowerment, its components and indicators, including how it is measured and examined in research and in practice, with a particular focus on employment.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed relevant feminist debates, which formed necessary background information for examining this research topic (exploring Saudi women’s agency intertwined with employment as a resource for empowerment). It began by accentuating feminists’ contributions in revealing how gender roles and patriarchal norms position women at an inferior level in comparison to men both socially and legally. It underlined the role of feminist research in developing the field of political economy, in particular feminist review of the divide between private and public spheres that marginalise women from economic participation and access to the benefits of labour markets. It furthermore discussed how their debates dating back to the 1970’s created a foundation for both the integration of women into international developmental plans, and for global women empowerment policies. On completion of this review, the reader can form a general idea about the relevance of feminism as the umbrella theory for this research. This chapter therefore paved the way for discussing the concept of women’s empowerment and agency in detail in the following chapter.

⁶⁰ See resolution No. 54/4 on women’s economic empowerment (United Nations, 2010).

⁶¹ Resolution No. 54/4 of the UN commission on the status of women: “microfinance, including microcredit, savings and other financial instruments, have especially benefited women and have contributed in the achievement of their economic empowerment” (United Nations, 2010). Therefore, diversified studies on empowerment examined micro-finance initiatives, see (Al-Shami et al., 2013; Asghari et al., 2013; Jain & Jain, 2012; Khader, 2016; Sholkamy, 2014).

Chapter 3: Resources and Agency in Women's Empowerment: Focus on Employment.

3.1 Introduction

As understood from the previous chapter; the empowerment of women attained popularity amongst researchers and practitioners of development, and it became central to states and international development agencies initiatives to resolve gender inequality (Gram et al., 2018). To realise women's empowerment and assess its progress, development researchers and policymakers have set certain indicators which compare the opportunities and involvement of men and women in education attainment, economic participation, health care and political participation. Various reports of international organisations designated low ranks for the economic opportunities of women in Saudi Arabia (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2010; Hausmann et al., 2007; The World Bank, 2008). However employment reforms since 2010 created new vast work opportunities for Saudi women;⁶² but to what extent these reforms have enhanced their agency and empowerment is yet to be investigated (Al-Rasheed, 2013; *Back To Work in a New Economy...*, 2015; Fatany, 2009, 2013).

Hence, as explained in Chapter 1, this research aims to assess the impact of this new legislation - expanding women's access to the labour market- have had on Saudi's women's agency as a main component of empowerment. Yet, it seeks to gain nuanced insights of Saudi women's views and experiences regarding the determinants of employment (as a resource of empowerment) increasing their abilities to exercise choice (agency), and influencing barriers of agency within their social structure. This approach falls under the qualitative context relevant approach, which various intellectuals recognise its efficacy and significance in examining empowerment (Cornwall, 2016; Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Drydyk, 2008; Kabeer, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2016; O'Hara & Clement, 2018). By bringing forward the opinions of Saudi women, this research can be instrumental to provide bottom-up answers for local policies of women empowerment and social change, and for the broader international development and empowerment policies.

⁶² Chapters 4 clarified how Saudi women's employment opportunities were restricted to segregated education, banks, and health-care services only, see (Doumato, 2001; Le Renard, 2008).

To answer my research questions, this investigation adopts Naila Kabeer's definition of empowerment as the process of acquiring the ability to make strategic and purposeful choices, for those who have been denied such ability. In that respect she stresses that agency, recourse and achievement are inseparable components of empowerment (Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005). To her agency is a central element of empowerment; it is the route of putting purposeful choices into effect, and it unavoidably entails challenging inequality in power relations and constraints within the structure surrounding women (Kabeer, 2005). She further delineates resources as the means by which agency is exerted; they include knowledge, skills, and money amongst other attributes (Kabeer, 2005). Therefore, employment (the focus of this research) is considered a key resource of empowerment and a main asset for developing agency; as it provides women with an income, a sense of security, a greater bargaining power; it furthermore improve their skills, self-value, and wellbeing (Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2016; Sakshi, 2015). Nonetheless Kabeer –amongst other intellectuals- emphasises on the weight of social structures in moderating the access to resources and determining its effectiveness to develop agency (Kabeer, 2005, 2011, 2016). To explain, the process of empowerment involves the transformation of impediments that restrict individuals from making meaningful choices (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Porter, 2013). The social structures in different institutions (such as family and market) control access to resources and highly influence the possibility of reaching this goal (Kabeer, 2005; Porter, 2013; Muldoon, 2017).

This research which supports the various arguments maintaining empowerment is context dependent, as it is highly influenced by cultural norms, social class, gender relations, religious practices, and economic circumstances, or what literature of empowerment label as “power relations and the structure of constraints” (Kabeer, 2005, 2011; Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer et al., 2016; Malhotra & Mather, 1997). Therefore this study endorses that researching agency as part of empowerment requires; considering the particularity of the individual woman's challenges and limitations defined by aspects specific to her context, and acknowledging the extent to which a socio-cultural context can mould women's desires and limit their choices even with the availability of the opportunities.⁶³

This chapter critically engage with existing scholarship to situate this research and shows that it fills an important gap. It begins with discussing empowerment, its definitions, domains, and

⁶³ See Kabeer, 2005, 2011; Chopra & Muller, 2016; Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Drydyk, 2008; Porter, 2013.

indicators.⁶⁴ It further explains Kabeer's definitions of empowerment and agency, as well as its relevance to be adopted as a main reference to the analysis of this research. This part also discusses the parameters for measuring empowerment underlining that it is indispensable to draw conclusions without consideration of the context's specificities.⁶⁵

The second part illustrates how agency is examined, introducing Alsop & Heinsohn's framework that this investigation used to explore Saudi women's agency. Then it dedicates a subsection for depicting employment as a tool for developing agency and realising empowerment. It illustrates positions which finds that women's work is valuable for their financial autonomy, enhancing their living standards and for achieving a greater role in society (Alrumaihi, 2008; Cook et al., 2000; Duflo, 2012; Hou & Ma, 2013; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010; Metcalfe, 2008; Peterson, 2005). Then, it clarifies that developing women's agency and attainment of empowerment through work is dependent on other factors including gender power relations, working conditions, cultural restrictions, and the existence of other substantial legal rights (Bespinar, 2010; Calkin, 2015; Caraway, 2009; Elson, 1999; Haghghat, 2013; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Sadaquat & Sheikh, 2011). The chapter ends with presenting the state of research on Saudi women's employment and agency; indicating how qualitative and context-relevant examination of such topics falls short for the case under study.

3.2 Understanding Empowerment

3.2.1 Defining Empowerment

Empowerment is discussed in many domains such as philosophy, psychology, and development studies. It is linked with various connotations such as power, self-reliance, wellbeing, equality, autonomy, and security (Malhotra et al., 2002; Mandal, 2013).⁶⁶ However this research focuses

⁶⁴ Areas of empowerment are commonly discussed to be: education, psychological, social, health care, political, and economic. Measuring empowerment then depends on calculating women's opportunities and achievements in these domains (Jahan & United Nations Development Programme, 2015; Kabeer, 2005; Mandal, 2013; UNDP, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2016).

⁶⁵ The context includes social norms, ethnicity, economic circumstances, cultural values, religious rules and legal rights. Although this research focuses on limitations within the social structure it does consider other relevant factors in its analysis.

⁶⁶ The verb "empower" means "to give power", "to enable" or "make things happen" but empowerment as an approach is complex (Mandal, 2013; Parpart et al., 2003). It can imply "the transfer of power in a dynamic way" or "increasing power to a lower individual/group" (Mandal, 2013, p. 19).

on the feminist approach to empowerment that addresses women in particular.⁶⁷ The definitions of women's empowerment vary amongst scholars and the specificities of the conception lack unanimity, as it is broad and multidimensional. For example, while some view it as a process, others explain it as an end result (Chopra & Muller, 2016; Drydyk, 2008). Therefore, there are different perceptions and interpretations of its meaning and components. Regardless, across various definitions there is convergence of several aspects; women's empowerment is commonly related with power, freedom, autonomy, expanding choices, resources and agency (the focus of this study) (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Doumato, 2010; Drydyk, 2008; Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002; Mandal, 2013; Pratto, 2016). This subsection will review various definitions of empowerment, before it presents and discusses the definition that this research adopted.

As explained in Chapter 2 the inclusion of female empowerment in development was understood as a "change in the circumstances for a woman, which enables her to raise her capacity to manage a rewarding life", living holistically healthy, with dignity and having a sufficient number of her needs met (Janghorban et al., 2014, p. 226; Mandal, 2013). In this outlook empowerment is a goal with targets to achieve (Chopra & Muller, 2016; Drydyk, 2008). Further explanations of women's empowerment looked at it as a multi-dimensional process of acquiring greater power and more choices, focusing on inequalities of power relations, acquisition of resources, and challenging patriarchal structures of constraints (Chopra & Muller, 2016; Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Mandal, 2013; Nikkhah et al., 2012). The feminist scholar Batliwala was quoted defining "empowerment as the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power" (Batliwala, 2013; Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p. 4; Mandal, 2013, p. 23).

Women's power in the process of empowerment is represented in three forms; 'power within', 'power to' and 'power with' (Beck, 2017; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Nikkhah et al., 2012; Parpart et al., 2003). The first one is represented in 'gender awareness', self-esteem and understanding, seeing oneself as capable and entitled. It is women's internal power that works to change in their lives to become better (Beck, 2017; Nikkhah et al., 2012). 'Power to' is individual as well but more dynamic and productive; it is power to create new enabling possibilities, to take decisions and to overcome issues (Nikkhah et al., 2012). This is the power, which alters the surrounding institutions and transforms daily life (Beck, 2017). Finally, 'Power with' indicates women fighting as a group against inequality. Empowerment thus entails gaining power and pushing for

⁶⁷ See Beck, 2017; Christens, 2012; Drydyk, 2008; Mandal, 2013; Pratto, 2016.

a structural change in their power relations with men via the development of their ability to access and control resources; and consequently to make valuable strategic decisions leading to an enhanced quality of life.

The majority of the prevailing definitions existing in literature agree that making meaningful choices is the essence of women's empowerment. Grabe maintains that empowerment is an "expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life, ... for many marginalised groups that freedom is severely curtailed by lack of opportunity determined by structural inequities" (Grabe, 2012, p. 234). Similarly, Mandal lists several definitions in line with this statement, for example the World Bank holds that empowerment is "the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (Mandal, 2013, p. 20).⁶⁸ Additionally, Jo Rowlands was quoted as stating that empowerment is a process that makes individuals "perceive them selves as able and entitled to make decisions" (Parpart et al., 2003, p. 11). The various definitions also consent that access and control of "resources" is essential to the development of empowerment (Cornwall, 2016; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Drydyk, 2008; Porter, 2013). Nevertheless, Kabeer's definition presents a valid point of reference, as it combines all the aspects discussed above, and it is practical to apply across different contexts. In addition her definition has been a reference for numerous current studies of women empowerment (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Drydyk, 2008; Haghghat, 2013; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005a; Narayan, 2005; O'Hara & Clement, 2018).⁶⁹ Besides that it expands thoroughly on the dimensions of women's agency allowing this research to comprehensively relate the participants perceptions to the concept, and develop the analysis (Kabeer, 1999, 2005, 2011, 2016; Kabeer et al., 2016). I shall prolong why and how it suits this research after I present the definition.

⁶⁸ Chattopadhyaya defines empowerment as "the expansion of freedom of choice and action in all spheres (social, economic, and political) to shape one's life. It also implies control over resources and decisions" (Mandal, 2013, p. 20).

⁶⁹ Various studies and frameworks for measuring empowerment in international organizations such as the World Bank acknowledge her definition, see Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Drolet, 2005; Grabe, 2012; Haghghat, 2013; Hirschmann, 2003; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005a; Miles, 2016; Moghadam & Senftova, 2005; Parpart et al., 2003; Tsikata & Darkwah, 2014.

3.2.1.1 *Naila Kabeer's Definition of Empowerment*

Kabeer portrays empowerment as “the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 1999 P. 435). In her view empowerment involves a process of change in a women’s situation that begins from within and it is indispensably interrelated with ‘Resources’, ‘Agency’, and ‘Achievement’ (Kabeer, 1999, 2005, 2011). To clarify, resources, whether material or not, are important prerequisites for exerting agency; they are the tools to attain a higher social status and a larger scope of power (such as education and employment). Material resources (financial) are represented in money, paid work, land and non-material resources are represented in knowledge, skills, experience, confidence ...etc (Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005). She further elucidates that access and distribution of ‘resources’ are guided by the rules and norms of institutions that construct a society (the family, the market, and the community). ‘Agency’ represents the ability to define personal goals and to actively act upon them. Together with resources agency provides a person a with greater chance of attaining the life they wish for, however ‘Achievement’ reflects whether the desired result or outcome had been achieved or not (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). Nevertheless, this research is concentrated on employment, as a resource only, and the way Saudi women perceive it enabling agency, consequently it doesn’t look at ‘achievement’. Assessing achievement is relative to the objectives of each person, and demands a different kind of research,⁷⁰ thereby it falls out of the scope of this research focus.

Distinctively, to Kabeer, agency (acting upon choice and making purposeful decisions to achieve life goals) requires challenging aspects of constraints in the structure of gendered power relations. The word ‘structure’ here refers to formal and social institutions, which organise the context of women such as norms and customs or laws and regulations. From one side, gendered social relations govern the access to and the distribution of rights and resources amongst men and women; as a result they impact the extent of power and exercise of agency. From another side, socially constructed gender norms can influence preferences and choices, as well as restrain women from questioning their subordinate situations (Kabeer, 1999, 2005, 2011; Kabeer et al., 2016; Garbe, 2012; Haghighat, 2013). In her view, agency is individual yet multi-dimensional, it involves questioning the status in a way that influences change in consciousness, enhances self-worth, enables renegotiation of relations with others, increases the control over life, and transforms the society (Kabeer, 2011; Kabeer et.al, 2016). Moreover, Kabeer relates agency to

⁷⁰ It requires investigating how many women achieved their goals and how, in comparison to others who didn’t and why.

the motivation, the meaning, and the purpose of the woman in question.

Interestingly, she distinguishes between different kinds of agency that is practiced in everyday life, and emphasises that only “transformative” agency is the one that counts in the process of empowerment. It is agency that motivates change in the awareness, the limitations surrounding women, and the structural constraints in the society (Kabeer, 2005). She clarifies that agency can be ‘passive’ when individuals are resected in their choices, or they are confined to choose between limited options. Also, agency can be merely ‘effective’, part of accomplishing responsibilities predefined by the society and gender roles, and this doesn’t progress empowerment (Kabeer, 2005).

Besides that, she acknowledges diverse forms of agency, rejecting the understanding of agency as a synonym of decision-making only. It “can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Kabeer, furthermore, elaborates in the notion of choice with reference to agency. She points out that for the choices to be empowering they must concern strategic matters (marriage, children, self, life, appearance, work, healthcare...etc). Conjointly, they must be multiple, and have alternatives (not restricted). In other words, a woman should be able to choose from different options and not be restricted or directed toward certain limited options. For example, women in some places may be restricted to studying only certain majors and consequently her work options are limited. Moreover Kabeer stresses that such choices must not only exist but they must be accessible and seen or known to exist (Kabeer, 1999, 2005).

3.2.2.2 *Why Adopt NK’s Definition?*

This thesis aims to discern the status of Saudi women’s agency in light of the increased employment opportunities; hence it focuses on agency a central component of women’s empowerment, and on employment as a main resource to enable agency. It aims to do so whilst drawing attention to the influence of the surrounding socio-cultural context on their agency, including gender relations within the domestic sphere, arguing that social norms and power structures can manipulate (support or block) the acquirement of the ability to make meaningful

decisions. Furthermore, it adopts an individualistic approach to analysing empowerment, to award these women the opportunity to voice their opinions and share their experiences.

The choice of Kabeer's definition of empowerment is motivated by different factors. Not only that Kabeer is one of the main current theorists in the domain of women's empowerment, and that current research of agency draw on her definition,⁷¹ but also her definition includes profound details on how resources and agency are interlinked to feed the process of women's empowerment. In particular, her view is key to this research (exploring how employment as a resource influences the agency of Saudi women); because it reflects how different resources can impacts agency (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). Relevant to this dissertation, she specifically offers extensive analysis on female employment and women's participation in labour markets in relation to agency and empowerment (Kabeer, 2005, 2016, 2018; Kabeer et al. 2016). Furthermore, Kabeer's deliberations discussed agency as part of empowerment in relation to development policies (MDG in particular), which matched this research position (Kabeer, 2005).

Additionally, her explanations expand on the notion of choice, and distinguish between different forms and kinds of agency (a focus of this research), and illustrate that only 'transformative' agency is affective to the process of empowerment. In that regard her analysis balance between illustrating how empowerment as a process begins from "within" the individual, yet it is only effective when it influences a change within the surrounding structure of constraints. In other words, this process must alter the structures, which cause women's marginalisation and lack of power, including social relations. Focusing on gender power relations and the structure of constraints makes her rationalisation deeply related to feminist theory, so as this research. Also, understanding empowerment in this way, allows a breadth for the analysis of the data, also key to this research. Therefore, besides the spread of this definition in the field, its detailed explanations of the dimensions of agency and empowerment enabled me as a researcher to link and analyse the different themes that emerged from the interviews.

Moreover, Kabeer's understanding of 'agency' and 'achievement' through women's eyes; (i.e. in terms of what it was they desired to achieve not how well their performance was rated in employment or education) is an angle that this investigation attempts to take by providing evidences of women's own accounts of their situation. For example, her exclusive clarification of 'the sense of agency'; namely considering the individual meaning, motivation, and purpose

⁷¹ See Cornwall, 2016; Clement & O'hara, 2018; Haghighat, 2013; Miles, 2016.

whilst examining agency, goes beyond observable behaviours reflecting agency. This matched a purpose of this research and allowed the analysis to be more comprehensive and to explain even singular perspectives. Finally, since Kabeer insists that empowerment relates only to women who have been deprived of the right to make their own choices, her definition is relevant to the case of Saudi women who were previously deprived the right to work and fully participate in different domains of the public life legally and culturally.

The points discussed above intersect with other definitions of either agency or empowerment, yet no other definition of agency as part of empowerment has included the previous aspects combined, which could have affected the analysis, and the depth whilst addressing the research question. For example, some researchers do not place the emphasis on agency in the process of empowerment; rather they focus on awareness and critical consciousness (Cornwall, 2016; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Rowlands, 1995). However, in accordance with Kabeer's understanding, Nussbaum also explain that agency permits individuals to make choices that are significant to express their interests and accomplish their goals (Nussbaum, 2011; Porter, 2013). Others agree that two concepts are entwined with the process of empowerment, 'agency' the ability to make strategic choices; and the access to 'resources' (education, employment, income, land) facilitates the exercise of agency (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Porter, 2013). Porter (2013), Cornwall and Rivas (2015) also explain that the process of empowerment in essence is transformative of gendered inequality, and that is what distinguishes agency that is empowering from one that is not. Adopting Kabeer's definition, as a basis of the results' interpretation, doesn't however exclude other explanations of agency, or the well-established components and indicators of empowerment; reviewed next.

3.2.2 Domains and Indicators of Women's Empowerment

3.2.2.1 Main domains of women's empowerment

Following the previously explained definition of empowerment, this section shall delve into a further explanation of different domains of women's empowerment. The development of women's empowerment targets five main domains: education, economic, social, political, and health care (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Chopra & Muller, 2016; Haghighat, 2013; Jain & Jain, 2012; Kabeer, 2005; Mandal, 2013; Seager, 2003; 'Women's Empowerment Principles', 2010; UNDP, 2018). This study examines Saudi women's agency interlinked with employment as a

resource, thereby it directly relates to economic and social empowerment. Nevertheless, although employment occurs in the economic domain, it affects, and is affected by other domains.⁷² Regardless, it is important to introduce all the main areas, as they represent the practical paths where empowerment is manifested, and where the resources of empowerment are developed, in addition they constitute the basis for measuring empowerment.

The first key domain of empowerment is ‘education’, which works as an instrumental resource broadening women’s horizons, increasing their knowledge and awareness, and providing them with the ability to analyse information critically. The enhancement of women’s education can positively influence other domains of empowerment. It helps them find better jobs when necessary, take greater care of their wellbeing, improve their social interactions, increase awareness of their rights, and heighten their intolerance to violence (Kabeer, 2005; Mandal, 2013). Various studies have focused on evaluating the effect of education on other attributes of empowerment (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Gubhaju, 2009; Kabeer, 2005).⁷³

‘Economic empowerment’ on the other hand embodies equal opportunities to acquire financial resources such as generating money, having a steady income through paid employment, owning a business, saving money, and owning properties. It can enable women to overcome poverty, negotiate gender power relations, or to be free from the control of others, and ameliorates their standards of living (Espen & Brody, 2007; Jain & Jain, 2012; Kabeer, 2005; Mandal, 2013). Economic empowerment is considered a precondition for attaining empowerment (Chopra & Muller, 2016). In fact some researchers assert that it is the most essential domain of empowerment maintaining, “without economic self-sufficiency other rights and scopes remain meaningless” (Mandal, 2013, p. 22; Metcalfe, 2008; Peterson, 2006).

‘Health care’ symbolises empowerment in terms of women being able to make decisions relating to reproduction, having access to health-care, and taking care of their well-being. Psychological empowerment’ denotes self-perception of being capable and worthy of influence and control (Christens, 2012; Mandal, 2013). ‘Political empowerment’ refers to the representation of women in the political domain particularly in decision-making bodies within the political system (Jain &

⁷² For example, the money received from employment could lead to better access to healthcare, by contrast working in bad conditions could affect health negatively.

⁷³ Conducting time-series analysis (1996-2006) in Nepal confirmed that the education of the couples was significant for increasing the use of contraception (Gubhaju, 2009). Another study on Ghana affirmed that education facilitated the route for achieving women’s empowerment goals there (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014).

Jain, 2012; Kabeer, 2005; Mandal, 2013).⁷⁴ Finally, ‘social empowerment’ entails overcoming gender discrimination and improving women’s position within the social structure. Women’s social power is reflected in their ability to interact freely in society, communicate their views and participate in activities (Jain & Jain, 2012). This also involves having women’s contributions recognised and valued (Mandal, 2013, p. 20).

3.2.2.2 Indicators of Women’s Empowerment

International agencies of development aiming to accomplish women’s empowerment took these primary domains into consideration. They operationalised indicators to keep records and measure achievements of empowerment initiatives (Kabeer, 2005; Moghadam & Senftova, 2005; UNDP, 2013; Visvanthan et al., 2011; ‘Women’s Empowerment Principles’, 2010; World Economic Forum, 2015). Measuring empowerment hence entailed calculating the availability of opportunities and acquisition of means (Drydyk, 2008; Moghadam & Senftova, 2005). To measure women’s opportunities in education, healthcare, recognition, labour market benefits, and political representation; scholarship on women’s empowerment considers women’s performance in comparison to men against several objective indicators. These comprise: life expectancy, access to medical care and reproductive health services; access to education, age at first marriage, decisions regarding marriage and contraceptive use, preference of sons, domestic violence, divorce rates, mobility, access to technology, property ownership, poverty rates, economic activity, women’s rates in paid employment, and rates in leading positions (Haghighat, 2013; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Kabeer, 2005; Moghadam & Senftova, 2005; Seager, 2003).

These proxies served to measure efforts towards realising empowerment as a goal, contrasting this research acknowledging empowerment as a process not an end. They were practical to calculate access to resources of empowerment, however they do not discern when and how women use these resources in empowering ways. Furthermore, they do not emphasise on a key element in the process of empowerment; i.e. the change of gendered power relations within the social structure (Porter, 2013). Therefore, this operationalisation has led to confusion in understanding and examining empowerment (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Drydyk, 2008). As Drydyk clarifies; measuring the available means for achieving the goal confuses the valuable with the measurable (Drydyk, 2008, p. 232). To illustrate, shortage in endowments and limited

⁷⁴ Women’s representation, leadership and voice in the political domain is important in resolving gender inequality and enhancing women’s status.

opportunities to access institutions of power are indeed barriers to empowerment but they do not signify “disempowerment”.⁷⁵ At the same time, the provision of resources (legal change, labour market opportunities, improving education.. etc.) is important; they are “enablers” of empowerment but they are not sufficient to realise empowerment, and certainly they do not represent empowerment (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).⁷⁶ This research hence takes a different approach in researching the agency of Saudi women with reference to employment, which will be explained later in this chapter.

Existing data on aspects of empowerment for Saudi women are inadequate, in particular regarding agency. Referring to the frequently used international systematic measures of empowerment in different studies, there are several distinguished surveys; The Gender Development Index, The Gender Inequality Index, The Global Gender Gap, and The Demographic Health Surveys (Castro Martín, 1995; ‘Demographic Health Surveys’, n.d.; Haghighat, 2013; Metcalfe, 2011; Moghadam & Senftova, 2005). The GDI and GII measure the differences between men and women’s rates in health and life longevity, education, standards of living, parliament representation, labour market participation, and income in more than 188 countries (Haghighat, 2013; Jahan & United Nations Development Programme, 2015). The GGG of the World Economic Forum however includes 145 countries around the world and ranks women’s situation in comparison to men in education, labour market participation, political participation, and healthcare and life expectancy. The UN gender inequality index categorises countries according to their development.

Each index however position countries differently according to the aspects they prioritise. By way of illustration, the GII report of 2018 classified Saudi Arabia under “very high human development” category ranking number 38 out of 189 countries. Its rate in development is above the world average, and its ranking is higher than most Arab countries (UNDP, 2018).⁷⁷ Regardless, Saudi Arabia recorded a lower ranking in gender inequality in that index (No. 50), yet it still performs better than most of Arab countries and within the average of Gulf countries

⁷⁵ It is not possible to evidently define disempowerment, it will depend on the concept of ‘power’ underlying the meaning of it. It can relate to not having or losing the ability (and the influences on gaining such ability) to shape one’s life (Drydyk, 2008), or to evaluating the status of women in comparison to men (Clement & O’Hara, 2018), or to being in a state of poverty (Kabeer, 2005).

⁷⁶ “The work of external actors and interventions, then, may be conceived not as empowering women but as clearing some of the obstacles from the path and providing sustenance for women as they do empowerment for themselves” (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015, p.405).

⁷⁷ UAE and Qatar ranked slightly better than Saudi Arabia, the former was the 34th and the later ranked 37th.

in that index.⁷⁸ On the other hand, the World's Economic Forum Global Gender Index of 2017 provides a different indication of the situation in Saudi Arabia ranking the Kingdom as the worst Gulf country and below the average of other Arab states (*The Global Gender Gap*, 2017).⁷⁹ Although Saudi Arabia is included in their lists they do not carefully consider the socio-cultural dimensions that this study argues are key to the attainment of empowerment. Despite their inattention to gender power relations, and inconsideration to the interrelations between distinct domains of empowerment, they can be insensitive to the depth necessary for understanding agency, as this chapter explains in details at the end of this section.

Conversely, the DHS surveys include mixed methods for assessing women's participation in several kinds of decision making as a key indicator of women's empowerment.⁸⁰ DHS data has been used considerably in studies interested in women's autonomy, empowerment and decision-making. For example, using DHS datasets of Ghana, Fuesin & Lalule-Sabiti investigated whether religion affects women's autonomy. They maintained that both Muslim and Christian women were equal in autonomy level; meanwhile their socio demographic aspects highly affected their autonomy (Fuseini & Kalule-Sabiti, 2015). Such surveys are furthermore prevalent in assessing women's decisions on family planning in relation to other factors of empowerment. For example, Alsumri (2015) looked at the effects of married women's decision-making power on family planning in Egypt. The study disclosed that education and employment did not affect women's use of modern contraception tools as much as their level of autonomy in decision-making did (Alsumri, 2015). With reference to the Arab Gulf Countries, a study on Oman investigated the effect of education and employment of married women on family planning (Alriyami, et al., 2016).⁸¹ Although DHS includes datasets for 89 developing countries, unfortunately they are not available for Saudi Arabia to use in this research ('Demographic Health Surveys', n.d., 'DHS Datasets', n.d.).

⁷⁸ Three countries ranked better than Saudi Arabia U.A.E ranked (6th), Bahrain (47th), and Qatar (44th).

⁷⁹ Saudi Arabia ranks as number 138 out of 144 countries. Only Syria and Yemen were lower than Saudi Arabia, ranking 142 and 144.

⁸⁰ DHS investigate women's decisions on household purchases, financial matters and assets, health care, relationship with the partner, domestic violence, marriage, division of responsibilities, reproduction, children matters, and employment or unemployment ('Demographic Health Surveys', n.d.) See <https://dhsprogram.com/Topics/Womens-Status-And-Empowerment.cfm>. <https://dhsprogram.com/What-We-Do/Methodology.cfm>.

⁸¹ 47% of the participants conveyed, their husbands decide whether they used contraception or not while 50% of them completed higher education and more than 30% were working (Alriyami et al., 2016).

Only quantitative indicators on some domains of empowering women (such as employment and education) are available for Saudi Arabia,⁸² while the information on women's decision making and other aspects of social empowerment that this thesis is interested in is lacking. The global statistical reports that include Saudi Arabia do not provide information on aspects of women's empowerment and agency for the Kingdom such as social life, unpaid care work, and personal maintenance due to the lack of this information (Jahan & United Nations Development, 2015). The existing reports that provide details on some indicators for Saudi Arabia were issued before 2010 when women employment in Saudi Arabia began to expand (The World Bank, 2008).

However, it is worth highlighting that since 2006 the Arab Barometer provided updated datasets for quantitative research on the Middle East including 14 Arab countries. It comprises elements of gender issues and social justice, yet out of four periods only one included Saudi Arabia, in 2010. This was during the beginning of expanding women's employment opportunities, and unfortunately the data does not exist for the time frame of this study. This research therefore aims to contribute to filling the gap in the literature researching Saudi women's empowerment, by adopting a qualitative and a contextual approach for examining employment as a factor in enlarging Saudi women's agency. This is not motivated merely by the lack of existing data, but because in principle (as justified earlier) the surrounding context of the social structure and gender relations are highly influential in the attainment of empowerment.

To illustrate the importance of embracing such an approach, Hightat highlighted that the statistical achievements in some measurable indicators regarding Middle-Eastern women can implicitly indicate their dependent status on their male guardians (Hightat, 2013). She underlined the studies of Shavarini and Lattouf disclosing that many families encourage their daughters' into higher education to heighten their chances of finding a husband of a certain social status (Hightat, 2013; Lattouf, 2004; Shavarini, 2006). Analysing social structures in Sri-Lanka, explained unseen dynamics of power for the study of (Malhotra & Mather, 1997). For example, they discovered that upper class and higher-educated women work to satisfy their consumerism needs, rather than to develop decision-making abilities. By contrast, wealthy women had better opportunities to work due to their level of education, but their families alienate them from employment and direct them towards 'leisure' to preserve their purity. The point is; quantitative results can't reveal underlying aspects of empowerment without considering the

⁸² See GII, GGG, and gender data portal of the World Bank (Jahan & United Nations Development, 2015; The World Bank, 2014; World Economic Forum, 2015, 2016).

context of social structures and gender relations. In principle, the process of empowerment is inherently “contingent and contextual” (Cornwall, 2016; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015), and this is accentuated in the next subsection.

On a final note, qualitative data learned through fieldwork is essential to enlighten research of International Organisations and NGOs’ in development and empowerment.⁸³ As an example, a group of consultants carried out a study for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. They collected data using focus groups and focused on context analysis of the informal institutions and social norms to examine agency (Munoz Boudet, Petesch, Turk, & Thumala, 2013).⁸⁴ This approach clarified the aspects of social obstacles, which strategies need to address to realise gender equality. Equally, O’Hara and Clement (2018) used qualitative fieldwork to puzzle out issues in standardised measurement of empowerment and agency, such as Women’s Empowerment in the Agriculture Index (WEAI). Their conclusions discovered inconsistency between the local meanings of empowerment and the aspects that the index measure, thereby recommended a number of improvements to the index criteria. For example, they suggested adding critical consciousness (to reflect women’s ‘power within’) to improve measurements of empowerment, and called for considering the influences specific to the social context (O’Hara & Clement, 2018).⁸⁵

3.2.3 Context is Key to Studying Empowerment

“It is possible to develop a program aimed at individual empowerment, but if this does not consider the context in which the individual is embedded ... there is less likelihood that actual increases in influence and control and improvement in quality of life will occur” Barbara Israel (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p. 11).

Concisely, empowerment is sensitive to the context because it is relevant to 1. gender norms and the social structure, 2. cultural, ethnicity, and religious influence, 3. personal preferences and experiences (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Haghghat, 2013; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Mandal,

⁸³ See Chapter 5 on methodology.

⁸⁴ It explored how men and women practice decision-making in all aspects of life, and how gender and social norms influence their daily-life and motivations.

⁸⁵ Household composition, intra-household relationships, and social inclusion/exclusion were important aspects for women’s empowerment in the local context, but they were ignored by the index.

2013; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013). To explain further, the process of empowerment occurs “within the structural constraints and discursive practices” (Parpart et al., 2003, p. 4). Therefore it demands consideration of the uniqueness of challenges specific to the place, as well as comprehensive understanding of the environment in which women’s choices are restricted (before examining their status in making purposeful choices independently). This research therefore supports the opinion which acknowledges context-relevant and individual paths for developing agency and attaining empowerment (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 2011; Kabeer et al., 2016).⁸⁶

Various researchers have emphasised the importance of incorporating the analysis of socio-cultural aspects while evaluating and understanding women’s empowerment. In societies where male domination is the norm; women’s decision making is restrained in various aspects of living, such as appearance, movement, education and work (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Kohan et al., 2012).⁸⁷ Therefore, in order to appraise women’s empowerment, or examine their agency, it is crucial to appreciate how gender relations and socio-cultural surrounding impact women’s behaviours and choices (Cornwall, 2016; Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer, 2011, 2016). Gender relations within the domestic sphere are a crucial element of women’s disempowerment around the globe (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). As an example, Kabeer elucidates that cultural norms influence choices by refuting that discrimination in power relations exists and validating inequalities, claiming that they are the essence of certain cultural identities (Kabeer, 1999, 2005).⁸⁸ To clarify further, Pratto states that power is a “property” of social relationships, and that limited access to resources and opportunities locks a woman’s dependence upon the person who possesses that power. However she explains that this social relation changes and that women’s needs, knowledge, and attitudes evolve with their efforts to gain greater power (Pratto, 2016). This explains why empowerment can only be well understood by looking at the distinct paths for realising it, and why social-relations and structure of constraints constitute a vital part in its analysis.

⁸⁶ The next chapter discusses Saudi women’s context, the structures of constraints restraining agency, and the structure of opportunities regarding expanding employment.

⁸⁷ In many developing countries women are not primary decision makers (Haghighat, 2013; Joseph, 2010; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Sadaquat & Sheikh, 2011). Especially in Arab countries cultural rules are strictly adhered to, even if they contradict with legal rules. For example, civil and Islamic laws forbid and criminalize killing, yet honour crimes still occur within these communities (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Moghadam, 2004; Zuhur, 2003).

⁸⁸ Without critical consciousness and analytical reflection of one’s positioning agency can reinforce the discriminative patriarchal system (O’Hara & Clement, 2018).

Another important fact in studying the context is that failure to attain empowerment, when there is open access to resources; can be understood only when considering the socio-cultural setting where women exist. Literacy and poverty reduction programs in countries where numerous religious and ethnic backgrounds coexist such as India, affect women differently depending on their sect or religion. Women can positively interact and benefit from the advantages of such programs, but only if their cultural background allows them to (Das, 2004; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Sadaquat & Sheikh, 2011). Malhorta and Mather's study (1997) on Sri-Lankan women focused particularly on demonstrating how powerful external social constraints can be limiting to empowerment, even for women who are educated and employed.⁸⁹ Another study on the "dimensions of empowerment" pointed out that empowerment is dependent on the context and it is a result of a change in circumstances. The study found that even though achieving empowerment in one aspect may boost women's position in another aspect, there are many cases of women who benefited from economic empowerment but suffered disempowerment in social dimensions (Tsikata & Darkwah, 2014). Further to this, in Bangladesh empowerment initiatives, which considered the gender structure and local values proved to be more fruitful for women (Kabeer, 2011). Khader provided an example of a females' microfinance program in Karnataka that failed to empower beneficiaries because they didn't consider the specificities of women's social norms nor the transformation of gender relations (Khader, 2016).

An additional aspect to consider is that women exist in distinct countries of different circumstances. While examining the execution of international empowerment plans in India Mandal explained that; developing countries differ in their economic and cultural status, hence the quest by governments and states to make improvements to empowerment criteria vary according to the need or the specific inequality affecting women in the country (Mandal, 2013). Segal (2008) also affirmed that when examining women's agency cultural consideration and the representation of women's individual experiences is of high importance.⁹⁰ Another comparative study by Zuhur on Arab female empowerment demonstrates that although similarities in culture and practices may exist amongst Arab countries, women's situations and requirements for

⁸⁹ They illustrated how women's access and control over one dimension of power doesn't automatically give them control over another dimension, therefore the analysis of empowerment should focus on details relating to the surrounding context for each element of empowerment (Malhotra & Mather, 1997).

⁹⁰ The researcher explains how the culture affect choices, identities, and self-expressions.

empowerment differ in each state.⁹¹ For instance while women in some countries suffer from public harassment, inadequate medical care, and female genital mutilation (such as in Egypt and Yemen), other women require more civil and legal rights in favour of women (such as in Saudi Arabia) (Zuhur, 2003).⁹² Thus, it can be argued that the room of improvement in women's status is different amongst Arab countries -especially since they vary in wealth and some social aspects. For example, Saudi Arabia and oil rich countries do not have the pressing economic need to challenge poverty and seek international aid that exists in other Arab countries like Egypt and Yemen (Jahan & UN Development Programme, 2015). Furthermore, the influence of religion is different in Saudi Arabia compared to other Muslim countries; the laws followed only the most rigid interpretation of Islamic texts while other countries use a variety of interpretations in order to adapt *shari'a* to local laws (Doumato, 2003; Fatany, 2009; Sonneveld & Berger, 2010).⁹³

Finally, it is to be noted that considering the context incorporates taking into account women's personal experiences, circumstances, needs, and values (Kabeer, 2011; Kabeer et al., 2016; Khader, 2016; Klein & Ballon, 2018; O'Hara & Clement, 2018; Wray, 2004). It is advised that while measuring empowerment one should keep in mind that women are not a homogenous group, they are individuals with different characteristics (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005).⁹⁴ Sharon Wray contends that the successful realisation of agency means having to consider different cultural perceptions and experiences of women that vary in places and circumstances. She argues that universal or western conceptions of empowerment are not useful when applied worldwide, since they neglect cultural and personal views, needs and conditions. The reason for this is "What constitutes agency changes within shifting cultural and political spaces....[especially that] the multitudinous power relations operating within particular... cultural localities create different ways of thinking about agency and empowerment" (Wray, 2004, p. 24). The findings discussed in Chapters 7 and 8 shall reflect how even within local experiences; the individual perceptions of what fosters agency can be different.

⁹¹ See (Kandiyoti, 1988; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Metcalfe, 2011; Zuhur, 2003).

⁹² A study analysed aspects of empowerment on more than 40,000 Arab women in 6 countries and established a framework that includes women's personal needs and values. The researchers noticed significant variations between countries and between women in the same country (Spierings et al., 2010).

⁹³ See Chapter 4.

⁹⁴ Findings on the empowerment of Canadian Muslim women (secular, and conservative who apply Islamic laws in daily-life) showed, their choices varied according to their social values despite they were above the national average in higher education, and had similar employment status to other women (Marcotte, 2010). The study revealed that conservative Arab women particularly (35% of participants), conflict with gender ideas because they contradict their social values especially regarding sex segregation, appearance, and freedom of behaviours.

Moreover, the process of empowerment it is about identifying particular power imbalances, and acting to transform specific limitations within a specific social structure, therefore it can't be set or donated by others (Cornwall, 2016; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Similarly, Porter indicates that "women's understandings of empowerment are culturally diverse", and if policies aim for advancing the status of women and their empowerment in a particular place; it is essential that they derive from a local bottom-up approach, not the opposite (Porter, 2013, p.5). This accentuates further the value of employing contextual analysis for the purpose of this research, which relies on Saudi women's opinions and experiences to evaluate the interrelation between employment as a resource and agency.

In summary, studies on empowerment that have paid considerable attention to gender relations, socio-cultural aspects, and women's circumstances are numerous and they present a valid space for this research. All these discussions are in line with and support the approach of this investigation, which centres around delivering personal accounts of agency interlinked with employment (as a resource of empowerment), that are specific to the Saudi context. Furthermore, they lay emphasis on the social influence of gender relations and the social structure in women's attainment of empowerment, another key factor to the framework employed in this study which will be explained in details shortly (3.3.1).

3.3 Examining Agency in Relation to Employment as a Recourse of Empowerment.

3.3.1 Investigating Agency

As explained in Chapter 1 the intention of this research is to examine agency specifically in relation with employment in the process of empowerment, after the reforms expanding employment opportunities for Saudi women since 2010. This narrow focus addresses an important research gap as (3.3.4) will demonstrate, and examine an aspect of women empowerment that is seldom researched for Saudi Arabia. However, agency by nature is difficult

to evaluate quantitatively due to the fact that people's intentions and motivations "to choose" are hard to measure.

As previously explained in this chapter, developing agency is commonly based on accumulating "psychological, informational, organisational, material, social, financial, and human" assets (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005, p.8). Women's acquisitions of these assets can take many forms individually or collectively, in the domestic or the public sphere, and via formal or informal structures (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016). Regardless, when it's feasible to calculate literacy and employment rates, identifying women's social or psychological assets is complex, because it's personal and context specific. Further complications arise when the entitlement of an asset (such as higher education or job position) affect a woman's capacity to make effective choices by boosting their confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, the way in which women acquire different assets, and how this opportunity was regulated contributes to the perception of empowerment. Strictly speaking, the interrelations between different dimensions of agency are difficult to track or to generalise in other cases because their influences differ from one to another. Moreover, a woman's ability to make viable choices in a domain doesn't necessarily mean she is capable of practicing choice in other domains, for example she may be able to choose her partner but not her job (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Cornwall, 2016; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Kabeer, 2005; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Tsikata & Darkwah, 2014). The arguments that have been presented make it clear that it is intrinsically difficult to measure agency.

However there is opulent research that offers frameworks for investigating agency as an element of empowerment (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Malhotra, 2003; Narayan, 2005). Examining agency requires identifying subjective characteristics related to making choices to be learned from individuals living in the context (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013). In general, learning about agency entails inquiring about strategic decisions (financial and personal) which women make (or want to make), whether they have the ability to make decisions regarding an aspect? How they make them? And what are their motivations? In addition, to include the structure of constraints in this inquiry information on formal (legal) and informal (social) restrictions that women face or consider while making these decisions, are required (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Kabeer, 2005, 2011; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013). Again, because states policies and social norms together influence women's access and benefit of resources and their level of agency (Grabe, 2012; Kabeer, 2005; Malhorta & Schuler, 2005b; Mandal, 2013; Nikkhah et al., 2012). This study therefore acknowledges the importance

of adopting an integral framework, one that considers the agency of women in addition to the social and formal structures of opportunities and constraints.

Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) developed a multidimensional framework to pinpoint women's empowerment level through evaluating agency together with the "formal and informal" structure of opportunities, which have effects on it.⁹⁵ Corresponding to this research, the framework derived from Kabeer's definition of empowerment, and was based on the assumption that both agency and structure of resources highly affect the ability to make viable choices. It proposes assessing agency and the structure of opportunities to understand the different yet interconnected levels of empowerment. The first step of the assessment comprises examining 1. Whether an opportunity to make a choice exists (to investigate the existence of the opportunity or the resource) 2. Whether a person actually takes the opportunity (to inquire about agency) 3. Whether the choice resulted in the desired outcome (to evaluate achievement) (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005, p. 10).

The second step is related to detecting the structure of opportunity and constraints, it involves identifying the formal and informal structure where opportunities exist, how they function and how they influence women's decisions (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). The word 'formal' here means laws and regulations, meanwhile 'informal' implies traditional norms and customs; they both define who is entitled to which empowerment assets. To clarify, if women of a country legally can't study academic specialization, they would be lacking opportunity for formal reasons. However if the academic specialisation was open to women but their fathers or husbands do not allow them to study it, then they are lacking opportunity as a result of informal limitation.

Ruth Alsop and Nina Heinsohn, recommended their framework for in depth qualitative research, which aims to understand how women are/can be empowered in a particular country, as well as research that focuses on examining empowerment in a particular domain (resources and agency in the case of this research) (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016). Therefore, this framework formed the basis of collecting data on Saudi women's agency in this research. It is worth mentioning however that their framework was used partially to investigate agency and the structure of resources only. According to Metcalfe this kind of analysis is lacking in literature

⁹⁵ "Agency is defined as an actor's ability to make meaningful choices; that is, the actor is able to envisage options and make a choice. Opportunity structure is defined as the formal and informal contexts within which actors operate" (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005, p. 6).

on empowerment for the Arabian Gulf states (Metcalf, 2011). She argues that the inclusion of social and cultural factors influencing gender relations in the analysis of women's development in the Gulf, improves achieving empowerment goals. This research, however, doesn't only investigate agency in general, women's employment as an asset for developing agency and a resource of empowerment. Hence, the following section will review discussions on employment as a women's empowerment resource.

3.3.2 Women's Employment: an Asset of Agency in the Process of Empowerment?

3.3.2.1 Argument #1: Employment is key to practicing agency and attaining empowerment

Women's employment has been widely discussed, and approved by development strategists, as a vital tool for achieving women's empowerment.⁹⁶ The 2003 Arab Human Development Report suggested that guaranteeing women equal access to education and offering them equal economic participation lead to the achievement of complete empowerment (McLaren et al., 2008; Metcalf, 2008). Women's access to adequate paid employment and gaining an income is argued to be a main resource of empowerment because: 1. It improves poverty 2. Equips women with non-material resources 3. Boosts the sense of security and protection and 4. Drives social change in favour of women, corresponding the findings of this study.

Studies on varied countries demonstrated that women's economic participation can lead to a higher quality of life, poverty reduction, and improvement in women's and children's health care, and greater participation in household and expenditure decisions (Duflo, 2012; Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005, 2016; McLaren et al., 2008). Economic empowerment is essential to fight poverty and secure basic needs of women and families, otherwise women will not be concerned by gender inequality (McLaren et al., 2008). There is plentiful evidences of women living in a "better-off" environments and being more able to exercise agency than poorer women (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016). In fact as explained by Kabeer, extreme poverty outlaws agency, since it

⁹⁶ See Asghari, Sadeghi, & Aslani, 2013; Duflo, 2012; Haghghat, 2013; McLaren et al., 2008; Porter, 2013; Sadaquat & Sheikh, 2011; Visvanthan et al., 2011. Both the United Nations and the World Bank indicated that women's empowerment correlates with their labour market participation (Haghghat, 2013).

limits the available choices an individual can make, but the consequence can be more severe on women as a result of gender-related inequalities (Kabeer, 2005).

Income generation via employment gives women a purpose, self-confidence, and the ability to support their families, which makes them feel valuable (Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005; Sakshi, 2015). It grants them knowledge of a skill and expands their understanding of rights, besides extending their social network and their mobility. Moreover, it increases their bargaining power, authority over self, and it reduces domestic violence (Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2016; McLaren et al., 2008). Gaining revenues from employment is also believed to boost women's entrepreneurial attitude and enhance the spirit of social and political emancipation (Porter, 2013). All these attributes are necessary to agency which begins from within (Kabeer, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2016; Sakshi, 2015).

Furthermore, wage offers women a sense of security and protection in countries where legal protection is poor, especially in facing circumstances such as divorce (Duflo, 2012). In fact, financial independence allows women the possibility to leave abusive marriages and oppressive relationships, and to move away from their oppressive patriarchal constraints in cases (Chopra & Muller, 2016; Kabeer, 2005).⁹⁷ The availability of employment opportunities for women also minimises the risk of financial difficulties when losing the male head-of-the-house (Sakshi, 2015). Consequently, it opens doors for alternative opportunities in life enabling more exercise of agency.

Broadening work opportunities for women is also a key driver of social change and a facilitator for reorganising gender hierarchy within society (Alrumaihi, 2008). Improving labour opportunities and conditions for women can lead to changes in their status (Haghighat, 2013; Visvanthan et al., 2011). Such changes are substantial for empowerment to occur (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 1999, 2005, 2011; Sakshi, 2015). Agency in particular relates to elevating the positioning of women in social, economic, and political structures (Sakshi, 2015). Employment is not only an opportunity for women to participate in the public sphere, but also for acquiring greater independence from patriarchal constraints and attaining power in the family (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Kabeer, 2005; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Parpart et al., 2003; Ross, 2008; Visvanthan et al., 2011). In various societies strict traditional customs and patriarchal norms were diminished by increasing literacy and work participation rates amongst women (Joseph &

⁹⁷ There are conditions for this possibility depending on the woman's context, such as personal status laws in the country. Opposite views will be discussed in (3.3.2.2).

Slyomovics, 2001; Sadaquat & Sheikh, 2011). Several other studies of female employment convey that the provision of employment for women results in overcoming gender roles, an increase in women's decision making, as well as greater division of domestic labour between spouses (Elamin & Omair, 2010; Hou & Ma, 2013; Kabeer, 2005, 2016; Sakshi, 2015).

Hence, evidences points to positive relations between female employment and the progress of empowerment. However, the significance doesn't lie in women's access to employment, but what advantages it can bring to transform women's lives or to change the gender structure (Kabeer, 2016; Sakshi, 2015). The benefit of employment as a resource of empowerment, which contributes to the growing exercise of agency is mediated by several factors that are discussed next.

3.3.2.2 *Argument #2: Employment is not enough.*

The matter of improving the agency of women via the expansion of employment opportunities is complex. Access to opportunities of empowering resources, 'material' (financial) and 'non-material' (knowledge and skills), through work is better understood as a necessary but insufficient condition for developing or practicing agency. Employment is important but is does not automatically grant women their empowerment or increase their agency (Elson, 1999; Haghghat, 2013; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Visvanthan et al., 2011). Evidence from diverse studies transferred that the relation is conditioned by: the social context, the economic situation, the type of work, legal support, and the responsibility division within the domestic sphere (Bespinar, 2010; Calkin, 2015; Caraway, 2009; Duflo, 2012; Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005; Malhotra and Mather, 1997; McLaren et al., 2008; Sadaquat and Sheikh, 2011; Sholkamy, 2014). Subsequently, the discussion explains why employment's efficiency to fostering agency and empowerment of women is dependent on such factors. It is worth highlighting that scrutinising the following studies served as a basis of comparison between the existing literature and the results of this research, regarding these aspects, which will be elaborated in Chapters 7 and 8.

With regards to the first factor: the social context, it has a strong influence in determining women's access to employment, and the extent of its advantage to their agency. For example, in Sri-Lanka women's ability to access employment and benefit from it depends on religious and ethnic values (Malhorta & Mather, 1997), whilst in the UAE families of Emirati workingwomen was a factor of support to their career success and their reach to leading positions (O'Sullivan's,

2015). Hence women's benefits from employment depend on the value of women's work in the surrounding society.⁹⁸

Even if the surrounding society doesn't directly prevent women's access to employment, aspects related to the social context such as the attitude of others or the domestic responsibilities discourage women from work. By way of illustration, Sadaqat and Shiekh (2011) questioned the low rate of women's participation in Pakistan's labour market while opportunities are growing and international developmental support is available. They concluded that the attitude of the surrounding society toward their work, and the burden of accumulated household responsibilities entirely carried out by the wife, besides the shortage of care and transportation services; refrain women from joining employment (Sadaquat and Sheikh, 2011). Similarly, female employment in MENA region is regulated by the predominant values; such as cultural acceptance of a woman to work in a certain job, the partner's education, and women's care responsibilities (Spierings et al., 2010). Unfortunately, in many patriarchal societies women face these constraints on employment even when the opportunity for employment exists. For this reason, whether paid work increases women's empowerment can highly depend on their partner's sharing of domestic and caring obligations (Elson, 1999; Kabeer, 2005; Sakshi, 2015). Chapter 7 transfers how this is reflected in the Saudi context, according to the narratives of the participants.

Further research on Arab countries affirms that the interpretation of Islamic laws according to traditional patriarchal values has been used to restrict women's role in the domestic sphere only (Charrad, 2011; Haghighat, 2013; Hijab, 2001; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Sidani, 2005). These opinions influenced the populations' convictions of Arab countries and especially women (Al-Eissa & Gahwaji, 2012; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Sidani, 2005).⁹⁹ As a result a substantial number of women in the Middle East tie themselves to domestic work and their identity with their family role as care givers (Kabeer, 2016), hence employment can contradict their priority, unless the care role is fulfilled by another woman (Spierings, 2014). The results of this research found this accurate for the majority of housewife participants across different social classes.

⁹⁸ Using comparative analysis of 40 years (1960-2000), Klasen and Lamanna (2009) found that MENA region endures the lowest female employment rate, even though female education has showed consistent progress. Beside limitations in employment structure related to the economy the study attributed the reasons to social and cultural ideologies. The results contradicted assumptions that women's progress in one aspect of empowerment can result in progress in another.

⁹⁹ Religious scholars promote the role of women as mothers, submissive wives and daughters and they do not approve of a sex-mixed environment (Hijab, 2001; Sidani, 2005). Whilst they agree that men and women are equal in Islam, women's participation in the labour market and the public sphere is debatable particularly concerning their appearance and contact with men (Sidani, 2005).

Another point to bear in mind, the benefits of employment (such as increase in income, taking out a loan, learning a skill) may not result in a change of a woman's positioning, consciousness, or constraints while fostering agency and levelling up in the process of empowerment entails significant changes in oppressive social structure biases (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 2005, 2011). The ability of employment to relax patriarchal social restrictions on their agency doesn't always hold true. Evidences demonstrates that in some cases of Arab countries employment does not challenge the gendered social structure enough (Donno & Russett, 2004; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Kabeer et al., 2016; Moghadam, 2004; Zuhur, 2003). A study on employment and empowerment including more than 40,000 Arab women, underlined that in some cases employment didn't change social restrictions imposed on women by their family (Spierings, et al., 2010). This research will demonstrate that some in cases employment enabled some women to overcome social restrictions and exercise more agency (Chapter 6), whilst in other cases or regarding particular matters it didn't (Chapter 8).

Secondly, for women to benefit from employment to enlarge their exercise of agency and control over their strategic matters; it's important that women control the money they earn. Control of earnings increases women's bargaining power, negotiation of responsibilities, and authority within the household (Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer 2005, 2016; Kabeer et al., 2016, Shakshi, 2015). It furthermore, encourages change of behaviours towards women in and outside the household (Kabeer et al., 2016). Evidence from Turkey further demonstrate that control of income relates to women's agency as it enables them with a larger spending power and extended decision making regarding purchases which express their image and status (Bespinar, 2010). The control of money is not to be neglected when examining women's agency as it has an influence on the dynamic of power within the household, and on other strategic matters such as spending on entertainment or investment, as Chapters 6 and 7 will review.

Despite employment being acknowledged to improve social and economic conditions for unprivileged women, unfortunately contradictions between poverty reduction and attaining empowerment exist (Chopra & Muller, 2016). In that regard, for employment to empower women it should be their choice to work or not, and it should reflect improvement to the quality of their life and well-being (Bespinar, 2010; Drydyk, 2008; Duflo, 2012; Elson, 1999; Sakshi, 2015; Sholkamy, 2014). Calkin explains that promoting women's work in many developing countries served to empower the poorest of the poor rather than empower all women, interested in productivity rather than resolving gender inequality (Calkin, 2015). Specifically, some women

can be involved in economic exploitation of cheap labour or exposed to risky work conditions, which contradicts their wellbeing (Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005, 2016; Peterson, 2005). The outcome of this study about Saudi women's employment didn't reflect this argument, because it didn't include the segment of very poor or rural women. Yet, it is to be underlined that women's labour market participation could be a sign of poverty and necessity rather than empowerment.

To illuminate further, Kabeer stresses that in order to assess whether female labour is an empowering asset of agency, one needs to distinguish whether women are working to secure their 'survival needs' or they are doing so to build a career and seek independence (Kabeer, 2005). Additionally, Malhorta & Mather (1997) notifies that employment may have a positive impact on upper social class women, and is attributed to the domestic help provided by maids and to the consuming behaviours they have. Poor women work because their economic contribution is a matter of survival, necessity, and obligation; thus they are willing to sacrifice their wellbeing (Duflo, 2012).¹⁰⁰ Examining women's employment in Arab countries illustrated that divorcees and widowers represented higher employment rates than others. This indicates their work as an economic need rather than self-realisation (Spierings et al., 2010). There is also concern over women's informal labour that is growing in Arab countries, where labour accountability, healthy conditions, legal protection, and maternity compensation are lacking; reaffirming that not every employment is empowering to women (Sholkamy, 2014). Kabeer listed various studies that detailed how women were exploited in jobs such as manufacturing, which involved heavy duty, long hours, and health and safety hazards. Relatedly, several other researchers emphasise that the process of empowerment should be achieved in harmony with wellbeing, hence working conditions are key to women's empowerment through employment (Drydyk, 2008; Hirschmann, 2003; Sadaquat & Sheikh, 2011; Sen, 2001). These cases do not, however, represent the case of Saudi women under this study; despite the fact that some participants were indeed working out of need for money, however their employment didn't compromise their wellbeing and had a positive impact on their level of agency.

The final point to highlight addresses the essential role of the government and the legal support to women for employment to be foster their agency and enable their empowerment, because the rules impact the practice of agency and the development of empowerment as much as the availability of the recourses. They are important for both enhancing women's positioning in the economic structure and motivating change within the social organisation (Kabeer et al., 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Poor adults compromise their need for food and health care to ensure they are able to provide the necessities for their children. When impoverished women work they endure house-word and compromise their health (Duflo, 2012).

Employment policies particularly must be supportive to the process of empowerment by facilitating the obstacles challenging women (Miles, 2016; Spierings et al., 2010). By way of illustration, Hania Sholkamy argues in favour of social protection and steady financial aid from the government, which enabled varied aspects of women's empowerment in Egypt (Sholkamy, 2014). She maintains that women should benefit from social legislation even when they are working, because evidences on women globally shows that they are unequal to men in terms of control of resources, liberty of choices and in domestic responsibilities, even when they contribute to the household income (Sholkamy, 2014).¹⁰¹ Equivalently, Peterson (2005) alerted that reducing or neglecting the importance of public social services and access to secure employment, threatens the progress of women empowerment through employment.

Other researchers advocate for government support to wage and positions equality between men and women. For example, Iversen & Rosenbluth (2010) explained that as long as women make less money the family would assign lower priority to their career. Other recommendations suggested strong policy interventions granting subsidies to cover the costs of hiring women, or mandating parental leave as effective practices, to increase demand for female labour (Cook et al., 2000; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010a). Chopra & Muller (2016) further affirm the importance of the government's effort to facilitate families' balance between paid and unpaid work to enhance women's economic empowerment, by the provision of opportunities for work that are flexible in time and place, besides child care service (Chopra & Muller, 2016). Amy Wharton also proposes that women either have greater access to high ranking jobs, or their wages must be equivalent to men in high positions (Wharton, 2000). This way employment can enhance women's positioning and balance between the status of men and women in the private and public spheres. Such policies increase the value of women's employment; hence their economic role becomes as important as men's. This relieves gender roles, allowing women greater practice of choice regarding employment and other aspects. Concerning this study, Chapter 4 will outline relevant employment policies and regulations in Saudi Arabia, whilst Chapter 8 will discuss the experiences and recommendations of the informants in that regard.

Ultimately for women's empowerment to progress, labour and other legal reforms must be inseparable from that process. It's vital that the state strives to eliminate legal obstacles preventing women from acquiring agency in addition to expanding their employment

¹⁰¹ She documented an experiment of transferring money to poor women in Cairo, given in exchange for mothers to spend it on their children's needs and medical check-up. Beneficiaries shall fulfill attendance to workshops and community services. The participants reported less stress and domestic violence, as well as greater ability to choose to work or not. Those who stayed at work used the money to elevate their living standards.

opportunities, and this is dependent on what women need in each context (Duflo, 2012; McLaren et al., 2008). For example, when women's work opportunities in Saudi Arabia were expanded, they were unable to drive and required their guardian's permission to work and travel (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 1999, 2001).¹⁰² Such aspects limited their practice of agency despite the existence of the opportunities.¹⁰³ By contrast, as a result of legislation development and the political will to advance women's role in society, women in Qatar registered the highest female employment rate amongst Gulf states despite lacking financial need (Golkowska, 2014).¹⁰⁴

These opinions confirm that access to resources (specifically employment) is only a step towards developing agency and attaining empowerment. It's therefore apparent that for employment to enable the agency of women one must consider several points: 1. How or whether employment influences limiting gender norms (ones that restrain women from making purposeful choices) or forward social change in a way that facilitates women's empowerment. This is represented in the value of women's work within the family and society, the expansion of their bargaining abilities, as well as the division of domestic labour. 2. Paying attention to working conditions and rights, the type of employment, and women's well-being. 3. The importance of women's control of money, and the existence of other legal rights which support women's empowerment. These for example include: the existence of basic individual liberties to make choice, the provision of sufficient welfare services, protection from sexual harassment and discrimination at work, and the efficient execution of these rights.¹⁰⁵ Also, the benefit is not about the access to the opportunity of employment, but about whether employment brings advantages to women that increase their ability to practice agency and be in control of strategic matters in their lives or not, which is the interest of this research. Nevertheless, the discussion of the findings (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) considered and compared these previous arguments with the data whilst interpreting Saudi women's views on employment as an enabler for agency.

3.3.3 The State of Research on Saudi Women's Employment and Agency.

The usefulness of employment as agency enabling has been discussed in several contextual

¹⁰² Women's situation in India didn't correspond to the reform of dowry laws, as they were not supported with reforms of inheritance and property laws (Mandal, 2013; McLaren et al., 2008).

¹⁰³ Chapter 4 analyses the context of Saudi women and demonstrates how it influences their agency.

¹⁰⁴ According to the GGG index of 2016, Qatar ranked 97th with 54% of FLMP whilst the second GCC country "Kuwait" ranked 125th with 49% FLMP (World Economic Forum, 2016).

¹⁰⁵ Some aspects will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 8.

qualitative studies for different countries (Bespinar, 2010; Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 2015; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Miles, 2016a; Sakshi, 2015; Wolf, 2011), yet they are lacking for Saudi Arabia. Existing analysis of Saudi women's employment concentrates either on its relation to education, or its assessment of employment as a tool for economic progress rather than empowerment.¹⁰⁶ Several research carried out on this subject has focused on the social and economic marginalisation of Saudi women (Alghamdi, 2018; Doumato, 1999, 2001; Le Renard, 2008). Few qualitative studies have demonstrated the way in which working women in the past such as doctors have been challenged by cultural norms, religious conservatism and legal obstacles (Alkhateeb, 1987; Doumato, 1999; Fatany, 2009; Le Renard, 2008; Miller-Rosser et al., 2006; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Even fewer inquiries focus on agency or Saudi women's choices, and in all cases they do not examine choices interlinked with employment (Quamar, 2016; Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013; Yakaboski et al., 2017). There is one exception by Alfarran et al., (2018), a recent paper which investigates the influence of one Saudi labour program "Nitaqat", in resolving structural barriers against the employment of women. Lastly, other studies interested in examining the influence of expanding women's employment have targeted the views of men about it instead of seeking women's opinions (Bursztyn et al., 2018; Elamin & Omair, 2010).

In that regard, Benstead (2016) has highlighted the lack of research on how women's employment affects patriarchal attitudes within the family and surrounding society in oil rich countries (Benstead, 2016). Recalling these studies enhances the aim of this thesis, which is to explore the opinions of Saudi women, since they're scarcely acknowledged and seldom present in recent discussions of employment in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, it pinpoints 1) the existing gap in the literature, which discusses Saudi women's employment, 2) the scarce information about Saudi women's agency. In this way, the contribution of this research had been validated.

To give further details on the existing research, many studies concentrate on the education system as a main challenge to the employment of women in Saudi Arabia besides limiting social norms. For example, Calvert and Al-Shetaiwi (2002) used questioners to examine the views of managers in private-sector companies relating to women's employment. They argue that women's marginalisation in the labour market is only partly influenced by cultural and religious impact; rather it is due to the lack of proper vocational and technical training in the education system (Calvert & Al-Shetaiwi, 2002). Alternatively, Baki portrayed how the education system

¹⁰⁶ See Alghamedi, 2016; Baki, 2004; Calvert & Al-Shetaiwi, 2002; Elimam et al., 2014; Riedy, 2013; *Saudi Saleswomen's Experience ...*, 2015.

in Saudi Arabia is sex segregated and emphasised how traditional gender roles failed to prepare students for the labour market as professional employees.¹⁰⁷ She confirms that social norms are entrenched in interpretations of religious texts that govern social life, in legal laws, in the education system, and in labour market structures as well. Although it includes information on the limitations to women's access and endurance in the labour market, the article doesn't focus solely on women nor their agency but rather on the education policy (Baki, 2004).

In addition, more recent research questioned the low economic participation of Saudi women despite the government's efforts to expand their employment opportunities since 2010 (Alghamedi, 2016). However, this thesis adopted quantitative methods, inquired business owners and employers of the Ministry of Labour, and focused on unemployment challenges in Saudi Arabia.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless those studies do not address the role of women in the market or the influence of employment on women or their empowerment. Furthermore, they fail to create a space for the opinions of Saudi women depicting the situation from their point of view and experiences.

Two other quantitative examinations of women's employment and empowerment; focused on the benefit of education and employment to enhance the economic development of the Kingdom (Elimam et al., 2014; Saqib et al., 2016).¹⁰⁹ With respect to this thesis, the first study mentioned that research examining Saudi women's roles and contributions to society are very limited (Elimam et al., 2014). However, in the discussion of the results the second study only stated that laws, traditions and gender roles are limiting women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, but without providing details (Saqib et al., 2016). Such information confirms the need for this research to be conducted as it fills a poorly addressed gap in the literature of Saudi women's empowerment in terms of knowledge and method application.

It is however fair to point out studies, which examined Saudi women's employment qualitatively, focusing on structural limitations. They are similar to this research in benefiting from women's narratives, and considering the context as central to the analysis of the status of

¹⁰⁷ Baki (2004) executed context and interpretative document analysis addressing laws, religion, culture, and history to understand the impact of education policy on labour markets.

¹⁰⁸ Conclusions suggested reforming the education system and employment policies, and creating more jobs for women (Alghamedi, 2016).

¹⁰⁹ Conclusions about women's contribution to the Saudi economy confirmed that there is a significant relationship between female's education, employment and the GDP rate (Elimam et al., 2014). Also, three researchers from Riyadh conducted a statistical analysis on fertility, literacy, employment, and GDP as parameters of women empowerment, and confirmed that women empowerment encourages long-term economic growth (Saqib et al., 2016).

women, however neither empowerment nor agency was discussed in these studies (Alfarran et al., 2018; Miller-Rosser et al., 2006; Riedy, 2013; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Only few exceptions have studied choices; for example two studies examined contextual and qualitative information on Saudi women's choices but they focus on dress and appearance rather than employment (Quamar, 2016; Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013), whilst one inquiry focused on studying decisions (Yakaboski et al., 2017).

As for the other studies on employment, Vidysagar & Rea (2004) provided details of the challenges that twenty-nine female Saudi doctors experienced in their education and work, which were mainly social and gender related. It is noteworthy that these doctors appreciated the chance to communicate their views and express their opinions to the world (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Relatively, Miller-Rosser et al., (2006) explored cultural influences on the status of Saudi female nurses, underlining how challenging were the pressures of social values were to them.¹¹⁰ Thus, further research is necessary to welcome other women of society to participate in communicating their views and experiences, as Saudi female doctors were offered the opportunity to work earlier than other women and they are classified as elites within their communities.

There is recent material that explores women's work and concentrates on education, conveying propositions more relevant to the topic of this investigation, even though it doesn't explicitly examine agency. Robbin Riedy explored how Saudi women studying in Washington universities formed their career motivations facing their socially and economically conservative culture. Riedy concluded that the participants preferences were compliant with their gender norms and social system, exhibiting passive resistance to limitations they encountered (Riedy, 2013). The research was useful in understanding students' views regarding employment and social limitations,¹¹¹ which provide a space for this thesis to further interrogate women who accessed the labour market and experienced its real dynamics, employment struggles, and consequences.

¹¹⁰ The participants were disappointment with society's view of nursing as a non-respected and non-appropriate profession especially for females because it involves dealing with male clients and long late working hours.

¹¹¹ Her study demonstrated the gender conditioning of the Saudi labour market creating jobs specific to women that are compliant with Saudi Islamic laws.

The previous research constitutes a great deal of motivation to spark off further qualitative research on women's recent expanded employment with a view to making meaningful choices, in the Saudi society which is structured upon traditions and morals that are strictly protective of women; their identities, voices and thoughts which are all shielded against disclosure (Jamjoom, 2010). In particular, the research which examines women's employment focuses on men's attitudes and opinions about it (Bursztyn et al., 2018; Calvert & Al-Shetaiwi, 2002; Elamin & Omair, 2010). Consequently, it could be interesting to conduct further investigation into how women themselves perceive work and its implications.

In summary, reviewed sources of literature on Saudi women's employment or empowerment are either dated or quantitative, furthermore it emphasises the opinion of men and excludes the opinion of women. On the other hand, qualitative research that benefits from women's narratives focuses on the challenges of previous and specific employment. The review of these studies serves to validate the fact that there is a gap in the qualitative information available on Saudi women's agency in general and its development by employment in particular. It further confirms the benefit of a context relevant analysis whilst examining the status of Saudi women. Therefore, this thesis can contribute to filling the gap in the literature as an addition to the scarce ethnographic research on Saudi women's employment with a view of empowerment, so as to enhance the representation of Saudi women's opinions and experiences.

3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the first part of this chapter reviewed women's empowerment; its domains, and indicators. More importantly, it presented and justified the choice of this research to draw the analysis of the findings upon Naila Kabeer's definition of empowerment and agency. This part demonstrated a key argument and a main pillar of this study; examining empowerment in general and agency in particular require paying special attention to social structure and gender norms in the context of women under examination, because they work as the main facilitator or restraint for developing agency and attaining empowerment.

The second part, however, illustrated the framework of Alsop and Heinsohn (2005), which this thesis employed as an approach to study Saudi women's agency. Afterwards, deliberations concerning the usefulness of women's employment to develop their agency and empower them were reviewed. It began by gathering the arguments maintaining that rewards of employment

such as financial security, building connections, improving skills and self-esteem, beside other benefits; work as important assets of agency and contribute to women's empowerment. Then, it clarifies that this result isn't automatic; for employment to enable agency it compels the existence of other criteria depending on the individual needs, values, circumstances, and the support of legal rights. In other words, again, this process depends on the context and structure of opportunities and constraints surrounding the woman in question. This final part ends with presenting contextual and qualitative research of women's agency intertwined with employment, and pinpointed the existing gap in the literature for research on the case of Saudi women's. This motivated dedicating the following chapter to study the structure of constraints on Saudi women's agency and the opportunity structure of expanding their participation in the national labour market.

Chapter 4: The Structure of Constraints and Opportunity: Reforming Saudi Women's Marginalisation?

4.1 Introduction

As illustrated in Chapter 3, fully comprehending women's empowerment requires a comprehensive examination of the context of their lives. This demands paying close attention to the structure of the opportunities available to them and the social and legal constraints limiting women from exercising purposeful choices. Hence, this chapter is dedicated to examining the particular context of women in Saudi Arabia, during the course of the development of the kingdom from the 1970s until 2018. The first part is allocated to anatomising the aspects restraining Saudi women from practicing agency, until the expansion of female employment opportunities. In other words it analyses the structure of constraints. Thereby it addresses key elements that determine women's status, role, and agency. It explains how the economic circumstances of the Rentier Kingdom, together with the *Wahhabi* conservatism, and the legalisation of patriarchal norms; limit women's agency particularly when it comes to employment.

The second part of the chapter, examines the structural changes brought forward by King Abdullah, with emphasis on reforms expanding women's employment opportunities that began in 2009. This focus is considered because; employment is the resource of empowerment this study is investigating in connection with agency. The second part therefore, depicts the "opportunity structure". It begins with a general overview of changes in the legal system, education, and expanding women's participation in public. It also addresses the motives of such reforms and how they turned out to be of benefit to Saudi women by creating new doors of opportunities for them. It then progresses by reviewing the development of Saudi women's employment opportunities from 2009 until 2017. Finally, it ends with a critical analysis of the employment reforms policies, consulting the relevant literature on increasing women's employment.¹¹²

¹¹² This included news articles and websites.

4.2 Structural Constraints: Decades of Marginalising Saudi Women

“The discussion of women employment in Saudi Arabia goes beyond the economic or development sphere.... It involves the profound influence of religion and socio-cultural forces, which in turn affect the behavior and the attitude of the society towards the issue of women’s work” (Al-Harthy, 2000, p.151).

Marginalisation is the lack of power and restricted social integration in the public sphere (Lister, 2004). Number of research in politics, economics, and sociology have examined the origins and the effects of women’s social and labour marginalisation in Saudi Arabia.¹¹³ They have identified key factors of Saudi women’s marginalised and subordinate status that also formed structural restraints on their agency. These are oil wealth, the influence of religious elites on matters of women, besides the conservative interpretation of Islamic laws, patriarchal traditions and values, and some legal obstacles.¹¹⁴ This part hence will discuss in details each of these aspects (figure 2).

Historically, before the development of the Saudi State in the nineteenth century women were neither marginalised economically nor socially. Prior to the oil boom in the 1970s rural women in the Gulf worked in the field, in grazing sheep and camels, and in handicrafts (Al-Harthy, 2000; Elsaadi, 2012; Le Renard, 2008; Rajkhan, 2014). Women then were breadwinners of their families in pre-oil Gulf regions, because men had to be away for a long period in merchant trips or maritime activities (Elsaadi, 2012).¹¹⁵ Women of what later became Saudi Arabia played a key role in the economy of different regions, they were in charge of the date harvests and they helped in the provision of services to pilgrims in Mecca and Medina.¹¹⁶ Working class women were teachers, preachers, healers of illness, midwives, matching spouses, organising celebrations, and washing dead bodies. Wealthy wives of ruling elites and merchants on the other hand were involved in the jewellery selling trade for example and investing in land and charity donations (Elsaadi, 2012). Women were furthermore in direct contact with men of the family and others in

¹¹³ See Al-Harthy, 2000; Al-Rasheed, 2013; Caraway, 2009; Dildar, 2015; Doumato, 1999; Fatany, 2013; Haghghat, 2013; ILO Department of Statistics, 2011; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Le Renard, 2008; Meijer et al., 2012; Moghadam, 2007; Pharaon, 2004; Schwarz, 2008; Sultan et al., 2011; W.T.P, 2010.

¹¹⁴ Obligatory male guardianship, sex segregation, uncoded civil and family laws, the ban on driving, and a range of restrictions to freedom have resulted in deprived women’s social positioning and poor labour market participation (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 1999; Fatany, 2009; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Seager, 2003; W.T.P, 2010).

¹¹⁵ Men had to leave for fishing and pearling for a long time, and they could die or become wounded.

¹¹⁶ Rajkhan (2014) confirms that women were active in agriculture and face covering was spread in the 1980s only.

public places (Sultan et al., 2011).¹¹⁷ That is to say, women in the past were not economically marginalised.

With the generation of oil revenues in the late 1960s that situation changed and the role of women became commonly restricted to the private sphere.¹¹⁸ However the factors mentioned earlier together determined what a Saudi woman can be or do, and influenced their options and possibilities in life, thereby assigned them limited scope of agency (Doumato, 1999; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Le Renard, 2008; Pharaon, 2004). These factors are reviewed to understand Saudi women’s challenges prior to the reforms, their barriers and dynamics to achieve greater agency. In other words they establish the substance of examining the limitations within the context of the women understudy. Hence, they form the point of the departure to analyse if employment reforms were influential to reduce these barriers, and understand how Saudi women themselves view the changes in their environment.

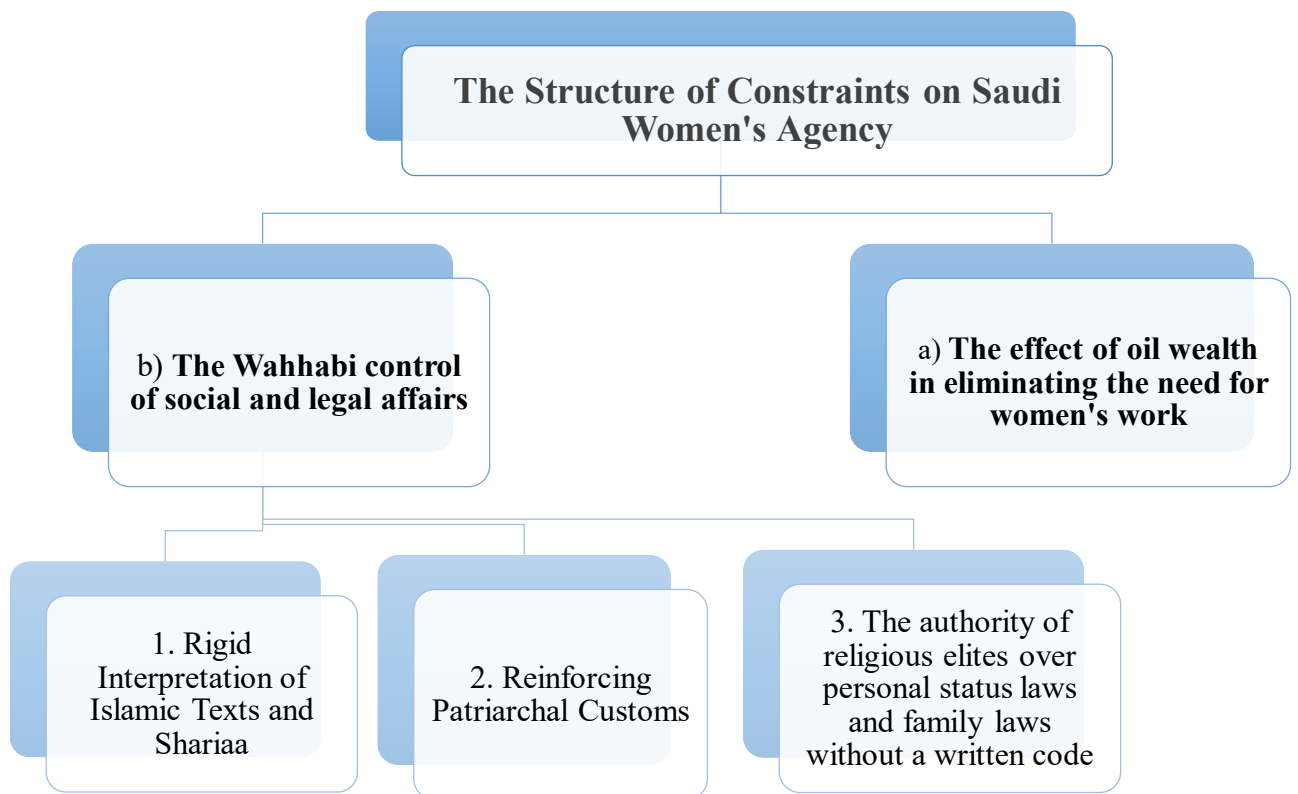


Figure 2: The Structure of Constraints

Source: Author.

¹¹⁷ Al-Harthi (2000) notified that women worked around the field with men who were family relatives; therefore mixing with stranger men is limited even in the past.

¹¹⁸ Similar situations occurred when societies in Europe transformed from hunter-gatherer communities to agrarian ones (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010).

4.2.1 The Influence of Oil Wealth on the Positioning of Saudi Women

The oil boom in the 1970s changed the situation of women dramatically (Al-Khateeb, 1998; Sultan et al., 2011). On one hand, the government introduced a succession of development plans, which resulted in rapid urbanisation. Oil revenues enabled the establishment of compulsory public education to both men and women (Commins, 2009; Moghadam, 2011). The spread of education have raised awareness and gradually delayed the age of marriage, as well as encouraged to replace extended families with nuclear families. Oil returns also financed free public health care, hence mortality rates declined (Al-Khateeb, 1998; Haghigat, 2013; Le Renard, 2008; Moghadam, 2011; Torabi & Abbasi-Shavazi, 2015). On the other hand, oil wealth contributed to women’s exclusion from the public sphere securing highly paid jobs for Saudi men with rewarding benefits in the public sector (Shiraz, 2016). At the same time it created dependency on foreign labour for other jobs and the development of the country (Commins, 2009; Moghadam, 2011). Consequently, it delayed women’s integration into the labour market and diminished their opportunities of employment; therefore they became entirely dependent on male relatives financially.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, generous oil revenues facilitated the modernisation of the country and the spread of abundant luxury providing citizens with modern houses and facilities of urban cities, thereby eliminating women’s need to work and promoted their comfort and protection as a stay home women (Le Renard, 2008). In other words, oil enabled the “Rentier” kingdom to secure high living standards for individuals and families, without the need of Saudi women’s work (Haghigat, 2013; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Ross, 2008; Schwarz, 2008; Sultan et al., 2011)- (figure 3).

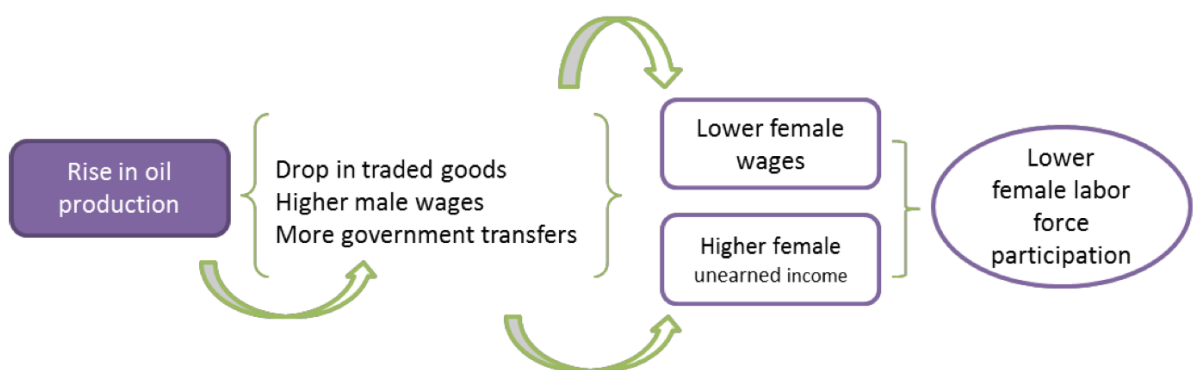


Figure 3: The effect of oil on women’s employment.

Source: (Rajkhan, 2014, p.15)

¹¹⁹ However gradually middle-class women were offered employment in civil services, education and in hospitals (Moghadam, 2011), and this will be expanded in the second part of this chapter.

Prosperity as a result of oil was not, however, the sole determinant of women's marginalisation in Saudi Arabia; there are other factors as the next part will elaborate. To clarify, Charrad (2009) explained; oil appeared in patriarchal social and political structures, which produced women's marginalisation. Nevertheless, neighbouring oil rich countries progressively scored higher rates of women's participation in various domains of the public sphere not just in labour markets (ILO Department of Statistics, 2011; World Economic Forum, 2016).¹²⁰ The effects of oil wealth marginalising women were minimised in other oil rich Gulf States, with governments attempt to modernise and develop their countries.¹²¹ By contrast, the rulers of Saudi Arabia were stuck with their religious clerks allies, who were promised to control social matters in the country. That alliance (explained in details following), was another key influence on Saudi women's status and limited agency (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Commins, 2009; Jamjoom, 2010).

4.2.2 The Religious Establishment's Control of Social Matters

“Wahhabism, the Saudi state's version of Islam, is a constantly present factor in Saudi society through Saudi Arabia's laws, education, television programmes, regularly issued fatwas on social and moral issues, the judicial system and religious organizations” (Meijer et al., 2012, p.13)

The ruling families of other Gulf countries and Arab kingdoms inherited their political power from ancestors unlike Saudi Arabia, which depended on Ibn Abdul-Wahhab's ideology of reforming Islam to establish their rule and gain their legitimacy (Commins, 2009; Doumato, 2003). The establishment of the first Saudi state relied on the well-known political religious alliance between the ruler of Ibin Saud and the religious reformer Mohammad Ibn Abdul-Wahhab in 1744 -1745. The former used the latter's orthodox interpretation of Islam as a foundation to extend his leadership and reinforce his rule.¹²² Consequently, their alliance involved that Ibn Saud holding the political authority while Ibn Abdul-Wahhab controls the

¹²⁰ See the Global Gender Gap report (2007), all Gulf States scored higher rates than Saudi Arabia in women's participation and opportunities. Out of 128 countries Saudi Arabia ranked number (127) in Economic participation, (128) in political Participation.

¹²¹ The national female employment in Saudi Arabia is lower than other Gulf Countries (Rajhkhan, 2016, p. 20).

¹²² Mohammad Ibn Saud was the tribal leader and ruler of Darieah (North of Riyadh), who wanted to establish a state in the Arabian Peninsula.

religious and social power.¹²³ Since then, the Wahhabi institution was assured to remain partners of the rulers via controlling social affairs (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Commins, 2009; Doumato, 2003; Jamjoom, 2010; Meijer et al., 2012; Vogel, 2011; Thompspon, 2015). This religious establishment is underlined as a principal factor of Saudi women's marginalisation (Hammond, 2012; Jamjoom, 2010; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Pharaon, 2004; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004; Vogel, 2011, Thompson, 2015).¹²⁴

In Saudi Arabia Islamic Shari'aa (jurisprudence) is associated with all classes of politics. It is not only the official constitution of the country but also the chief source of the rulers' political legitimacy. It incorporates religious practices and the common law; moreover, it dictates and vindicates customary norms for individuals, community and private spheres (Korteweg, 2008; Moghadam, 2011; Vogel, 2011). That is why its application directly influences men and women and the various aspects of their lives. The application and interpretation of *Shari'aa* in Saudi Arabia corresponds with *Wahhabi* explanations of it.¹²⁵ Wahhabism accepts the "Hanbali School" only as the basis of their jurisprudence. This school is known for its rigid and conservative interpretation of sacred texts of the Qur'an and Sunna as the sources of law (Daghistani, 2007; Vogel, 2011).¹²⁶ However it is noteworthy to state that prior to the Saudi Rule different regions in the Arabian peninsula consulted different and more moderate schools of Islamic interpretations such as Hanafi and Shafie (Eijk, 2010).¹²⁷

The control of the religious establishment entailed; allowing religious perspectives of Wahhabis to adjust cultural values and norms, in addition to having the jurisdiction of personal status and civil law (Alzahrani et al., 2013; Eijk, 2010). Religious clerks are judges in courts and they govern civil and family rights and conflicts without a written code according to Hanbali interpretation of Islamic laws (Alzahrani et al., 2013; Eijk, 2010). Since the development of the

¹²³ This alliance remained valid even after the collapse of the first Saudi State and the establishment of the second and the third states (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Meijer et al., 2012).

¹²⁴ One of the most influential religious institutions with power on social matters was the Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong (the *Hay'a*). Its officers walk around the streets, restaurants and shopping malls to oblige Wahhabi morality. This includes assuring that women wear their headscarves, and that unrelated and unwedded men and women do not socialize (Meijer et al., 2012).

¹²⁵ Wahhabism is situated under "Salafism", which follows instructions of Islam as performed by the initial predecessor generation.

¹²⁶ Qur'an and Sunna in that regard are literally matched to the situation of the present, and different interpretations are not trusted. The source of *Ijmaa* (agreement of scholars) is eliminated, while *Qias* (analogy) and "reasoning when the main text is silent" about an issue is acceptable (Piscatori, 1976, p. 158). *Qias* provides the flexibility for the state to accept and implement the interpretation of Wahhabi religious *Ulama* in recent or current matters (Eijk, 2010; Vogel, 2011).

¹²⁷ Especially the Hijaz region where both Holy Mosques are located (Eijk, 2010).

country in the 1960s and 1970s Wahhabi ideas were communicated via radio, T.V channels, 30% of school subjects, and to the public through the religious police (Commins, 2009; Jamjoom, 2010; Vogel, 2011). They controlled the content of school curricula, media content, and promoted women's public role only as preachers of their ideology (Commins, 2009; Jamjoom, 2010; Le Renard, 2008). They were authorised to set the norms of the social life as guardians of morals (Commins, 2009). Whenever there was a tendency to change that order, the religious establishment would step up and prevent or challenge the change (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Fatany, 2013; Jamjoom, 2010; Piscatori, 1976). For example, religious Sheiks strongly objected to the introduction of radio and television, minimising religious subjects at schools, lifting the ban on women's driving, limiting religious police authorities and ratifying international conventions charters related to women or the social sphere (Commins, 2009; Fatany, 2013; Hammond, 2012; Jamjoom, 2010; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Pharaon, 2004).¹²⁸

Women are used as the main symbol to portray the application of true Islam in various Muslim countries (Le Renard, 2008), however for Saudi Arabia it was particularly important to affirm the Islamic status of the country (Meijer et al., 2012). Therefore, the control of religious elites was always strict when it came to women's issues and their restriction from participating in the public sphere (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 2001; Le Renard, 2008).¹²⁹ Saudi religious leaders have been prohibiting different kinds of entertainments including sports, because a good Islamic figure of a woman dedicates herself to worshiping and raising good Muslim children (Hammond, 2012; Pharaon, 2004). To further assert the Islamic identity of the country, they obliged women's wearing of veils, sex segregation in public places, and they continuously criticised Western women's lives and thoughts.¹³⁰ Religious clerks promoted segregation between the sexes and prohibited their minimal interaction as an Islamic duty,¹³¹ whilst in most other Muslim countries women's contact with men was never an issue of faith (Fatany, 2009; Zuhur, 2003).¹³² As a result, patriarchal gendered identity, role, and behaviours of women were tangled with the

¹²⁸ They strongly confront western values and the codification of the laws which can minimize their authority (Commins, 2009).

¹²⁹ "When King Faisal (1964–1975) wished to introduce girls' education in the 1960s, some '*ulama*' were the main opponents of girls' education... It was not until the '*ulama*' confirmed that girls' education was in accordance with Islam that conservative families started sending their daughters to schools" (Meijer et al., 2012, p. 60).

¹³⁰ Wahhabis communicate western values as harmful and contradictory to the proper Islam so both women and society as believers will not be affected by any attempts of change (Hammond, 2012; Pharaon, 2004; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Accordingly, many people perceive aspects of human rights and international laws violating Muslim beliefs (Daghistani, 2007).

¹³¹ For details about Wahhabi interpretation of segregation see (Meijer et al., 2012, p.16-19).

¹³² Such as in Egypt, Tunisia, Malaysia, and UAE, the level of segregation in Saudi Arabia is unprecedented in other Arab or Muslim countries where both men and women study at universities and work together.

conviction and the Islamic identity, making it difficult for women to challenge or question their status.

The Wahhabi establishment managed to reorder society in line with their rules by 1. mandating a particular interpretation of Islamic texts, which 2. reinforced gendered patriarchal norms, and 3. by sanctioning civil laws accordingly. This lifestyle and structure has affected women and their agency for decades imposing limitations on their life options.¹³³

4.2.2.1 *The Rigidity of Wahhabi Interpretation of Islamic Texts*

The prevalent strict Wahhabi interpretations of Islam were used to keep women in a subordinate position by firmly implementing sex segregation in the domestic and public sphere, and place the control in the hands of men (Sallam, 2013). Its interpretation of certain religious text sanctions complete unquestionable obedience to husbands by wives, and provide men with the power of divorce and custody of children.¹³⁴ In contrast, with the explanation of *Qiwama* in Saudi Arabia, interpretations of different scholars explain that the Qura'an required men to take economic and protective responsibilities for women, and to provide them with necessities while neither grants them unconditional authority nor considers them superior (Pharaon, 2004; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004).¹³⁵ Nonetheless, *Qiwama* does infer certain roles of family members to strengthen the family structure rather than assign power to men only. Men and women in Islam have complementary roles, and responsibilities towards each other, but they are equal in dignity, social status and rights (Al-Harhi, 2000; Pharaon, 2004; Sidani, 2005). Islam granted women the right to own properties, manage their finances, keep their names and wealth after marriage, and never to be responsible for household necessities (Daghistani, 2007; Eijk, 2010). Women are valued and respected in many verses of *Quraan* and *Sunna*, indicating that women must be

¹³³ The control of religious scholars and their employment in government positions is a substantial reason behind women's limited rights in Saudi Arabia (Meijer et al., 2012).

¹³⁴ For example they interpret the *hadith* "women's minds are deficient" literally to endorse male's guardianship over women in all matters, whilst other interpretations view that this hadith regulates women's testimonies in courts only (Bauer, 2010).

¹³⁵ Three Muslim scholars who became references for Quraan interpretation have explained *Qiwama* differently. Ibn Kathir viewed *Qiwama* as; the man is the woman's manager or prince therefore she must obey his orders (Ibn Kathir, n.d.). Albaghawi explained that *Qiwama* means; men are favoured by a stronger logic, more worshipping tasks, and with what they pay for their wives (Albaghawi, n.d.). Contrariwise, Altabari mentioned that *Qiwama* means the man's financial responsibility for women's supplies and expenses, along with his support and companionship in life and religion (Altabari, n.d.).

treated with care and tenderness, mothers are to be prized, and that marriage is about sharing and emotional harmony (Daghistani, 2007).

In terms of employment the Qur'an clearly states that women can earn independently and the fact that the prophet's first wife Khadija was a businesswoman is a strong valid evidence (*Saudi Saleswomen's Experience...*, 2015).¹³⁶ Also reflecting upon the social and political role that Aisha (the prophet's wife) was assigned (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004), one can recognise that Islam was not to meant to challenge women's public role. Egyptian modernist Islamic scholars like Muhammad Al-Ghazali and Yusuf Al-Qaradawi were against marginalising women in the name of Islam and encouraged women's active role in public (Sidani, 2005).¹³⁷ In Saudi Arabia however framing women's labour was according to Wahhabi guidelines of what is a suitable profession for women and their nature (Elson, 1999; Fatany, 2009; Le Renard, 2008). Therefore women were restricted to work in medicine, teaching, social services and segregated departments of sales (Doumato, 1999; Pharaon, 2004).¹³⁸ Other Muslim and Arab countries however depend on *Shari'aa*, which is constituted by different scholar interpretations over the history of Islam, and is used as a complement to established codes of law (Vogel, 2011). For example, you have gender egalitarian personal status codes in Tunisia. Conversely, in Saudi Arabia the vagueness of rights in *Shari'aa* is used to squeeze women's available options of self-realisation rather than to activate their role in society. Religious clerks only publicised texts that encouraged women to stay home, focus on nurturing and worshiping, and refrain from going out and seeking growth in public.¹³⁹

Beside their conservative views, the problem with the *Wahhabi* interpretation is their interrelation with the extremely conservative traditional norms, and their adoption of defensive attitudes against other viewpoints (Doumato, 2003). Moreover, the *Wahhabi* religious establishment was the main reference for the ideal Muslim woman's image and role in Saudi Arabia (Al-Harthi, 2000; Daghistani, 2007; Doumato, 2003; Le Renard, 2008; Sidani, 2005). Due to the Wahhabi establishment's authority over social matters in Saudi Arabia, and their understanding of Islam that converge with many traditional patriarchal customs; women's social

¹³⁶ At the times of the prophet Mohamed there was a woman "Um-Sharik" who worked as a hotel operator (Sidani, 2005).

¹³⁷ Women are active in different domains of the public sphere in several Islamic and Arab countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Iran, Malaysia, Egypt, and Jordan (Fatany, 2009; Sidani, 2005; Zuhur, 2003).

¹³⁸ Creating jobs for women in Saudi Arabia was only possible if it was appropriate to Shari'aa, and this involved sex-segregation at workplaces (Al-harthith, 2000).

¹³⁹ Aljawzi (2009) recite different Hadith on women's restrictions from going out of home according to the Hanbali school [p.146 -149].

restrictions in the Kingdom are misunderstood for the application of Islamic laws. The argument is; the issue of the status of women in Saudi Arabia is the understanding of Islam from a cultural point of view that is patriarchal.

The Egyptian religious scholar Mohammad Al-Ghazali (1917-1996) criticised ignorant Arab traditions that caused the humiliation of their communities, and warned against confusing them with Islamic beliefs (Sidani, 2005). To clarify this confusion and how it impact women in Saudi Arabia, the next section discusses examples of patriarchal norms reinforced by the Wahhabi interpretations of Islam, which impeded women's agency or their ability to actively make purposeful choices. Whilst the following part will concentrate on restrictions related to the legal structure.

4.2.2.2 *Reinforcing Conservative Patriarchal Norms*

In Saudi Arabia women carefully follow and rarely challenge strict traditional customs enforced by male guardians and the community as a whole (Fatany, 2009; Riedy, 2013; Sallam, 2013).¹⁴⁰ These customs include women's responsibility for the preservation of the family's honour through their behaviours and attitudes in all aspects of life (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Saudi women therefore avoid anything that could affect their reputation, this include their choice to have a career (Hodges, 2017).¹⁴¹ In parallel, the male guardian (a father, husband, or brother) is responsible for closely observing women's behaviour and has the right to discipline them in any way he sees best to protect his honour (Sallam, 2013).¹⁴² Consequently, women's actions and appearance are expected to reflect virtue and modesty, and their exposure to non-relatives is restricted to ensure that they are not influenced by the external environment (Jamjoom, 2010).¹⁴³ For the same reasons, their movement is restricted and controlled (Syed et al., 2018). In summary, various actions and aspects of expressing the self and objectives are limited for women in the name of honour.

¹⁴⁰ "Saudis' main concern is that they should not under any circumstances be different from the norms" (Al-Seghayer, 2015, p.86). "Discrimination against women is endemic in the Saudi society; however, it is largely unrecognised within the Saudi culture and often accepted by women themselves" (Alfarran et al., 2018, p.713).

¹⁴¹ To guard the family's honor, social acceptability of the type of job is important to Saudi families and women them selves (Hodges, 2017; Syed et al., 2018).

¹⁴² In case of abuse to guardianship authority, the embedded value of this custom hinders women from taking an action against it, or seeking to file a formal complaint. Yet, many Saudi women value this custom (Sallam 2013).

¹⁴³ Syed et al. (2018) demonstrated examples of women who found difficulties performing in job interviews as a result of the value of modesty, they didn't comfortable talking to men.

Furthermore, in Saudi Arabia segregation of sex was strictly implemented, even in houses women gather in separate rooms. On one side, segregation to Saudis has a moral value: to preserve women's honour and piety by limiting interaction between men and women. On another side, it emphasises gender differences and dichotomy. Men don't behave differently and have a specific role only, but also have their own space (and the same applies to women). To ensure women's segregation within the public sphere; they shall wear a long black overcoat (*Abaya*) that covers their head, body and face in many cases, so they are not recognised by stranger men (Le Renard, 2008). To accentuate segregation further, even the cars that carry women inside were commonly shaded in black.¹⁴⁴ As Amelie le Renard describes it, to save all values mentioned thus far, a separate but parallel life is created for women in Saudi Arabia (Le Renard, 2008). With reference to segregation, in universities, work places, and public conferences women are required to be in a segregated room or corner (Fatany, 2009; Le Renard, 2008).¹⁴⁵ Segregation was firm to the extent that a mother was not allowed to attend her son's school's meetings, and young men were not allowed to enter shopping malls without a female family member, which complicated daily life routines (Fatany, 2009). Hence, the limitations of agency don't only encompass behaviours and appearances; they also include restricted spaces.

In addition, culturally, marriage is regarded as an arrangement between two families, which dictates that a woman pay obedience in exchange of maintenance (Moghadam, 2011). In general, the consent of the woman is considered, however the negotiation of the terms is in the hand of both families heads (Yamani, 2009). Regardless, in this society male superiority is sanctioned socially and legally (Syed et al., 2018; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004).¹⁴⁶ In view of this, socially men had full right to control and punish women even physically (Fatany, 2009). Furthermore, as official guardians they hold the decision making power within the domestic sphere, in addition to their control of women's matters outside the household (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 1999; Elamin & Omair, 2010; Pharaon, 2004; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Typically, women are encouraged to stay at home to care for the children and the family needs, rather than pursuing a career (Al-Harthi, 2000; Hodges, 2017). Moreover, the Wahhabi interpretation reinforced assigning women the role of being good mothers and obedient wives (Alsuwaida, 2016), and they affirm such values through the education system.¹⁴⁷ Aside from that, religiously, divorce

¹⁴⁴ These are modern Saudi State traditions. Women in Hijaz historically used to move around freely and covering up was a sign of virtue rather than an obligation (Elsaadi, 2012).

¹⁴⁵ In conferences, men speakers are exposed through telecommunications (Le Renard, 2008).

¹⁴⁶ In cases men refuse to be interviewed by a woman for a job (Al-Eissa & Gahwaji, 2012).

¹⁴⁷ "The Kingdom's policy on education stresses that a girl's education target to give her the appropriate Islamic

was communicated as the “worst permissible act” or the “most hated halal”, even though in Islamic law women are fully entitled to this right (Yamani, 2009). Consequently, women in Saudi Arabia perceived marriage as their ultimate goal while men considered their wives a property (Al-Seghayer, 2015; Alkhateeb, 1987).

These socially constructed values are attributed to being a faithful Muslim woman. Therefore, choosing a career over family is not a plausible idea to women in Saudi Arabia, as they are entwined in their traditional role (Rajkhan, 2014).¹⁴⁸ Women are regarded as fragile and need “to be looked after by men” (Hodges, 2017). In some cases, because men have absolute authority they are permitted to force women to stay at home instead of studying or working for example, or to set the conditions for women’s employment (Shiraz, 2016). Relatedly, Iversen & Rosenbluth (2010) maintained that restraining women’s role in public and limiting their employment opportunities, by default gives rise to the value of marriage as a priority for women and their parents. As a result, various researchers indicated that Saudi women would compromise their careers to be the corner stone of the household, and provide sufficient care for the family (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 1999; Elamin & Omair, 2010; Hodges, 2017; Pharaon, 2004; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). By way of illustration, a study on Saudi female doctors revealed that a number of the participants witnessed female medicine students’ withdrawal from marital responsibilities (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004).¹⁴⁹ Regrettably, many women who aspire to have a career; can be troubled by the conservative religious authorities, the cultural fundamentalism, and the narrow support society provides for them to grow (Rajkhan, 2014; Syed et al., 2018; Tlaiss et al., 2017; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004; Alkhateeb, 1987). Hence, restraining women’s agency is justified and accepted on the basis of believing that, men are superior, care giving is women’s natural role, and that permissible work should be in accordance with their role as wives and mothers.

Women’s traditional roles and men’s superior authority can be similar amongst Arab and Muslim countries, however the influence of these roles and power hierarchy have somehow lessened as a result of modernisation and development (Fereidouni et al., 2015; Golkowska, 2014; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Mehran, 2009; Zuhur, 2003). For example, when women’s

education that will equip her with the necessary set of skills to become a good wife and an excellent mother” (Rajkhan, 2014, p.3).

¹⁴⁸ For Saudi women the family is regarded as a priority whilst work is considered secondary (Al-Harathi, 2000).

¹⁴⁹ Al-Harathi (2000) confirms that it was normal for a Saudi woman not to work after graduation or to leave her job for marriage.

administrative work began in Morocco their career advancement depended on male bosses who treated them with superiority and abusive control. Yet the growing number of working women in all domains has changed the situation, normalising women's participation and increasing their value and respect (Sidani, 2005). In many other Arab countries feminists efforts towards lobbying, spreading awareness and asking for additional rights in Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia have managed to change customs and laws advancing women's situation in different fields (Bartlett, 2013; Zuhur, 2003).¹⁵⁰ However, in Saudi Arabia many women are reluctant to change and support preservation of social traditionalism and religious conservatism (Alghamdi, 2018; Al-Eissa & Gahwaji, 2012). If they are not showing resistance to modernisation, a large number of them are passive with regard to normalised discriminating practices and thoughts (Fatany, 2009; Riedy, 2013).¹⁵¹

The society in Saudi Arabia is "complex and structurally diversified"; the women in that society are not less different (Meijer et al., 2012). Saudi women can vary in their views of tradition, and they possess different values, habits and lifestyles within the same traditional and religious society.¹⁵² However, the transformation of women's situation in Saudi Arabia specifically is a point of disagreement, some view it as a threat to the culture and Islamic values whilst others are eager to speed up the pace of change (Al-Eissa & Gahwaji, 2012; Fatany, 2009; Sallam, 2013).¹⁵³ Nevertheless, a number of studies assert that the majority of Saudi women are themselves highly influenced by patriarchal norms, accept them, and live within their guidelines (Le Renard, 2008; Pharaon, 2004; Sallam, 2013; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004).¹⁵⁴ Various Saudis consider the unprivileged status of women in Saudi Arabia a western outlook, and a misreading to the reality (Sallam, 2013). Many of them believe that alteration of gender roles are negative influences of western culture and violate Islamic guidelines (Sallam, 2013). In this regard, Fatany (2009) proposed that Saudi women are either ignorant about their legal and Islamic rights

¹⁵⁰ Enlarging women's political participation, abolishing male's guardianship, combating female circumcision, and advancing divorce laws (Bartlett, 2013; Zuhur, 2003). See (Golley, 2004) for details on Arab feminists efforts for women's liberation.

¹⁵¹ Saudi women are socially educated "to be subordinate to men, timid, and weak... the feelings of male superiority and female inferiority" are embedded in their psyche (Thompson, 2015, p. 21).

¹⁵² 3 focus groups, and additional interviewees of this study (E.F.T and S.H.R) conveyed; the social texture of Saudi Arabia is complicated and people are very different.

¹⁵³ "Saudi women are often portrayed as a homogenous group, equally affected, or constrained, by the challenges facing them in contemporary Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless the reality is far more complex, with women representing a diverse range of constituencies" (Thompson, 2015, p. 18).

¹⁵⁴ Saudi women are brought up to see themselves as inferior to men, weak, lacking the sense of responsibility and abilities to be leaders (Hodges, 2017).

or they are used to being treated as second degree citizens.

To illustrate this point further, the majority of women in Saudi Arabia view they already enjoy a high level of independence (Sallam, 2013). According to a national poll in 2006 assessing women's opinions on the government's planned initiatives, more than 85% of women in Saudi Arabia were against women's driving and work in a mixed sex environment (Al-Eissa & Gahwaji, 2012).¹⁵⁵ Another national survey registered 66% of Saudi women who disagreed on allowing women to travel without a permission (*Survey of Saudi Public Opinion ...*, 2013). Similarly, a different poll denoted that 80% of Saudi women do not approve of working in a mixed-sex environment, while other women were against females holding political positions (Sallam, 2013).¹⁵⁶

Women's preservation of norms is not exclusive to Saudi Arabia, previously chapter two brought forward examples of how women were instrumental to preserving the culture and gender norms across patriarchal societies. Women in such societies safeguard the social structure no matter how oppressive it can be (Kandiyoti, 1988; Zuhur, 2003).¹⁵⁷ The aim of this clarification is not to impose a certain opinion on women who are comfortable in their own lives. Rather it is to identify restrictions on practicing agency; for women who desire to have a greater opportunity to make purposeful choices and to exert control over their lives, but they can't. Nevertheless the major issue -besides women's moderate willingness to challenge oppressive norms- was the absence of civil rights, which restrained any woman from looking for a port of survival or self-realisation. Hence the following paragraphs, aim to demonstrate aspects within the structure of legal rights in Saudi Arabia, which hampered women from exerting agency in the past.

¹⁵⁵ When the ban on women's drive was lifted; 120,000 Saudi women applied for driving license ('How many Saudi women applicants', 2018), a small number of more than 10 million Saudi women ('Total population in 2018', 2018).

¹⁵⁶ See (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001, p. 171) and (Al-Eissa & Gahwaji, 2012, p. 40-42) for examples of Saudi women arguing against social change.

¹⁵⁷ Senior women enjoy authority over domestic affairs and over younger women, therefore young women aspire to have this control in the future. Hence, they preserve the norms to get their share of the authority (Haghighat, 2013; Kandiyoti, 1988).

4.4.2.3 Jurisdiction: Defending Women's Rights or Mandating Restraints?

A number of governments in Muslim countries endorse the local gender ideology and practices by enforcing policies which affect women (Charrad, 2011).¹⁵⁸ In the Kingdom, jointly laws and norms limited the civil, political and social rights of women (Moghadam, 2011). The Saudi state integrates the tribal customary law known as *Urf* as part of Shari'aa laws to be respected by regulations and considered by judges in court (Alzahrani et al., 2013; Hammond, 2012; Moghadam, 2004, 2011; Sallam, 2013; Syed et al., 2018).¹⁵⁹ Sharia is a general set of principals which includes (amongst other aspects) moral guidelines, which regulate family matters including marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance; therefore, it impacts crucial facets of women's lives (Charrad, 2011; Korteweg, 2008). As explained earlier, Shari'aa in Saudi Arabia is employed according to the Wahhabi interpretations of Islamic texts. In addition to that, judges were generally known to be traditional and conservative, and they enjoyed the liberty of controlling women's judicial matters without a written code of Shari'a laws (Doumato, 1999; Fatany, 2009; Pharaon, 2004; Vogel, 2011).¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, their readings and positions were not always consistent as a consequence of the freedom of interpreting un-coded Shari'aa (Sallam, 2013).¹⁶¹ Hence, juries can be discriminative against women without accountability. More importantly, as Charrad (2011) expounds, the law is a fundamental tool for women to acquire independence from patriarchal kinship, but placing the law in the hand of religious sheiks favour norms over justice.

In Saudi law women are considered as minors, since males guardianship was legally institutionalised, and their permission was mandatory for women to work (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Fatany, 2009; Hammond, 2012; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004; Vogel, 2011). It is worth highlighting that mandating guardianship is a tribal custom which entails women's both protection and control by her father, brother or husband, not Islamic (Sallam, 2013). However sanctioning guardianship as a legal obligation; women needed the guardians' permission to study, get

¹⁵⁸ Middle Eastern states target women in their political and economic policies because they represent the nation, the culture and the identity (Charrad, 2011).

¹⁵⁹ The Kingdom lacks a constitution that specifies the authority and the procedures of the legislative power (Commins, 2009).

¹⁶⁰ For example, a girl was raped in Qatif, Saudi Arabia by four young men but she was the one punished, because judges considered it was her fault to tempt the men (Fatany, 2009).

¹⁶¹ Sallam (2013) provided the example of the chief of Mecca religious police, Sheikh Al-Ghamdi, who views that gender segregation in public has no basis within Shari'aa. Contrariwise, Sheikh Al-Barrak, a religious figure, issued a *fatwa* that permits killing advocates of gender mixing.

married, access certain medical services, travel, rent, and to finalise business matters or governmental procedures (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 2001; Fatany, 2009; Moghadam, 2011). Thereby this law restricted women's agency not only regarding employment but also regarding all their strategic matters. According to Van Geel's research on Saudi women, the majority of her informants accentuated that the guardianship system (*mahram*) was "the greatest challenge for women in Saudi Arabia" and their empowerment (Meijer et al., 2012, p.72).

Additionally, women were banned from driving and don't have access to any form of public transportation, and this reinforced the social restriction of their movement in public (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 2001; Fatany, 2009; Moghadam, 2011; Rajkhan, 2014; Sallam, 2013).¹⁶² Moreover, the local understanding of obedience, maintenance, and inheritance rights, which the law recognises; assert women's economic dependence on men (Moghadam, 2004, 2011). Therefore, women's practices of various aspects of living and their chances for success, growth, and being; are legally and socially dependent on her male guardian. This situation automatically contradicts being able to make autonomous meaningful choices; i.e. the practice of agency.

With reference to women's work, their options were restricted to segregated banks, medical and academic sectors to fit specific requirements of Saudi Shari'aa (Jamjoom, 2010; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). In terms of employment opportunities, women were not offered enough variety in work, and they were initially excluded from participation in municipal elections (Daghistani, 2007).¹⁶³ As a result, women were not expected nor encouraged to play a productive role in society or the national economy (Hammond, 2012). Limited work options and opportunities for career growth kept Saudi women socially and economically marginalised (Alfarran et al., 2018). By diminishing the scope of options and alternatives for women, the law itself is a barrier to social and economic rights, reinforcing their role as wives, and their dependent status on men.

Other Arab and Gulf countries minimised the effects of traditional customs by having a codified legal constitutions and regulations, enabling women to take advantages of their rights in Islam rather than limit them (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Elsaadi, 2012; Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2015; Welchman, 2010). For example, the basis of Egyptian personal status laws are formed according to the European legal system influenced by previous colonisation. Shari'a was

¹⁶² Despite that there was no law that forbids women from driving, and numerous Sharia experts clarified that women's drive is not religiously prohibited (Rajkhan, 2014), women's driving troubled conservative men and religious leader as it symbolizes freedom and independence (Meijer et al., 2012).

¹⁶³ Women were allowed to participate in these elections in 2015 (Quamar, 2016).

later incorporated in 1971 and 1980 using all religious interpretations, and considered Shari'a compatibility with international agreements (Sonneveld & Berger, 2010). Evidence from the Moroccan Kingdom is King Mohammad VI who reformed personal status and family laws in the 1990s despite the opposition of religious sheiks (Bartlett, 2013). The King modified divorce and marriage laws in favour of women arguing that Islam is tolerant and the possibility of *Ijtihad* incubates modern interpretation of religious texts according to current life needs and circumstances. The Saudi Arabian legal system, however, observed the least reform in the region (Charrad, 2011).

It is worth noting that according to Islamic texts of Hadith and Quran women enjoy a variety of rights including property ownership, wealth control, receiving dower, the allocation of their expenses to men, child custody, dictating the terms and conditions of marriage, and the opportunity to divorce should she wish (Eijk, 2010; Le Renard, 2008; Moghadam, 2004). However, in practice women's personal rights and family laws largely hinge upon the government, and the social structure, particularly because they incorporate patriarchal tribal customs (Moghadam, 2004, 2011). In doing so, the law blocks women from many rights they are religiously entitled to, and/or it supports male dominance at the expense of justice for women.

For example, men are permitted to divorce their wives directly and without having to give a cause, whilst women are required to file for a divorce case without the guarantee of obtaining it (Hassani-nezhad & Sjogren, 2014; Moghadam, 2004). In relation to this study, several feminist economists argue that together legal and social impediments to divorce impact women's bargaining power and domestic choices (Hassani-nezhad & Sjogren, 2014; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010a). It strengthens men's power within the household and prevents women from choosing "out-side" alternatives even when they have diversified opportunities available to them (Hassani-nezhad & Sjogren, 2014; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010a). Another example is represented in imposing customary male guardianship as a government rule, which maintains the patriarchal structure of gender labour division and power. Yet, at the same time it preserves kinship support, which reduces pressure on welfare services provided by the government; an appealing advantage of keeping this structure going. Indeed this has had crucial consequences for women's socioeconomic participation and their practice of agency.

The interplay of these factors altogether, influenced the positioning of Saudi women. With respect to women's empowerment, the factors discussed thus far explain the barriers that have traditionally prevented women from accessing the labour market or from being productive in the public sphere. They also show the limitations of opportunities available to women to make autonomous strategic life choices. In terms specific to this study, those factors represent the structural constraints of practicing agency in the context of Saudi women. Slowly, however, these obstacles began to fade with the introduction of numerous reforms that will be discussed in the following sections, concentrating on the expansion of female employment opportunities. Subsequently, the next part of this chapter delivers an analysis of the "opportunity structure". In other words, it discusses the circumstances and the regulation of putting into effect the opportunity under examination, which is the expansion of Saudi women's employment.

4.3 The 'Structure of Opportunity': Expanding Saudi Women's Opportunities and Participation.

"Scholarships, women in media, and the expansion of women employment opportunities, have created a place for women in the labour market and in the entire society.... Today there is a strong support from the government to women... The new policies widened the door of opportunities for women to grow and achieve their goals" (Focus Group 2)

4.3.1 The Dawn of Reforms with King Abdullah Al-Saud

When the former King Abdullah Al-Saud came into power in 2005, he introduced several reforms at different national levels; political, economic, legal, and educational (Al-Seghayer, 2015; Fatany, 2009). Paying special attention to women's issues, he opened the doors for them in the political arena. He made some key improvements in educational opportunities, labour market participation, as well as legal family regulations (Abdel-Ghaffar, 2013; Al-Seghayer, 2015; Fatany, 2009, 2013). Various opinions assert that reforms and empowerment in the Kingdom at the time were an illusion, with the segregated public sphere, the ban on women's driving, the survival of male guardianship, and the continuous influence of religious elites (Doumato, 1999; Hammond, 2012; Jones, 2011; Pharaon, 2004). Several researchers argued that changes were necessary for the monarchy's security (Hammond, 2012; Jones, 2011; Kechichian, 2003; Wehrey, 2015). By contrast, according to others views including the participants of this study,

Saudi citizens perceive King Abdullah as a reformer for his efforts to develop the government and the society (Fatany, 2009; 2013; Meijer et al., 2012; Rajkhan, 2014; Vogel, 2011, Thompson, 2015).

In all cases the reforms turned out to be of benefit to Saudi women by expanding their opportunities of empowerment in all domains, and King Abdulla showed the “political will” to increase women’s participation in public life (Thompson, 2015). More importantly, the reforms were significant because they tackled some aspects within the structure of constraints on women’s agency, they did not just expand opportunities of employment only. However it is important to understand the motives behind bringing forward such initiatives as it helps to better analyse and comprehend the “opportunity” structure on a holistic level. Therefore, the following paragraphs will address the drivers of change along with introducing the reforms and their implications on Saudi women’s agency, in order to provide a complete analysis of the opportunity structure.

Due to pressing external and internal factors that posed a threat to the Kingdom’s security and its international recognition, from the outset former King Abdullah Al-Saud considered social reforms were necessary. The primary motive for the reforms, was to combat extremism after the striking 9/11 attacks in 2001 (Jamjoom, 2010; Kechichian, 2003; Vogel, 2011).¹⁶⁴ The attacks were attributed to religious and cultural extremism therefore, the Saudi government determined to confront terrorism with social moderation, particularly after *Wahhabism* became associated with intolerance (Kechichian, 2003). The reforms were to challenge the strict religious establishment began in 2003 by introducing the National Dialogue Conferences, a platform on which to discuss views and to promote tolerance and respect of other cultures and religions (Daghistani, 2007; Quamar, 2016). In 2004 the second conference’s discussion was about the most debated topic in Saudi Arabia, women’s issues and rights (Alwasil, 2010; Daghistani, 2007; Quamar, 2016). This was a significant emblem that women finally had the support of the King, the most powerful authority. Since then women were addressed as the main beneficiary of the reforms agenda.

Furthermore, the battle against extremism included adopting an “enlightened version of Sharia law” by spreading moderate interpretations of Islam and adjusting conceptions of rigid ones (Kechichian, 2003, p. 104). This involved reviewing interpretations regarding formal interaction

¹⁶⁴ Other events also occurred, for example in May 2003 foreigners’ residential compounds in Riyadh faced terrorist attacks and tens were killed (Kechichian, 2003).

between different sexes, and the confusion of social norms with religious beliefs and practices. In 2007 Prince Naief Al-Saud Minister of Interior affairs stated, “Segregation of men and women is incorrect”, and in 2008 the Minister of Islamic Affairs Saleh Alasheik gave a public lecture advising, “to refrain from dictating hardline policies” and adopt tolerant interpretations of Islamic texts.¹⁶⁵ Consequently, a 20-year project was set to modernise the courts system and efforts to codify *Fiqh* (religious views) have started (Fatany, 2009). It is noteworthy to highlight that “Back to moderate Islam” and re-establishing an open society is still a main target of the current Saudi government. The Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman restricted the authority of the religious police and affirmed, “we won’t waste 30 years of our life combating extremist thoughts, we will destroy them now and immediately” (Abdel-Ghafar, 2017; Chulov, 2017; Siddiqui, 2018). As learned from the previous section, the rigid Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic laws was one of the main constraints facing the development of women’s empowerment in Saudi Arabia and restraining their agency. Therefore showing the real will to stand up against conservative religious opinions can play a key role in freeing women from beliefs that limit their empowering options, such as believing in the unquestionable obedience of parents and male guardians, or that women’s participation in the public domain is harmful to their piety; even if changing beliefs can take time.

Besides raising awareness of tolerance and moderation, the former King Abdullah took a stronger action to reshuffle the main religious figures appointed in positions of authority (Eijk, 2010; Kechichian, 2003). This entailed establishing a new judicial supreme court and reordering the religious establishment with the appointment of new sheiks.¹⁶⁶ The new nominations in the Council of Senior scholars were anticipated to be in harmony with the social and economic modernisation process (S. Fatany, 2009; Vogel, 2011). Considering legal reforms with regards to women, in 2013 all forms of exploitation under domestic abuse were criminalised by law, and women were encouraged via advertisements to report abusive treatments to the police stations and to the ‘Human rights Commission’ (‘Regulation of Protection from Abuse’, 2013; Sallam, 2013).¹⁶⁷ In addition, since 2005 marriage and divorce laws have been revised and new resolutions were issued. For example but not limited to, prohibiting forcing a woman from marrying a husband whom she doesn’t want, or preventing her to marry someone who is eligible.

¹⁶⁵ See (Fatany, 2009, p. 12 and 21).

¹⁶⁶ Hardliners heads of the Supreme Council of Justice, the Commission of the Promotion of Virtue, the Permanent Council of Religious Research and Fatwas, and of the Council of the Supreme Judicial Council of Judges were removed (Meijer et al., 2012).

¹⁶⁷ A legislation against domestic violence for women, children, and foreign workers, since 2013 (Shiraz, 2016).

Moreover, the law forbade obliging the wife to return to a husband whom she doesn't want to live with (Fatany, 2009, 2013).¹⁶⁸

Under the rule of King Abdullah Saudi women have witnessed the beginning of tangible change in their legal rights. Reforming laws in favour of women is meaningful to their agency, because it is the main tool that grants them the opportunity to choose, and entitles them to independence from patriarchal constraints when necessary. Reforming the law and the judicial system, eases one of the main constraints on Saudi women, even if such reforms were aiming at a different end. To clarify, the kingdom have obtained the admission to the World Trade Organisation in 2005, and promised to reform the judicial authority and comply with some aspects of human rights. Several opinions argue that, the interest of Saudi Arabia in a larger international involvement and recognition has worked as a motive to bring forward social and economic reforms (Alwasil, 2010; Eijk, 2010).

Efforts to polish the Kingdom's international reputation and to stand against extremism also targeted education across all levels. Firstly, the modernist Prince Faisal bin Abdullah was appointed as the education Minister (Meijer et al., 2012). Schools reforms then aimed at minimising Islamic subjects, and boys were permitted to continue in girls' schools until the age of nine instead of six. Equally, schools curriculums have changed; English language has been integrated in primary schools, whilst the religious establishment is no longer permitted to interfere with education. In addition, the opening of private schools and higher education colleges especially for female were welcomed (Hammond, 2012; Jamjoom, 2010; Vogel, 2011). Moreover, new university specialisations were opened for female students such as architecture, engineering and law (Doumato, 2010; Koyame-marsh, 2017).

Nonetheless, in 2009 King Abdullah established the University of Science and Technology as the first mixed sex university in the Kingdom's territory (Fatany, 2009; Vogel, 2011). This was not merely a new education experience,¹⁶⁹ but a change to mark the direction of the government towards greater social openness, i.e. a change that affects the social structure. Most importantly

¹⁶⁸ In 2018 adjustment was made to children's custody rights, which acknowledge the mothers as the first parent eligible for custody in case of non-conflict. In case of conflict, the court seeks the most efficient parent and the more appropriate environment (Alfawaz, 2018; 'The Minister of Justice: the mother is eligible', 2018).

¹⁶⁹ "This is a major social experiment where co-education, and unveiled dress is permitted on campus" (Sallam, 2013, p.148).

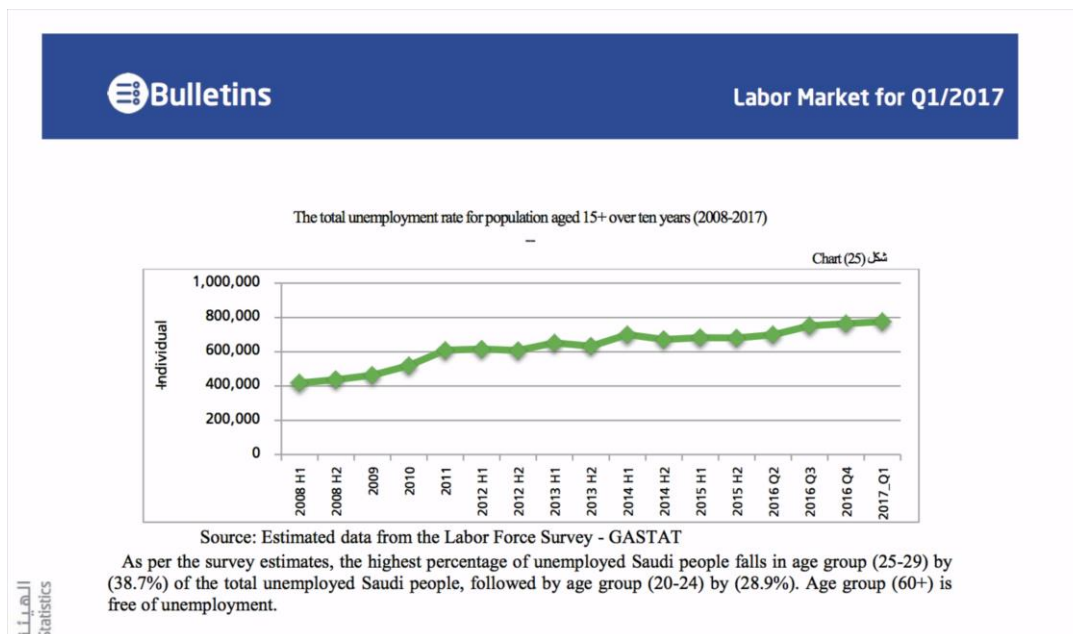
since 2005 King Abdullah has offered tens of thousands of university-scholarships for male and female students equally to study abroad every year (Al-Seghayer, 2015; Abdel-Ghaffar, 2013). As a result the students have been exposed to new experiences, cultural exchange, mixed sex environments and non-censored educational curriculums. This in turn has resulted in cultural and social openings and the transformation of young people and their families (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004).

Overall, King Abdullah's reforms have expanded women's inclusion in the public sphere. Since 2006 women have been permitted to occupy decision making positions in the Chambers of Commerce, the Council of Engineers, Saudi Management Society, the Saudi Lawyers association, and The Committee of Journalists (Fatany, 2009; Le Renard, 2008; Rajkhan, 2014). The King also appointed Nora Alfayez as a deputy minister of Education in 2009 (Sallam, 2013; Vogel, 2011), whereas Dr. Arwa Al-Aama has managed to sustain her position as a vice mayor in Jeddah's Municipality since 2008 (Al-Aama, 2016). More importantly, in February 2013, thirty women from different fields were appointed in the *Shura* Council, the second legislative authority in the Kingdom (Aljazeera, 2013; Quamar, 2016; Rajkhan, 2014; Sallam, 2013).¹⁷⁰ Regarding women's participation in the political sphere, the previous King also promised women they could participate as voters and candidates for municipal council elections in 2015 that took place under the rule of his successor King Salman (Aljazeera, 2015; Quamar, 2016; Sallam, 2013).¹⁷¹ Despite the modest number of electors, seventeen women won the municipal elections in different cities around the Kingdom (Black, 2015). Even if the actual influence of these two bodies remains debatable, and the impact of having women as public figures on women's agency can be limited; it is significant to the status of women in the country. According to some Saudi researchers these initiatives shall deliver women's voices regarding their issues allowing them to gain more rights and potentials in the future (Al-Seghayer, 2015; Fatany, 2013). Furthermore, a rise in women's public presence and recognition is considered a starting point for the development of their empowerment (Kabeer, 2005), it works as an instrument to improve general awareness and to allow women to visualise the scope of opportunities.

¹⁷⁰ *Shura* council is the consultative council of the legislative authority, and the 30 women constitute 20% of the total number of the 150 members.

¹⁷¹ These councils are the only governmental bodies in which Saudi citizens are permitted to elect half of their members.

It is important to note that expanding women’s participation in the public sphere paralleled the Arab Spring upheavals, which threatened several Arab rulers. Education and employment reforms were argued to be an affordable price to pay in exchange for securing the stability of the monarchy (Adham, 2018; Wehrey, 2015). Regardless, in 2011 the public spending exceeded a hundred billion dollars on raises, incentives, and residential allowances to discourage people from protesting (Hammond, 2012; Jones, 2011; Wehrey, 2015). Other arguments affirmed that the real urge for the reforms was the crucial economic situation in the Kingdom, as it can no longer supply the welfare services to the growing population relying exclusively on income from oil (Jones, 2011; Kechichian, 2003; Wehrey, 2015). On one hand, oil prices continued to decline and the diversification of economic resources became an obligation not an option. Therefore, it was vital to minimise the reliance on foreign labour, improve local dependence, and attract foreign investment. On the other hand, the increasing number of graduates and unemployed youth became an unhidden reality, which needs to be resolved (Meijer et al., 2012; Wehrey, 2015) (Figure 4). Therefore, creating jobs in the private sector and enlarging women’s economic participation were a necessity. This confirmed the expectations of some researchers who argued that once there is an economic need for female labour in GCC countries; governments will allow women to join the labour market (Haghighat, 2013).¹⁷²



Source: (General Authority of Statistics, 2017a, p.57).

Figure 4: Unemployment in Saudi Arabia between 2008- 2017

¹⁷² Haghighat (2012) clarified that when Saudi Arabia enjoyed the economic stability as a result of oil revenues, women employment was of little importance to the government. Therefore, now that the Saudi economy is in a transition phase, women employment became key to achieve economic targets.

Some observers argue that women were only used as a symbol of reform and progress (Meijer et al., 2012; Sallam, 2013). Nevertheless, it is evident that the result of these changes was numerous benefits for women, including the expansion of the opportunities available to them and a variety of alternative life-options, which are important to the practice of agency. Applying incremental reforms and focusing on ways to integrate women so they are able to acquire more power can accomplish effective results, especially in a country where the people are traditional and conservative (Fatany, 2009). In the eyes of Saudi women, symbolic reforms are cherished and minor changes are celebrated (Le Renard, 2008; Thompson, 2015), because it means a new sphere of possibilities. Relevantly, in a previous research, Saudi women acknowledged the value and effectiveness of a top-down reform, deriving from the government and the King's decisions to empower women (Meijer et al., 2012). The weight of the government's decisions to expand women's opportunities and activate their role in society can be distinctively influential on Saudi society, as it is considered by the religious scholars and the community the superior guardian of the people (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 2003). Thus issuing and promoting laws that are women-enabling can grant Saudi women a credible tool to challenge their conservative surrounding culture; when they desire to seize available opportunities (Doumato, 2001).

In parallel, the gender development report revealed; "In MENA's political setting, the bottom-up approach will not succeed unless it is matched by the government's leadership and commitment to a more gender-egalitarian environment. The role of the state has been critical in affording women greater rights" (The World Bank, 2004, p. 14-15). That is why I argue that the reforms were an effective beginning to change diverse aspects of the constraints structure, not just to offer women extended opportunities, as chapters 6, 7, and 8 will demonstrate.

4.3.2 The Expansion of Women Employment Opportunities

After reviewing general related reforms above, this section shall address the development of women's employment opportunities in particular, as the main focus for this research. It adds to the analysis of context of Saudi women's context by focusing on the structure of employment opportunities, demonstrating how their participation in the labour market evolved specifically after King Abdullah's reform until 2018, and discussing specific labour reform programmes.

Since the country's development in the 1970s women have gradually but slowly infiltrated the labour market beginning with work in education. The official ban on mixed sex environments in

the workplace came into effect in 1969, legitimising women's work but limiting their options to the segregated domains such as education and a few occupations in the public sector (Le Renard, 2008). Nonetheless in 1980 the number of female graduates and the direction towards the nationalisation of Jobs lead to the expansion of female branches of banking facilities (Daghistani, 2007; Le Renard, 2008). The number of jobs for women in the public sector rose, while some qualified women managed to work in foreign international companies because they operated under special licences. Increasing numbers of Saudi women doctors and business women also exhibited competence in their fields, however until recently they were restricted to these sectors only (Alhamri, 2014; Bahry, 1982; Doumato, 2001; Nasseef, 2004; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Limited work opportunities became a growing concern for the people and the government especially with female university graduates out numbering male's, and increasing financial needs for women dependent on their husbands or families for living (Fatany, 2009; Nasseef, 2004). Changes were progressively brought forward, motivated by an accelerated growing population and numbers of female graduates searching for employment (Doumato, 1999, 2001).¹⁷³

In 2004 women no longer needed to register their business in the name of their male relatives (Le Renard, 2008). In parallel, this time was the beginning of issuing national identity cards for women (Rajkhan, 2014). The businesses owned by Saudi women increased from 5.6% in 2005 to 17.5% in 2012 (Rajkhan, 2014). This indicates that beneficiaries have acknowledged the changes, and that there are women who were eager to seize the available opportunities. Furthermore, in 2005 resolution #187 permitted companies and offices of private sector to employ women without the need to apply for licenses, which was a pre-request prior to that. Several additional series of laws were issued to; guarantee equal pay for men and women, raise the minimum wage, and grant 10 weeks of paid maternity leave. Moreover the laws obliged the provision of day care facilities within companies employing more than fifty women (Fatany, 2009; 'Ministry of Labour in Saudi Arabia', n.d.; Ministry of Labour in Saudi Arabia, 2016). Apropos public employment women were permitted to work in administrative civil defence posts, passport centres, the national human rights commission, and the Ministry of Trade (Rajkhan, 2014). In addition, women's employment opportunities vastly expanded to comprise multiple sectors in the private sector, including but not limited to nursing, broadcasting, financial, industrial, sales, services, and legal (Daghistani, 2007; Sallam, 2013). Law graduates were granted a practicing license that was not granted for females prior to 2012.¹⁷⁴ Some women stood

¹⁷³ Annual growth rate scored 2,3% in 2007 (*Demographic Survey 1428H*, 2007).

¹⁷⁴ See ('Saudi women to be granted a license to practice law', 2012). Women lawyers were permitted to represent women in courts over family cases since 2010 according to Sallam (2013).

out and reached executive positions in banks and international enterprises.¹⁷⁵ In general Saudi Women became more visible and publicly active in various domains.

The Ministry of Labour, supported mass female employment by several labour programs:

- 1) Human Resources Development Fund Programs: this fund pays private sector employers up to 2500 Riyals of new Saudi female employees salaries. The programs target the development of professional skills, providing career assistance services and training options via different plans.
 - a. Hafiz (Incentives):¹⁷⁶ It is a search engine of employment that entitles a monthly allowance of 2000 Riyals to jobseekers for one year or until they up-take an occupation (*Back To Work in a New Economy: Background Paper*, 2015; Rajkhan, 2014).
 - b. TAQAT (Energies): Is an Online platform that links job applicants with employers.¹⁷⁷
 - c. LIQAAT (Encounters): Is an annual career fairs which takes place in the main cities of the Kingdom ('Human Resources Development Fund', 2016).
- 2) NITAQAT (Ranges): This is a program of national quota; it encourages businesses to employ Saudi nationals in exchange for the provision of particular government's facilities such as recruiting foreign labour (*Back To Work in a New Economy: Background Paper*, 2015; Valdini, 2013).¹⁷⁸
- 3) Saudi Feminisation: This program included three stages; the first was compulsory Saudi feminisation employment in lingerie stores in 2011. Then in 2013 it expanded to include all women's supplies stores and services such as make-up, cosmetics, accessories, women's clothing, and beauty salons. The third stage comprises integrating Saudi women's employment into other retailing sectors such as pharmacies and fabric stores

¹⁷⁵ See Rodionova, 2017; Thompson, 2015; 'The First Saudi Women As a General Manager', 2017.

¹⁷⁶ Created in 2011 (*Back To Work in a New Economy...*, 2015).

¹⁷⁷ It secures also paid internships, for more information see <https://www.taqat.sa/web/guest/individual>. There is also a program for securing internship opportunities for females who graduated from scientific fields ('Female Science Graduates Training', n.d.).

¹⁷⁸ Business entities collect points for employing Saudi nationals and hence reach to higher range of benefits, and according to the percentage of national employment the company is categorised under a certain colour (Platinum, green, yellow, and red). Female employees are count as double points in this system.

(Al-hazazi, 2017; *Back To Work in a New Economy*, 2015, *Saudi Saleswomen's Experience*, 2015; HRDF, n.d.).¹⁷⁹

Upon the application of female employment laws, the Saudi government raised the minimum wage to 3000 S.R, in addition to the salary subsidies for organisations that employ new Saudi female workers (*Back To Work in a New Economy*, 2015; Valdin, 2013). Female nationalisation policies and programs privileged Saudi women by accelerating their recruitment and career development (Elamin & Omair, 2010). Such laws and policies created tens of thousands of jobs for Saudi women to replace foreign workers (Arabnews, 2014; H.R.D.F, n.d.).¹⁸⁰ The latest expansion of women's employment opportunities includes for the first time positions in the ministry of justice for the first time (SaudiGazette, 2017a). In addition, new support programs have been launched such as day-care and transportation allowance (SaudiGazette, 2017b).¹⁸¹ As per the calculation of the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, since the introduction of these initiatives female unemployment declined from 36% in 2012 to 32% in 2014 (Alfarran et al., 2018), and that the private sector recorded a 130% increase in the number of employed Saudi women since 2013 (Al-fahd, 2018).¹⁸²

The employment reforms were recognised and appreciated. The World Economic Forum praised Saudi Arabia's attempts to diminish the gender gap in economic participation and opportunities through these initiatives, despite the fact that the Kingdom ranks at the bottom of its Gender Gap index in Economic participation (Gazette, 2014; World Economic Forum, 2015). At the same time, according to a survey conducted on Saudi women working in new sales opportunities, the majority of them were very satisfied in their jobs (*Saudi Saleswomen's Experience of Employment*, 2015).¹⁸³ In particular that group of Saudi women previously expressed their appreciation of having greater opportunity to earn an income, and to be financially autonomous even if in a separate space (Le Renard, 2008).¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, in her study exploring Saudi women's opinions on empowerment, Van Geel concluded that the interviewees considered

¹⁷⁹ See (Alfarran et al., 2018) for details.

¹⁸⁰ The numbers businesses ran by of female entrepreneurs' increased to 100,000 projects in 2014 (Alhamri, 2014).

¹⁸¹ "Qurra" is a new support program of day-care allowance for employed women, whom their wages are less than 8000 Riyals, for four years, ranging from 400 S.R to 800 S.R ('Daycare support.', n.d.).

¹⁸² The employment of women in the private sector jumped from 50,000 in 2011 to 400,000 in 2015 (Alfarran et al., 2018).

¹⁸³ The survey included more than 1000 women from different regions around the Kingdom.

¹⁸⁴ I met with the general manager of N Embroidery Centre, she expressed that the satisfaction and the gratefulness of the female employees were the greatest reward for being in her position. They continuously thanked her for the opportunities of employment and training that the centre offered.

employment and holding positions in the government is a mark of empowerment to women and the society overall (Meijer et al., 2012).¹⁸⁵ Her result endorsed the local opinion which found the reforms tangible, and the government interference regarding women issues having an important impact on women and the social structure in the Kingdom.

Nevertheless, despite the efforts and reforms Saudi women's labour market participation is still notably low with only 21% of them employed, and their unemployment rate is growing only slightly (*The Global Gender Gap Report*, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2015, 2016). Besides that, the labour market still offers limited opportunities of career advancement for women (Tlaiss et al., 2017; Alfarran et al., 2018; Alghamdi, 2018). Therefore, a number of scholars pinpoint some issues regarding policies expanding female employment. Correspondingly, the final part of this chapter intends to highlight stances evaluating particular angles of those employment reforms, to enhance the analysis of the opportunity structure.

4.3.3 A Critical Eye on the Counterchallenges of Saudi Female Employment Reforms

Whilst reviewing the strategies of expanding women's employment in Saudi Arabia, two main aspects arise as drawbacks. The first is represented in the obligatory sex segregation policies in work places. The second; is the interruption of a new economic plan and privatisation targets, which result in declining employment status and wages for job seekers. This section therefore discusses the relevant views on such challenges that in turn constitute the current context surrounding women's employment, as part of analysing the opportunity structure. Other researchers criticised the labour programs and employment policies because they didn't address certain constraints on women's employment such as "*wasta*" or having a connection to get the job (Alfarran et al., 2018; Hodges, 2017; Syed et al., 2018). This however is an issue facing both men and women (Adham, 2018), yet men are privileged with having better connections in the labour market and the public domain in general because their entry preceded women's access to various fields of employment.¹⁸⁶

The first criticism with reference to employment reforms is the significant sex segregation within

¹⁸⁵ Corresponds with (Thompson, 2015).

¹⁸⁶ The discussion of this aspect will be in Chapter 8

careers. Sex segregation in work places is a legal obligation which involves women performing their work in a separate area from men (Alfarran et al., 2018). Even after the reforms businesses could be penalised if they do not follow segregation requirements ('Ministry of Labour in Saudi Arabia', 2016).¹⁸⁷ The key issue resides in the fact that men's departments in banks, universities, and companies are the ones responsible for making the key decisions, while women's career development is restricted by segregation policies (Le Renard, 2008). Relatedly, the studies of Al-Ahmadi (2011) and Hodges (2017) indicated that segregation policies and the limited authority of women's positions constitute one of the primary challenges to Saudi women's leadership. Therefore, since 2008 female board members in the Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah have been arguing that segregation in the workplace is an impediment to women's empowerment (Fatany, 2009). While they clarified the urgency for expanding women's employment opportunities, they also requested professional and productive interaction between work mates to strengthen the progress of both the country and women's status (Fatany, 2009). On that account, if the segregation offers men higher positions and larger authority, it then discriminates against women and certainly has consequences for women's empowerment.

In addition, it has been argued that creating a specific space for women involves extra costs for businesses; consequently it causes reluctance to recruit women (Adham, 2018; Hodges, 2017; Syed et al., 2018). Segregation requires a new infrastructure to employ women; this means totally new bathrooms, meeting rooms and entrances (Hodges, 2017). This major restructuring of the work place can be difficult and expensive, particularly for small and medium-sized businesses (Syed et al., 2019). Correspondingly, (Adham, 2018; Naseem & Dhruva, 2017) pinpointed that the cost of complying with segregation policies as a main reason for companies preference to employ men and foreigners instead of women.¹⁸⁸ Thereby, such policies could possibly minimise women's chances for work in many organisations that are, in essence, profit driven. Nevertheless, it is fair to recognise that the Saudi government has considered this fact, and mandated quotas for employing women depending on the business sector; this limits companies' deterrence from recruiting women.

On the other hand, other studies confirmed that segregation policies are not an issue for Saudi women; by contrast they prefer to work in sex-segregated environments. In other words, such

¹⁸⁷ Also see (Ministry of Labour in Saudi Arabia', n.d.).

¹⁸⁸ The findings concerning these arguments will be discussed in Chapter 8.

regulations are in harmony with what the majority of women in Saudi Arabia consider as an attractive working environment. In 2006 The National Dialogue Conference on Saudi women's rights gathered pro-women intellectuals and conservative figures to debate the changes in the situation for women and their employment in the country (Le Renard, 2008). However both sides of the debate agreed on recommendations, of which confirm women's right to work and the importance of creating additional work opportunities for them. None of the recommendations contested sex segregation policies, in contrast they asked for more female institutions (Le Renard, 2008). Van Geel's Study on Saudi women has found that, very few participants believed segregation should be terminated. The majority of informants were satisfied with the current position; they neither looked forward to gender-mixed-environments nor aspired to more women-only jobs (Meijer et al., 2012). Others expressed their preference of segregation and their desire for more women-only work options. They viewed having segregated spaces for women as enabling their increased presence in public domains, where society didn't previously accept them (Meijer et al., 2012).

Similarly, in a recent study on the barriers to Saudi women's employment, many interviewees didn't view segregation as an impediment. Instead; they appreciated the respect of this social norm, and refrained from accepting employment, which required gender mixing (Alfarran et al., 2018). In fact, implementing strict sex-segregation in the public sphere, is one of the main reasons why women prefer to work in public jobs (Alfarran et al., 2018). This signifies that sex-segregated settings are enablers for women to work rather than obstacles, despite the potential to be at the expense of the businesses interest. The participants in this study support this opinion, as Chapter 8 will present, and shall elaborate on this research position regarding this aspect.

The second concern regarding expanding women's employment in Saudi Arabia and its link to empowerment; arises from its association with the economic transition plans. The kingdom is currently undergoing a period of transition towards economic and social change, motivated by a new "Vision 2030" of Saudi Arabia's future. This vision is founded by the Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS), in May 2016. In essence it is a plan aimed at diversifying national economic resources, and reducing the dependence on oil revenues (Abdel-Ghafar, 2016; Siddiqui, 2018; *Vision 2030*, 2016; Young, 2016; Kinninmont, 2017b).¹⁸⁹ According to the vision's outline, the diversification of economic resources relies on four main strategies;

¹⁸⁹ The drop of oil prices in 2014 -2015 and the beginning of the war in Yemen lead up to a deficit of \$87 billion in 2016, hence creating new sources of revenues for the Kingdom became vital (Abdel-Ghafar, 2016; Al-Khateeb, 2015; Riedel, 2016; Kinninmont, 2017b).

reducing the public spending, restructuring the energy sector, attracting direct foreign investments and enhancing privatisation. Primarily, the government started to cut spending on subsidies and benefits, which cost approximately more than \$70 billion annually. Consequently the prices of fuel and utility services increased, such as electricity and water, whereas spending on salaries, benefits and incentives for employees in the public sector decreased (Abdel-Ghafar, 2016; Al-Khateeb, 2015; Young, 2016).¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, the plan leans heavily towards privatisation strategies to expand the economic activities and to enhance national productivity instead of depending on foreign labour. Relying on a public-private partnership, it sets an ambitious target of growing the number of national employees in the private sector from 40% to 60%, whilst reducing the unemployment rate from 11% to 7.6% (Abdel-Ghafar, 2016; Young, 2016).¹⁹¹ Accordingly, the agenda attempts to support entrepreneurs and stimulate the growth of small to medium businesses, and to integrate more women in the economic development.¹⁹² In this regard, Jane Kinninmont (2017) warned that the realisation of privatisation together with shrinking the public spending will lead to job losses in the transition period.

Many researchers have stressed that relying on privatisation has some inconvenient consequences such as the rise in unemployment and inequalities coincided with less welfare benefits and more flexible types of work (Lindino-McGovern, 2007; Moghadam, 2011). Specifically, feminist researchers sustained that in general boosting female employment and entrepreneurship go along with declining wages and work conditions, as well as diminishing employment opportunities in the public sector, shortening welfare services, and fragile application of labour laws (Moghadam, 2011; Peterson, 2005). As a result it may cause impairments to women rather than benefits. Therefore, they warn that promoting women's employment must not be mistaken for empowerment when it reflects economic failure or an

¹⁹⁰ A new fiscal policy of the government included raising the prices of soft drinks and tobacco, imposing a 5% VAT on goods and services, and requiring a payment of \$27 monthly fee on foreign workers (Young, 2017).

¹⁹¹ The general authority of Statistics in SA announced unemployment rate of 12.8% in 2017 (female unemployment is 32.7%, and male unemployment constitute 7.4%) (General Authority of Statistics, 2017b). Sallam (2013) notifies that Saudi Arabia has an official unemployment rate of 10.7%, but unofficial records register it as 20%. The rate is higher for women, with unemployment rate estimation of 24.9%. *The Global Gender Gap Report* (2017) state youth unemployment rate as 6.6% for male and 25.9% for female, whilst adult unemployment is 2.4% for men and 21.4% for women.

¹⁹² Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (deputy of the crown prince then) stated "Saudi women are half of the society and we have the desire to use the productivity power of this segment" ('The Full Script of Prince Mohammed', 2016).

attempt by the government to offload welfare expenses to the labour market and realise neoliberal strategies (Calkin, 2015; Haghghat, 2013; Wray, 2004).¹⁹³

To explain further, both Peterson (2005) and Calkin (2015) maintain that ‘the feminisation of certain jobs’ to accelerate women’s employment consequently implies declined salaries and worsening job conditions for both men and women.¹⁹⁴ Evidence on some Arab countries confirms that argument. A comparative study on Jordan and Egypt demonstrated that women’s employment and salaries in both countries were affected by economic liberalisation policies, because the public sector was their main employer. The study of Alfarran et al. (2018) on Saudi women conveyed that several interviewees complained about the unsuitable positions and low salaries which the labour programs offered. They criticised the discrepancy between the status of the jobs and their educational qualifications, besides the insufficient salaries.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, Ahmad, (2012) reported that Saudi small and medium businesses struggle to survive as a result of the unstable economy and policy fluctuation.¹⁹⁶

Another point to consider, the growth of women’s economic participation can reflect an increase in poverty or a decrease in households’ income. The statement possibly holds true in the Saudi case, in particular after the regression in oil prices,¹⁹⁷ the beginning of the war in Yemen (Miles, 2015),¹⁹⁸ and when the wages of public sector employees were lowered in September 2016 (Carey & Nereim, 2016; Nereim et al., 2016; Kinninmont, 2017b). This may have resulted in increasing the ‘need’ for unemployed women to work and earn an income, who may not have wanted to work before. Accordingly with the growing demand for jobs, those who seek to work in the private sector are more likely to accept low wages and positions. As Holloway and Wilson (2016) assert, policies of economic transformation restructure women’s lifestyles and influence

¹⁹³ Arab governments who seek economic growth are keen to overcome women’s marginalisation, especially because investing in women’s human capital has generated successful results for economic development in Asian countries (women’s Human Capital is measured by their education, skill knowledge, and health status) (Torabi & Abbasi, 2015). Kabeer (2016) confirms that enhancing gender equality in labour markets results in economic growth.

¹⁹⁴ Deteriorating working conditions comprise working in a job that is not secure or less desirable to the employee (Peterson, 2005).

¹⁹⁵ Others said, the jobs required previous experience and were disappointed that there was no entry-level jobs.

¹⁹⁶ Unemployed participants of this study (GHD and Group 3) have noticed that employment used to be easier in terms of accepting any sort of specialisation to work anywhere. Employers currently look for specialised employees who have experience. This implied that it became difficult to find good job positions currently.

¹⁹⁷ The deficit reached \$97 billion in 2015, and in early 2016 oil prices descended to 30\$/barrel after it was \$114/barrel in 2014 (Kinninmont, 2017b).

¹⁹⁸ When Houthis took over the capital of Yemen (Shi’i rebels movement), Saudi Arabia launched a military operation to support President Hadi since the beginning of 2015 (Alghamedi, 2016; Wehrey, 2015).

their choices regarding employment. This perhaps fulfils their need for money, but not necessarily their desires or future goals. Consequently, widening employment opportunities, and women's interest in taking them up doesn't necessarily mean or lead to greater agency.

In addition, when women's employment grows in patriarchal societies due to economic transformation and financial need, it may have undesirable consequences for women's positioning in the market. As Peterson asserts, "the ideology of patriarchal states... that locates women in the home (as loyal dependents and loving service providers) is today contradicted by two realities: many women wish to work outside of the home, whilst for many other women, economic realities (and consumerist ideologies) compel them to seek formal employment" (Peterson, 2005; p. 511). Yet, in these countries women are still fully responsible for domestic work and child care, as a result they take-up flexible employment or accept lower paid and less positioned jobs, because their time available for work and productivity can be less than men (Cook et al., 2000; Duflo, 2012; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010; Miles, 2016; Moghadam, 2007; Peterson, 2005). In such cases employment sustains their lower positioning in the household and in the market. Amany Asfour (the president of the Egyptian Business Women Association) states that the orientation towards privatisation in Egypt resulted in the diminishment of women's opportunities, because the private sector is reluctant to endure maternity ruminations (AllAfrica.com, 2009).¹⁹⁹ Concerning the Saudi case, the findings of Alfarran et al. (2018) revealed that there is discrimination against employing women on the basis of age and marital status, i.e. resilience in employing women with caring responsibilities. This reality accentuates the importance of sharing domestic responsibilities between spouses and the availability of care services for employed women.

Nevertheless, one can't generalise the negative consequences of expanding women's employment opportunities during economic reforms, in particular in relation to agency as part of the empowerment process. This is because empowerment as a process is an individual trajectory that is shaped by varying factors according to the circumstances of the woman, and relevant to her earlier and upcoming state (Cornwall, 2016; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Kabeer, 2011; Sakshi, 2015).²⁰⁰ Similarly, as explained earlier in Chapter 3, the practice and development of agency is dependent on the structure of constraints, and aspects related to the particular context were

¹⁹⁹ Said, (2012) remarks, women's dependency on the public sector in MENA is attributed to the discrimination in the private sector, where there is reluctance to employ them.

²⁰⁰ Chapters 7, 8 and 9 will elaborate on this point.

women are located such as gender relations and norms, women's values, preferences, and needs (Kabeer et al., 2016). It is true that when the Saudi government began their attempt to diversify economic resources, women were encouraged to replace foreign labour in low paid jobs such as sales and supermarket cashiers (Alghamedi, 2016; *Saudi Saleswomen's Experience*, 2015; Torchia et al., 2016; Wilson, 2008). However, it is worth mentioning that the feminisation of jobs in Saudi Arabia offered the opportunity of employment to women with lower qualifications, who needed employment but couldn't work before the reforms.²⁰¹ For example, a survey of 1012 Saudi women, working in the new sales jobs, indicates that 79% of the participants have secondary high-school degrees and below (*Saudi Saleswomen's Experience*, 2015).²⁰²

To reiterate, empowerment is not about access to employment but what benefits and changes it can bring to women's lives and how it can potentially influence their positioning within power relations (Cornwall, 2016; Sakshi, 2015). This statement accentuates the contribution of this study, which attempted to highlight the voices of Saudi women regarding how the reforms expanding their employment opportunities can contribute to the development of their agency, and eliminate social structural constraints. In particular, when global agendas stress on the value of women's economic participation to realise their empowerment. Essentially, economic empowerment entails maximising women's employment opportunities increasing the variety of sectors in which women can work, and eliminating impediments to their participation in the labour markets (Chopra & Muller, 2016). The eagerness to off load job creation and productivity from the public to the private sector is an indispensable reason behind the continuous expansion of Saudi women's employment opportunities until today, which can be considered an achievement for their economic empowerment. Although broadening women's employment is accompanied by significant challenges and hitches that require attention, one can still argue that it presents women with more opportunities that will contribute to their empowerment.

“[Saudi] women continue to experience barriers to equality in employment. If organisations want to tap into this potential labour force and if the government wants to use this asset to develop its economy, more insights into the lived experiences of female employees in this country are needed” (Syed et al., 2019, p.164).

²⁰¹ Sakshi (2015) provides an example from the Asian context of how expanding female employment opportunities in the city minimised the risks after losing the male breadwinner of the house in cases death or divorce. Those women survived economic hazards by taking up employment, even if they offered modest salaries.

²⁰² Only 21% of them were holding a higher education degree.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter situates the literature on feminism, empowerment, and agency in the Saudi context, providing an in-depth discussion of social and legal constraints as well as previous and ongoing reforms. It forms a preliminary data collection in the context of Saudi women and their constraints, and how their opportunities were expanded. It was written based on the conviction that examining women's empowerment in general and their agency in particular requires scrutinising the larger socio-cultural context in which women live; paying attention to their own limitations and opportunities.

Thus, the first part was devoted to analysing the structure of constraints on Saudi women's practice of agency. It included highlighting the central factors marginalising Saudi women and restraining their agency, since the establishment of the kingdom. The second part of the chapter examined the opportunity structure. It addressed the reforms introduced by the former King Abdullah Al-Saud since 2005 and their drivers, however, this section concentrated on the reforms expanding women's employment opportunities; presenting the shift they witnessed from complete marginalisation to promoted participation. It concluded with a review of critiques regarding the strategies of the employment reforms.

Overall, the chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the particular impediments to Saudi women's practice of agency, and of the opportunities that have been made available to them. This analysis serves by contextualising the particularities of Saudi women's struggles and limitations to make decisions regarding various aspects of their lives, and to understand the impact of local reforms on the expansion of women's opportunities in general and for employment in particular, no matter how minor they can seem. It also serves to inform the national and international public policies interested in developing the role of women in the society, about the challenges women face, and the concerns regarding reforms policies. It advises paying attention to enhancing women's status, wellbeing and empowerment along with increasing their employment participation, and considering women's needs whilst implementing strategies for reforms and expanding opportunities. Ultimately, the completion of this chapter formed a foundation for this study to investigate whether the new opportunities have influenced women's agency? And whether expanding women's employment has had an impact on changing the social challenges according to Saudi women?

Chapter 5: Research Methods: Qualitative Ethnography

5.1 Introduction

The foregoing literature review in Chapter 3 demonstrated that there is a lack of qualitative research on Saudi women's agency, which leaves out a crucial voice from our understanding of this research topic: the voice of Saudi women themselves. This research is interested in understanding the perspectives of women within the Saudi socio-cultural context. It falls under an interpretivist, constructivist methodological approach.²⁰³ Specifically, it attempts to utilise qualitative ethnographic methods to explore how the expansion of employment opportunities contributes to the empowerment of Saudi women, namely their ability to purposefully make strategic decisions (agency). Ethnography is used methodologically, i.e. as a method of data collection and interpretation. Adopting this method allowed giving Saudi women a voice as well as the ability to seize bottom-up information according to real experiences to enlighten strategies and theories of empowerment. Therefore, this chapter is dedicated to presenting the methodological approach of this research.

It shall begin by discussing methodological debates around research on social sciences. This discussion shall clarify key concepts of the methodology adopted in this research, such as induction, interpretivism, constructivism, and qualitative methods. Subsequently, it will explain what ethnographic research is, and why it is useful to conduct for the purpose of this investigation. Thereafter, a general summary of how this research was constructed will be presented. After that, the chapter will demonstrate how I implemented ethnographic methods by providing details of the data collection and analysis techniques. This includes explaining how participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and thematic analyses were used in this study. Furthermore, the chapter will discuss the challenges and limitation of utilising this method, and it ends with a note on reflexivity and a clarification of ethical considerations.

²⁰³ Constructionism here refers to an interpretive methodological approach, which aims to understand how individual construct meanings about their situation in a particular context according to their views and experiences (Ormston et al., 2014; Sharan, 2009b).

5.2 Multidimensional Methodological Controversy

Choosing a methodology for social research depends on epistemology, the research goal and questions. Epistemology distinguishes between the ways in which we learn about the world and how we generate knowledge. There are two main epistemological paths: first there is ‘induction’ which entails building knowledge from the bottom-up, by discovering patterns and generating findings through collecting and observing the existing evidence, this in turn provide the basis for developing theories or laws. The second is ‘deduction’; it is a top-down approach to discover knowledge, by developing a hypothesis according to existing theories first then collecting evidence to confirm or reject it (Bayard De Volo & Schatz, 2004; Johnson et al., 2006 Ormston et al., 2014).

A central epistemological debate addresses the position of the researcher and his/her impact on facts and values (Alandejani, 2013; Ormston et al., 2014). ‘Positivism’ stresses the objectivity and rigor of the research process, which is independent from the researcher and generates “value-free” conclusions about social reality. It argues that social inquiry shall adopt scientific methods similar to natural science. It suggests that there are laws of causes and effects, which can objectively explain the closest possible estimation of reality. This approach is predominantly interested in investigating causal relations and verifying hypothesis, hence why it uses rigorous methods that can outline coloration between variables (Bayard De Volo & Schatz, 2004; Ormston et al., 2014; Tuli, 2010). By contrast, ‘interpretivism’ encourages social investigations where the relationship between the researcher, the participants and the social phenomenon is interactive and ‘value-mediated’. In that sense knowledge develops from exploring and understanding events via interpretations rather than strict observations. This approach (which this research falls under) focuses on meanings of the social world according to individuals under study. This is why positivists accuse interpretivist research of being subjective, descriptive and lacking rigor (Ormston et al., 2014; Sharan, 2009b).

Under interpretivism the ‘Constructivist’ paradigm emerged; emphasising human construction of knowledge according to lived experiences and individual perceptions.²⁰⁴ It maintains that both the individual and the context “interact to construct social reality” (Peterson, 2005). Constructivist researchers habitually study the phenomenon in the field where it occurs, highlighting the importance of the influence of socio-cultural norms. Furthermore, they

²⁰⁴ It holds that there are several constructed realities in people’s minds according to their experience (Altorki, 2013).

acknowledge the subjectivity of research influenced by the researcher, informants, and the process (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2006; Alandejani, 2013; Ormston et al., 2014; Peterson, 2005).²⁰⁵ Since the choice of ‘method’ depends on the methodological epistemology, constructivist researchers prefer interactive methods that enable them to reveal the embedded meanings in human perceptions and activities. Hence why constructivists commonly use qualitative methods, because they accentuate a holistic understanding of social events and highlight the importance of interrelation between the researcher, participants, and the context (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2006; Alandejani, 2013; Ormston et al., 2014).

To illustrate this point further, methods are the process for data collection and analysis that are designed according to the chosen approach of inquiry (Alandejani, 2013; Kemp & Squires, 1997). Social research of different epistemological paths can employ quantitative or qualitative methods. Quantitative methods adopt empirical techniques such as statistics, experiments or observation (Travers, 2001b; Tuli, 2010). Research adopting quantitative methods focus on measurable indicators for explanations and seek high validity and reliability. Thus, quantitative research conclusions thus are based on a large sample that is representative, so findings can be generalisable (Adato, 2008; Travers, 2001b).

On the other hand, qualitative research is concerned with exploring a problem within the social context from the interior arising from individuals’ perceptions. It provides an “in-depth understanding of the social world” and lived experiences (Ormston et al., 2014, p. 4). In qualitative inquiry individuals “construct reality in interaction with the social world” (Sharan, 2009, p. 22). The researcher aims to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the individuals involved, by learning about their opinions, how they “make sense of their lives”, and how they interpret their experience (Sharan, 2009, p. 23; Ormston et al., 2014). However, this can’t be discovered, it is rather constructed; therefore researchers following this approach choose methods that offer a holistic comprehension of the participants’ perceptions and actions in a particular context. In terms of outcome, qualitative research provides detailed accounts of the phenomenon examined, and emphasises the richness of the data collected (Ormston et al., 2014).

This type of research commonly uses ‘non-standardised’ methods that generate rich and detailed data, such as semi structured interviews, focus groups, and interactive observations. It uses personal contact and focuses on building relations of trust; therefore, the researcher constitutes a key “instrument” in the process (Ormston, et al., 2014; Bartlett, 2013). Such methods allow the

²⁰⁵ Constructivism is widely recognised in feminist research (Peterson, 2005).

exploration of participants' views and experiences, alongside the socio-cultural processes and traditions, which motivated this qualitative constructivist research to employ them. Nevertheless, qualitative research incubates diverse forms of qualitative ways and strategies to conduct it, of which ethnography and grounded theory are considered to be recognised theoretical methods by many researchers (Sharan, 2009; Patton 2002, Ormston et al., 2014).

Specifically, this research applied ethnographic qualitative tools, which will be explained in the following part. However, to summarise the methodological stance of this thesis; it is an inductive, interpretive qualitative research project, located under a constructivist paradigm. It employed ethnographic methods to gain detailed insights from women in Saudi Arabia regarding the influence of employment (and its expansion) on their agency, within their specific socio-cultural context and challenges.

5.3 Conducting Qualitative Ethnographic Research.

5.3.1 What is Ethnographic Research?

Ethnography means “conducting in-depth, open-ended research over an extended period of time within a specific community” (Hausner, 2006, p. 323). It is a method of study, analysis and data collection suitable for subjects interested in comprehending cultural structures, and their role in forming how people think, behave, and interact (Bennardo, 2014; Bernard, 2011; Sangasubana, 2011; Sharan, 2009b).²⁰⁶ In ethnography researchers carry out their empirical exploration and integrate their findings with theoretical interpretation of social and cultural concepts (Hausner, 2006). Ethnographic research is founded on extensive detailed data collected from fieldwork, which incorporates engagement in the lives of individuals over a period of time to generate and record detailed information (Bennardo, 2014; Brockmann, 2011; Davies, 2008). The essence of ethnographic work is interactions with individuals and groups in their own terrain, learning about their experiences, observing their environment and going back to them to seek clarification.

²⁰⁶ Traditionally this required a field work experience in an alienated community, learning its language and living amongst its people, but it is currently used to examine a modern social category in different settings, and it became inclusive of studying the individual's own culture (Altorki, 2013).

Although ethnography uses qualitative tools, essentially “ethnographers immerse themselves in their research setting, attuning themselves to the daily rhythms^[11] of their subjects” (Bayard De Volo & Schatz, 2004, p. 268). Through immersion the ethnographer can reveal insiders perspectives on political or social phenomenon’s or examine a system’s impact on a phenomenon (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2006; Bartlett, 2013; Bayard De Volo & Schatz, 2004). Long-term immersion in the field encouraged me to precede my research using ethnographic qualitative methods being a native insider instead of “going native”. My intrinsic knowledge of the field and its language is useful to utilise in ethnographic research, especially because such qualifications are key determinants in this kind of research (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2006; Ormston et al., 2014). The appropriateness of this method for this research is explained in the subsequent section.

5.3.2 The Usefulness of Qualitative Ethnographic Methods for This Research

This subsection will explain in depth the variety of reasons that motivated the decision to use qualitative ethnography. Firstly, it is useful for achieving the aim of this research and for answering the research questions.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, it is quite effective when there is a lack of data on the research topic. Moreover, the usage of qualitative ethnographic methods is widespread in similar research on feminism and women’s empowerment. Finally, it allowed me to utilise my advantage as a researcher: the access of a community and a segment that are difficult to reach by other researchers. This is a substantial factor in ethnographic work.

Ethnographic methods serve the research aim to develop an in depth understanding of women’s views, aspirations and challenges with regard to developing agency through employment.²⁰⁸ They enable the capturing of statistically unmeasurable assets and influences of agency, which this research is interested in exploring, such as women’s “power-within”, values, goals, needs, motives, and circumstances. Furthermore, they help to explore socio-cultural (supportive or restricting) influences on strategic choices made after a period of reforms; by using ethnographic methods the researcher knows what is working and what is not, according to the informants’ own language and experience (Berger, 2011; Odrowaz-Coates, 2015). Qualitative methods used in

²⁰⁷ See Chapter 1.

²⁰⁸ Ethnographic research is renowned for discovering underlying motives, influences, and consequences related to making strategic decisions. For example, an ethnographic study examining gender differences interlinked with work, found that women in Thailand who chose to take employment in cities; seek to release their parent’s control and to have more freedom in choosing their marriages. In return they become financially obligated to their families (Simona Ciotlaus, 2010).

fieldwork are capable of explaining how formal and informal structures (policies, norms, and relations) intersect affecting women and their empowerment (Adato, 2008). This is particularly important for this research, because evaluating these structures is a fundamental part of this investigation. To illustrate this importance, Donno and Russett (2004) suggested using quantitative methods with caution to study Muslim women's empowerment because there could be confusing impacts of culture and political regime with religion.

Besides its usefulness in answering the research question -the determinant of which tools to employ-, qualitative ethnography is remarkably useful for generating missing information. Hence, adopting this method shall support the contributions made by this study to the inadequate literature on Saudi women's employment interlinked with empowerment.²⁰⁹ Marcia Inhorn argues that Gulf countries merit greater attention in ethnographic research on gender in many fields that are ignored, including legal and economic anthropology. She maintained that available regional research on social science focuses only on veil/dress, Islam, tribalism, migrant workers and discovering places (Inhorn, 2014). In addition to the field of education, the ethnographic studies found on Saudi women are dominantly within her list.²¹⁰

There exists a useful yet dated ethnographic study conducted by Soraya Altorki which confronts western views of Saudi women's oppression and provides information on women's social power in relation to their decision of marriage (Altorki, 1977). Altorki upheld that to collect and examine information on social sciences in Gulf countries the researcher would most likely depend on "personal communication" through conducting interviews, in addition to analysing very few "pieces of secondary literature are available" (Altorki, 2013, p. 238). Those are tools that are predominantly used in ethnographic research (Abu-Lughod, 1990). With reference to the research topic, Spierings et al. (2010) conclude that the determinants of female employment in Arab countries emphasised the significance of adopting a comprehensive approach, which provides insights on influential factors from these women in their countries. However, ethnographic work on Saudi women's employment is scarce, dated before the reforms and limited to certain professions such as education and medicine (Alkhateeb, 1987; Jamjoom, 2010; Miller-Rosser et al., 2006; Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004). Nevertheless, incomplete data is only one reason to use ethnographic methods for the purpose of this investigation.

²⁰⁹ See Chapter 3.

²¹⁰ For example of studies on education see (Drury, 2015; Dunham, 2013; Jamjoom, 2010; Michelle, Usman, & Treff, 2008; Riedy, 2013), others which focus on the Arabian peninsula (Ardovini, 2015; Simona Ciotlaus, 2010; Swirsky & Angelone, 2016). For research on Bedouin women and dress see (Le Renard, 2013; Tawfiq & Ogle, 2013), and also (Al-Saggaf, 2011) investigating the usage of Facebook in Saudi Arabia.

Multiple feminist studies on gender analysis favour the use of qualitative methods in building knowledge about women (Kemp & Squires, 1997; Safadi et al., 2013; Simona Ciotlaus, 2010; Travers, 2001a). They value subjectivity as a way of giving a voice to women who were traditionally marginalised from participating in research and from communicating their views publically, which is the case for this research. Feminist research that refuses rigid methodological constraints views women's perspectives as "experiences and realities crucial to the field of social science",²¹¹ especially in realising social transformation (Ardevini, 2015, p. 51-54; Kemp & Squires, 1997, Simona Ciotlaus, 2010). Ethnographic methods were commonly used in feminist research to generate information on formal and informal structures of gender and power inequality embedded in social and market organisations (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Bepinar, 2010; Fisher, 2012; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Simona Ciotlaus, 2010; Travers, 2001a).

Additionally, ethnographic tools are used and recommended for examining women's empowerment, whether to evaluate and develop policies,²¹² or to understand how empowerment can work for particular women in their societies and according to their values.²¹³ Similar to this thesis, other studies examining empowerment through a feminist lens, aiming to understand women's opinions and experiences; required by nature to interact with them, and to learn about their practices and challenges in their socio-cultural context.²¹⁴

Researchers use ethnographic methods to study individuals within their local communities, in an attempt to convey detailed insights on their perceptions and lived experiences. Therefore, various studies examining women's empowerment make use of ethnographic tools (Bartlett, 2013; Enck & McDaniel, 2015; Fisher, 2012; Hausner, 2006; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013; Porter, 2013; Schuler & Rottach, 2010; Tsikata & Darkwah, 2014). Accumulatively the reviewed studies demonstrate how the flexibility of structure and the proximity to individuals in ethnographic research enable it to capture bottom-up data, hence linking developmental

²¹¹ Women gain knowledge through their everyday struggle, and their experiences are essential in contribution to knowledge (Bartlett, 2013; Roulston, 2014).

²¹² See Adato, 2008; Fisher, 2012; Hausner, 2006; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013.

²¹³ "Understanding what constitutes agency and empowerment requires analysing the values, beliefs and norms that distinguish cultural groupings" (Wray, 2004, p.35). Also, see (Enck & McDaniel, 2015; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Marcotte, 2010; Sholkamy, 2014; Wray, 2004).

²¹⁴ See Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Schuler & Rottach, 2010.

policies and academic theories with the ground/life experiences. It helps to gather information on how plans and theories can improve the situation and solve problems.

The methodology of this thesis corresponds to various international and local research studies on women's empowerment. It's also inspired by the World Bank's qualitative ethnographic research project on how social norms influence gender inequality and agency in twenty developing countries (Munoz Boudet et al., 2013).²¹⁵ To collect the data, the study made use of fieldwork, focus groups, and interviews, however, the analysis compared the narratives to find similarities and differences across cases (Munoz Boudet et al., 2013). In fact, the study called for further qualitative research on women's agency in other regions, and Saudi Arabia was not included amongst countries in this study. However, instead of comparing countries and communities my examination compared the narratives of various Saudi women with differing characteristics.

Ultimately, employing this method requires a researcher with specific characteristics. Namely, finding assistance reach key informants, and to translate or master the language are important elements to the success of ethnographic research. I possess the requirements to apply this method,²¹⁶ whilst it could naturally be challenging for non-Saudi researchers. This is because the access to Saudi Arabia and Saudi women in particular is problematic; even when the language barrier can be resolved (Alfarran et al., 2018; Hodges, 2017; Meijer et al., 2012). In their report on Saudi Arabia Meijer et al. (2012) reported that a male researcher was not capable of interviewing Saudi women, or conservative scholars in general. As for Alfarran et al. (2018), they revealed that discussing gender as a subject in Saudi Arabia is "extremely sensitive", and that in order for them to participate discretion and confidentiality is of high importance to Saudi women. That is why being an insider was valuable for reaching the informants, building trust, and making them feel comfortable enough to share their views.²¹⁷ In short, owning these attributes and using qualitative ethnographic methods enabled access to the information generated in this research, which increases the value of its contribution.

²¹⁵ It explored how men and women practice decision-making in all aspects of life, and how gender and social norms are influence their daily lives. It included 4000 participants from 97 communities across diverse cultures. The study initially aimed at investigating how men and women make decisions about their economic participation, but then expanded to examine implications of social norms on their sense of agency and empowerment.

²¹⁶ Arabic is my native language, and I lived and worked in Saudi Arabia, which enables me to reach informants.

²¹⁷ See (5.8).

5.3.3 Conducting This Ethnographic Research on Saudi Women

Ethnographic work is characterised by being flexible in its structure (Hausner, 2006), nevertheless this research was developed through four main stages.²¹⁸ The primary stage (preparation pre-fieldwork) is when the researcher reviews existing data to discover potential broad concepts that are in line with the research goals. On completion of this stage the research focus was narrowed; this entailed capturing themes of interest that later defined the structure of the research. To clarify, the review of available data added to my own previous experience in the field, enabled the exploration and evaluation of the (social and formal) context surrounding women in SA.²¹⁹ Fundamentally, it demonstrated the existing gap in the literature, and motivated this research to focus on the influence of employment as a resource of empowerment on agency particularly amongst the diverse aspects of empowerment. Furthermore, it assisted in framing the research design, choosing the sample, and preparing the observation questions, focus groups and interviews.

The fieldwork commenced at the following stage; it took a few rounds of information collection and interpretation. The duration of this fieldwork was three months from August 2017 until the end of October 2017.²²⁰ I began the fieldwork with participant observation and interviews, taking field notes and spending time interpreting, then planning the next set of interviews (details on the data collection will be explained in the next section). Once most of the interviews were complete, I organised the focus group sessions. After I'd evaluated the generated information by considering the previously reviewed theories and opinions in each round, as a result, questions and ideas emerged, and the structure became clearer and more focused.²²¹ To clarify, while I was collecting and interpreting the data I identified emerging themes or categories and refined them continuously. However, dominant themes of the research developed at the analysis phase.

The third was the stage at which the "official" data analysis took place, as general analysis (reflection, interpretation, and connecting information) occurred throughout the process. This stage commenced after the data had been collected, it began with transcribing and translating. Additionally, it involved reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews together with the

²¹⁸ Corresponds with (Dunham, 2013).

²¹⁹ Chapter 4 was dedicated to analysing the context, and was written before data collection.

²²⁰ This was the time limit permitted by my sponsors.

²²¹ The interpretation of collected information gave meaning to reviewed theories and vice versa, and enabled understanding the relationships between different factors.

field-notes, and organising the bulk of gathered information. This entailed highlighting key information, as well as noticing the similarities and disparities. Repeating this process several times enabled me to group the perceptions of the informants and my interpretations under five main themes. Only did then the final stage begin.

Once the primary themes had been selected and the corresponding information had been identified; I was able to structure and write the chapters accordingly. The conclusions brought forward are thorough descriptions of the phenomenon under study, as grounded in the informant's perspectives. However, the pattern of this project was iterative (not sequential) and the phases as described were interconnected. This demanded flexibility of movement in-between and a great deal of openness to change. However, details on the analysis process are explained in the next part.

“Qualitative research... is not sequential. While concepts, definitions, and hypotheses are evident, they are viewed as ‘working’ matters – conditional until further notice.... While qualitative researchers also conceptualise, define, and hypothesise, they do so in on-going relationship with data collection.” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2014, p. 36)

5.4 Collecting Data on Saudi Women's Agency in Jeddah

5.4.1 Sampling

The study sample is a non-probability sample, where the selection of cases is purposive (Alandejani, 2013; Gobo, 2013; Patton, 1999; Sharan, 2009a). In general purposive sampling is associated with qualitative research interested in in-depth comprehension of perceptions and experiences, as it allows accessing individuals who can be informative of the research topic.²²² Research using ethnography studies a small sample because every case counts with all its details, however the more diverse information we can look at the more views we explore and depth we gain to understand issues embedded in the culture and opinions (Bernard, 2011; Dunham, 2013; Swirsky & Angelone, 2016).

²²² Purposive sampling is recommended in different qualitative studies on empowerment and particularly in ethnography (Esin et al., 2014).

For the purpose of this research, the choice of participant was somewhat conscious but it was also determined by circumstances, time, and accessibility. The aim was to reach both employed and unemployed Saudi women who were diverse in characteristics. The focus targeted recent employment opportunities such as law, sales, workers in production lines, employees in companies and offices, as well as free lancers or self-employed people, (For example, party planners and graphic designers). However, other segments of earlier employment such as nurses, teachers, academics, and bankers were not excluded to gain a wider variety in opinions. As a result, the selected women represented a diversified range of employment. Conjointly, both employed and unemployed women represented different age groups and different social/economic classes.

This study included Forty-seven informants in total. Thirty-five of them participated in individual interviews (only one was conducted over the phone). Fifteen informants took part in four focus groups' sessions, however three of them formed part of the individual interviews as well. The women varied in; age, education,²²³ employment or non-employment, professions, marital status, and, social class,²²⁴ and income (Table 1). To distinguish between these characteristics, each participant was offered a biographical sheet and consent form to fill in prior to the commencement of the interview. It included questions about their age, marital status, income, education, job type and position, family members, years of experience...etc.²²⁵ The sample only included women located in Jeddah (the second largest urban city after the capital of Saudi Arabia), where employment opportunities of the western region are concentrated, and where accessibility to informants was manageable. Jeddah is where the interviews were conducted, however some participants came from different cities like Makkah, Riyadh, and Yanbu as illustrated in the table.²²⁶ In the discussion of the results, those patterns are only highlighted when peculiarities surfaced; otherwise the result appeared across the diverse categories and represented a large group of the sample, and details of participants are listed in Appendix 5.

²²³ Saudi women perform well in education, that is why most of the interviewees hold higher education degrees. Over 93% of employed females hold either a secondary qualification or a university degree, and 78.3% of the unemployed women are university graduates (Rajkhan, 2014). According to the World Bank 40% of women in Saudi labour force have tertiary education (Alghamdi, 2018).

²²⁴ See (AlOmar et al., 2018) for details on the classification of different social classes in Saudi Arabia.

²²⁵ Some participants didn't provide all biographical information or didn't fill the sheet entirely.

²²⁶ They were in Jeddah for work, visiting family, or moved recently.

Table 1: Participants' characteristics and patterns

Characteristics of the participants					
Education (2 unknown)	PhD. = 5	MSc = 9	BA = 25	High School = 5 Below H.S = 1	BA students while working = 3
Employment	Employed = 28	Never been Employed = 10	Used to be employed but now unemployed = 6	Self Employed = 3	
Marital Status (1 not given)	Married= 25	Single= 13	Divorced = 7	Widow = 1	Remarried = 2
Children	Mothers 27	No Kids 20			
City	Jeddah= 36	Makkah = 6	Yanbu = 2	Riyadh = 3	
Age	20s = 19	30s = 21	40s = 4	50s-60s = 2	
Class	High/Affluent = 7	Upper Middle Class = 7	Middle Class = 26	Limited income = 7	

I reached the informants through personal and professional networks,²²⁷ and via the “Snowball” referral technique. This is a commonly used searching tool in qualitative research where previous participants refer others prospected informants to enable a wider reach of informants (Dunham, 2013; Jamjoom, 2010; Miller-Rosser et al., 2006). In addition, the rounds of participant observations during fieldwork enabled finding the targeted participants. The essence of reaching key informants is the accessibility; that explains why certain segments outnumbered others. Accessibility was an advantage that I pre-owned, especially because women in Saudi Arabia are habitually reluctant to communicate with strangers and to share their views on public or personal matters (Dunham, 2013). In fact, numerous women who agreed to participate expressed that they took part in the study to support a young Saudi researcher, and because they didn’t fear the misinterpretation of their views. This experience highlights the importance of the relation between the researcher and the participants in this kind of research.

On another note about sampling, one might argue that only focusing on women for data collection could result in selection bias or be viewed as an act of subjectivity (Andrews et al.,

²²⁷ This is a type of gaining access in qualitative research (Hodges, 2017).

2013; Gobo, 2013). However the decision to focus on women serves the purpose of this research, which is interested in those who were the key beneficiaries of the recent employment expansion reforms on one side, and who constitute the central segment in research on empowerment. Furthermore, Saudi women are a segment that had been spoken for by western researchers and the media, or local religious elites and male researchers, rather than speaking for themselves.²²⁸ This thesis aims to provide women who were traditionally marginalised a voice by focusing on their opinions. Also, the choice to interrogate women only is out of respect for the moral, social, and legal limitations of segregation between sexes in Saudi Arabia. As Syed et al. (2018) illustrated whilst researching Saudi women's employment and gender equality, sharing the same gender and cultural background between the interviewees and the interviewer relieved sensitivity issues. Finally, although I recognise that the expansion of Saudi women's employment has effects on foreign labour; the sample included Saudi women only (i.e. nationals) to maintain the scope and the aim of this research exploring Saudi women's agency in particular.

5.4.2 Data Collection Tools

5.4.2.1 *Literature Review*

This chapter previously discussed the importance of reviewing the literature to prepare for the fieldwork and the data collection. In ethnographic work the literature review forms part of the empirical work in a way. In fact, scrutinising the relevant literature and writing chapter four (the context) formed the first step of the data collection, whilst fieldwork followed as a second step. Besides exploring existing information on the topic to narrow the research focus and identify the gap, the literature review in this study examined previous research for three other purposes. The first was to collect preliminary yet necessary information about the context of the sample and the (social, political, economic, legal) nature of the country under study. The second was to identify the main areas and the general questions to discuss in the interviews. The third was to recognise the consistency or disparity in the results of earlier studies across cultures. That was to distinguish “what can reliably be” constructed during the process of interpretation, analysis (Elliot et al., 2016). The process is similar to the “systematic review”, which involves exploring a collection of secondary data, then classifying them critically according to the research question (‘Systematic Reviews.’, n.d.). Furthermore, the literature review enabled selecting the framework

²²⁸ See the last part of Chapter 3. ²²⁸ They were in Jeddah for work, visiting family, or moved recently.

²²⁸ This is a type of gaining access in qualitative research (Hodges, 2017).

²²⁸ See the last part of Chapter 3.

of Alsop and Heinsohn, to understand how women are/can be empowered in a particular country, or to examine a particular aspect of empowerment; which formed the roadmap for collecting information. It framed the interviews' questions of this research, and worked as a guideline for the observations during fieldwork as well.²²⁹

5.4.2.2 Participant Observation (P.O)

Relevant to the interpretivist approach, participant observation provides an opportunity to explore the necessary depth of the formation of meanings related to the issue under examination (Brockmann, 2011).²³⁰ Participant observation remains a key mechanism in ethnographic fieldwork for generating data. Contrary to complete observation, it is based on the direct engagement of the ethnographer with the field and the people directly and capturing details as they happen (Marvasti, 2014). P.O is the essence of the immersion of the ethnographer in the field. It specifically embodies unstructured yet formal inspection process, recording, and interpretation information, whilst noticing details of people and practices in the community under research. More explicitly, when an incident or event captures the attention of the researcher during the fieldwork,²³¹ he/she notes the moment and reflects on its significance to the context in which it occurred. Hence, the research focus works as a “filter” of what the ethnographer notices (Marvasti, 2014). Later, this form of data is transcribed to reflect upon it, to understand it, and perhaps relate it to other incidents (Walford, 2009).

What is finally recorded; is the researcher's evaluation of both the exact “moment”, and his/her interpretation of it (Esin et al., 2014; Marvasti, 2014). The ethnographic observation records are named “Field Notes” and they contain general comments and thoughts as well as descriptions of places, dates and timings (Bartlett, 2013; Fisher, 2012; Walford, 2009). They are especially important for data analysis and interpretation, as they assist in clarifying links between informants' discussions or similarities and differences between the context and literature (Marvasti, 2014; Strasser, 2012). For this study, I kept a notebook to write daily incidents or thoughts. Sometimes I wrote down the details immediately, other times I took general notes and added the details when I had the time to reflect upon them (Appendix 6).²³²

²²⁹ See Chapters 1 and 3.

²³⁰ Observation is “part of cultural anthropology” and is a “humanistic and scientific method” of producing knowledge (Bernard, 2011, p. 256).

²³¹ It could be a behavior, a conversation, a situation or non-existence of something that is expected to be there.

²³² During the interviews, my side notes about the participants or the place constituted part of the field-notes.

For this research P.O was helpful, 1) to learn about the real context of women's employment (spaces, work dynamic, practices, attitudes, and conditions), and to link the real ground with the reviewed literature and the data (the narratives of women) (Crewe, 2014; Fisher, 2012; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013; Tsikata & Darkwah, 2014; Wray, 2004).²³³ In addition, 2) it was essential for recruiting participants and improving the interview questions. The P.O took place in diverse women's work places, where I experienced the different dynamics of sex segregation, and how the regulations of feminisation were executed. I paid close attention to how expanding employment opportunities for women were implemented on the real ground? And how customers or supervisors deal with female employees? I was looking for anything noticeable and wondering about many questions, such as whether the dynamics and work atmospheres differed across sectors? How the employees and the customers interact with each other? And how they adapted with the new policies? Where do I notice the concentration of women employees in public? ...etc.

To elaborate, during the course of my fieldwork period I planned formal and informal visits to women's working places. In regard to formal ones (i.e. scheduled) I managed to visit two mixed-sex work locations; the first was a large brands retailing group, whilst the second was an advertising agency owned and lead by a woman C.E.O. Furthermore I visited two women-only working-environment locations; the first was a tailoring and embroidery centre with well-equipped laboratories,²³⁴ and the second was a charity society that teaches impoverished women handcrafting and sells their products in a small store and at charity events.²³⁵ In principle, my intention for those visits was to seek participants, but I took the chance to take a tour around women's working spaces and have quick random chats whenever it was possible.

In addition to the formal visits, using P.O whilst informally walking-around different locations was very informative. During my three-month data collection I would go out weekly on random visits to restaurants, shopping malls, and beauty centres to seek potential participants or at least to have casual conversations with female employees.²³⁶ Participant observation was valuable for finding a key informant for interviews. After I paid a random visit to a place, to make a personalised gift, I managed to organise a key interview with the GM of embroidery factories,

²³³ An American researcher intended to explore the context of Saudi women in the United States. She began her ethnographic fieldwork with a participant observation in one Islamic Center in Michigan to learn more about them and meet possible Saudi women informants (Riedy, 2013). She notified that most of her interview questions were as a result of participant observation. Also, see (Fisher, 2012)

²³⁴ October the 2nd, 2017 at 2 P.M.

²³⁵ September the 24th, 2017 at 11 A.M.

²³⁶ Informal chats are valid in ethnographic and other qualitative research, see (Adham, 2018; Gallagher, 2007).

and a focus group with the employees. I also secured two recorded interviews with sales-women in different stores using this technique. However, I tried several times to interview female cashiers in supermarkets and women working in beauty salons (formally and informally) but all my attempts were in vain. In such cases casual conversations, were useful. P.O offered the opportunity to initiate casual conversations with the individuals continuously during my observations, and to gain more information or clarifications about things that I noticed, or on which I had comments (for details please check the P.O field note example in the Appendix). This technique enabled me to come up with further questions for focus groups and interviews, and it encouraged me to look for more information in available literature.

For example, when a Saudi woman provided me with a service at any place (a restaurant, a store, a salon...etc.), I took the chance to talk about my research and I tried to ask them about the work environment. For example, how did they apply for the job? Or how are the customers dealing with them? On several occasions, the general conversations in casual gatherings addressed key issues regarding women's personal choices, career objectives, the nature of their relationship with family members, and opinions about current social issues or challenges.²³⁷ Thus, I was able to apprehend the values that influence varying women's opinions regarding various matters related to the research findings. Being attentive to comments and incidents was very useful during the interpretation and the organisation of data.

Spontaneous chats were also core for the evolvement of my data collection experience; they formed the initial steps that outlined the route and direction of the project. They contributed to developing and refining the interview questions. They were equally as important for the analysis at a later stage when I needed to contextualise the data, and to tie the mass of information together. However key issues and the relationship between certain elements are obviously not visible in many contexts even for a native researcher because they are hidden in the individuals' thoughts. Therefore this tool was used to complement and assist comprehending the focus groups and the interviews' conversations (Al-Saggaf, 2011; Alandejani, 2013; Bartlett, 2013; Brockmann, 2011; Sangasubana, 2011)

²³⁷ In gatherings, I have listened to outspoken whimpering about the increasing financial responsibilities and the heavy burden on workingwomen, and I have witnessed the complaints about allowing women to work in certain jobs such as a security guard or a waitress.

5.4.2.3 Semi- Structured Interviews

Interviewing is an interpretive research practice which entails leading a conversation to gain details and to learn about opinions and experiences, especially when information is lacking. Interviews are essential in ethnographic research which is interactional and conversational by nature (Alandejani, 2013; Dunham, 2013; Walford, 2009). In ethnographic research the most common style of interviewing is semi-structured, where questions are open ended and asked fluidly upon the aspects that emerge during the conversation (Rapley, 2004; Walford, 2009). This type uses open-ended questions, which gives the participant the chance to elaborate and share more information (Bartlett, 2013). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the interviews of this study retained a degree of structure for the purposes of comparability.

In accordance with the interpretivist approach adopted in this research, using semi-structured interviews was the main tool for collecting the data. This choice was considered because, data on the structure of opportunities and constraints in a specific society in relation to empowerment, requires direct contact with its people via interviews, so the researcher can comprehensively grasp the “rule of the game” (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). Therefore, extensive similar research used interviews to 1) clarify whether the context of where women lived was enabling or limiting to empowerment and to 2) gain information on non-measurable assets of empowerment, and 3) to clarify the complexity of how different elements intersect to influence women’s agency or empowerment.²³⁸ The use interviews matched the nature of this exploratory study,²³⁹ and allowed a profound understanding of the links between employment and agency according to the interviewed Saudi women (presented in chapter six). It also permitted generating a detailed analysis of the distinct influential contextual factors that affect this link (discussed in chapter seven). Thus, this research employed semi-structured interviews with Saudi women to reveal information on:

1) Women’s practice of ‘agency’, represented in the ability of women to make strategic life choices. Learning about agency, requires asking questions on financial and non-financial, personal, and familial life decisions (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Haghighat, 2013; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Pratto, 2016; Zuhur, 2003). This included asking about how women make a

²³⁸ For examples, see Bospinar, 2010; Enck & McDaniel, 2015; Hausner, 2006; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Schuler & Rottach, 2010; Tsikata & Darkwah, 2014; Wray, 2004.

²³⁹ In social sciences, conversations became prevalent “as a tool to analyse participants’ experiences of a wide range of social issues such as social inequalities...[and] gender relations” (Esin et al., 2014, p. 204).

choice regarding; personal and domestic expenses, savings, investments, marriage, education, domestic responsibilities, medical care, use of contraception, career, mobility, appearance, and leisure. To determine the criteria of the strategic decisions this research benefited from global surveys' indicators of women's autonomy and empowerment.²⁴⁰

2) Influences on women's choices and practice of agency: how they make a choice regarding a strategic matter, and why? What are the enablers and restrictions of choice regarding different aspects of life? And what are the formal and informal limitations they face or consider while making these decisions?

3) Opinions of women regarding employment as an asset for developing agency, and how different women perceived the expansion of employment opportunities as influential to women's ability to make strategic life decisions.

4) The influence of expanding women's employment opportunities on relaxing existing social limitations on women's agency.

In total 34 individual (face-to-face) interviews were conducted and audio recorded for this study, of which two were carried out in Reading, and the other 32 were in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The locations of our meetings varied as I ensured that the participants chose the place where they felt comfortable enough to talk. Therefore, I met them in coffee shops, at their homes, during their breaks at work, and in my home as well. The length of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to two and a half hours. In addition, one extra interview was conducted over telephone. (The questions of the interviews are attached in appendix).

One of the most important factors for the effective generation of information in interviews is building trust and targeting the right informants (Pinsky, 2013). Trust can be achieved by clearly introducing the research and its goals, or sharing some personal stories, in addition to knowing the person in advance or reaching them via a trust-worthy connection (Marvasti, 2014). Therefore, I frequently began the conversation by explaining the research topic and aims, and shared my personal interest in this research and how it derived from my previous experiences.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ *Egypt Demographic Health Survey, 2014, The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017, Yemen National Health and Demographic survey, 2015; Jahan & United Nations Development Programme, 2015.*

²⁴¹ I shared that my interest in this research derived from 1) a previous work experience, 2) that my close relatives then had different views about work and how it influenced their lives differently, which incited me to explore other opinions.

Some experts encouraged carrying out several face-to-face encounters between the researcher and the informants, to benefit from a closer interaction. In fact, I have profited from the usage of this technique with few participants. In two cases, I invited them to participate in the group discussions (which will be explained next) to compare their opinions with other women. In other cases, I had to continue the interview on another day either due to time restrictions or because the surrounding environment was not very comfortable.²⁴² Eloquence, sociability, the location, and the general atmosphere can all affect trust and the quality of the information generated (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Enck & McDaniel, 2015; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013).

To ensure the genuine flow of information I repeatedly asked the participants in which language they wished to speak, even when I knew they spoke English.²⁴³ Consequently, all the conversations were in Saudi Arabic with the exception of one participant, with whom the discussion was a mix of Arabic and English. It is also worth mentioning that I realised the advantage of being an insider was being able to access information, build trust, and create a comfortable atmosphere. When I asked the informants for a 45-minute interview but the conversation lasted for more than two hours. The majority of women were voluntarily open, and genuinely expressed their experiences regarding the various aspects related to the topic. Moreover, they expressed gratitude and appreciation towards the participation experience and the research topic.²⁴⁴

5.4.2.4 Focus Group Sessions

The Focus group technique is frequently used to establish a primary or confirmatory idea about issues related to a topic, conception, or a product. In principle, this method entails scheduling a session in a given location for a number of participants (Hautzinger, 2012). It is useful for ethnographic data generation as it allows discussions to emerge between respondents who might address key issues related to the investigation and the reviewed literature, or to clarify confusion raised from observations (Munoz Boudet et al., 2013; Wray, 2004). Furthermore, in a group interview a remark or a question from one participant entices another to share her experience,

²⁴² I was once interviewing a woman while her son was playing around; and he injured himself. Although she didn't mind to continue the conversation I insisted to reschedule our appointment. I wanted her focused and relaxed.

²⁴³ All the interviews were in Arabic except one.

²⁴⁴ Their generosity of sharing information surpassed my previous expectations, in particular that previous research indicates that Saudi participants are discrete and not cooperative in sharing personal information, see (Dunham's, 2013).

which can be distinctive, and eye opening to issues or recommendations (Gobo, 2013; Patton, 1999). Focus group sessions in this research allowed capturing differences in women's views on work, their dynamics of decision-making, or how they viewed influences of social norms, instinctively. In a way that differs from individual interviews, as the group discussions offered the opportunity to cover several viewpoints on the same aspect at the same time. They enabled living the full experience to notice points of agreement and disagreement that arise spontaneously.

For the purpose of this research, I organised four sessions with different categories of women. The first group included three women working in the industrial sector receiving minimum wage, whilst the second comprised six women working in various sectors (schools, universities, banks, marketing agencies, hospitals, life coaching). The third session, however, was with three middle-class housewives, whereas the participants in the last discussion were three upper-class housewives. The housewives of both groups had never worked, and varied in age. There was a time gap between the sessions; the first two groups were scheduled during the same period of time as the individual interviews. Nonetheless the remaining two sessions took place after the interviews were completed. Therefore, the questions varied from one session to another depending on the group members, the time available, and the information collected prior to the discussion. The duration of the first session was one hour and 30 minutes, whilst the other three were 2 hours and 30 minutes long. The structure of each session was flexible, yet they were generally based on; the field notes generated from observations, the questions prepared for the interviews, and the participants' interactions. On a final note with regards to the data collection, mixing between different qualitative techniques to generate information isn't unprecedented in ethnographic research studying Saudi women. To provide a concrete example of a previous study, Meijer et al. (2012) used a similar methodological strategy by mixing between textual research, field work, interviews (formal and in formal) and focus groups.

5.5 The Data Analysis.

5.5.1 Transcribing and Translating

After collecting the data (or during in several cases), the researcher enters the stage at which the large quantity of information is written and organised. This stage includes transcribing and translating the interviews (Esin et al., 2014; Tlaiss et al., 2017), reducing and organising the data (Roulston, 2014), as well as selecting the relevant information from the field-notes (Marvasti,

2014). I should note that this stage consumed a great deal of time and effort, which is expected in ethnographic research. It is equally imperative to consider that, throughout the transcription, translation, and analysis, the ethnographer is accountable for making key decisions relating to the sufficient and adequate information obtained from the large amount of generated data. Therefore, this sub-section will explain the process of transcribing and translation in this research.

Transcribing the data involved, listening to each interview audio recording several times, and writing them in the same language in which they were carried out. As a result each recorded interview had a written script, which was later reduced into a focused version. To clarify, after transcribing all the interviews, comparing them to each other, and selecting key information, I took each script and reduced the amount of words. I excluded long description of events that didn't relate to the topic.²⁴⁵ To guarantee that the focused version didn't exclude essential information, a few of the participants have reviewed their reduced script.²⁴⁶ Nevertheless, information of unrecorded casual conversations was written as I re-remembered it with the help of the field notes. The inclusion of the narratives whilst writing the chapter was taken from the translated scripts, and in some cases they were edited using indenting for readability and organisation purposes.²⁴⁷

It is important to consider that the data was collected in Arabic, a different language from which the data was presented throughout the chapters.²⁴⁸ In addition, the majority of the participants did not use formal language whilst sharing their experiences and aspirations. This required being cautious whilst translating and ensuring that vital information was not misrepresented, in particular key words or phrases, which can't be translated literally. For example, Sometimes the participant uses metaphors or expressions that lose their meanings if translated literally, therefore in such cases I translate the meaning instead.

“In translating stories, the researchers play an active role, not limited to their knowledge of the two languages, but including their understanding of the full lived and spoken contexts of those two languages” (Esin et al., 2014, p. 208)

²⁴⁵ See Esin et al. (2014), Syed et al. (2018), and Tlaiss et al. (2017).

²⁴⁶ SMR, MDI, HWZ, LEE, GHD, DIA,WDH.

²⁴⁷ See (Roulston, 2014).

²⁴⁸ This is common in ethnographic research, however the researcher is required to explain their decisions regarding translation (Esin et al., 2014).

To ensure the quality of the translation I used the parallel translation technique, implemented by two native Saudi-Arabic speakers. I applied this method myself with the assistance of a Saudi/British PhD candidate at the University of Reading. She is bilingual; her mother is British, yet she lived in Saudi Arabia for 18 years. I am a native Arabic speaker myself, who has been studying English for 18 years. Both of us are researchers who master the cultural background of the participants.²⁴⁹

The process of translation went as follows, before we translated each transcribed script, we read the entire conversation first. Then we started from the beginning; and translated each sentence literally, then checked it made sense. When we had finished translating the conversation we read it again to compare it to the first read (script in Arabic), and the second one (in English). To further validate the quality of the translation, I benefited from a second opinion. A PhD graduate from the University of Reading, currently an academic, chose eight random Arabic scripts and translated them into English,²⁵⁰ of which I compared with the first translation. From the previous explanations, it seems clear that the procedures of transcribing and translating also formed part of the analysis process. With each step I took side notes, underlined key information, indicated similar opinions, and highlighted unique ones. This in turn constructed the foundation of the data analysis.

5.5.2 Thematic Analysis

The selected analysis is interpretive and inductive; it corresponds with the nature of this research. In accordance with the methodological approach, the data was analysed using thematic analysis inspired by the grounded theory. This sub-part shall briefly explain the grounded theory, and how the thematic analysis as an analytical tool was used in this research. The following discussion intends to explain the origin of the thematic analysis, however it doesn't suggest the use of grounded theory as a basis of analysis.

²⁴⁹ Syed et al. (2018) revealed, when the interviewee and interviewer shared a similar religious and socio-cultural identity misinterpretation was not an issue.

²⁵⁰ Dr. Rania Adham, an Assistant Professor, CS of the Department Engineering, Science and Technology of Effat University in Jeddah.

The grounded theory was introduced by Glaser and Strauss; yet it was expanded and corrected to incubate varied interpretations and became an umbrella term for a well-established methodology of inductive research (Dey, 2004; Ormston et al., 2014). It identifies steps to discover a theory from qualitative data depending on a theoretical sampling.²⁵¹ This begins by recruiting participants who have information or experiences of the research topic. However, it also involves successive rounds of analysis to select and refine new ideas emerging from the data, which form (or add to) a theory. Accordingly, hypothesis and questions emerge at the end of the analysis, and the findings contribute to the discovery of a practical theory and recommendations that are implicit in the lived realities (Dey, 2004; Ormston et al., 2014).

This study has chosen thematic analysis to interpret the data, and it was performed manually.²⁵² Thematic analysis is a process of generating the conclusions via distinguishing themes derived from the narratives (the interviews texts) to answer the research question. This technique values the researcher as a key tool for generating and interpreting data, i.e. how the researcher notices themes emerging from the narratives (Dunham, 2013; Esin et al., 2014; Strasser, 2012). To clarify, the analysis emphasises on the meaning making of the participants, and the interconnection between their perceptions, the researcher's understanding and the outer context (Esin et al., 2014).

The implementation of thematic analysis requires continuous review of the interviews, then the data is reduced and organised into categories of key concepts. The goal is to identify the cases or circumstances where the theory or arguments do and do not exist; then compare them to deliver a meaningful analysis; this step is called (Coding) (Dey, 2004; Riessman, 2008; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Syed et al., 2018). In principal this entails looking at the similarities and differences amongst the perceptions of informants, whilst transferring general structures and common views on the identified themes (Bayard De Volo & Schatz, 2004).²⁵³ Evidence from previous research described the process as “ [keeping the] analysis open to emerging themes and meanings. A diary-like account of each meeting with notes about ideas, insights, and questions was maintained. These notes served to stimulate further probing questions and document how our findings were grounded in our data” (Safadi et al., 2013, p.780). The analysis then stops when

²⁵¹ It doesn't rely on representative sampling, and it doesn't test hypothesis. It is suitable for analysing observation and interviews qualitative data (Dey, 2004).

²⁵² In ethnography a great deal of the analysis occurs during the data collection (Roulston, 2014).

²⁵³ Using this analysis entails demonstrating sections of the narratives as told by the informants exactly, while keeping the words that are added between brackets (Bernard, 2011; Esin et al., 2014).

the “core categories” are discovered; ones that enabled writing and incorporating the different aspects in harmony (Dey, 2004).

Therefore, to identify the common thematic patterns in the data, I have read each conversation several times (asking my self to what degree it answers my research questions), and took side notes.²⁵⁴ Then I compared the narratives and the field notes, so that the narratives became inclusive of the context. Correspondingly I highlighted key information and contextualised them under common themes that emerged organically during this process,²⁵⁵ which later defined the chapters or became part of a chapter. The themes at the beginning were labelled as the interviewees described (i.e. in their words such as 1/a); however after that they were changed and abstracted in accordance with the literature (Table 2).²⁵⁶

Table 2: Themes

The Main Themes Emerged	
<p>1) How employment works as a tool to enable agency?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Exposure: “It is the real learning experience”. b. Stimulates ‘Power-within’. c. Financial independence serves as a means of resistance, security, and creates new opportunities. d. Women’s visibility influenced change in the perceptions of women’s roles. e. Work secured the basic financial needs for working class women. 	Chapter 6
<p>2) Aspects where employment didn’t serve in developing agency.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Some women do not use work benefits to change their oppressive situation. b. The existence of some formal restrictions (such as male guardianship, and limitations on marrying non-Saudis) 	Chapter 8
<p>3) The Matter is Context Dependent.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Circumstances, social background, motives, and values. b. Depends on other enablers available to women (Education, Family’s support, strong character, control of money, help with domestic responsibilities) 	Chapter 7

²⁵⁴ Ritchie and Spencer (1994) label this task as “familiarisation stage”.

²⁵⁵ This process entailed relating the themes and key ideas with the literature and attempting to look at the data from different perspectives.

²⁵⁶ The structure of the themes changed several times before they became final, and each point includes detailed explanations, ideas and quotes from the narratives.

<p>4) Other Intervening Factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The new public policies pro women: Scholarships, employment opportunities, and other legal rights. b. The new economic situation in Saudi Arabia, and the growing economic need. 	<p>Chapters 6 and 8</p>
<p>5) The Emergence of New Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Questioning the importance of motherhood. b. Competitiveness with previous foreign labour. c. Work can become a double burden that compromises women's social and financial rights. 	<p>Excluded</p>

The analysis and interpretation of the data (interviews and focus-groups conversations, and field notes) generated conclusions, which, in turn, are reviewed with existing theories. In this study, the analysis depended on Kabeer's explanation of agency, as a basis on which to compare with the participants views, however it also included various other relevant opinions, which reflected the informant's opinions within the existing research. This enabled connecting the themes and discussing them coherently. For example Chapter 6 discussed the findings in Theme 1, whilst Chapters 7 presented and discussed Theme 3, and Chapter 8 discussed subthemes 2/b and 4/b relevant to answering the research questions. Some themes and subthemes were used to elaborate on the explanation of particular findings only such as Theme 4 and 2/a. However, in ethnographic studies the theoretical background and the research questions determine the focus of the analysis and which information to look for (Roulston, 2014). Therefore, some interesting emerging findings did not relate to answering the research questions and were not included whilst discussing the findings (Theme 5).

Consequently, the themes allowed organising the conclusions in the chapters as following: the views and experiences about positive impact of employment on agency are discussed in Chapter 6. Also, the individual reports and personal experiences of important conditions for employment to foster women's agency are explained in Chapter 7, whilst the informants' accounts about more general external influences related to the social structure are reviewed in Chapter 8.

Additionally, for this particular research thematic analysis served the purpose of voicing the opinions of Saudi women, because it enabled presenting the details of their perceptions, capturing the underlying motives, and portraying the uniqueness of their experiences. As a researcher, it allowed me to dive into the depth of the insights, experience the reality as told, and transfer it back to the reader. From another side it permitted the discussion of the overlapping

aspects of agency and social relations throughout the chapters, rather than covering some angles while eliminating others.²⁵⁷ Ultimately the analysis distinguished this study amongst other methods quantifying qualitative data by counting the repetition of certain words,²⁵⁸ which shifts the focus away from the details, and compromises the essence of ethnographic fieldwork.²⁵⁹

5.6 The Challenges Encountered During the Data Collection

Ethnographic research and fieldwork in particular are challenging to plan or to structure, on the contrary, the data collection demanded a high level of time and flexibility. Unexpected challenges occurred throughout the process, and as a researcher I had to continuously come up with an immediate plan B. Knowing the nature of the field in advance I tried to identify possible difficulties and reflected upon alternative scenarios, nevertheless several unanticipated circumstances interrupted the data collection.

As a sponsored employee-student, to begin my fieldwork I was required to obtain three official approvals from different authorities.²⁶⁰ What was planned to take from 4 to 6 weeks required more than three months instead, and hence delayed the beginning of the data collection. Therefore I had to reschedule several appointments and re-contact anticipated participants, however I took advantage of the time and interviewed two informants I was in Reading, which enhanced the preparation for the rest of the interviews. Moreover I encountered time restrictions; I was permitted to a period of three months only, which included 12 days of national vacations. In principle ethnographic work requires a longer period of time and this has affected the level of access gained to more participants, however being a local prevented the time factor from influencing the quality of data collected.

In addition I faced further restrictions to recruiting certain participants for interviews, such as supermarket cashiers and unemployed women with limited income.²⁶¹ The supermarket cashiers segment was my biggest disappointment, I made several attempts to interview them voluntarily

²⁵⁷ This would've not been possible if I wasn't able to use women's conversations as a whole, or I was required to focus on numbers or the frequency of the repetition.

²⁵⁸ See Bartlett, 2013; Esin et al., 2014.

²⁵⁹ "Research guided purely by procedural rules... misses the point, which is to provide understanding" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2014, p.37).

²⁶⁰ The Saudi cultural bureau in London, KAU in Jeddah, and the Ministry of Higher Education.

²⁶¹ I aimed for a better coverage of diverse participants, yet I didn't manage to reach this segment in specific. However I had casual conversations with cashiers that formed part of field notes.

but the supervisors didn't allow them to participate in the interviews inside the supermarket, nor would they meet with me after working hours. They either had family commitments, and a set time for their transportation, or simply were not willing make the effort to schedule meetings in their free time later. Therefore, I visited administration offices to seek formal permissions to conduct the interviews, but they were only willing to take my number and the requests remained pending until I left the country.

Similarly I experienced other disappointments from un-kept promises, for example I met with a brand manager who agreed to organise an interview and a focus group session with saleswomen. Unfortunately, even though the date and time were confirmed, the manager cancelled on the same day and didn't reschedule.²⁶² However, I managed to interview this segment (Saudi saleswomen) with informal access.²⁶³ Workers in supermarkets and sales were critical to this research, as these sectors were the first domains of Saudi female employment expansion, and where their employment became compulsory.

Another unforeseen difficulty was the cost management of hosting the interviews and arranging the transportation. Informants were dealing with me as a regular Saudi woman rather than a foreign researcher, and being part of the community I was obliged to follow the local hospitality standards. I had to invite most of the participants to my house or in a coffee shop which were convenient for them, this was costly and required management.²⁶⁴ Finally, managing power relations with participants, and setting boundaries between my conflicting roles as a researcher, a friend, and a sociable ethnographer were challenging, yet exciting learning experiences. While it wasn't possible to separate each role, I had to pay close attention to my connection with the participant. When I sensed that I was at a higher power level I made every effort to break-the-ice between us.²⁶⁵ However when the interviewee was at a higher level of power, un-willing to share information, or thought that some of the questions were too personal, it was difficult to loosen the boundaries.²⁶⁶ On the other hand, other participants were so comfortable and friendly that they drifted away from the topic; in such cases I needed to remind them of the topic or hint at the time. Equally, I needed to remind my self to preserve the analytical detachment, so that

²⁶² Wagemaker reported the same issue with scheduling interviews in Saudi Arabia, "incidental meetings were sometimes cancelled" (Meijer et al., 2012, p.14).

²⁶³ I walked around the shops and explain my requests looking for interviewees to participate until I managed to interview 2 sales-women with their consent to be interviewed during their lunch break.

²⁶⁴ Even when I meet the participants in their houses I mostly offered to be in charge for the food and the drinks.

²⁶⁵ I made jokes, gave an example from other interviews, and showed appreciation. I let the participant know that she was very helpful and valuable to my study.

²⁶⁶ In such cases I try to repeat the question differently or give clarifications.

sympathy didn't overpower the quality of information collected.²⁶⁷ In this regard, using reflexivity was helpful to overcome issues that might have arisen from the different roles performed during the fieldwork. However, the explanation of reflexivity is discussed after the next section.

5.7 Limitations of This Ethnographic Research

This is an interpretive qualitative study, which examines the expansion of women's employment as a pathway to developing agency in a patriarchal social context. It is interested in understanding perceptions on 1) the usefulness of paid employment to enhance women's exercise of purposeful choice and 2) whether the nature of socio-cultural constraints to agency that women in S.A face have changed as a result of the expansion of women's employment. It doesn't compare determinants of Saudi women's empowerment (employment and agency) according to a demographic characteristic (rural vs. urban, older vs. younger, educated vs. non educated) or before and after a period of time. In such research issues of subjectivity, internal validity, and generalisability must be clarified.

Ethnographic research is occasionally blamed for its lack of rigor in comparison to statistical tools, however validity in qualitative research is different than in quantitative or experimental research, as their purposes are different (Bayard De Volo & Schatz, 2004). Research using qualitative methods doesn't test a theory or disconfirm a hypothesis like in controlled experiments; hence the repeatability of the studies is not targeted or exactly achievable. That is because the external environment is changeable and cannot be controlled in social qualitative investigations seeking to gain insights like this research, even informant's opinions may change over time with change in their circumstances (Bartlett, 2013; Enck & McDaniel, 2015; Fisher, 2012; Hausner, 2006; Munoz Boudet et al., 2013; Schuler & Rottach, 2010). It is important to consider the time period of the data collection, as it was a period of social and economic transition, and further reforms for women evolved after this period. This means that women's perceptions, which are shaped by their experiences, can change, therefore an exact reproduction of results is not possible. Nevertheless, a certain degree of comparability exists.

By choosing ethnographic qualitative methods the researcher focuses on gaining depth and enhanced understanding, rather than the breadth which statistical tools offer; however that is

²⁶⁷ Conflict of power relations is a common challenge ethnographic research (Dunham, 2013; Marvasti, 2014).

justified by the research question and aim (Adato, 2008; Bartlett, 2013; Borman et al., 1986).²⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the ethnographer demonstrates internal validity through the provision of detailed descriptions of the field, interactions, the surrounding environment, in addition to communicating findings from different research projects in the same field (Dey, 2004; Ormston et al., 2014; Sharan, 2009a).²⁶⁹ To insure validity, similar to this study, the reviewed ethnographic studies on empowerment, agency and women's work, provided details on the process of sample selection, the questions asked, the surrounding environment, and the tools utilised (Borman et al., 1986). They also explained how ethics and consents were considered and approved, how the analysis was done,²⁷⁰ and what challenges appeared while collecting and interpreting data, all considered in this research (Schuler & Rottach, 2010).²⁷¹

To further enhance internal validity, references on qualitative research methods suggest the use of the triangulation technique. This involves adopting different data generation tools to examine the same research question, adopted by this research using different data collection tools (interviews, focus-groups, and field notes) (Davies, 2008; Sangasubana, 2011).²⁷² On one side triangulation is recommended to examine different angles of a phenomenon. It enables comparing diverse or contradicting findings, and identifying cases that are consistent (or inconsistent) with theories or arguments existing in current literature (Bayard De Volo & Schatz, 2004). It also helps to construct conceptions that better fit the context in question, by understanding how well the general theory can fit a specific case (Borman et al., 1986). This examination compared the narratives of groups with the narratives of individuals, and with the observation notes. The findings were analysed interlinked to the arguments and theories existing in literature, as explained earlier. In sum, ethnography uses several tools in combination to construct a "richer understanding" and to avoid miss-interpreting meanings.

This thesis builds on constructivism which embraces the researcher's subjectivity in contributing to knowledge (Bayard De Volo & Schatz, 2004; Bernard, 2011; Borman et al., 1986). It indorses positions, which "recognises that research cannot be value free but which advocates that

²⁶⁸ In fact even using surveys doesn't guarantee the reliability of respondents' answers (Alfarran et al., 2018).

²⁶⁹ See (Munoz Boudet et al., 2013; Schuler & Rottach, 2010), ethnographic studies compared results with similar previous research on the same area to insure validity.

²⁷⁰ "Specification of the research environment and procedure is most important here. The research context and methods should be spelled out transparently, so that reviewers and readers can themselves judge the quality of the data" (Bayard De Volo & Schatz, 2004, p. 270).

²⁷¹ An American researcher explained how she penetrated the Saudi Society in the U.S through her boyfriend, his friends, and the Islamic centre to research Saudi women, however the number of women were willing to share information with her were very few (Dunham, 2013).

²⁷² See (Fisher, 2012; Schuler & Rottach, 2010), for examples of combining qualitative tools.

researchers should try to make their assumptions, biases and values transparent, while striving as far as possible to be neutral and non-judgemental in their approach” (Ormstone et al., 2014, p. 8). To minimise the effects of biases ethnographers practice reflexivity throughout the research process, and employ several techniques to enhance the credibility or the trustworthiness of conclusions. Therefore, this research made use of member checking, i.e. asking informants to validate the interpretation of the information they provided.²⁷³ Interactions with the informants and going back to them enables validating the usefulness of the questions asked and the interpretations generated from the answers (Borman et al., 1986). Furthermore, I applied information and checked by asking different researchers to interpret the same data and compare our interpretations (Bayard De Volo & Schatz, 2004; Borman et al., 1986). Ethnographers seek outsider critics and researchers from different fields with whom to share their explanations and interpretations, and gain their feedback.²⁷⁴ The reflection upon negative cases, or research that disapproves the findings was another useful tool to expand the explanations and reach to conclusions. Furthermore specialists in ethnographic research argue that time spent in the field, and mastering the language are additional sources of credibility, which I inherently possessed (Davies, 2008).²⁷⁵

With reference to generalisability, ethnographic research is conducted to improve the understanding of a phenomenon on a small scale, in a particular place, at a specific time; while the conclusions represent participants’ opinions (Brockmann, 2011). The findings represent the opinions of a certain number of women in one city, but their experiences reflect other women in society. The evidence is; the informants shared several common opinions and experiences regarding the topic. Also, this kind of research is key in informing future research: qualitative and quantitative, academic and policy-oriented.²⁷⁶

In addition, even if the representativeness is not measurable, and the extent of generalisability is limited, the data collection stopped only when saturation was reached.²⁷⁷ To clarify, saturation occurs when the information has been collected, the different aspects of the topic have been

²⁷³ After the interpretation I have contacted 6 participants who were reachable for this purpose.

²⁷⁴ The University of Reading offers several opportunities to do so; during weekly student seminars in different departments, making helpful academic members available, and providing various spaces where I regularly meet with other researchers to talk about our studies.

²⁷⁵ That is because the more time a researcher spend in the field the more information he/she can gain or confirm, while language knowledge enhances the understanding of meanings and hence minimize confusions while interpreting.

²⁷⁶ For examples see Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; ‘Demographic Health Surveys’, n.d.; Kabeer et al., 2016; Munoz et al., 2013; Porter, 2013.

²⁷⁷ See (Alfarran et al., 2018; Syed et al., 2018; Tlaiss et al., 2017) for similar studies.

covered, and enough “refinement” to the theory has been generated (Dey, 2004). For this research, saturation was operationalised according to the research questions and aim. Therefore, saturation was determined when: 1) variation across perceptions regarding different aspects of agency and the expansion of women’s employment was remarked, 2) the generated themes were repeated, 3) almost no new insights had emerged from the interviews, and 4) no further analytical explanations developed. Finally, the limitation of generalisability in interpretive research is waved when the researcher explicitly clarifies the use of a method’s tools, and links the conclusions to existing scholarships exploring the same phenomenon in different countries, to demonstrate similarities (Adkins, 2003; Kemp & Squires, 1997).

5.8 A Note on Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Reflexivity means turning back on oneself continuously throughout the study, and assessing how both the researcher and the process influence the research (Alandejani, 2013; Sharan, 2009a). This practice is particularly important in social and ethnographic studies,²⁷⁸ as conducting fieldwork is inherently subjective.²⁷⁹ The position of the ethnographer is significant in such research; reflexivity thus is considered a critical part of the analysis (Esin et al., 2014; Strasser, 2012). Ethnographers must constantly evaluate their own opinions and feelings, recognise their backgrounds and motivations and be aware of their biases (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2006; Alandejani, 2013; Tuli, 2010).²⁸⁰

In my case, I attempted be fully aware of how being (middle class female, married, had grown up in different cities in Saudi Arabia, frequently travelled abroad, worked in both private and public sectors, studying and living in France and the U.K) can influence my research. These attributes have already influenced the selection of my research topic. For example, travelling has made me discover how different people around the world are interested in knowing about Saudi women. People consider Saudi women alienated, and they only know what western news broadcasts on them. That is why I chose my topic to focus on women and to include insiders’

²⁷⁸ However, it is also essential to consider reflexivity in all kinds of research, because researchers are usually part of their investigation.

²⁷⁹ In the choice of the topic, recruiting informants, interpreting and analysing generated data, and organizing the conclusions ... etc

²⁸⁰ These biases can be represented in all aspects that intersects with our identities such as religion, education, gender, age, social class, economic status, occupation, marital status, health conditions ... etc.

perspectives on contemporary issues. Also, living in different cities in S.A and working in different jobs had given me the chance to listen to many women's stories who had different experiences with work, social challenges, and achieving life goals. This aspect had influenced my research to adopt an interpretive ethnographic approach, to deliver the diversity of their opinions lacking in literature on S.A. It furthermore made me realise that Saudi women can be very different and that I might have taken many possessions for granted. I realised that my family and my husband were supportive and open to my choices in life. Also, my education level and experience have sculpted my personality differently than those who have continued studying in Saudi Arabia.

Remembering my characteristics is what made the fieldwork experience enriching and eye opening. In other words, reflexivity (questioning my self and realising my biases) enabled me to switch from an insider to a researcher. During the interviews and the analysis, those influences made me continuously question in which way the informant is different than I am? And how her perspective differs from mine? Moreover living in the U.K (away from Saudi Arabia) for more than two years before collecting the data, permitted noticing and capturing the change that occurred to the labour market easily. Which would have not been as easy if I was living there and experienced the development day by day and got used to it.

In addition, my previous work experience offered me the exposure to the Ministry of Labour and the International Labour Organisation, which has motivated me to investigate employment reforms particularly and to explore how women as beneficiaries view these reforms as influencing their lives.²⁸¹ Having the necessary exposure and connections, I was well positioned as an insider to access the required informants and information. However -as a researcher- throughout the research process,²⁸² I kept in mind that I must be continuously critical of meanings, self and society using reflexivity. Reflexivity is considered of high importance when examining socially constructed gendered norms and abstract concepts such as agency, especially for an insider like me (Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2006). While researching these aspects in my own country, some things seemed meaningless while they were worthy to the research. Therefore, I reminded myself continuously that what seems normal, can be important (the

²⁸¹ I worked in a team to suggest recommendations for the Ministry of Labour and the regulations of women's employment.

²⁸² I.e. reviewing the literature, collecting data, transcribing, reviewing information, analyzing, and writing as well.

opposite applies as well) and I have tried to note and record as much as I can.²⁸³ I repeatedly questioned my observations, and discussed the information and interpretations with others (informants, other insiders, and non-Saudis), not to judge by my own filter only. The process also included constant reasoning about un-thought parts of common meanings and habits that are normalised as behaviours and beliefs. Since it was challenging to remain objective in an interpretivist subjective research study, being reflexive allowed critical thinking, expressing biases, and acknowledging influences that the researcher notices.

Besides reflexivity there were several ethical considerations to pursue this research. They can be summarized as seeking authorizations, protecting confidentiality, and respecting research ethics. Frist before beginning the data collection, I had to obtain a formal ethical approval from the department of politics and international relations at the University of Reading. However to seek informants and practice observation, I had to acquire verbal authorizations to access certain establishments. This included scheduling an appointment with an employee of a particular company after explaining the research project and its goals. Also, during the period of observation and field-exploring, when I intended to open a casual conversation with the purpose of collecting data, I explicitly state that I was a PhD candidate researching Saudi women's employment.

Nevertheless to conduct the interviews and record them, I had provided sufficient information about the project and its objectives together with the consent form (in formal sheets from the University of Reading). The form ensured that the information and identities of informants are strictly confidential. Furthermore, it explained that the participant could refrain from answering any question, and withdraw from participation. The value of privacy and discretion was highly respected, in particular that Saudi women concern about their reputation.²⁸⁴ For example, I asked the participants whether they preferred to be quoted by initials, or as anonymous. The recordings of the interviews were kept secured in a locked folder in my personal computer, out of reach to

²⁸³ For example in my first visit to a shopping mall, I saw men and women standing in front of several stores laughing and talking to each other. They were employees of the same store; I needed a minute to understand what I saw, because this scene was unusual and improper a year before that. In my opinion, this was a fundamental change in social norms in the public sphere. Regardless, I shared my thought with the participants and other individuals to construct a richer understanding of this scene.

²⁸⁴ One participant phoned following her interview, to verify that her name will not be associated with the story she shared about her divorce. I explained that her that names will not be mentioned, and that I am willing to eliminate her participation completely if she wanted.

others, and they were deleted after transcribing them.²⁸⁵

In addition to that, distinguishing between personal and professional aspects of the research formed part of the main ethical considerations. Paying respect to such boundaries was an act of research ethics, thus I insured respondents against “harm and deception” every time. Respecting their privacy and being honest when representing their opinions were a priority for this research (Ormston et al., 2014). In several cases, for example, I revised the information collected with the informant to insure it was correct, and that the informant didn’t mind to include it.

5.9 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter articulated the methodological stance of this ethnographic study, as an inductive and a constructivist qualitative research, interested in gaining bottom-up data, based on perceptions and experiences of lived realities. The chapter further clarified the basis and the relevance of the methods choices; highlighting the main studies that influenced the choice of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, it explained, how participant observation, interviews, and focus groups were used as data collection tools, and illustrated how they were useful for this research. It also illustrated how the information generated was analysed using thematic analysis. Ultimately, it presented the limitations and the challenges of this study, and terminated with reflexivity and note on research ethics.

²⁸⁵ The researcher who participated in the parallel translation had access to the transcribed scripts with initials only.

Chapter 6: How Has Employment Served Saudi Women as a Means to Greater Agency?

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings regarding how employment can be instrumental in developing Saudi women's agency. It is the first of three chapters, which present and discuss the empirical findings of the fieldwork to address the twofold research question: how do Saudi women perceive employment enabling them with greater agency, and challenging or loosening limitations on their agency within their social structure?

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3 this research has adopted Alsop and Heinsohn's (2005) framework for measuring empowerment qualitatively to collect the data; while the analysis follows Naila Kabeer's interpretation of agency (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). The data collected for this research generated core ways in which employment has allowed Saudi women to develop greater agency. These comprise the benefits of employment 1) as a learning experience that compensates for the flaws of education; 2) as an exposure to restricted life experiences; 3) as a process of self-development and awareness; 4) as a tool of financial independence; and finally 5) as an influence of social change. In regard to all five, the social or formal limitations that face Saudi women in developing agency will be discussed, along with the ways in which they may restrict their strategic decision-making abilities. Then the informants' views on the manner in which employment served to overcome the relevant issues, and the ways in which it enlarged their agency will be examined, especially in relation to Kabeer's understanding of agency.

Altogether, the present findings coincide with many aspects of Kabeer's outlook of agency. These are: 1) Moving from "passive agency" to "active purposeful agency". This implies exercising choice according to the individual's purpose, meaning, and motivation, instead of choosing from limited and customized options. 2) Improving gender inequalities and activating "transformative agency", which amends patriarchal structural limitations. 3) Equipping women with certain intangible assets of agency such as knowledge, skills, social networks, personality development, satisfaction, and self-value. 4) Enlarging the variety of life options. 5) Enabling various expressions of agency, such as voicing opinions, bargaining, and negotiation. 6) Permitting the exercise of personal choice even when encountered by opposition 7) Improving women's status, besides encouraging change in gender roles.

Against this background, the following sections present and discuss the views of the informants concerning the ways in which employment served as a tool to develop agency, and how these related to Kabeer's deliberation on agency. Besides addressing the research questions, the discussion can inform national and international policies concerned with realising women's empowerment in providing exclusive bottom-up data and real-life experiences from Saudi Arabia, a developing country with particular socio-cultural and economic characteristics.

6.2 Employment Compensates For the Deficiencies of Education

"It is the real learning experience for Saudi women". (W.D.H & H.W.Z)

Education is central to the path of women's empowerment as it expands their knowledge, it fosters their analytical abilities and critical thinking, it develops their awareness and the reflection about oneself and situation (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Kabeer, 2005; Mandal, 2013; McIntosh, 2009). Equally, the importance of education as a resource of agency in relation to this topic lies in the fact that improving women's cognitive abilities via education shall increase their opportunities to access and compete in the labour market, as well as enhance their health alertness and social relations (Kabeer, 2005; Mandal, 2013).²⁸⁶ Therefore, when the education system of women is somehow deficient, or their journey of education is hindered it can pose limitations to their expansion of agency.

In her reflections on agency and resources, Kabeer pinpointed the role of inadequate education in restraining the agency of women (Kabeer, 2005). She made clear how such institutions as schooling impact the system of gender privileges and regulate the distribution of education, which consequently influences the setting of priorities and the making of decisions for oneself. Therefore when the education of females is only geared to preparing them to be future wives, the system reproduces gender roles and inequality, restraining the development of agency abilities. In addition, it limits the options available to female students so they end up making decisions from restricted choices, a situation that Kabeer denotes as "passive agency". Unfortunately, these points characterize the Saudi female education.

²⁸⁶ A study on Ghanaian women validates that education have facilitated the rout for achieving women's empowerment goals there (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014). For other cases see (Kabeer, 2005, p. 16-17), and for education and Saudi women's empowerment see (Drury, 2015; Alghamdi, 2018).

The achievements of Saudi Arabia in the spread of education amongst Saudi females are well recorded and praised (Hausmann et al., 2007; Shiraz, 2016; *The Global Gender Gap Report*, 2017) - (Table 3). According to the GGG reports the Kingdom has been attaining substantially higher ranks in education equality than in other criteria (Figure 5). That is because female education is calculated by rates of literacy and degree accomplishments, whilst the quality of the education is not considered (Torabi & Abbasi-Shavazi, 2015). Nevertheless, numerous studies have pointed out the shortcomings of women’s education in Saudi Arabia,²⁸⁷ which begs the question whether the quality of education available to Saudi women provides a sufficient learning experience for the acquisition of decision making abilities and the development of agency.

“Most institutions of higher learning lack the social empowerment that is essential for women’s learning exposures in spite of allowing the females to enroll for advanced education and graduate studies in Saudi Arabia”. (Alghamdi, 2018, p. 9)

Table 3

Higher educational achievement in Saudi Arabia by Gender

Year 2016	Female	Male
Number of graduates from secondary school to PhD	7,766,992 (80% of Saudi women)	8,075,371 (79% of Saudi men).
Gross enrolment in universities	97.5%.	83.1%.

Source: The General Authority of Statistics in Saudi Arabia (GAS, 2016).

	rank	2006 score	rank	2017 score
Global Gender Gap score	114	0.524	138	0.584
Economic participation and opportunity	115	0.240	142	0.320
Educational attainment	93	0.880	96	0.975
Health and survival	54	0.977	130	0.965
Political empowerment	115	0.000	124	0.077
rank out of	115		144	

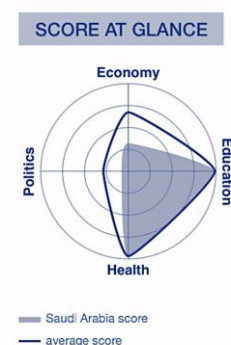


Figure 5. Saudi Arabia: Global gender gap. Source: *The Global Gender Gap Report (2017)*.

²⁸⁷ See Alsuwaida, 2016; Baki, 2004; Ibraheem et al., 2018; Koyame-marsh, 2017.

Formal schooling for women in Saudi Arabia only began in 1960; however, such belated access to education is not the only issue (Alsuwaida, 2016; Alghamdi, 2018). Besides the mandatory sex segregation in schools and universities, the content and the methodology of the education curricula exhibit serious hitches. On the one hand, until recently the *Wahhabi* religious establishment controlled the content of the programs; consequently the philosophy of female education promotes and institutionalises social gender norms (Alsuwaida, 2016; Jamjoom, 2010; Rajkhan, 2014). Rather than educating women to become interactive citizens of the community, Saudi education cultivates them to be an additional value to the marriage by being good Muslim wives and mothers (Alsuwaida, 2016). Although this assessment is not intended to diminish the social role of women or their motherhood advantages, it points at certain aspects of bias, discrimination and limitation in the education system (i.e. in the structure of the education opportunity) that impact agency.

On the other hand, neither the teaching methods nor the content of this controlled curriculum have adapted to the female students' learning needs or contributed to the development of their skills (Alsuwaida, 2016; Ibraheem et al., 2018; Koyame-marsh, 2017). Siddiek (2011) denounced that the evaluation system in the Saudi secondary schools led to humble teaching efforts and produced incompetent students, who left school having acquired techniques to pass the tests instead of "learning". The skills of decision-making, critical thinking, problem solving, negotiation, and teamwork are necessary qualities for every individual to develop and move forward with, not only at the professional level but at the personal and social level as well. The informants' comments upheld the research indicating that even obtaining a university degree in Saudi Arabia doesn't ensure that the graduate has acquired those skills (Ibraheem et al., 2018; Koyame-marsh, 2017).

The study of Ibraheem et al. (2018) about Saudi universities included the testimony of a student saying that throughout her years of education at the university, it was oriented to attending lectures and passing exams only, not to acquiring knowledge. The researchers further notified that the assessments depended on memorising information precisely as written in the books, and then discharging it on exam papers. As a result, the higher education system doesn't develop theoretical and practical knowledge efficiently. M.D.I, a participant in this study recalled her disappointment with her higher education experience: "the program was below my expectations... I haven't learned anything from studying in the university".

Further studies confirm that despite the uprising in academic qualifications, the available education limited Saudi women to traditional fields, besides which women were not attracted to studying fields that the labour market demands; and in general they lacked the “readiness” for employment (Alfarran et al., 2018; Rajkhan, 2014). This also signifies that the education didn’t necessarily enable women to acquire or develop agency in the way it should. The present participants who went to the public universities reinforced the criticism of the limited fields of specialisation available, and the difficulty of the enrolment in different disciplines,²⁸⁸ besides the quality of the education itself. To illustrate, each field of study accepts a certain number of students only, and requires the achievement of specific grades in high school as well as in the test of abilities.²⁸⁹ L.L.S felt let down by her limited education opportunities:

“Despite that my grades in high-school enabled me to apply for medicine, I needed two extra marks in the test of abilities. So I chose Medical Technology instead, yet they told me the course was full, and they placed me in Nursing. I felt disappointed to the extent that I refused to attend the classes and to study for the exams the first year”.

Furthermore, the choice to study a variety of disciplines is only available in the main cities such as Jeddah and Riyadh, not in smaller cities or rural areas. Three of the informants who lived in smaller cities (M.R.M, A.B.D, and H.D.L) criticized their shortage in course options for females. In general, specialisations available to women are still less than those available to men (Alsuwaida, 2016; Alghamdi, 2018). For example, Architecture, Engineering and Law recently became available to female students (Doumato, 2010; Koyame-marsh, 2017), nevertheless female students in Jeddah only have access to two departments of Engineering whereas male students can choose amongst fourteen departments.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, until this year only men can obtain a degree of Political Sciences from Saudi universities.²⁹¹ In fact, the study of Alghamdi

²⁸⁸ They noted that the number of high school graduates seem to surpass the available places in the public universities.

²⁸⁹ High school graduates are required to take a test of abilities to apply for the university, and their score determines which fields they can apply for (Almuwaten.net, 2018; ‘National Center for Assessment’, n.d., ‘Post-Graduate General Aptitude Test.’, n.d.; Siddiek, 2011).

²⁹⁰ See (‘Departments in the Faculty of Engineering for female.’, 2018, ‘The Departments in the Faculty of Engineering for male students’, 2018). Female students can only study Computer Engineering or Industrial engineering.

²⁹¹ Although the websites did not indicate that the courses are for male students only but female students can’t apply (‘Department of Political Sciences at KAAU’, 2012, ‘Faculty of Law and Politics at King Saud University’, n.d.). See (‘The creation of new departments and 10% increase in admissions at KAU.’, 2018), this news-article advertises new departments at the universities of Aseer and demonstrates the fields available to male in comparison to female students.

(2018) has found that the inadequate opportunities and treatment of education between men and women, constitute one of the main challenges to women empowerment in Saudi Arabia.

As a result, the participants found themselves either facing the issue of limited places, or restrained by the few options available according to their grades. Five informants reported they weren't able to choose their majors because of the previous obstacles, and they ended up studying what the system automatically registered for them. Six others articulated that they had to choose from very limited options.²⁹² The older generation of the sample (aged above 28) complained that "The education system in schools didn't place emphasis on how or why to choose different fields of study",²⁹³ therefore their grades and the availability of places in the public university determined the specialisation they studied. Such situations tied them to the practice of "passive agency" only, i.e. accepting that the circumstances determine their choices and to continually choose between limited available options. S.O.F remarked that an important insight of studying her Masters abroad was:

"I touched the difference between us [Saudi students] who chose fields of study according to the availability, and other foreign students who chose their degrees according to their career goals from the start".

Turning from formal limitations to social pressures, the participants conveyed that compliance with such pressures influenced their choice of education, which hampered their making purposeful choices.²⁹⁴ In many cases the family interfered in their daughters' choice of education. A 32-year-old participant admitted: "My mother advised me to continue my studies in French Literature. She knew my abilities, and I chose what she saw fit". Although this woman willingly chose to follow the advice of her mother, one can observe a shortage in the ability to make an autonomous and purposeful decision in that citation.

Several participants related similar situations in which families refuse to allow their daughters to study Medicine or other fields that require working in a sex-mixed environment later. Two other mentioned that their parents forbade them to move to a different city where they could study the major of their choice. One informant (55- year-old) viewed that the family can indirectly influence the choice of the specialisation, "Back in those days, you would choose to study what

²⁹² Alsuwaida (2016) has discussed the issue of limited fields of study available to Saudi women.

²⁹³ As described by Group 2, however this opinion appeared across other interviews of women above the age of 28.

²⁹⁴ By pressure I mean influences on their choices, whether it was imposed on them or it influenced their opinions indirectly.

your family perceived as a respected major. My family was conservative so I chose to specialise in Islamic Studies, which at the time I saw appropriate. [On the other hand] my friends whose their families encouraged them to become doctors studied Medicine”. Similarly, some women admitted that their choice of education depended on the opinion of their friends, which once again indicates the lack of independence in making strategic choices.²⁹⁵

All these findings show that the older education system and programs played a strong part in the limited development of Saudi women’s agency, as it structured them to adapt to the modest options available, and rarely look beyond.²⁹⁶ Furthermore, it coached them to favour following the advice of others rather than thinking for themselves, thereby discouraging trust in their own abilities and opinions. This originates from their schooling years when they were not trained to become aware of themselves and their values, or to discover their abilities and interests. The findings demonstrate that their practice of agency is ‘passive’ and it lacked purpose and motivation, which constitute the ‘sense of agency’ that is empowering (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). Likewise, their education hadn’t cultivated in them the abilities or the sense of agency.

This notification is critical because in theory education forms one of the main assets for developing agency (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Kabeer, 2005; McIntosh, 2009), however this doesn’t only involve reading, writing, and obtaining a degree.²⁹⁷ Rather, education that is enabling; is transformative of an individual, it fosters analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, and becoming an independent thinker, which many Saudi women instead learned from employment.²⁹⁸ The discussion of this finding doesn’t neglect the role of education in empowering Saudi women by expanding their knowledge and awareness, or by offering a public space for practicing diverse activities, networking, socialising with a wider community of other girls and social backgrounds, and expressing one-self as Le Renard (2008, 2014) illuminates.²⁹⁹ However, the discussion of this finding indorses that the quality of the education content and system is highly important in fostering women’s agency as part of empowerment. The finding emphasizes the role of employment in compensating for flaws in the structure of education (so

²⁹⁵ “When I had to choose my university major, I sat with my friends and we chose what we can all -as a group- be admitted into, so that we can stick together....I was specialised in special education of hearing disability, but I didn’t like it and I ended up working in H.R”. M.D.I.

²⁹⁶ I used the word rarely because there exist examples of women who challenged such obstacles.

²⁹⁷ McIntosh (2009) demonstrated how education, which modifies gender norms and confronts unjust practices towards girls, permits women greater agency and freedom.

²⁹⁸ Emirati women testified that the transformative education they had enabled them to challenge cultural influences, compete with men in the public sphere, and reach high levels in their career (O’Sullivan, 2015).

²⁹⁹ Although according to this research such impact or results appear stronger with employment, see (6.3)

when or if women gained limited benefit from education regarding agency development, their employment was influential. As R.N.A said:

“Education is important, but employment is more powerful, non-working women who are older than me, at my mother’s age, are all educated and have higher degrees, but their power on making personal and general decisions is not as strong as workingwomen.”

Thirteen interviewees held that education is essential for Saudi women to develop their sense of agency, while 18 viewed that employment is highly influential on the agency of Saudi women. “Employment is the path to realise their goals” as M.I.N stated. Several informants perceived that employment compensates for the poor quality of their previous education in many ways. First, they experienced an effective learning environment where they could realise their abilities, strengths, and weaknesses, and accordingly developed their skills and defined their goals in life. H.T.N pointed to the value of employment over education:

“Employment made me learn a lot and developed my professional skills, I learned more than when I was in the university”.

It is noteworthy, however, to mention that she graduated from the best private and highly paid university in Jeddah, she still felt that work was her main learning experience.

Furthermore, employment allowed the participants to become aware of different specialisations across sectors and to try various types of work, which strengthened their determination to seek a future career field. Through work they discovered their passion and interests in a way that counterweighed the formal or the social limitations they faced whilst trying to choose a specialisation in the university or whilst setting their future goals earlier in life. Employment hence permitted a number of women to move from being held in an artificial or “passive agency” (choosing from limited options that are customised by the surrounding structure), to practising “active agency”; one that is purposeful, meaningful, and driven by a motivation (Kabeer, 1999, 2005) – (Table 4).

The participants provided some good illustrations of this. An owner and a CEO of a marketing and advertising agency confirmed that she discovered her passion about marketing and realised that she wanted to be a business owner rather than an employee, after she worked in academia (Sociology) for several years and tried several types of employments.³⁰⁰ Another participant (R.U.H) mentioned, she worked in various organisations before she recognized that she wanted to make a living out of an exciting sport. A third informant (L.A.S) narrated, she studied

³⁰⁰ Although she chose her academic specialisation, she changed her mind after her work experiences.

Business Management because it seemed like the best available option she was offered at the public university, although she only discovered her talent and interest in interior designing via work. A further interviewee (L.E.E) related, she had to accept studying a specialisation in the university according to the availability of places (Media), but became aware of her desire for working with children from her employment in schools. Hence, employment served those women and other participants to obtain superior agency as it expanded their life and career options, broadened their practical knowledge, improved their skills, and made them more aware and decisive about their life objectives (Table 4).

The interviews suggested that there was an evolution in the educational curriculum of younger generation, which stimulated critical thinking and improved making choices regarding education and career. D.M.A, a (25 years) said:

“I kept Law in my mind since universities came to promote different specialisations in our school. Then in my final year I took a test to discover my abilities and competences which also resulted in a 75% match for Law”.

A.S.I (24 years) mentioned:

“During my preparation year in the university I found that I was interested in Hospital Management so I read and asked a lot about it, before I chose to continue studying it”.

In addition, D.I.A (28 years) explained:

“I know I was into art but I also wanted something related to business so I chose graphic designing the minute I heard about it”.

Their answers about education and career choices exhibited a stronger ‘sense of agency’ than the older generation. Their choice included a meaning, a purpose and a motivation.

To provide an example of the improvement in the education system, the National Centre for Assessment recently initiated free workshops on how and why to choose different university specialisations.³⁰¹ Analysis of the data revealed that the younger women, who graduated from high schools more recently, demonstrated a higher assertiveness towards their life goals. They were more confident about their education specialisations, and their personal or career orientations. Moreover, in a recent working paper, Naseem and Dhruva (2017) pointed to the reforms of education as an investment towards empowering Saudi women in the national labour

³⁰¹ It is the entity responsible for monitoring and organizing the Test of Abilities, see (National Center for Assessment, 2018).

market. This denotes a change in the opportunity structure, raising the hopes for an improvement in women's agency and empowerment in the future.³⁰²

Besides clarifying how employment was instrumental to offer women the learning experience to develop agency, the previous discussion confirms that the opportunity structure of education is as important as its availability. Accordingly, enhancing the structure of female education in Saudi Arabia to empower women requires; increasing the fields of education, improving the effectiveness of the content, and the outcome it offers for female students, in a way that doesn't reinforce gender roles. A further point in relation to the structure of education is that women who studied abroad on scholarships have benefited from this opportunity to develop the soft skills necessary to make them better independent decision makers.³⁰³ They were offered a broader selection of subjects and specialisations to study, they received a better quality of education, and experienced living in a different social context, which allowed them to compare and contrast the social and the professional settings surrounding them. For example, only informants who lived abroad had objections to, or saw limitations about, the variety of entertainment options in Saudi Arabia, as they had a basis of comparison. Their outlook vis-à-vis the diverse aspects of agency I asked about had a different dimension.

“Those who went on scholarships abroad managed to secure better jobs, and were able to experience independence and living a new life” (W.D.H) said.

Many participants viewed the introduction of scholarships to study abroad, together with the expanding employment opportunities, to be an agency enabler. It provided a turning point in their lives, as H.D.L explained:

“My time abroad was an unforgettable academic experience. I had the chance to voice my opinion publically, and represent women of my own country... Scholarships were fundamental for creating real opportunities and experiences for both genders”.

Such women experimented with a new kind of life that sculpted their personalities differently. Many appreciated the experience of independence, living alone, and being away from the social pressures that surrounded them in Saudi Arabia. This situation influenced the choices of how they wanted to live when they returned. Two participants decided to go back to Saudi Arabia and live in a different city from their families, explaining that living alone during their studies made this option possible when they worked. One informant narrated:

³⁰² Chapter 4 expanded on the structure of constraints and opportunity and included information on education.

³⁰³ 15 participants received scholarships and studied higher education abroad.

“My sister studied her Masters abroad alone, and this was a door of opportunity for her to be independent in her way of thinking and living. My mum now realises that she can’t control her in any way”.

Table 4

Women’s employment compensates for the flaws of past education:

Structural issues of education:	Limitations on agency:	How employment helped to overcome this limitation:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Reinforced gender roles. - Segregation. - Focus on Islamic studies. - Lacks the development of skills. - Limited fields of studies. - Influence of the family on the choice of education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Does not make women question the world. - Reinforced gender norms. - Practising “passive agency”. - Limited options. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Effective learning experience. - Developed skills. - Learn about abilities and the various career options. - Discovered their interests. - Practise “active agency”. -Expand life and career options and goals.

6.3 Employment Offers a Broader Exposure to New Life Experiences

“My work experience made me feel that I never actually lived before” (W.D.H)

Having examined the structure of opportunities and institutions surrounding Saudi women, it should be noted that some daunting challenges appeared to restrict their ability to develop agency. In addition to the shortcomings of the education system, which in part contributed to the limited exposure of women to proper learning, Saudi women lived in a context that imposed strict social and formal limitations on their exposure to real life experiences. As a result, this had an influence on their accumulative experience and capability to make purposeful decisions. In other words, this had undesirable consequences on their level of agency. Many participants, however, expressed that employment offered Saudi women the kind of exposure necessary to develop their decision-making abilities and sense of agency. As they viewed it, employment allowed their full social integration and expanded their space of mobility: two aspects considered by Kabeer – and other scholars- to be strategic life choices which are significant to agency (Kabear, 2005). Therefore the following paragraphs shall explain how limited exposure

(represented in segregation and restricted mobility) influenced Saudi women's agency, and how employment served to overcome this social constraint.

As Chapter 4 revealed, the exposure of Saudi women to life experiences and the public sphere was restrained by a number of social norms that found their way to be institutionalised legally. Amongst many, this subsection will focus on segregation and restricted mobility. Segregation constituted a main reason behind the women's limited exposure to life experiences,³⁰⁴ and its meaning in this context is twofold. The first concerns the physical segregation between men and women in the private and the public spheres as a moral and a religious value, and as a social norm as well. Sex segregation in the private sphere entailed that Saudi women can deal and sit with their father and brothers only (and with cousins in some families). In many cases even the relationship with fathers and siblings is either controlled by certain conducts such as non-objection to their views and orders, or restricted to requests. These requests include asking for money or for a service such as a ride to a place, and to finalise governmental paperwork,³⁰⁵ or fix something in the house.³⁰⁶ Indeed, exceptions exist where husbands, fathers, and brothers form a support system to women, not only financially but emotionally as well.³⁰⁷ However even, when the family doesn't apply sex segregation in the house, it is by the law firmly implemented in the public sphere: during education, within work places, in restaurants and most of the public places.³⁰⁸ Besides that, women's appearance with men who aren't their relatives in public was strictly prohibited.³⁰⁹ Furthermore the long period of male guardianship over women and the ban on women's driving contributed to escalate the situation, by making women restrained in various aspects of life and fully dependent on men in all aspects of the public domain (Doumato, 2010; UNICEF, 2011).

³⁰⁴ Doumato (2010) and Rajkhan (2014) explained how segregation and restrictions on mobility are major constraints in Saudi women's lives.

³⁰⁵ Until recently women were not allowed to enter certain ministries or governmental departments, they had to delegate their male guardian.

³⁰⁶ This is considered as part of the man's duty towards the house, and in cases it is socially not permissible for women to ask for a contractor directly since they are stranger men.

³⁰⁷ See Chapter 7 (7.4).

³⁰⁸ For details on segregation in SA see Doumato, 2003; Fatany, 2009; Le Renard, 2008; Meijer et al., 2012; Zuhur, 2003.

³⁰⁹ This is changing with the new socio-economic plan Vision2030, which changed regulations of interactions in the public sphere in 2018, after the interviews were done. The kingdom asserted their commitment to change by establishing the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) to promote the culture of amusement. It is a new agency to organize concerts, shows, and public entertainment events for men, women, and families. This was unprecedented to the Saudi culture, yet the people continuously attended such events in large numbers (Damanhour, 2017; Kinnimont, 2017).

Proceeding with the second style of segregation in this context, it is symbolic or descriptive of Saudi women's social reality (a further degree of segregation, within the sex segregation). It refers to the extent of how Saudi women lacked exposure to people and society, due to social norms that enforce overprotecting them. Several participants conveyed that they lived their entire lives, before work, separate from other social classes of the community.³¹⁰ Parents tend to ensure that their daughters do not socialize with other girls who were raised under a different background (of values and social practices); therefore they choose carefully which school they join or whom they can be friends with. R.A.F disclosed:

“My mom chose that we go to an international school, everyone in her family thought this was crazy and warned her. She had to face a lot of pressure only for us going to that school”.³¹¹

This social rule, however, doesn't apply to men, which makes gender discrimination a central reason behind women's lack of exposure to life experiences.

When I had the chance to ask about the gender discrimination between the informants and their brothers, each one of them pointed at exposure to the outer world as a key difference. For example, many of them affirmed that their brothers enjoyed a greater freedom to go out with whom they want at any time they wished. S.F.A said that she wasn't even allowed to go out at all except to houses of her relatives, while her brothers could travel to different countries.³¹² Other women who came from more liberal social backgrounds also said that their travelling was not as easy as their brothers'. They had to explain with whom they are going and why, and they had to provide a valid reason to be able to travel.³¹³

That is to say Saudi women's legitimate relationships, coexistence and dealing with men are very narrow, while their interaction with men in the public sphere is extremely minimal.³¹⁴ In addition to that, their choice of the surrounding circle of women is regulated by the terms and conditions of their families. As a result, women's knowledge and communication with men and other segments of the community is shallow, and their life experience is simply incomplete. Both the space and movement available to women are controlled, leaving them with restrained options of social interactions and mobility, which constitutes a main element of gender inequality in

³¹⁰ H.W.Z, K.L.D, A.B.D, S.H.R, W.D.H, and Group 1.

³¹¹ This is because they were girls and that school had western curriculum and international students; as she clarified.

³¹² M.I.N from Group 1 shared that the majority of women she knows are similar to this case.

³¹³ R.A.F, D.I.A.

³¹⁴ See Chapter 4 and (Doumato, 2010) for details on restrictions on movement and male guardianship in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia, and impedes their agency. As Klugman et al. (2014) maintained; norms and regulations, which restrain women in any aspect of life, influence both their daily and strategic decisions. The situation of Saudi women described thus far falls under “social inequality”, keeping in mind that inequality in one domain can be expected to spill over into other domains; casting more challenges in the process of developing agency (Kabeer, 2005). That is because the process of acquiring non-material resources (such as awareness and soft skills developed by social interactions) is interrupted. The discussion above has established the ground for the argument that when the exposure is deficient, it becomes difficult for women to make meaningful decisions. S.D.S described:

“Being raised behind closed doors and in a conservative environment always influenced my choices ... in education, marriage and separation.... Our inherited gender norms and customs unfortunately made women inferior in our society and limited women’s roles, decisions and possibilities”.

Building on Kabeer’s reflection on empowerment, Miles (2016) observes that the objective of realizing empowerment in a society is to level-up the domestic and the public positioning of women, by producing change in social and formal institutions that regulate the power distribution amongst genders. In accordance with this stance, McIntosh (2009) underlines that it is the “transformative” ability of empowerment that corrects unjust gender positioning, which boosts women’s agency. Given that, any change in the structure surrounding women, which results in broadening their awareness and attenuating impediments, paves the way for enabling agency. The informants considered that the situation concerning women’s exposure and movement has improved since the beginning of the King’s Scholarships Program (to finance higher education abroad),³¹⁵ and the expansion of women’s employment opportunities in the national market. The introduction of these reforms at the policies level has motivated structural change at the social level, which the participants acknowledged. They regarded such initiatives as profitable for women’s agency, and the resulting expansion of employment opportunities exerted a large influence to iron out the issue of women’s limited life experiences that are necessary to cultivate skills and forms of decision-making.

In that regard, the informants, of different ages and across all social classes, perceived that employment enables Saudi women to experience the wider community and fully integrate in it. It allows them the exposure to men and/or other members of the community who come from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, through employment, women challenged the social

³¹⁵ The second part of Chapter 4 previously provided details on the scholarship program.

inequality caused by their restricted exposure and mobility. According to S.O.F: “Working in education made me deal with diverse segments of the society”.

Departing from Kabeer’s definition of empowerment Haghghat (2013) and maintained that, the process of empowerment involves extending the influence of women outside of the familial circle. Sakshi's (2015) study revealed that for South Asian women, contributing in economic activities out of the house was a one of the main benefits of employment to their agency. Relatively, The World’s Bank Report *Voice and Agency* classified mobility as a key element of agency; it portrayed it as “an individual’s physical capacity to move freely beyond the household, as well as the ability to move across social and economic spheres. It helps women and men build and maintain social and professional networks.... Physical mobility influences social and economic mobility, and it significantly affects women’s and girls’ opportunities and choices.”(Klugman et al, 2014, p.35). Saudi women have access to these advantages interconnected with extended exposure and mobility, via work (Table 5). Communication and networking are soft skills of high value to the growth of the individual’s career and for elevating their social status. Gaining these intangible assists and creating a change in the status of women is an accomplishment towards greater agency and empowerment.

A number of the interviewees considered that employment not only enabled them to make friends of different backgrounds, but also to coexist with non-Saudis as well for the first time. As one of the saleswomen appreciated:

“Working in the mall and being in contact with women from a social class that never existed in my surrounding community feels amazing. I am working in a different world than the one I live in”.

H.W.Z took note:

“At work there are plenty of examples about social [segments] that I would’ve never met if I wasn’t working”.

The informants advocated that employment enlarges their professional and social circles, and consequently facilitates gaining wider connections. As one participant in Group No.3 remarked:

“A woman’s connections from work help her as much as gaining money to make more solid decisions”.

R.A.F expressed a similar view

“[Work] is how you build connections that serve your goals better”.

Along with the previous benefits and equally as important, employment expanded the space of movement for Saudi women. To further explain, employment became a legitimate reason for a woman to leave the house,³¹⁶ therefore women who were previously not allowed to go out of their houses as the social norms in their families dictate,³¹⁷ are now permitted this. H.T.N narrated:

“The father of one of my colleagues at work never allows her to go out except for family visits. However during lunch-breaks at work she comes with us to eat out in restaurants, or do some shopping without him knowing”.

Her friend expressed that she enjoyed this part of her employment.

Similarly, employment enlarged the space of mobility for other women to travel in Saudi Arabia and to other countries. As some participants recounted,³¹⁸ women started to travel when their work required, which endorsed their ability to travel for tourism later.³¹⁹ One participant said: “I used to travel alone when I used to work, now even when I resigned and stayed at home [my husband] would finance my travelling for tourism”. She elaborated that he became understanding of the importance of leisure and of her need to have a break away. Others illustrated that since women can finance their own travelling expenses, their families or guardians wouldn't interfere in their decision.³²⁰ This finding is an illustration of certain opinions in the sample, however this doesn't suggest that work solely is the reason for women to travel, or that families commonly accept that women travel for work or tourism alone. In fact several other interviewees made clear that the decision to travel alone is still highly dependent on the social values and norms of her father or husband.

The expansion of mobility for Saudi women is significant, in particular because the freedom of movement constitutes one of the main elements by which to evaluate women's agency (Alriyami, Afifi, & Mabry, 2016; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Kabeer, 2005; Klugman et al., 2014; The World Bank, 2004; World Bank, 2012). It is especially critical to Saudi women who were deprived the right to drive legally and who are restrained from mobility socially. In her anthropological thesis, Alkhateeb (1987) explains that marriage was a Saudi women's golden goal to reach a higher status and gain more freedom of movement. Employment, then, forms an

³¹⁶ I.e. to go out of their houses during the day or in a regular basis, even though in many cases the family has to approve of the kind of job a woman intends to work at first.

³¹⁷ This includes also the rules of their males' guardians.

³¹⁸ S.M.R, N.U.R, L.A.S, Group 2.

³¹⁹ By contrast, the upper-class housewives (Group 4) had a different opinion; they thought it was acceptable for women to travel for tourism but not for work.

³²⁰ Number of participants shared this opinion such as S.M.R, A.L.I, and T.I.M.

alternative option for women to choose instead of depending on marriage to achieve this goal. Any increase in the number of options available to women is considered important for exercising agency and attaining empowerment (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Kabeer, 2005). Ideally, women should have the complete freedom of movement rather than an expansion to the space of movement; nevertheless, the repetition of this element during various interviews motivated its inclusion as an improvement to the lack of women exposure prior to work. Finally, for the reasons discussed above, the informants considered employment a main tool to experience different angles of life, grow their social connections, develop their communication skills and awareness, and extend the arena of mobility. In sum, employment enables women to overcome the effects of social inequality and gender discrimination regarding exposure, interactions and mobility on their agency before employment (Table 5). Certainly, counter cases to this argument exist and they will be discussed in the next chapters.

Table 5

Employment enabled exposure to restricted life experiences

Structural Issues:	Limitations on agency:	How employment helped to overcome this limitation:
-Segregation: a. Sex segregation. b. Social segregation. - Restriction on mobility.	- The existence of gender and social inequality. - When life experience is incomplete, it influences the capability to make purposeful decisions.	-Allowed social integration and exposure to men - It developed social skills. - It enlarged connections and social networks. - It expanded the space of mobility.

6.4 Employment Awakens Women’s ‘Power Within’

“Employment is a quantum rise in a Saudi woman’s life”. (M.I.N)³²¹

This part discusses the informants’ view that employment was key for enhancing different aspects of, what I referred to as self-development, and what the literature in empowerment calls “the power within”. Grabe explains this as the “strengths of the individual and a sense of personal control” (Grabe, 2012, p. 233). As I understand it, it is a woman’s awareness of self that

³²¹ A participant in Group 1: (women employed with the minimum wage).

flourishes through experiences and transforms into an inner strength, which she uses to improve one or several aspects in her life. This mirrors various experiences and opinions across the sample, regarding the influence of employment on Saudi women.

There is a diverse body of research that places emphasis on self-development as being key to the achievement of women's empowerment through work (Asghari, Sadeghi, & Aslani, 2013; Jain & Jain, 2012; Kabeer, 2005; McLaren, George, & Harriet, 2008). The term "power within" represents the psychological resources of empowerment or the soft assets of agency, such as consciousness about the self, self-assurance and confidence, fulfilment and satisfaction, as well as self-worth and value (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005; Klein, 2016; Nikkhah et al., 2012). To further explain, Diener and Biswas-Diener (2005) argue that successful empowerment is one that promotes the internal belief in self-efficacy besides acquiring skills and being able to act upon choices. Empowerment "is also about expanding the horizons of possibility of what people imagine themselves being able to do" (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014, p.16). Additionally, it comprises changing the "reality via the acquisition of a collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of 'we can'" (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p.405).

Focusing on agency specifically, O'Hara and Clement (2018) proposed measuring agency by evaluating critical consciousness and the "power within" instead of depending on "visible" indicators.³²² As for Kabeer, she uses the word "power within" as a synonym of agency; in her view the process of empowerment begins within by developing a critical consciousness to question inequality and challenge it (Kabeer, 1999, 2005; Miles, 2016a). To her, agency can be in the form of developing negotiation, bargaining, and cognitive reasoning and analysis (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer further confirms that self-value is one of the main advantages of employment, which benefits women's agency (Kabeer, 2005). A number of informants perceived employment as capable of cultivating the properties indicated above, thereby enabling greater agency.

They suggested that employment improves a woman's character, builds her confidence and increases her awareness about her self. It made the participants realize their potentials, their abilities, and believe that they are as capable as men. Benstead argued that women's employment makes them challenge gender roles and the image of woman which the society dictates, as their exposure to work experience makes them realize their true abilities and potentials (Benstead,

³²² Critical consciousness is being aware of one's own values and abilities, questioning injustice and being reflective of situations and events (O'Hara and Clement, 2018).

2016). One informant observed happily: “Where I worked [a food factory], women fix machines, drive fork-lift trucks, and work like men excellently”.

Women from different social classes admitted that they became much stronger in character and overcame their shyness because of work.³²³ A non-working participant in a focus group considered that “the feeling of the money a woman earns [from work] affects her personality differently”; it makes her stronger, unlike a woman who depends on her husband for a living, she explained.

Many expressed that employment made them voice their opinions publically or within the family more comfortably; they feel that they have the experience, which qualifies them to do so, as they expressed. As an example W.D.H remarked “My employment made me stronger and gave me the courage to express my opinions, to request what I want, and to insist on achieving it”.

Other participants shared that they struggled with their family to allow them to work in a mixed-sex-environment at the beginning; hence they had to master persuasion and bargaining, in addition to defending their rights in stronger and more effective ways to achieve their goal; to work where they desired.³²⁴ In fact, a recent study on Saudi women’s employment, confirmed that acquiring experience through work was a way to exercise agency and resilience for one of the participants (Syed et al., 2018 p. 172).

Furthermore, the interviewees supported the notion that work developed women’s sense of self-value, and self-trust. Some viewed that before employment they were subjected to limited responsibilities towards themselves or others, therefore they perceived work responsibilities to enhance women’s growth and awareness.³²⁵ Others agreed that employment made them appreciate their contribution to the society reporting that the work routine, the commitment, and the feeling of the provision of service to the community changed the pattern of their lives and the feeling of their existence.³²⁶ L.L.S reflected on her own experience:

“With work I felt that my character became stronger, my social status became superior, and my self-satisfaction became higher.... Work makes a [woman] learn about her rights and boosts her self-trust... Therefore, it enhances her decision-making skills regarding all life matters”.

³²³ W.D.H, K.L.D, M.D.I, N.A.R.

³²⁴ W.D.H, S.F.A, M.D.I.

³²⁵ D.I.N, L.L.S.

³²⁶ L.L.S, S.F.A, M.I.N., L.A.S.

In addition, other women viewed employment as a source of motivation for growth. For example, women with a modest level of education ensured they learned to speak basic English to have a better chance of work. On the other hand, for those who were previously taken by their domestic responsibilities or had no interest in education, employment served as a motivation to upgrade their education level.³²⁷ Work made them appreciate the value and the importance of their education or knowledge for their access to better opportunities, and for the quality of their lives. This is fundamental to Kabeer's idea of agency, as she considers the motivation an integral element of what forms the individual's "sense of agency" (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). On a similar note, Klein (2016) established that internal motivation constitutes a powerful psychological asset of agency. Based on this perspective, when the participants considered that employment awakened their motivation to improve, the analysis attributed this finding to the growth of agency.

Another benefit provided by employment was that participants perceived it enlarges their life-options' alternatives in general, as it changed their perspectives of what is possible for them to do and be. It expanded their horizons of ambition, and made them reflect about their alternatives in life. For example, many viewed that employment substitutes marriage for various Saudi women. To illustrate, several opinions highlighted that employed Saudi women do not wait for marriage or marry for the wrong reasons anymore, as they have learned via work that they are important and can 'be' without being married.³²⁸ Employed women think about how marriage can serve them and their career rather than just wait for a marriage to begin their lives.³²⁹ Employment thus enhanced their reflection and decision-making with reference to marriage, as it increased their awareness about their selves, their goals, and the characteristics of the person they want to continue their lives with.³³⁰ Moreover, as pointed out in subsection 6.2, employment expanded some women's career options since it made them consider other domains of specialties, which relate to their real interests, their purpose, and abilities, instead of the options that only stemmed from their education degree.

Finally, the observation of the interviews found that women who established a career, or at least discovered their abilities and values through work, were more capable of sustaining a

³²⁷ S.F.A, G.H.D, A.M.L, K.L.D.

³²⁸ S.O.F, R.N.D, S.M.R, Group 1.

³²⁹ M.N.R, H.D.L, R.N.D, A.B.R, Group 2. For details on the value and the weight of marriage to Saudi women in the past see (Alkhateeb, 1987).

³³⁰ R.N.D, Group 1, R.A.A, and others.

satisfactory life, as they experienced living on purpose. The sense of being responsible for one's life and the achievements of some goals, even if it was for a specific period of time, boosted women's psychological wellbeing and overall satisfaction.³³¹ These qualities in particular are considered principal to their agency in the process of empowerment (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005; Kabeer, 2005; O'Hara & Clement, 2018). Several interviewees indicated that women who worked and then retired or settled to be housewives when they wanted (after working for several years) were more satisfied about their lives than women who never worked.³³² A.N.A provided an illustration:

“Because I achieved what I planned for while I was younger, I fulfilled my passion to learn and to work and succeeded; I feel that I am ready to settle for my family and will do it happily”.

Older women of the sample conveyed the same message, B.T.N explained:

“Women of the older generation contributed in building the path for women today. We entered domains of work that were not familiar for women. Therefore we received a stronger social blame yet we did it, and I feel proud”.

By contrast S.D.S talked about her past with regret and sadness, expressing disappointment at not being able to choose her husband and not being permitted to work or achieve anything she wished for.³³³

To sum up, several informants viewed that employment developed various aspects of the “power within” in them, thereby enlarging their agency. The impact of employment in their agency comprised boosting their confidence about themselves and abilities, and increasing their self-worth, self-trust, and satisfaction, which concurs with the opinions reflecting on the psychological assets of agency, reviewed at the beginning of this subsection (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005; Klein & Ballon, 2018; Nath, 2017). Moreover, the participants beheld employment improved their powers of negotiation, bargaining and persuasion; and it made them question their rights, voice their opinions, and become resolute to achieve their aspirations, even when it confronted the will of others. Such views directly converge with Kabeer's understanding of agency and its forms (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). Some also shared that employment worked as a main source of motivation for them to grow and improve in

³³¹ There was one exception, L.A.S expressed that her employment caused her emotional stress and had negative influence on her tranquility and psychological wellbeing.

³³² L.A.S, W.D.H, S.H.R, H.W.Z, L.E.E, and others.

³³³ She shared that her husband permitted for her to work as a part time lecturer once, and she was very excited and happy with the experience. Sadly, after few lectures he pushed her to quit, even though she desired to continue and the university offered to adjust the contract as a full time. The feeling that she was good enough thrilled her, yet she had to conform to her husband's demands.

away that awakened their ambition, resembling Klien's viewpoint that internal motivation and self-belief is the core of agency (Klein, 2016; Klein & Ballon, 2018). Finally, they conveyed employment in general enlarged their life options and their alternatives, once again affirming Kabeer's argument regarding the importance of the variety of choices and alternatives to realising superior agency.

6.5 Financial Independence is Instrumental for Attaining Agency.

“Money gives you power to choose different aspects of your life” (Group No.2)

Increasing women's economic participation to gain financial resources and other benefits of the labour market was one of the main targets of women empowerment policies (Kabeer, 2005; Nikkhah et al., 2012; Parpart et al., 2003; Visvanthan et al., 2011). With reference to the literature reviewed in Chapter 3, research in empowerment discussed the importance of women's employment to the development of their agency. Studies confirmed that receiving a stable salary from employment permits women to lead an overall better life, as it challenges poverty, balances or ameliorates gender relations, reduces domestic violence, and relieves women from the control of others (Duflo, 2012; Esplen & Brody, 2007; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Jain & Jain, 2012; Kabeer, 2005; Mandal, 2013). Similar benefits were noted by the present participants who perceived that the financial reward gained from paid employment serves the agency of Saudi women in the following ways: 1) it provides a means of resistance to oppressive circumstances and of relaxing social restrictions, 2) it constitutes a source of security; 3) it allows better standards of living; 4) it provides a tool to access other existing rights; and 5) it facilitates living life according to one's goals and aspirations. The subsequent paragraphs shall expand each point. However, it is critical to underline that these advantages are conditioned by the woman's ability to control her own earnings, a point the next chapter will elaborate upon.

Whilst researching what empowerment means to Saudi women, a Saudi activist participated in Van Geel's study and shared that to her, empowerment begins with “financial awareness and ability” (Meijer, et al., 2012). Wage is perceived highly influential to Saudi women's agency, because in many cases men don't give their wives a monthly salary, as some participants of the focus groups and other interviews revealed. Even though men are socially and religiously required to pay for their wives' expenses, husbands pay for the house necessities only, and

whenever the wife needs something she has to ask him.³³⁴ In general, not having an independent income implies that the person who generates the money controls every matter of the beneficiaries and regulates their decisions (Haghighat, 2013). This includes not just women but men who depend on their families for a living, as both S.D.S and A.N.A explained. Hence, Saudi women's marginalization from economic participation until 2009 has indeed kept them subordinated to their male guardians, as the majority depended on men financially.

A group of informants expressed that earning their own money was a main reason for them to challenge certain experiences of injustice they had lived through (Table 6). For example one informant asserted that her financial independence had the largest influence on her agency, as she was able to move out of her father's house and live independently a lifestyle that she desired. At the age of 36, her father's control and guidelines were intolerable; he didn't allow her to work and furthermore restricted her from going out of the house. While other women used marriage to find a better life depending on their husbands, S.F.A found her salvation in employment. Another informant mentioned that she was able to file for divorce and leave her abusive husband after more than ten years of marriage, through securing a job that pays her enough to depend on herself.³³⁵ In fact, some women chose work and gave up their family's support even if it was a difficult path for them, because financial independence facilitated their agency and made them feel valuable. H.D.L narrated, in exchange for her employment she had to abandon the financial privileges provided by her family. She struggled with her family for more than three months in order to accept a job away from them; only then did she start to enjoy being in control of her own decisions and "begin a new period of independence", as she put it.

Furthermore, the money received from employment constitutes a source of security and protection for Saudi women, who prior to their employment depended on their families and their husbands for security. S.M.R commented: "[Nowadays] Employment is like a mother, its existence makes you feel safe in this life". One informant (with hearing disability working with the minimum wage in embroidery) revealed that when her husband asked her to leave her job after she had her first baby she divorced him, the money was more important to her than the man. The interviewees viewed the salary as their backbone to be themselves and do what they aspire. As two examples of the importance of a personal income, H.W.Z said:

"No matter how well my husband is earning, having my own money is different".

³³⁴ Group 1 - S.D.S- R.N.A- A.S.I

³³⁵ She needed to depend on her self because her family was against the divorce.

R.N.A stated:

“A personal income is a security; it makes a woman fearless and gives her the audacity to make decisions. In addition to that it makes it difficult for a man to control her”.

Other participants perceived that gaining money from employment loosens some of the social restrictions facing women. They viewed that a woman’s financial participation in the household expenses coupled with fulfilling the needs of other members in the family entitles her to be freed from certain social restrains such as going out, living alone, or travelling.³³⁶ Few participants viewed that husbands in general become less controlling when their wives start working and earn an income.³³⁷ Some opinions suggested that by having their own money women gain more bargaining power and say in various matters regarding themselves and their options. Bargaining is clearly a visible and a powerful form of agency (Kabeer, 1999, 2005; Lindridge et al., 2016; Miles, 2016a; O’Hara & Clement, 2018; Sakshi, 2015), which N.A.R attributed to her employment:

“Work made me in control of my own-self, the way I deal with my husband changed, I can’t be obedient anymore”.

S.M.R maintained that

“The higher a woman’s salary is, the more support she gains from her husband regarding the children and the house; because she participates financially”.

In a similar fashion, having a job that paid her a worthy salary, L.L.S was encouraged to choose a new husband after her divorce, despite the fact that her family didn’t approve of the marriage at the beginning. Having a steady income was a bargaining tool for those women to voice their desires with persistence and accomplish them.

Moving to a different point, one of the main advantages of expanding employment opportunities for Saudi women is to offer women in poverty or with modest education level a stable source of income. The regular salary helped those in need to have money with dignity, rather than wait for charity or live on loans from families and neighbours.³³⁸ Diverse interviewees shared anecdotes of various women who were able to raise the standards of living for themselves and all their

³³⁶ Group No. 3, M.H.A, L.L.S, S.M.R

³³⁷ S.M.R, N.A.R, S.D.S, R.N.A

³³⁸ K.L.D and M.I.N.

family members through their income.³³⁹ In general, informants emphasized that their financial independence empowered them to fulfil their needs without the need of anyone else, which allowed them to practice more choice regarding life matters.

From another perspective, there are researchers who argue that women's economic empowerment is indispensable, to the extent that without financial independence other rights can be insignificant (Mandal, 2013; Metcalfe, 2008; Peterson, 2006). In that respect, the informant's narratives support the notion that when a woman secures an income through employment she has better access to other existing rights such as property and ownership. These rights were always legally available to Saudi women; however, only with their salaries were they able to rent or buy houses for themselves (S.F.A, H.D.L, K.L.D, and L.L.S), or invest their money (H.L.A, A.N.A., L.L.S).³⁴⁰ Correspondingly, in one episode of "*Majlis AlShabab*", a debate-show on a popular Saudi channel (MBC), a Saudi female doctor mentioned that her husband tried to interrupt her career advancement by forcing her to have more babies. When she realised that he was putting pressure on her, she decided to raise the issue to the court, and she was able to divorce him. As she explained, her career ambition and her monthly income encouraged her to do so.³⁴¹ Employment therefore permitted women to take advantage of their existing rights, and explore diverse options in life (Table 6).

The cases of the women discussed above reflect agency as theorised by Kabeer: making purposeful choices that are "transformative" of gendered patriarchal limitations. They used their income to challenge the regular restricted course of the life of a Saudi woman, and chose the alternative path they saw fit to direct their life. Overall, the women's acquisition of their own income enhanced their exercise of choice in regard to a variety of matters. Owning money enables a woman to choose the lifestyle she wants even if it doesn't suit her family.³⁴² This point in particular directly converges with Kabeer's view of agency in terms of expanding life options according to one's values whilst challenging the will of others. Several participants illustrated this point in regard to entertainment and leisure, where their income gave them the freedom to

³³⁹ R.N.D, K.L.D, M.H.A, Group No.1.

³⁴⁰ The Saudi law grants both men and women ownership rights in articles 8 and 17 in the Principle Law of Governance. It also grants them the freedom of contracting according to article 13 of the Civil Service System regulations (Alzahrani et al., 2013).

³⁴¹ Episode (8) on November 1st 2017, about women's work. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRijELJxUNg>.

³⁴² W.H.D, H.D.L, M.H.A, S.F.A.

engage in activities, which for women in Saudi Arabia are limited in their options and quite costly (Table 6).³⁴³ H.L.A stated that:

“Having an income makes a difference in going out, traveling, and changing your whole life style”

Similarly, the financial gains from work allowed some women to redirect their careers, overcome financial limitations to create their own dream businesses, and work in domains that are close to their hearts. A.N.A communicated that, even though she comes from a privileged social background and her family had enough money to finance her side-businesses, she was only able to start up this business via her salary from employment, because in the beginning her family didn’t approve of the idea of being a life-coach. They preferred that she focus on her job as a lecturer in Law.³⁴⁴

Table 6

Financial independence and developing agency

Income served as:	How it relates to agency:
1. Resistance to oppression. 2. Relaxing some restraints. 3. A main source of security. 4. Increased their bargaining power. 5. Better standards of living, 6. A tool to access other existing rights. 7. Expanded women’s leisure and entertainment. 8. Permitted living life according to one’s goals and aspirations.	- It enabled “transformative agency”. - It expanded the practice of choice and the alternatives of options available. - It enabled overriding the will of others when met by opposition, and being more in control of life direction.

6.6 Increased Visibility of Women in Public Promoted Social Change

“A Saudi woman today is a decision maker; her role is not restricted anymore by being a mother only... Her voice is heard more and her roles are extended”. (W.D.H)

³⁴³ J.H.R, S.H.R, A.N.A, M.I.N, R.H.A.

³⁴⁴ Also, H.L.A was able to open her gift shop and become a party planner only after working for 8 years in different food retailing companies.

Examining the influence of expanding employment opportunities on the agency of Saudi women entailed looking at how eliminating the legal obstacles on women's employment promoted change within their social structure to allow them to exercise choice and realise objectives.³⁴⁵ With the permitting of women to work in all domains since 2010 after years of economic marginalisation, Saudi women's visibility in the market sphere augmented, and hence an increased number of women were encouraged to join the crowd.³⁴⁶ Between January 2011 and November 2013, in less than three years, the private sector witnessed a surge of Saudi female presence rising from 37000 employees to 401,000 (*Back To Work in a New Economy*, 2015).³⁴⁷ Another report released by the Ministry of Labour and Social Development stated the number of Saudi women working in the private sector increased by 130% between 2013 and 2017 (Al-fahd, 2017). D.M.A affirmed:

“Expanding women employment opportunities are astonishing and that certainly have a great influence in activating women's role in the public domain”.

L.A.S pointed out:

“Before these laws you would never see a woman working in sales, today you can see them working everywhere”.

Two other informants highlighted the increase of Saudi women's involvement in volunteering; meanwhile a third appraised the rising prominence of Saudi women working in local media. As for A.N.A, she admired the growing number of women creating small businesses, and W.D.H declared her pride for the emerging Saudi women writers, inventors and leaders.

Diverse participants viewed and experienced that accelerated participation in the labour market: 1) encouraged more participation of women in various domains of the public sphere; 2) changed the public perception about women's role; and 3) improved women's positioning and recognition in the society.³⁴⁸ As a demonstration H.D.L stated:

“Activating women's role gradually by penetrating the labour market and positions of power is the way to overcome male domination in our society”.

³⁴⁵ This was part of applying Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) framework, and of referring to Kabeer's outlook of agency and empowerment that requires change to the structure and challenge of unjust social norms.

³⁴⁶ “Women's engagement in employment outside the sphere of control by family members and the greater visibility of remunerated outside work are seen as important and even sufficient conditions that have significant implications for their lives” (Sakshi, 2015, p. 273).

³⁴⁷ Baqi, Albalbeesi, Iftikhar, & Baig-ansari (2017) shared that women constitute one-third of all Saudi doctors.

³⁴⁸ See (‘A changing future: The economic role of women in Saudi Arabia’, 2018), the article maintains that the value of women's contributions to the economy and the society have increased. It states: “In a society known for its conservative values, there is emerging evidence of attitudinal shifts among working women”.

These findings are not unrivalled, as other studies on norms and agency confirmed that market rewards and benefits in cases altered social norms and gender roles, allowing greater agency for women (Klugman et al., 2014; Miles, 2016a; Nath, 2017; Sakshi, 2015). For example, Emirati women reported that traditional culture dynamics have witnessed an important change with the economic development that is favourable for women in their country (O’Sullivan’s, 2015).

Studying gender in the political economy from a feminist prism, Iversen and Rosenbluth (2010) maintained that when some women decide to take up employment they change the preferences and attitudes of other women in a manner that transforms gender norms and the division of labour in the household. They argued that the availability of varied options other than marriage in the public sphere for men and women balances the power between men and women in the domestic sphere (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010).³⁴⁹ Moreover, in the past experience of Arab countries such as Morocco, expanding the employment of women to all domains after their economic marginalisation; enhanced and normalised their presence in the labour market, and increased their value in the community (Sidani, 2005). Regarding the case of Saudi Arabia, past experience validates that the introduction of reforms by the government is met by social acceptance generally (Thompson, 2015). Saudi female leaders in particular viewed that female participation in high positions has a positive influence on socio-economic development, as well as “improve the public status and image of Saudi women in society” (Thompson, 2015, p.20).

With reference to Kabeer’s understanding of agency, 1) the increase in women’s presence and recognition, 2) the visibility of diversified choices, and 3) the occurrence of change at the social level regarding women’s roles and positioning, are considered achievements for women’s agency and empowerment. In fact, those aspects represent actual change within the patriarchal structure surrounding women in Saudi Arabia, and that is the essence of “transformative agency”, which acts on the restrictive aspects of gender inequality (Kabeer, 2005). On the one hand, both aspects influence a change in the general and the individual awareness regarding the everlasting gender inequality of women’s role and position in the society. Kabeer considers this to be a significant point of departure towards the progress of agency and the attainment of empowerment (Kabeer, 2005). On the other hand, Kabeer maintained that for a woman to be empowered she must be able to make viable strategic decisions, by choosing between a variety of alternative options that are obvious and achievable (Kabeer, 2005). Relatedly, it should be acknowledged that the increased participation of Saudi women in the labour market, their larger

³⁴⁹ Rajkhan (2014) highlighted that limiting work opportunities reduce women’s influence in the family.

visibility in public sphere, and their greater recognition are significant as a clear statement of the verity of the options available to them today.

Women's participation in the new opportunities of the labour market has changed public opinion about women's roles, rights, and competences. Eleven informants perceived that the new work opportunities have diminished the social contempt and disbelief in women, and improved the general perception about women's work.³⁵⁰ In 2012 the Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah conducted a survey with 3,004 participants, of which 42% were against Saudi women working in sales and dealing with male customers.³⁵¹ In a later survey conducted by the same organisation on Saudi women's experience in sales jobs, 78% of the respondents perceived the society exhibiting excellent attitude towards dealing with them; meanwhile 83% viewed that men customers dealt with them excellently.³⁵²

In relation to that, Klugman et al. (2014) maintained that; widespread practices fortify the society's opinion about norms and practices. Two different studies confirmed that younger Saudi men show more acceptance of women's work, which indicates change and adaptation in men's perceptions and attitudes (Bursztyn et al., 2018; Elamin & Omair, 2010). In their study Bursztyn et al. (2018) provided empirical evidence of quantitative data and an experiment that; Saudi men underestimate other men's support for women's employment, misperceiving social norms. Nevertheless, correcting beliefs about the opinions of other members of the society regarding women's work increased Saudi married men's consent to allow their wives to work (Bursztyn et al., 2018). This highlights the possibility of change in the perceptions of women's role in the Saudi society, in particular with regards to their employment. Lastly, the study of Benstead (2016) on Arab countries, demonstrated how the employment of women scatter the stereotypes about women being incapable and incompetent at work in comparison to men, and how it changes the society's perception about women's role in public. She furthermore suggested that the employment of women is capable of influencing the change about women's role in the forthcoming generations, when the children witness their mothers or other women in the family working (Benstead, 2016).

Various participants argued that the decision of King Abdullah Al-Saud to appoint women in the Legislative *Shura* Council and to enforce the employment of women in sales fostered the society

³⁵⁰ In addition to other participants in focus groups.

³⁵¹ See (*Survey of Saudi Public Opinion on Women's Participation*, 2013).

³⁵² See (*Saudi Saleswomen's Experience of Employment in the Retail Sector*, 2015).

to change their perceptions about women's role in public.³⁵³ It additionally incited women's contribution in all other fields, and promoted more support from male guardians to their daughters and wives.³⁵⁴ As one informant G.D.A explained:

“The society never accepted these employments for Saudi women, but with time it adapted especially with the promotion and discussion of women employment in T.V shows... The expansion of women employment influenced the change in society”.³⁵⁵

A participant in Group No. 2 also stated:

“When a woman works in a position of power and authority, the whole community is obliged to respect her, including men”.

R.N.A acknowledged the recent changes:

“In the past five or seven years the society's view of women changed, as her role in public grew and became influential... I personally witnessed this change in my mother who formerly refused that I work; but now she believes in the importance of women's work and supports it”.

Certainly, expanding employment opportunities have changed convictions about the importance of employment in a woman's life. S.M.R related that when she wanted to continue her PhD in 2016 everyone around her told her that it was more important for her to have a job and start building a career rather than to continue education, even though she came from a wealthy family that covers her expenses generously.

Women's increased presence in public, and their participation in various fields of employment incited by the government, made women feel more empowered in the society, and encouraged them to take charge of their lives. Amelie Le Renard has emphasised the significance of women's presence in decision-making positions to Saudi women; they perceive it “important and inspirational”, while other opinions can consider it merely publicity (Le Renard, 2008). As M.I.N stated, “[Nowadays] the sky is the limit for women's ambitions, and achieving goals became within reach”.

M.H.A and M.N.R both mentioned the CEO of the bank they work at as an inspiring role model for them, as well as a leading example of how far Saudi women can reach in this new Saudi

³⁵³ L.A.S, R.N.A, R.N.D, S.M.R.

³⁵⁴ M.R.M, R.N.A, G.D.A, L.A.S, K.L.D, T.I.M, H.T.N.

³⁵⁵ Younger men participants in Bursztyn's et al., (2018) study supported women's employment.

era.³⁵⁶ This is key to their agency in the sense that it reduces negative perceptions about workingwomen, and made all women (even non-workingwomen) realise that options are varied and amplified. Women's increased opportunities and participation in the labour market have provided a visible demonstration of the occurrence of change to all segments of the society, which influenced the public attitude, as well as motivated women to take action towards realizing their goals.

“[For Saudi women] a central feature of tamkin al mar’a [empowerment] is participation in public life: for example that a woman can become a minister, a doctor, or a judge. Working, and for some holding public office, is a sign of [empowerment] not only of women themselves but also of society as a whole” (Meijer et al., 2012 p. 71).

Women's access to larger employment opportunities has influenced social change by improving the recognition of women in the society. As reiterated throughout this thesis, employment is considered a key resource of women empowerment and their agency. Resources represented in material and non-material possessions are fundamental requirements of wielding agency. One of the advantages of acquiring such resources is that they assist a woman to reach a higher social status (Grabe, 2012; Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005). Alrumaihi (2008) suggests that the mounting employment opportunities for women impact the gender hierarchy in the society. Correspondingly, several participants underlined that employment enabled them to witness greater recognition amongst their family and the society. As they viewed it, in the past women in Saudi Arabia were commonly recognized for being good mothers and wives, while men were the ones encouraged and expected to have greater recognition for what they achieve in public or how they contribute to society.³⁵⁷ However, the view of a Saudi woman's role as only a housewife and a mother has reduced amongst Saudi women and other members of the society. The expanded possibilities for Saudi women to work changed the rules of the game, and furthered more balance between men and women's role in public, allowing women a larger space of practicing agency.

The participants who viewed that employment offers women superior recognition claimed that once a woman is employed she becomes more recognized and trust worthy by her family

³⁵⁶ Sarah Al-Suhaimi is the CEO of the National Commercial Bank Capital and a Vice Chairperson in the Capital Market Authority. See Alarabiya.net, 2017; 'Bord of Directors in Tadawul', n.d.; Rodionova, 2017.

³⁵⁷ S.D.S, R.N.D, S.M.R, and others.

members and the community around her, which expands her practice of agency (Table 8).³⁵⁸

S.H.R shared:

“My relationship with my father changed completely after I began to work. I felt he trusted me more, he actually told me: from now on you and your brothers are the same to me, I don’t feel insecure about you anymore”.

Saudi saleswomen reported in a survey that parents’ support of their daughters to work in this job increased after they began their employment (*Saudi Saleswomen’s Experience...*, 2015).³⁵⁹

With reference to husbands, R.N.A held that: “the man [the husband] gives more value and status to a woman that works”.

Other participants mentioned that husbands tend to be more supportive of women who work before marriage.³⁶⁰ They suggested that in such cases the man also adapts to the women’s situation and her life rather than the opposite, as they explained.³⁶¹ This opinion, however, doesn’t imply that employment is the sole factor for which women can be recognised for in the Saudi society. It rather indicates that employment has enlarged the alternatives for women to establish a sense of recognition and upgrade their status within the family and the society as well. Indeed, opposite scenarios also exist where expanding employment opportunities didn’t have positive impacts or it might have created further challenges for them, such as accumulated double burden. Nonetheless, those cases will be contextualised and discussed in the following chapter, as this one focused on presenting the informants insights on how employment allowed women to develop and exercise agency.

³⁵⁸ K.L.D, S.H.R, R.A.F, R.N.D, Groups 1 and 2.

³⁵⁹ 63% respondents said their parents supported their employment before beginning the job. However, 82% indicated that their parents support their employment after starting to work in sales.

³⁶⁰ A.B.R, M.N.R, G.H.D.

³⁶¹ There are other participants who deny that employment incites husbands support, rather they view that the woman’s character and stance define the relationship between spouses, hence result in sharing decision making power. Chapter 7 will elaborate on these cases.

Table 7

Expanding Saudi female employment encourages social change

Benefits:	How does it relate to Agency
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Encouraged more participation of women in various domains at the public sphere. 2. Changed the public perception about women’s role. 3. Improved women’s positioning and recognition within families and the society. 4. Visualise the variety of options 	<p>Both increasing women’s participation and recognition, and the occurrence of change in women’s role and positioning are characteristics of “transformative agency” (Kabeer, 2005).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General practices influence public opinion about women. - Market benefits can change social norms in favour of women’s agency. - Employment expansions influence the perceptions of women in society.

6.7 Conclusion

“Employment gave women confidence, a sense of their independent identity rather than being a complete follower. An employed woman participates in making decisions in the house because she makes money, she thinks about herself and her best interest ... she makes a life out of the house, and cares about her appearance for herself not only because she has a husband; their overall psychological well-being gets better with work”. (R.A.A) ³⁶²

In conclusion, ample positions in the existing literature of empowerment support employment as a tool that enables women with greater agency (Atal, 2017; Bespinar, 2010; Kabeer, 2005). This chapter is dedicated to examining in detail how the informants perceived employment to empower them with greater agency. Many informants approved that employment was vital to Saudi women’s agency, as more and more it becomes a cornerstone of security for them, and it develops their skills, awareness, self-value, confidence and satisfaction. ³⁶³ Moreover, the chapter discusses how employment offers a stable income, which serves women as a source of security and protection, improves their standards of living and well-being, and enhances the bargaining power and negotiating responsibilities, as well as reduces patriarchal oppression. ³⁶⁴

³⁶² GM of embroidery factories and a consultant in women’s employment.

³⁶³ See Jain & Jain, 2012; Kabeer, 2005; McLaren et al., 2008.

³⁶⁴ See Asghari et al., 2013; Bespinar, 2010; Duflo, 2012; Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005; McLaren et al., 2008; Miles, 2016b; Sakshi, 2015.

Those advantages of employment are uniquely important to the Saudi case; the study found that employment compensates for the lack of exposure to life experiences due to the restricted integration and mobility they lived according in the Saudi society. Moreover, the findings suggest that employment resolved many of the drawbacks of the education system that was ineffective in cultivating the necessary skills for the development of their agency, such as independent critical thinking and exploring their interests and values. Furthermore, employment was perceived to release women from various social pressures and patriarchal constraints to a certain extent, but more importantly, employment promoted social change towards creating a society that is more accepting of the value of women and their role in public.

The chapter categorised Saudi women's perceptions on how employment facilitates the development of their agency into five sections, although some arguments overlap across the sections, which reflects the complexity of dealing with a multidimensional concept such as agency.³⁶⁵ The analysis of the participants' views was related to Kabeer's explanation of agency, showing that: employment permitted the growth of various forms of agency, activated "transformative agency", moved women from practicing passive agency to purposeful agency, amended aspects of gender inequality, and multiplied the range of options and alternatives for women. However, the interpretation goes beyond that by providing detailed insights specific to the Saudi society, and how it mattered to Saudi women's agency in particular. This chapter didn't address adverse situations or discuss counterarguments to the positive influence of employment on women's agency; such discussion will occupy the next chapters (7 and 8), which elaborates on the conditions and influences on fostering agency via employment.

³⁶⁵ For details on how the multidimensionality of agency can make triggering one aspect of it difficult, see (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Klein & Ballon, 2018).

Chapter 7: Conditions for Developing Agency by Employment

“[In Saudi Arabia] the extent to which women are free to participate in and influence community life, policies, and social development; depends on their family’s support for such activities, their family connections, their education, and their personal abilities.” (Doumato, 2010, p. 26)

7.1 Introduction

Having reviewed the ways in which employment enabled Saudi women with greater agency in the previous chapter, this one provides a further dimension to the picture before asserting that employment enables women with agency. To completely address the research question, the analysis of the participants’ conversations and reports of their experience identified five key enablers that are highly desirable for Saudi women to have if they are to benefit from employment in attaining or expanding their practice of agency. Therefore, the more of these enablers that a woman has, the greater such benefit will be from having employment, while their complete lack can actually work against the acquisition or enhancement of agency. These are: 1) the control of earnings; 2) help with the domestic responsibilities; 3) the support of a family member; 4) the possession or the development of inner strength, represented in challenging restraints and bargaining skills; and 5) the purpose and the motivation of each woman.³⁶⁶

The analysis in this chapter illuminated how such factors function as necessary enablers for employment to serve women in enlarging their agency, in broad agreement with the positions of particular studies on agency across different countries; the details of the discussion, however, are specific to women in the Saudi context. Precisely, the analysis clarified how those factors can work as assets of agency by: expanding women’s circle and alternatives of choices, increasing their practice of purposeful choice, contributing in clearing obstacles challenging women’s practice of agency, and leading them to their desired goals.

³⁶⁶ See Kabeer et al., (2016) indicating, the potential of employment for developing women’s agency was conditional on the control of income, expanded mobility, bargaining power, authority over self, control over marriage and reproductive decisions, reduced domestic violence, and experiencing better health, in addition to, women’s “internal dimensions” such as motivation.

The aim of underlining and discussing these considerations is to fill gaps, to address the research question. At the same time it serves a larger purpose: it aims at the reinforcing or promoting them among Saudi women and society, which will hopefully contribute to enlarging their practice of agency. Furthermore, it explains why it is fundamental for strategies of empowerment to derive from the particular needs of different women in specific circumstances, and consequently why universal policies may not be so beneficial in empowering women.

The findings discussed in this chapter, transmitted that just as the concept of empowerment is multidimensional, the practice and the development of agency are multidimensional and overlapping. They validated that what works as an asset of agency for one woman might not work for another. They support that fostering agency effectively should work on reforming the structural limitations specific to the context, and there being no one specific way to do that. It is a continuous process of adapting to the views, needs, and challenges of women in a particular country regarding the various dimensions of agency.

7.2 The Control of Money

For women to benefit from employment or to acquire greater power and decision-making abilities, it is vital that they have control over monetary earnings (Bespinar, 2010; Duflo, 2012; Elson, 1999; Sakshi, 2015; Sholkamy, 2014). In fact, assessing women's control over their income is an essential element to include in examining agency (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2016). Inquiring about this aspect generated divergent findings. Thirty-one participants maintained that they have full control over the money they receive from their work or their husbands. This can be attributed to the man's full responsibility for the financial needs and expenses of the Saudi household (Al-Harhi, 2000; Alkhateeb, 1987), as well as the awareness of women about their legal, religious, and social entitlement of preserving control over their own money.³⁶⁷ The fact that the woman could take care of her personal expenses (or the extra unnecessary expenses, such as shopping, gifts, house decoration, children's toys) is considered a relief to the Saudi man.³⁶⁸ That explains why it is conventional that a woman controls her earnings, and her participation in the basic financial needs of the house and children

³⁶⁷ Group 4, L.A.S, G.D.A, L.E.E.

³⁶⁸ R.N.D, R.N.A, S.M.R, L.E.E.

is voluntary, and became accepted in modern Saudi Arabia only recently.³⁶⁹ S.U.M shared that men of older generations would never accept a woman to help in financial responsibility: “it is disrespectful to their manhood”. It was considered an insult for a wealthy man to let his wife work and have an extra source of income, she explained, adding, it would appear as if he was incapable of securing her finances.

Women’s control of money and freedom of spending are entitlements of gender norms and roles, besides being legal rights.³⁷⁰ As some participants explained, when the man of the house is the sole source of income he sets the budget, but he does not have the time to manage the money and the expenses, so the woman does.³⁷¹ In fact, in the pre-oil society of Saudi Arabia, the women’s role included managing the budget and the expenditure of the family (Shiraz, 2016). In Kabeer’s view, the freedom of making decisions as part of gendered roles and responsibilities exemplifies “effective agency” and does not count as “transformative agency” that is empowering, because it does not change the restrictive aspects in the social structure and in power relations (Kabeer, 1999, 2005, 2016). However, by contrast the interpretation of the findings considered the control of money an important enabler for practising agency, even when it forms part of the norm, as some men can possibly violate this right. This becomes critically problematic when the woman is not employed, because men do not always give their wives a monthly salary for themselves; they only pay for the house expenses.³⁷²

As examples, four middle-class housewives (aged 39 and above) stated that their husbands interfered in their expenses, spending, and overall monetary decisions.³⁷³ About eighteen interviewees (from different age groups and social classes) imparted that they know women who don’t enjoy the freedom to control their earnings. Although this did not apply to the participants themselves, it formed a significant part of their responses, views, and experiences regarding women’s control of money in Saudi Arabia.³⁷⁴ S.F.A related:

“I know many women who are employed but have absolutely no say about any penny

³⁶⁹ R.N.A, S.M.R, R.N.D.

³⁷⁰ This finding corresponds to women in Sri Lanka, they control the money even when they are not working as part of the norm (Malhotra & Mather, 1997).

³⁷¹ R.N.D, L.E.E, L.A.S, G.D.A, S.M.R, and others

³⁷² S.D.S., R.N.A, Group 1 (minimum-wage workers).

³⁷³ Two of them later gained full control over money when they started working and divorced their husbands.

³⁷⁴ The fact that it was repeated in interviews incited its inclusion as part of the results.

they gain. When I was married I didn't work but my father used to help me with some money, my husband would take it from my bag without asking, and I was not supposed to say anything".³⁷⁵

During the focus group of the women working with the minimum wage, one of them stated and the others agreed that:

"We know many women that work to provide for the family, but all her salary goes to the demands of the house. It is completely out of her control, and this doesn't help her achieve her life goals. Some families don't even give her any of it."

In like manner, the focus group of middle-class housewives also perceived that the woman's control of money depends on her husband, whether he allows her full discretion or not. By contrast the group of housewives from the upper class had a different opinion: they said that men never interfere in their money, and their husbands are generous enough to give them extra money to invest. This could indicate that women's control of money might be class-related; where women of upper class enjoy larger control over money. However, exceptionally M.D.I from upper class recounted:

"My father didn't allow me to use my salary from work, he obliged me to put it all into savings as he considered it humiliating that I pay for my own expenses. He wanted to be the only person responsible for my spending, but I was free to use that money after I got married".

These accounts reveal that lack of control over money signified different positions regarding agency to different women. Therefore, the analysis brought forward a dual explanation. The first suggest that limited or absence of control over money can evidently resemble a lack of choice and impede having or practicing agency. Thereby it can diminish the advantage of employment as an asset of agency, that is the reason why it is placed as one of the conditions of developing agency via employment. To clarify, when male authority influences the agency of women regarding money against their will, at the same time women do not challenge this particular structural limitation in any way to empower themselves; it prevents them from exercising their rights, choices, and reaching their goals. In such cases, gendered power relations overpowered

³⁷⁵ K.L.D from working-class also shared: "50% of my friends from work have no control over their money".

women's legal and social right to control their money, and formed an obstacle to women's agency even if they work.³⁷⁶ In academic terms, this structural limitation banned them from gaining the control over a resource and limited their capacity to be free agents.³⁷⁷ This establishes a ground for understanding why Kabeer might have considered "effective agency" (explained earlier) not to be empowering, because gendered hierarchy of power can take away its advantage.

The second interpretation recognises that in other cases not having control over money can be an act of choice: an 'agentic' behaviour; it reflects bargaining or choosing to neglect a particular right in exchange for access to other benefits (having someone responsible for taking care of your needs and requests for example). If the woman selected this alternative situation in accordance with her values, and in a way that fulfils her motives, the analysis considered her act to be an exercise of agency. Despite that, other opinions could argue against this interpretation considering their choice to be motivated by unconscious influence of gendered norms, or a reproduction of gender inequality. However, the analysis view that; the essence is the woman's sense of control over life and strategic matters, which this chapter will keep demonstrating. In support of Wray's (2004) view, what shapes agency; differs according to local cultures and the way of understanding it.

Also, the argument above arose from acknowledging that women make choices regarding employment and money according to their preferences (Atal, 2017), and that cultural beliefs and values highly impact the individual's perception and feeling of having agency (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005; Sen's,1989). As many researchers argue, preferences and priorities are substantial aspects to consider for the holistic understanding of a woman's agency (Caven, 2006; Khader, 2016; Wray, 2004). In fact, Sen (1985, 1989) portrays the ability to act on values which the individual identifies as important, an attribute of agency. Likewise, this interpretation is part of understanding the 'sense of agency' to different women, i.e. the meaning and the motivation behind their decisions (Kabeer, 2005). This research doesn't limit its understanding of agency as resistance and making a free choice only, or treats social norms as constraints in all cases. It respects women's views regarding social arrangements when they consider them as benefits or

³⁷⁶ Male domination here formed a constraint that hindered women's access to opportunities or control of recourses, and their exercise of agency as a result.

³⁷⁷ See Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer 2005, 2011, 2016; Kabeer et al, 2016; Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005.

supportive to their agency.³⁷⁸ Therefore, the interpretation of this result attempted to recognise agency within normalised life behaviours.

7.3 Help with Domestic Responsibilities

“ The children’s care and the housework is fully the responsibility of the woman even if she is studying or working. The husband thinks that as long as it was your decision to continue education or work when you are married, then you should bear the consequences”. (S.D.S)

Chapter 3, presented arguments of researchers that emphasized the importance of dividing domestic responsibilities between spouses, for employment to empower women (Bespinar, 2010; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Sadaquat & Sheikh, 2011; Sholkamy, 2014). Also, it is of high importance for a woman to have a greater agency such that the burden of domestic responsibility does not fall on her shoulders alone, in particular if she was employed (Kabeer, 2005, 2016; Kabeer et al., 2016; Sakshi, 2015). Correspondingly, evidence from the data collected for this research confirms this argument, with certain specifications relevant to Saudi women’s context. A 40 y middle-class informant mentioned:

“I was enjoying my job and felt comfortable in working because my husband never put pressure on me or complained about my late working hours...He used to help me with my little daughter, he would check on her homework and manage her affairs, even though he pays for the maid”.

However, she explained that this was not the case for her colleagues at work and that she continually felt privileged with her husband’s help and understanding. According to several participants of different age and class, gender roles regarding the housework and the children’s care seem to be preserved even in younger generations. Wives are still dominantly accountable for the domestic responsibilities in the typical Saudi family. L.A.S 37 y declared:

“I am against that a woman takes a full time job because she would bear the domestic responsibility all alone. The husband never helps and he might ask her to pay for the maid”.

One participant in Group 2 found:

“Socially, a woman who works doesn’t have the right to compromise domestic responsibilities. After all, this is her main duty”

³⁷⁸ See Korteweg, 2008; Charrad 2011; Gallagher, 2007.

Another interviewee noted:

“The working women I know are requested to fulfil their domestic responsibility perfectly, they bear a double burden. That is why women can avoid employment”.

K.L.D shared the same opinion:

“Everyone I know around me is living as if we were in the past century, where the woman is responsible for everything regarding the house and the children”.³⁷⁹

The findings suggest that women seem to have less freedom of agency regarding this aspect in comparison to other aspects, such as the choice of education, the use of contraception, and the control of money. Women’s accountability for domestic responsibility alone can hinder their practice of agency, as this aspect directly influences and shapes their choices regarding other strategic decisions such as; the number of children, time and variety of entertainment options, mobility, and the type of employment if they have more than one child.

In fact, carrying the double burden of the employment and the housework is underlined as a significant disappointment of empowering women via employment (Kabeer, 2005, 2016). Furthermore, the shortage of help provision regarding domestic tasks for employed women affects their competitiveness in the market. It restrains their work options, their time availability, and their mobility, blocking their freedom of agency (Kabeer et al., 2016). A recent study on Saudi women’s employment correspondingly confirmed that domestic responsibilities restrict women’s choices of employment (Alfarran, Pyke, & Stanton, 2018). Whilst some women shared they could not accept jobs with long working hours, others revealed that employers ask them whether their family obligations would influence their commitment (Alfarran et al., 2018).

According to Sen and Mukherjee (2014), fostering agency has come as a result of the shifting of norms in favour of women so they can exercise choice and larger control of life aspects. In relation to this, the present findings point to the help with domestic responsibilities as an area where norms have been modified slightly to the benefit of women, although a large degree of improvement is still required. Some informants maintained that it is rare that Saudi husbands cooperate in helping with domestic work,³⁸⁰ nevertheless they take part in this responsibility by

³⁷⁹ These participants varied in age, work status, social class and education level.

³⁸⁰ L.L.S, L.A.S, BTN, Group 1, and Group 4.

securing a maid to help the wife.³⁸¹ As reported by Alkhateeb (1987), domestic helpers commonly share the responsibility of children and the housework with Saudi housewives.³⁸²

From another perspective, half of the informants viewed that cooperation between the married couple is somewhat increasing, in particular concerning certain aspects of children's care. They affirmed that young fathers offer to stay with the kids at home when the wife has an important occasion. The majority also mentioned that men became more flexible with the food preparation; they do not expect women to prepare food daily, and they do not mind bringing lunch from restaurants. By contrast, the participants recalled that lunches and dinners were unquestionable duties of the wife in older days. The sample included three exceptions; these workingwomen maintained that blessedly their husbands are in charge of the housework, because they are obsessed about cleaning and they previously lived alone for a substantial period of time; but none of these women have children yet.

According to their cross-national study, Iversen and Rosenbluth (2010a) confirmed that working women receive more help from their partners and enjoy more equal division of labour in the household compared to women who do not work. By contrast, some participants denied that employment is the reason behind the increase in the husbands' cooperation. M.R.M and T.I.M are both housewives who have never worked yet their husbands help them with their children all the time. Each woman has to have a stance; "It is the wife who makes her husband either get used to helping her or depending on her to do everything", as the latter stated.³⁸³ Another woman shared a different experience; she said that after all her children entered the school and passed 12 years old, she withdrew from all the house responsibilities. "I told my husband I need my own time and it is your turn now, and he was completely understanding and supportive," W.D.H said. These women indicate that it is the wife's ability to educate her husband about cooperation that makes men help, not just her employment status. To summarise, help with domestic responsibility increases the sense and the practice of agency to women, but it doesn't always come as a result of employment.

However, if employment was an influential factor for housework distribution, S.M.R takes the view that "the better the job and the higher the salary you gain, the more support and division of

³⁸¹ Most of the participants who were married, and all the participants who were mothers (employed and housewives) from the middle and upper class had maids for domestic help. One participant from women with limited income had a maid as well.

³⁸² In Saudi Arabia the hiring of domestic helpers is widespread amongst different families (Al-Harhi, 2000).

³⁸³ M.R.M shared the same opinion, H.T.N and R.N.A also agree.

responsibility you get.” A study on the change in men’s perceptions about domestic gender roles with the employment of women concluded that men who earn less hold more egalitarian ideology on domestic roles, because they benefit from their wives’ financial contribution more than men of higher income (Tang & Zuo, 2000). R.N.D further adds:

“Men help more nowadays because there is growing awareness about the importance of sharing the children responsibilities between the younger generation. The employment of women is another factor as well as the financial pressures, which do not allow young couples to have maids for help like before.”

This means that in some cases husbands appreciate the contribution of the woman in the financial matters, therefore they make an effort to help her domestically so she can achieve better professionally. Likewise, the study of Sakshi (2015) on South-Asian women concluded that the kind of the job and the amount of earning determine the woman’s power in negotiating domestic responsibilities.

From these testimonies it appears that husbands who share some domestic duties with their wives practise such behaviour out of being familiar with doing these duties,³⁸⁴ or for the financial benefits that the family gets out of the wife’s work. Other men accept it as an expression of responsibility towards the house and the children, and as an appreciation for the wife even when she does not work; this can be in the form of employing maids or actual help in the case of some young couples. In all cases women appreciate the husband’s help regarding this matter in any way, thereby the interpretation found that it evidently eases constraints on women’s choices and enables them to practice a larger degree of agency regarding different matters.

With regards to employment, help with domestic responsibilities make women feel more comfortable working, which influences their effectiveness and achievements in their jobs. Consequently it enables them to feel confident, capable and productive rather than lagging behind, and this is a form of psychological assets of agency (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Klein, 2016; Clement & O’hara, 2018). Furthermore, having help expands their choices of employment type, moving from ‘passive agency’ (not being able to work for being in charge of domestic responsibilities) towards ‘active agency’ (choosing from a variety of possible options). Additionally, help with domestic responsibilities widens women’s options regarding other aspects of life, such as the time and the experience of leisure. Particularly, it provides mothers,

³⁸⁴ For example, they are used to doing domestic duties because the experienced living separate from their family before marriage.

both employed and housewives, with more spare time for leisure and self-care.³⁸⁵ As reviewed formerly (in Chapters 3 and 6), having a variety of options is a condition of empowering agency. Consequently, this factor has a positive influence on women’s agency and overall practice of decision-making (Figure 6). Finally, the observations found that the participants whom their husbands provided help with domestic responsibilities, demonstrated a stronger sense of agency and of control over domestic matter. As a result, the study suggest that cooperation in domestic responsibilities is a step towards more balanced gender roles in the private sphere, which influence women’s sense of agency positively (Figure 6).

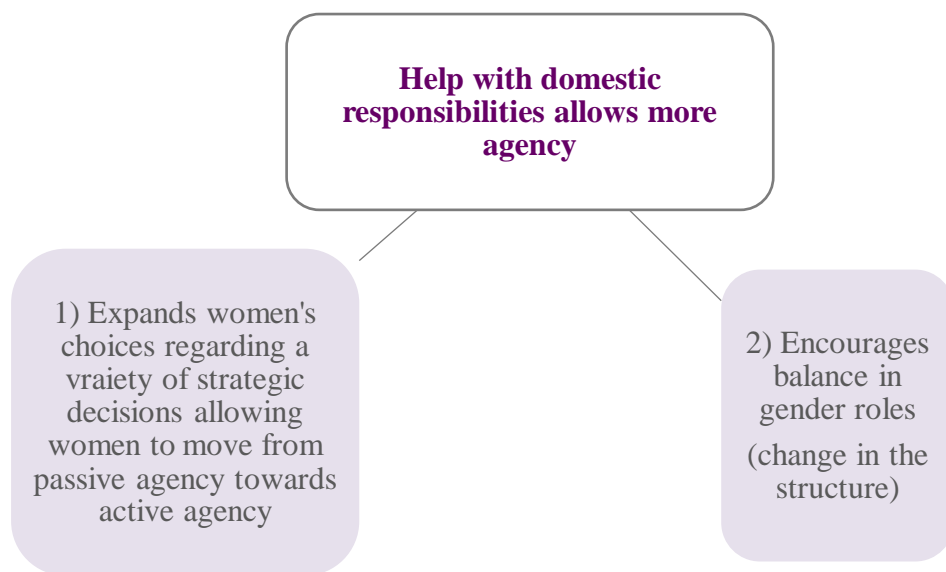


Figure 6: Help with domestic responsibility as an asset of agency - Source: (Author)

7.4 The Support of a Family Member

“The support of the family is key for a Saudi woman’s freedom of agency and for her success. By family I mean all of them; her parents, her brothers, her sisters and her husband”. (S.M.R)

To evaluate agency, researchers have looked at women’s “assets endowments” amongst other aspects, and these can be tangible, such as properties and money, or intangible, like information or social relations (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Cornwall, 2016). The examination of agency entails identifying these assets and how they are distributed to women (Kabeer et al., 2016, Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005). The analysis of this study drew from the interviews and the

³⁸⁵ A.S.I, L.A.S, N.A.R, G.H.D, S.H.R.

participants' individual experiences that the support of a family member is one of the main assets of agency, whether it was financially or emotionally. A substantial number of them expressed that their family is a powerful enabler for them to have a greater role in life and to exercise a superior level of agency.³⁸⁶ At the same time they viewed that the absence of family support can be a “disabler” and a woman's biggest limitation. However, this subsection concentrates on family support being an asset of agency.³⁸⁷ Diverse participants across the sample viewed that the family forms the core support system to a woman when they allow her to be herself,³⁸⁸ cultivate her independence, encourage her choices, and stand by her through struggles morally and financially (Table 8 and Figure 7).

J.H.R reflected:

“I feel very independent in making my choices.... I was raised this way. I am free to voice my opinions and share my thoughts about everything with my family”.

N.A.R added:

“Your family is key to your agency as a woman; they help you build your inner confidence [to make independent decisions]”.

To give a concrete example, D.I.Y was very thankful that her family is being patient with her choice of career, they are supporting her financially and emotionally to be self-employed because she didn't feel fit to be employed in a routine job. This finding is not unprecedented regarding Arab women; family relations continue to be significant to women's “sense of identity and agency” in the Middle East (Gallagher, 2007, p. 229). A previous study on Emirati women indicated that the family constituted the main pillar to the success of the women under study (O'Sullivan, 2015). Examining agency and employment In Turkey, Bespinar (2010) established that it was important for women to have the support of their family, as they feel secure socially and economically when they have strong family bonds.

G.H.D explained:

“The social background where a woman grows-up has a substantial influence on her role in the future, besides the support of her husband... She would have the right mind-set to achieve, and most probably the man who will propose to her would also appreciate such values and would understand that she has her own goals and life”.

It is worth mentioning that Kabeer excludes women who are free and capable of making

³⁸⁶ This subpart discusses some participants' answers to the interview question: What have helped them develop their agency in their own experience.

³⁸⁷ The family being as a limitation was discussed in Chapter 4, and will be discussed in Chapter 8 (8.2).

³⁸⁸ Please check the participants' patterns in appendix 5.

decisions from the process of empowerment, in her view they are already empowered (Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer, 1999, 2005), a point which this research disagrees with. The finding presented in this part offers a distinct explanation. The analysis endorse that without the support of a family member Saudi women’s practice of agency could be more difficult, especially when the social and/or legal environments are not permissive. When family members provide support to women, they provide a wider extent of agency and reduce barriers to agency; they relief the social pressures on their decisions, and can even ease the effects of certain laws restrictive to women’s agency. For example, even when the law requires the guardian’s permission for women to travel, supportive fathers (or husbands) sign and open (unlimited) consent form for the woman to travel at any time. Therefore this research highlights the importance of the family’s support as a main facilitator for overcoming constraints and developing agency. In fact, it argues that family support is a key ‘soft asset’ for Saudi women to practice and foster agency (Figure 7). It is part of their identity, as well as a source of their confidence and reassurance (Kabeer, 2011; Gallagher, 2007; Joseph, 1999). Even if women who have access to such an asset are considered empowered already according to Kabeer’s view, the family support in those cases is key to maintain their empowerment; which this research views as a continuous journey not an end-state. Corresponding to Drydyk’s (2008) explanation; the crux is that individuals not only become but also “remain” in control of leading their lives.

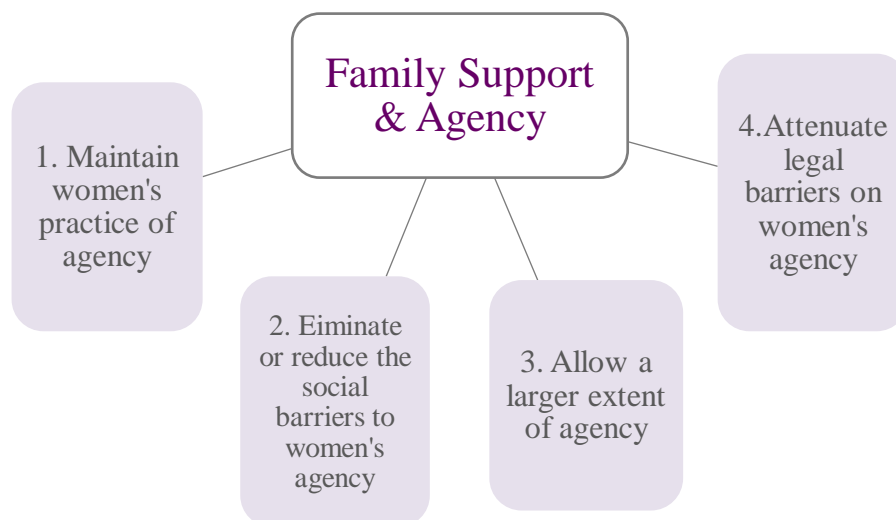


Figure 7: Family support as an asset of agency

Source: (Author)

Table 8:*Participants' patterns (The support of a family member as an asset of agency)*

Participant	The family member who provided support	Age	Social class
SFA	Mother	41	Working class
RHF	Mother	31	Upper mid-class
RND	Father	34	Mid-class
SHR	Father	33	Mid-class
SMR	Father	33	Mid-class
HTN	Father and Husband	28	Upper mid-class
KLD	Brothers	23	Working class
MDI	Husband	33	Upper class
WDH	Husband	40	Mid-class
LLS	Husband	30	Mid-class
LAS	Husband	37	Mid-class
MRM	Husband	23	Mid-class
HLA	The whole family	32	Mid-class
DIA	The whole family	28	Upper mid-class
NDA	The whole family	35	Mid-class
NWR	The whole family	29	Mid-class
MNR	The whole family	29	Mid-class

7.4.1 The support of fathers and brothers

Suad Joseph (1999) argues that Arab women's draw strength and reassurance from their familial relations, which is originated and sustained through the father. Several participants considered their fathers to be their main source of support. I witnessed interviewees that talked about their fathers with ecstatic admiration, when I asked them to identify influences on their agency. For example, S.M.R Shared that her father provided financial and moral support to her decisions regarding divorce and continuing her studies abroad. She added:

“My father gave us the total freedom as girls, even though my older brother is conservative and doesn't like the way we [his sisters] dress or live, he can't impose his opinion on us because my father wouldn't allow him... my mom always had the freedom to make choices regarding every aspect of her life, such as investments, travelling, purchases, going out, and that is because my father is understanding”.

Another informant (S.H.R) communicated that she continued her higher education because her father insisted, only realising how important that step was later on. She was profoundly grateful for the way he raised her and how he treated her, especially after her mother's death. She explained that he was very kind and supportive “even though his family was conservative but he made a choice to make us live a different life”. A third participant (A.B.R) shared that her father supported her education, career, and her choices in general. Furthermore, when a man proposed to marry her, her father requested that the fiancé respects her decisions and never interrupts her career; she viewed that her life is joyful because of her father's support and love. Similarly, R.N.D expressed her gratitude for her father who stood against his brothers (her uncles) and the family's norms to support her decisions in life and let her study abroad, work away from their city, and live alone without being married. Also, N.D.A communicated that her father gave her full support (financially and emotionally) to continue her Masters and PhD abroad and to pursue her career the way she wanted. She mentioned as well that this support was equally distributed between her and her brothers. Those four participants come from different social class, have different levels of education and different marital status, one of them never worked, the other used to work but settled as a housewife now, the third started working with the minimum wage in an embroidery centre, and the last participant is working in a management position in a hospital. This is to indicate that this finding emerged from different participants with distinct characteristics.

Other participants depended on their brothers for support and advice.³⁸⁹ Some brothers make restless efforts to help their sisters achieve their goals and realise their desires; they reinforced their sisters' choices in education, career, or marriage. In many times they play the role of mediating between their sisters and their fathers because they are more trusted and heard, so they take advantage of that to serve their sisters. D.I.Y said, "my brothers are my friends, I lean towards my older brother for guidance and support in life... and to my younger brother regarding business and career decisions". Correspondingly, studying Syrian women's agency, Gallagher (2007) discussed how familial male-power can serve women's decisions by demonstrating an example of brothers that collaborated to protect their sister from her husband, and supported her decision not to return to him.

7.4.2 The support of husbands

Other informants found this support in their husbands, in particular those who came from very conservative families and married a man who is more open. Several articles on agency conveyed that the character and the mentality of the husband has a fundamental impact on the various aspects of agency for a woman and on her life direction (Klein, 2016; Sakshi, 2015). For example, Nigerian immigrants in the UK conveyed that their access to opportunities and benefits depended on the support and understanding of their husbands (Lindridge, Penaloza, & Worlu, 2016). Diverse participants in this study mentioned that they started exercising choices freely only after marriage.³⁹⁰ One participant (W.D.H) expressed, "My husband offers to me all aspects of comfort so I can practise agency liberally regarding all my matters... He had been always understanding to my needs and this factor enabled me to overcome work challenges". She was very thankful to him, further emphasizing that she understands well that he is an exception to others when she compared her situation to other women at work. Similarly, Syed, Ali and Hennekam (2018) affirmed that career success of Saudi women requires the approval and the support of a male family member.

Likewise, M.R.M narrated that after living all her life with an extremely controlling father, she married a "very supportive husband, financially and emotionally". As she explained, her husband pays generously for his family and financed her side-business. With her father, she was allowed to go out of the house on emergencies and family occasions only; further, he controlled

³⁸⁹ G.D.R, T.I.M, D.I.A, H.L.A, K.L.D.

³⁹⁰ L.L.S, M.R.M, A.S.I, T.I.M, A.B.D, W.D.H.

all other aspects of her life. By contrast her husband provides a car, a driver, and the freedom to go anywhere at anytime.³⁹¹ Other husbands can have the same or more wealth but they might not be willing to provide the support for their wives, encourage their success, or allow them the freedom of mobility.³⁹² Portraying the social life of Saudi women in 1987, Alkhateeb explained that marriage for those women represented freedom, support and protection (Alkhateeb, 1987). Similarly, Vidyasagar & Rea (2004) found that early marriage was desired amongst Saudi female doctors, because the participants considered having a husband a source of support. That is the reason why the husband can represent an asset of agency for many women.

7.4.3 The support of mothers

Mothers can be a key source of support to a woman's agency as well, by being inspiring, motivating, and a safe guidance.³⁹³ The mothers of some participants inspired their characters to be stronger; they support their goals and aspirations, and enhanced their daughters' belief in the power of education and work. S.F.A described:

“ My mother was my greatest support, she always encouraged me to find my path in life, and that I shouldn't be submissive to life difficulties”.

Equally, R.A.F recalled how her mother had to face several social pressures for her children to grow up in an open and modern life. Her mother was her idol and she considered her upbringing is a main source of agency. She recounted:

“My mom is completely supportive of us being independent and building our lives... She gave us opportunities that our cousins never had...any freedom we enjoyed [was because that] my mom saw it as the right path”.

However, it is worth highlighting that the support from a female family member can be secondary or different from that of a male family member, as men have the upper hand authority over the family socially and legally. Therefore, the support of fathers and husbands is more powerful in practicing or developing agency. Yet mothers' support can be more significant emotionally. Moreover, mothers as wives have an influence on the fathers and their opinions. In one case, it was the mother who convinced the father of one participant to allow her to study abroad.

³⁹¹ Having a driver is not unusual in Saudi Arabia, see ('A changing future: The economic role of women in Saudi Arabia', 2018), one-in-five households have a driver in Saudi Arabia and 800,000 drivers work for women.

³⁹² W.D.H., L.L.S.

³⁹³ Gallagher (2007) found that women of the family in Syria (mothers and daughters for example) collaborate together to provide support for each other and act as a resource of agency.

7.4.4 The support of friends

Finally, there were two participants who considered their friends as family, and as the main support to their agency. One of them pronounced:

“My friends from work are my biggest supporters in life; it encourages me a lot that we are in this together, and facing the same struggles; we have each others back and we’ve been there for each other whenever needed”.

The support of friends as an influence on agency was an exceptional finding in this research, yet other research did count having friends and spending time with them as important to a woman’s demonstration of agency (Green, 1998). Also, Kabeer (2011) distinguished how being amongst a group who shared the same circumstances and difficulties could be an encouragement for women to stay strong. However, in general the participants considered having the support of any members of their surrounding circle is extremely important to their encouragement to exercise agency. Those persons and their support work as a source of trust, self-belief, inspiration, assurance, and motivation, which are all closely related to the concept and facets of agency (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer et al., 2016).

This part doesn’t seek to deny that Saudi women could lack family support (Alkhateeb, 1987; Rajkhan, 2014); by contrast it sets out to accentuate how important the support of men and other family members is to their exercise of agency. In their article, Cornwall and Rivas (2015) demonstrated that there are dimensions of men and women’s relationship that are neglected within the negative discourse about male superiority/dominance in gender relations, such as “intimacy and cooperation”. In the same manner some participants have illuminated that the support of men in particular and other family members in general is a key enabler to women’s agency in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, empowerment strategies are recommended to look into this substantial facilitator, and target the enhancement of family support to women and their awareness about empowerment, amongst other aims.

7.5 Possessing Inner Strength

Six participants considered that a woman’s “strong character” and or “inner strength”, as they described, is the most influential factor in a woman’s agency irrespective of the resources she has access to; whether it be employment or education (Table X).³⁹⁴ In addition, about four participants considered the character and the inner strength to be equally as important as other resources. In short, they viewed that inner strength weights in the formula of practising or developing agency.

ABD shared:

“[Developing agency] depends on the woman’s character and her experience in life; it depends whether she allows the people around her to influence her decisions or not”

SOF revealed:

“[Agency grows] when a woman intends to determine her destiny, and sets her goal”

GHD explained:

“It is my character that motivated my practice of agency”³⁹⁵

Table 9

Participants’ patterns (Inner strength as an asset of agency)

Participant	Employment	Age	Status	Social class
SFA	Employed	41	Divorced	Working class
WDH	Previously employed in factories	40	Married	Mid-class
RUH	Yoga trainer – self employed	34	Divorced	Mid-class
MRM	Housewife	23	Married	Mid-class
SOF	KG teacher	32	Single	Upper Mid-class
ABD	Employed in customer service	29	Married	Mid-class

To clarify the terms used, some viewed inner strength in terms of: challenge and resistance, while others perceived it as a capacity of building strategies of manoeuvring or winning negotiations to achieve an end, which reflects various opinions within previous research on agency (Bespinar, 2010; Sakshi, 2015; Charrad, 2011; Korteweg, 2008; Kabeer, 1999, 2016; Kabeer et al. 2016). In addition to confirming these traits, the analysis added to the

³⁹⁴ For details about other participants please check appendix 5.

³⁹⁵ 26 years, married, unemployed, housewife with high school degree.

understanding of character strength: the capacity to persist in achieving goals and disregard the opinion of others. This explanation evolved from the participants' conversations describing different situations. Also, this understanding related to Kabeer's account of agency as acting upon one's choice, superseding the agency of others when met by opposition, and altering restrictive aspects of gender relations (Kabeer, 2005). Moreover it coincides with her view of empowerment as a process which results in better negotiation of power, questioning and refusing subordination, and being more in control of life (Kabeer, 2011; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). This part, hence, shall present the four features of "inner strength" according to the participants' opinions and experiences, explaining how they were important to acquiring or fostering agency.

7.5.1 Challenge and resistance

With reference to challenge and resistance, Kabeer considers them as forms of agency. Like other scholars, having agency to her is inseparable from resisting oppositions and challenging gendered power relations (Kabeer, 1999, 2005; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016). In other words, agency that is empowering must be transformative of oppressive circumstances or biased arrangements. Building on Kabeer's understanding Miles explained that empowerment evolves from being critical and resistant to injustice (Kabeer, 2005; Miles, 2016a). Therefore if a woman has the readiness and the ability to challenge the obstacles she faces by resistance, then she expresses a high level of agency. Correspondingly, Korteweg (2008) distinguished resistance and attempting to weaken the dominance of others or norms as a face of agency. Concerning this study, some informants' responses lent support to the claim that challenge and resistance are effective for enlarging agency, but in particular circumstances. The viewed that challenge is able to change the situation to the women's favour, matching Kabeer's concept of "transformative agency". However this study, interpret challenge and resistance as assets or enablers of agency; they are means rather than forms or synonyms of agency.

To provide an example, S.F.A shared that after years of being deprived from every possible freedom, and trying different techniques, only by confrontation and resistance "I am today absolutely free and able to practise all forms of decision making for all aspects of life". The woman's strong character is everything; she would either choose to challenge others bravely or surrender to the circumstances, she maintained. She further reported:

“When my mother, refused that I work in a mixed sex environment I had to stand up for my right and that caused escalated tension between us; but with resistance at the end she came to understand”.³⁹⁶

Similarly, living amongst a conservative family H.D.L continually used resistance and confrontation against her father and brothers to stand for her choices of education, entertainment, work, travelling, and living alone, “I was rebellious”, she highlighted. K.L.D shared:

“I believe that even with a conservative family, a woman’s stubbornness and insisting can resolve everything... A woman who has a goal and persistence to achieve it can challenge all limitations and make it, yet I don’t deny that she could face struggles in the beginning”.

Other interviewees viewed that parents might plan or envision a certain life for their daughters, and they try to influence them out of care. However they perceived that a woman who resists and contests could achieve different results, whereas the one that conforms becomes submissive to the control of others.³⁹⁷

R.H.A stated:

“ It is only when a woman allows her family to, that they can control her with their rules”

N.A.R also agreed, saying:

“Until today there are women who are reluctant to challenge their social limitations, and they let it influence their destiny... that is very sad”.

In addition, D.M.A attributed the main struggle with the expression of agency to:

“[When] a woman is weak and has no reaction to the oppressive authority of her father or male guardian, even though she can legally file for a lawsuit and abolish his control”.

The analysis shows that women found resistance an effective method to enlarging the extent of agency in cases where alternative solutions to change oppressive or restrictive situations were not useful. Thereby it was not suggested as the preferred way to gain agency; rather it is a necessary attitude when their wellbeing (physical and psychological) or their financial situation is at stake. However, despite that resistance, in cases, expands women’s practice of agency it comes at a cost, and risks familial relations support and protection.³⁹⁸ This means that a woman

³⁹⁶ Her father continuously rejected her request to work, he refused all options of employment even when they were only-female jobs. Then she realized that she needed to stop him, so she accepted the job and moved out of the house. She had to deal with the pressure of the surrounding community considering her ungrateful for her parents and disrespectful of the norms.

³⁹⁷ Group 2, S.H.R, S.F.A, R.H.A, W.D.H

³⁹⁸ S.F.A, H.D.L, L.S.S.

needs to be ready to fully depend on herself, which may lead to the emergence of other challenges in her life. That is the reason why selected researchers viewed Arab women's resistance as a form of agency is represented in their use of indirect ways and maneuvering to reach their goals (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Gallagher, 2007; Charrad, 2011), which is discussed next.

7.5.2 Negotiation and manoeuvring

Regarding the informants' opinion that considered negotiation and manoeuvring as a strength in a woman's character that enables greater agency, previous research on empowerment classified bargaining and manipulation as forms of agency, which in effect alter some patriarchal constraints (Bespinar, 2010; Kabeer, 1999, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2016; Miles, 2016a). Researchers on agency argue that bargaining power, together with the access and control of income impact the power distribution within the household; as a result, it grants less exposure to domestic violence, more control over fertility, and better health (Kabeer et al., 2016; Sholkamy, 2014; World Bank, 2012). The study of Malhotra and Mather (1997) on empowerment affirmed that negotiation abilities within the domestic sphere are, in the long run, the predominant factor of enabling women's empowerment regardless of the education level or work status. Relatedly, the analysis acknowledged the significance of bargaining power as a representation of inner strength, which impact the level and space of women's agency in Saudi Arabia.

To clarify with an example, R.N.A recounted that she had to find different strategies to gain control over money when she was first married and didn't work. Gaining control over money was a real struggle in her marriage at the beginning because she was never used to asking or negotiating, as she explained.

“I had to explain to my husband how my father used to give me money before marriage, and I negotiated having a separate salary beside the house expenses. At the beginning he couldn't understand why I would need extra money if he pays for the house needs, but it worked well after several trials. On top of that, now whenever I am going out my husband has learned to ask if I need extra money”.

In her case she chose to negotiate what she saw as her right, having the courage to ask and re-ask until she convinced her husband, and that is the crux of exercising agency; acting upon one's choice and challenging limitations within the surrounding structure in any form to reach the desired outcome.

From the same standpoint, H.D.L delivered that she started questioning gender discrimination between her and her brothers since she was in school. She kept asking her parents why her brothers were allowed to do things that she can't do such as diving. She never accepted receiving answers like 'that's the way it is', and she insisted that her parents should give her convincing reasons. H.D.L mentioned that she had to negotiate with her parents several times to get their approval to obtain a Master's degree from the UK. She came to an agreement with them when she suggested living there with her brother who was studying there already. However, a whole series of negotiations started regarding everything she wanted to achieve when she was there. She managed through negotiations and bargaining to let her brother be responsible for his own domestic chores, for which she was responsible when she first arrived. Furthermore she demanded to live in a separate place, and managed to realise her goal. The courage to negotiate and bargain for the things she wanted (which were unacceptable in the eyes of her family) took her to new places and experiences. Voicing opinions and articulating requests are unquestionable facets of agency (Kabeer et al., 2016; Klugman et al., 2014), and the situations that the participants described above are statements of these facets.

Other women, who are not intrinsically negotiators, prefer to cope with the surrounding conditions and manoeuvre the situations to be in favour of achieving their goals. Coming up with strategies to adapt the surrounding constraints to the choices of women also falls under the diverse forms of agency (Bespinar, 2010). One participant in Group No.3 mentioned, "Saudi women housewives are good in manoeuvring regarding money; they know how to save money from the house expenses even when their husbands do not pay them a separate salary". In a relevant study on Nigerian women, hiding money to buy the products they desired was regarded as a form of practising agency through consumption mechanisms (Lindridge et al., 2016).³⁹⁹

In other cases women from the sample hid information instead of money; for example M.D.I had to conceal from her father the fact that she worked with men in her first job, for him to approve her beginning in this job. Then after a few weeks she had to break the news to him gently, saying that sometimes she was expected to attend meetings with men colleagues.⁴⁰⁰ T.I.M, likewise, said that in order to marry the person she loved, she came up with an idea to use her brother as a mediator. The brother claimed that her boyfriend was a friend of his, and he recommended his

³⁹⁹ By contrast Sakshi, (2015) articulated that when the social structure is gendered and favor men in terms of power women making decisions and controlling money by using tactics and secrecy is against having agency because it is not a form of challenge but a form of coping.

⁴⁰⁰ W.D.H mentioned, many women in the factory where she worked do not tell the truth about the existence men in their work place. Their families think that the factory is sex-segregated.

proposal to their father.⁴⁰¹ Consistently, when describing the authority practices of Saudi women; Alkhateeb (1987) mentioned that education works as a source of power for women when it develops their strategies of bargaining and manipulation.

Another manoeuvring strategy specific to employed women was to maintain a certain appearance to have their family's blessings to work. W.H.D was once offered to appear in a cooking show on an online channel; her husband agreed on the condition that she covers her hair. One of the saleswomen working in an evening-gowns boutique shared that the family of her workmate permitted her to work only if she covers her face during working-hours. She comes and leaves covering but she takes the *Niqab* off inside the shop, she explained. To her, that was the strategy to take advantage of employment whilst avoiding the confrontation of the family. This is the key advantage of bargaining and manoeuvring in fostering agency; they allow women to act upon choice and reach the ends they desire without risking their familial relations, which they consider a source of support. Kandiyoti (1988) also explained workingwomen's use of modesty in appearance and veiling as a means of bargaining with patriarchy, to avoid losing their familial support and protection.

In contrast with this opinion, women's use of such methods can be seen as a coping mechanism rather than practicing agency, and that it implies their lower position in the hierarchy of power (Bespinar, 2010; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). However, in agreement with the position of this research Charrad (2011) calls for a localised understanding of agency and explains how Arab women's agency is represented in such daily life behaviours. She clarifies how their power is reflected in pushing the boundaries, breaking the rules, and creating a new social reality beyond moral codes.

7.5.3 Being decisive and persistent

Other examples of women exhibited inner strength by being decisive about what they wanted and never paid attention to the judgment of others. One interviewee faced discouragement from her mother, her father and the society about working in a factory, because the working hours

⁴⁰¹ An informant (working in legal affairs) shared a story regarding maneuvering; "I witnessed a case of a girl that made a marriage agreement with someone to overcome the social and the formal limitations of studying abroad. Now she is divorced by choice and is pursuing the career she wanted". Some families do not accept that a woman lives abroad alone, and the scholarship requires the consent of a male family member, that is why she chose a male friend and made an agreement to marry him.

were long, the location was remote, and the work environment was not suitable for a lady; the area was full of men workers, according to her description. She explained:

“[However] I had a different opinion...I did what I saw fit for me.... I thought my work was fun, unexpected and that it provides a new experience in life. They [family and friends] expected me to work in education or hospitals like other women but I chose a challenging domain and I was happy with the experience”.⁴⁰²

Additionally, G.H.D expressed:

“Since the beginning of my character formation [since she was a little girl in school] I was stubborn about my decisions even when they contradicted the will of others surrounding me... I have learned from my mother and life that I must be in control of my life direction”.

R.N.D also showed inner strength at an early stage when she chose her university specialisation, a new major that she thought was useful and none of the people surrounding her had studied before. She was looking at being something different even though her parents suggested that she studies other disciplines. Furthermore, she was the first woman in her family and neighbourhood to go on a scholarship overseas, and her father was criticized harshly for sending her abroad. Yet she didn't stop there, she found a job away from her city and she is living alone. However, she recounted that her parents supported her inner strength; it did not develop as a result of resisting them, as in the previous examples. Finally, R.H.A recapitulated:

“The character, the willingness to develop, the thirst for growth, and loving life influence women's agency the most.”

Previously Chapter 6 offered diverse examples of women who developed bargaining power and resistance and gained characteristics of “power within” through employment; nonetheless, for the cases presented in this part employment was not the main or the only resource of agency, for they had the ability or the readiness within. Such qualities can be fostered by employment or education, but the analysis found that women who neither possess this inner strength inherently, nor develop it through work (or whatever other resource they have access to such as education) may not be able to challenge restraints, develop sense of agency or truly practice it. In fact this finding prompted recalling Klein's argument that agency is not merely the ability to make decisions, rather, it is having instrumental inherent qualities such as self-belief (Klein, 2016).

⁴⁰²A.B.D similarly insisted that she works in a sex-mixed environment although her brothers and father were against.

Her argument serves in demonstrating the importance of owning or cultivating inner strength for a woman to acquire and develop agency.⁴⁰³

7.6 Motives are Leading Driving Force to Exercise Agency

“Any Saudi woman who possesses a strong motive can develop and achieve, regardless of whether she uses employment or education as a means. Her motives are sufficient to make her succeed”. (D.I.A)

This part places emphasis on motivations and desires as the power engine that translates the inner strength into actions and the abilities to make meaningful decisions. Exercising agency is interconnected to human assets and individual motivation, besides access to material resources (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016). Kabeer underlines that the motivation and the purpose of decisions and actions establish the “sense of agency”, which a researcher needs to apprehend while examining women’s agency (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). In other words, having a motivation transforms the practice of agency into a purposeful action (Kabeer et al., 2016). Likewise, based on a study in Mali, Elise Klein considers motivation as a basic element which defines the psychological agency of women, and which makes agency active and intentional (Klein, 2016; Klein & Ballon, 2018). In consistence, the analysis of the findings found that having motives is a basic constituent of agency, and it is what directs a woman to define her goals and work towards achieving them.

During both group discussions with housewives of the upper and the middle class, the participants insisted on the ambition of a woman as a fundamental element to make her decisive and successful in fulfilling the life she desires. It is worth noting that the women of those groups have never been employed, and they looked at agency without counting employment as a resource for developing it. About five other participants viewed that motives govern women’s decisions regarding strategic matters, and they determine whether employment can actually develop a woman’s agency or whether another factor can be more influential, such as education.⁴⁰⁴ They are the reason why women make choices of a particular direction, or classify

⁴⁰³ Klein’s analysis of the internal dimensions of agency have been used by recent research of agency, see (Kabeer et al., 2016).

⁴⁰⁴ When I asked the participant about the factor they think it influences a women’s practice or development of agency the most, employed participants from middle and upper middle class such as L.A.S, D.I.A, R.U.H, H.T.N

their personal priorities. As the analysis assumes, motives and desires drive women to choose what to be and how to pursue it, whether it is regarding education, marriage, and work, or where to live. They further provoke women's inner strength to resist, challenge and bargain, when necessary. In support of this, the following paragraphs shall exhibit cases of women who had strong motives, which guided strategic decisions in their lives, demonstrating how motives are powerful to practicing or developing agency.⁴⁰⁵

Concerning the choice of education, one informant shared, "I was inspired by my aunt [she was a single and an independent working woman], I grew up watching her working in the hospital and I always wanted to be like her"; therefore she specialised in "Food Science". In a similar fashion, J.H.R mentioned that her aunt also encouraged her to specialise in Law "she was a writer and an advocate for women's rights but at her time this major was not available for women in Saudi Arabia", this was a main motive for her to apply in law when it was first allowed for female students in 2005. A third interviewee expressed that her motivation to study Architecture had resulted in several confrontations with her family because she had to move to another city to be able study it. However, her persistence to realise this particular desire opened various doors of opportunities for her; even though she didn't graduate from Architecture she experienced moving to another city away from her family, and maintaining a career there. A fourth informant mentioned that her motive for studying Psychology was because her son was diagnosed with autism. Her son's case gave her the motivation to continue her PhD to help support more children psychologically in the future.

One participant revealed a strong case of how a motive can be powerful in developing greater agency in all aspects of life. This 41 years-old informant (divorced, high-school degree, employed, working-class) was a cancer survivor and after beating this critical disease she decided that her life had to change, no longer wanting to be weak or obey oppressive social rules: "I was not satisfied about my self in that life", she explained. She fought for divorce from her abusive husband, challenged her family to work, secured financial independence, began to continue her higher education as a part timer, and gained the custody of her children. This interviewee was a main supporter to the argument that employment enables Saudi women's agency and limits the influence of social restraints on them, she had a strong intrinsic motive to use employment as means to obtain superior agency. She recalled:

replied "It depends on what she wants to reach and why". S.O.F thought, agency is fostered when a woman sets a purpose in life.

⁴⁰⁵ See appendix 5 for details about participants' characteristics.

“My medical condition was the main motive for me to change. I was so close to death and I survived, this made me stronger. [However] of course my employment and financial independence increased my practice of agency, it encouraged me to be more daring and decisive about my own decisions. For example, I was able to rent a house and live separate from my family and you know how this can be difficult in our society. Work enabled me to resolve my issues in my own terms... Your financial ability is very influential in loosening the social control and pressure over you as a woman. The money makes you say I am going to do this my way, and I will be responsible for my own decisions”

Most importantly to this research, motives and aspiration can be the key to a woman’s choice of work. Some chose to work because they were facing financial difficulties and their motive was to improve their living,⁴⁰⁶ or acquire financial independence.⁴⁰⁷ Others pursued a career for self-realisation and for the achievement of professional goals.⁴⁰⁸ An alternative motive is viewing employment as ‘the expected track’ after education.⁴⁰⁹ A few women conveyed that loneliness and boredom were their main reason for work; they needed it to construct a sense of self-worth.⁴¹⁰ Nevertheless, to some housewives working is a sacrifice to the children’s and the husbands’ rights, therefore their motive for committing themselves to their families refrains them from working. To others work comes at the expense of their well being and accumulating more responsibilities, thus their motive for staying at home is the burden they would carry with work.⁴¹¹ As M.N.R puts it: “Some women chose to devote themselves to the family and others fight for their career success”.

The consideration of the diversity of motives for having employment adds further depth to the analysis of agency and demonstrates the complexity of drawing conclusions about it. Understanding that motives can be quite different and important to agency makes us reconsider the assertion of what is empowering and what is not on behalf of all women. Having different motives translates into divergence in individual women’s choices between employment and non-employment. In addition, it explains why employment might not result in offering greater agency

⁴⁰⁶ K.L.D, R.N.D, A.M.L, H.W.Z, Group 2.

⁴⁰⁷ S.F.A, H.D.L, Group 1 and 2, S.M.R, R.N.D, S.D.S, L.A.S, L.E.E.

⁴⁰⁸ Such as B.T.H, S.F.A, J.H.R, A.N.A, D.I.A, M.N.R, and many others.

⁴⁰⁹ W.H.D, L.E.E, J.H.R, H.W.Z.

⁴¹⁰ L.L.S, S.M.R, R.N.D.

⁴¹¹ Conclusions regarding women employment and gender equality in SA showed “heterogeneity of experiences, identities and perspectives of Saudi women in pursuit of employment” (Syed et al., 2018, p. 171).

for some cases, as it might not serve their purpose or fulfil their motivation whilst another path can.

For example, J.H.R saw that her employment was a “natural evolution” after her academic journey in Law. Another informant mentioned:

“Since studying in the university I knew I wanted to work, I wanted financial independence, I don’t want to depend on my father only for money.... Besides that I do not like to stay at home and do nothing” even after her marriage. [On the contrary], most of my friends prefer to get married and settle as housewives rather than develop a career”.

Like others, H.W.Z said:

“I have graduated from university to benefit the community and develop myself, therefore I chose to work; I can’t live without achieving my goal”.

Similarly, D.Y.I explained her motive for being a freelancer rather than employed:

“It is tragic that I work for others and give them all my energy and ideas for a fixed price. This doesn’t satisfy me... I prefer to determine where and what to work”.

In contradistinction to the previous participants, others viewed themselves as mothers and not workers because that was what they chose to be. As Nasseef (2004) confirmed, many Saudi women prefer to be housewives and stay at home rather than work. Several non-employed participants in this study mentioned the absence of financial need and their social entitlement of comfort as common reasons for them not to think of work.⁴¹² One informant shared a story of her daughter who graduated as one of the top students in Dentistry, but when she had her first baby she decided to dedicate herself to her family since she had the choice to do so. Another interviewee reported that she appreciated that in our society the man is the main house provider, because when she wanted to stop working she didn’t have to worry about the finances. Similarly, G.H.D expressed: “I am grateful that I don’t have to work or help my husband in the family’s expenses”.

Although some researchers would argue that this opinion may represent false consciousness that is informed by norms (Caven, 2006), the analysis tends to embrace that as long as the opportunity is available, and the informant has the ability to make a choice, and hasn’t referred to limitations regarding that, then it is a matter of preference, and their choice is purposeful. Correspondingly, Khader (2016) advise women’s choices according to preferences must not be

⁴¹² They agreed it is the man’s duty to provide for the family whilst women’s work is for experience or leisure. They perceived not-working is favourable for women who do not need money.

overlooked for examining aspects of empowerment comprehensively, even if they endorse local cultural values. In the same vein, Caven (2006) has discussed how neglecting preferences can mislead the researcher to an inadequate understanding of agency. She urged researchers to recognize that employment might not be a fundamental concern of a woman, in particular since women in various societies have the option to work or not, unlike men, who are responsible for the provision of finances as a matter of duty. She accentuated that it is possible that a woman prefers to stay at home and care for the children as a matter of prioritizing rather than being a “victim of patriarchal systems” (Caven, 2006).⁴¹³

Altogether, this sub-part demonstrates the significance of motives in fostering agency and determining which resource can benefit the realisation of women’s empowerment (Figure 8). In summary, motives influence women’s agency as they direct women towards making a particular choice. Furthermore, they influence women’s choice of the way or the resource to reach their goals, that’s why employment can enlarge some women’s level of agency but not others. Finally, motives are the determinant of whether women are practicing ‘effective agency’ (selecting choices according to their social and gender roles responsibilities), or ‘active agency’ that is meaningful and purposeful.

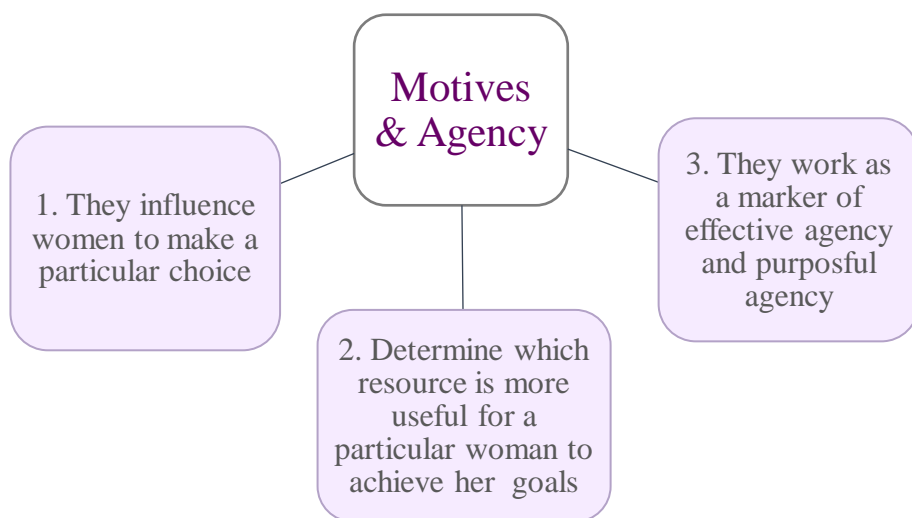


Figure 8: Motives and Agency

Source: Author

⁴¹³ living in harmony with one’s values and preferences is part of the individual’s well-being and overall health, which is important for being empowered (Khader, 2016).

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter complements the former chapter by discussing five central arrays of conditions for women to develop agency through employment or any other resource. These involved the significance of the control of earnings, the support of the family members to woman's goals, the provision of help with domestic responsibilities, the woman's character strength represented in challenge, persistence and negotiation, and the need to have a driving motive. The discussion included clarifying in which sense each aspect work as an enabler of agency, so one can comprehend how their absence can impede practicing agency. Despite the resemblance of the results with other studies on agency and empowerment, the discussion and the analysis introduce unprecedented details specific to the experiences of Saudi women from Jeddah.

Chapter 8: External Influences on the Development of Saudi Women's Agency via Employment

8.1 Introduction

This chapter takes the analysis one step further; by considering external factors, which impact women's practice or acquirement of agency by employment. It discusses particular social and legal aspects of the outer context surrounding Saudi women, and how they relate to fostering agency via employment. Those are: 1) the family and the surrounding environment, their rules and values; 2) the financial situation of the woman and her family; and 3) relevant laws and regulations. The division between the conditions in the previous chapter and the external factors here was driven by the responses of the participants in groups and individual interviews. They distinguished between enablers which had affected the development of their own agency and these external influences which relate to the general social structure, or apply to the general features of the society. These points can also be understood as the participants' evaluation of the social and legal "opportunity structure".

This exploratory research examined the opportunity structure of employment in Chapter 4 by reviewing previous studies. However, this one discusses the interviewees' evaluation of the opportunity structure of female employment, whilst the analysis deliberates how they determine the extent to which employment can foster women's agency. It sheds light on a number of reasons why enlarged access to employment as a resource doesn't enable agency in the same way for different women. Consequently, it demonstrates the importance of studying the opportunity structure and considering life circumstances as part of examining of women's agency (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 2005, 2016; Kabeer et al., 2016; Ballon & Klein, 2018). This chapter offers bottom-up data on the opportunity structure that can be useful to instruct future strategies and actors about particular facets of the structure, which either require reform and improvement to enable women with greater exercise of agency in Saudi Arabia, or can serve as a guidance for some starting points to build future strategies of empowerment for women in Saudi Arabia and other contexts.

“The work of external actors ... may be conceived not as empowering women but as clearing some of the obstacles from the path and providing sustenance for women as they do empowerment for themselves”. (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015, p.405)

8.2 The Influence of the Social Surrounding

“The needs and requests of women differ according to their social surrounding, hence their aspirations for change are different” H.D.L.

Part of the main inquiry of this research is to inspect whether expanding employment opportunities has resulted in eliminating or relaxing social limitations on the agency of Saudi women. Eleven informants explicitly affirmed that expanding women employment in general relaxes social limitations for women to acquire greater agency. Previously Chapter 6 (6.6) has discussed how the expansion of employment opportunities has enticed a change in the public perception about women and their role in the society. On the other hand, eleven participants also perceived that the social surrounding of the woman in question determines whether employment, and/or the expansion of female employment opportunities, can serve in loosening informal limitations on her attainment of a superior level of agency.⁴¹⁴ To explicate, in their view the influence of employment or its expansion on developing women’s agency principally depends on the family’s understanding, acceptance, and permission for that development to transpire. Those informants reaffirmed that the surrounding socio-cultural values and norms control women’s exercise of agency even when the opportunity is available, and they have access to it. However, the opinions across the sample were distinct regarding the type and strength of the social surrounding’s influence on a woman’s agency, which this subsection shall discuss.⁴¹⁵

The term “social surrounding” here signifies the values of the family and the surrounding community where a woman is raised and with whom she interacted throughout her life. It also includes the norms that define gender relations and roles, which as a result delineate the social rights, duties, and behaviours of a woman.⁴¹⁶ Although there are broad lines that define these roles and rights (explained in Chapter 4), they still vary depending on the values of the

⁴¹⁴ The conclusions discussed in part represent the participants’ answers to the question whether they viewed women’s employment loosening social limitations to foster agency.

⁴¹⁵ It is to notify that this section represents the informants’ answers about the effect of employment on women’s agency in general; it doesn’t infer their personal experience.

⁴¹⁶ The participants’ did not imply the economic status or class of women when they say social environment.

surrounding environment.⁴¹⁷ Ample of research on women's agency and empowerment upholds that the social context which the woman is exposed to and lives in can have a very negative influence on her abilities to make strategic decisions freely and direct her life, in particular when it's patriarchal (Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer, 1999, 2005; Klasen & Lamanna, 2009; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Marcotte, 2010). As reviewed in Chapters 2 and 4, the Saudi social context is distinguished as patriarchal; however, the perceptions of the participants varied regarding the influence of women employment and its expansion, on patriarchal norms.

The first group of views takes at the conservative social surrounding as an obstacle to the development of women's agency via employment.⁴¹⁸ In other words, it makes it difficult for employment to enable women's agency (Figure 9). Their standpoint explains and reinforces this research's argument that the support of a family member works as an asset of agency to Saudi women, which was demonstrated in subsection (7.4).

S.D.S (55 years-old, married housewife, university degree in Islamic studies, mid-class) stated:

"I don't think that employment has relaxed social limitations on women, even if it did its influence is minimal. Women who are employed in respected jobs come from open-minded families, they are already well educated and come from upper social classes. Working-class women who are employed for living are pushed to the labour market to survive.... The intention is not the growth and advancement of women".

K.L.D (23 years saleswoman, single, high-school degree, working class) confirmed saying:

"Why would your family let you work if you are not going to give them the money in the first place? In my [surrounding] community they don't get the idea that a woman works for herself and to achieve her purpose".

Similarly E.F.T (39 years, married, previously employed, working class) viewed:

"Only when the family is understanding and open to change, work can relax social limitations".

M.D.I, (33 years, married, working in HR, university degree, Upper-class) also affirmed:

"Being employed or not, does not change social constraints which your family believes in and impose on you".

⁴¹⁷ Investigating the influence of education and employment on women's decision-making as part of empowerment in Sri Lanka, the findings demonstrated how distinctive norms of different ethnic and religious communities dictates what women can be or do was the central problem, rather than women's autonomy (Malhotra & Mather, 1997).

⁴¹⁸ Conservative here implies that the family preserves patriarchal norms, practices, and social values that can be against the freedom of women's agency.

Those observations were expressed from participants that differed in their characteristics. They varied in age, marital status, social class, education, and employment status. Nevertheless, this group confirms the argument stressing that patriarchal norms and values is a vital restraint to acquiring or exercising agency (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Kohan et al., 2012; Malhotra & Mather, 1997). Equally, it sustains that in many cases the advantage of employment is not sufficient to develop the agency of women and waive the structural limitations within their social context. This argument corresponds findings of other research on women’s agency and empowerment around diverse countries (Elson, 1999; Haghghat, 2013; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Sadaquat & Sheikh, 2011; Visvanthan et l., 2011).

Kabeer (2016) maintained that gendered restraints are embedded in the relationship between family members, which explains the argument of this group. She gave an example about Middle Eastern women; and how norms can strongly influence their agency by sanctioning constraints on their mobility and public participation. Whilst listing the reasons for the failure of employment to develop women’s agency, she outlined that some facets of gender inequality were immune to transformation as a result of the strength of the cultural norm’s influence on women and their positioning (Kabeer, 2016). Therefore, realising agency via employment is possible only when or if it encourages change to the constraints related to gendered relations and patriarchal social norms (Kabeer, 2011; Kabeer et al., 2016). Evidence on women of the Middle East confirmed that cultural beliefs plays a vital role in their modest employment rates (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009).⁴¹⁹ In some Arab countries, employment has not proven to be effective in challenging cultural norms (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Spierings et al., 2010; Zuhur, 2003). Evidence from other research coincides with the opinion that the surrounding society can restrict the exercise and the development of agency.

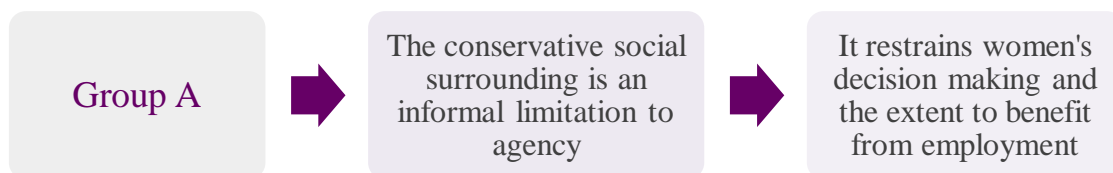


Figure 9. Influence of conservative norms A

Source: Author.

⁴¹⁹ Corresponds the study of Sadaquat and Sheikh (2011) on Pakistani women establishing that the surrounding society and their attitude towards workingwomen is one of reasons for their low market participation.

By contrast the second set of opinions (four participants from middle and working class) maintained that the conservative and difficult social surrounding have cultivated the attributes of strength and power in Saudi women, which makes employment an absolute advantage to the practice of their agency (Figure 10). For example, H.W.Z revealed:

“Saudi women endured a difficult environment and controlling social norms yet they were active as mothers and as business investors ... this difficult environment is what made them powerful and strong”.

Furthermore H.D.L maintained:

“Women whose rights are abused by the male dominance gain more advantage from work to practice agency than others”.⁴²⁰

Despite the fact that this finding is exclusive to this research, unparalleled by findings of similar studies, the analysis attempted to translate their particular outlook in relation to the academic discussion of agency.

Having a difficult environment can be a driving motive for women to realise their life goals, and as discussed earlier in this chapter, motives are fundamental for agency to be purposeful (Kabeer et al., 2016; Klein, 2016; Klein & Ballon, 2018). From another side, in many cases, it pushes women to the exposure of tough experiences, which help them cultivate certain skills that are considered soft assets of agency. Such experiences could contribute to the growth of the “power within”, represented in questioning injustice, developing critical analysis, expanding knowledge, believing in oneself, and the willingness to seize empowering opportunities (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2016; O’Hara & Clement, 2018). The controlling environment also entices challenge, resistance, and rebellion in some cases,⁴²¹ and these are considered forms of agency (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). In general, as Parpart et al. (2003) put it, empowerment grows within the specific challenges of a certain context. Therefore, this group opinion can be part of Kabeer’s explanation that “pathways of women’s empowerment ... will be shaped by women’s struggles to act on the constraints that prevail in their societies, as much by what they seek to defend as by what they seek to change” (Kabeer, 2011, p. 499).

⁴²⁰ S.F.A supports this opinion.

⁴²¹ H.D.L, S.F.A, Group 1 (working-class).



Figure 10. Influence of conservative norms B

Source: Author.

The third group of opinions surprisingly held that there is no relation between social limitations, employment, and agency. It is important to note that this opinion derived from two participants only; and those were wealthy and came from more open-minded families (Figure 11).⁴²² The first stated:

“The greatest limitation of a woman is her lack of confidence and abilities. As for social and religious limitations I scratch them out of my dictionary, they don’t exist to me...The social norms are overrated, they are not as strong as everyone claims”.

The second expressed:

“There are so many cultures around the world that oppress their women, only those who challenge can survive everywhere not just in Saudi Arabia... A Saudi woman is able, and can realise goals! I do not think that there has been any kind of limitation for a woman to reach her goals, I am against the opinion that Saudi women are oppressed. These are just publicized ideas and we believed them”.

These opinions are also unique, in comparison to the various evidences reviewed in the literature. Nevertheless, they can represent two standpoints; firstly they confirm the participants’ views that the inner strength of a Saudi woman is a substantial asset of agency. Having the ability to belittle limitations and focus on the realisation of goals regardless of the obstacles is strength indeed.⁴²³ Secondly, one expectation of acquiring agency in the course of empowerment is to guide women towards seeing themselves able and entitled (Cornwall, 2016). The perception of this group intersects with this account, and highlights the importance of psychological assets for women to foster agency. Alternatively, it could be possible that those women haven’t met strong social limitations against their wills, as have other women in the sample (Figure 11).

⁴²² By contrast, other participants from the upper class transferred that their families exerted control or influence on their choice of work and education in many cases. 1) Family influenced their work decisions (M.D.I, D.I.N, S.O.F, T.I.M, S.U.M). 2) Family influenced the choice of education (S.O.F, R.A.F).

⁴²³ See Chapter 7 (7.5).

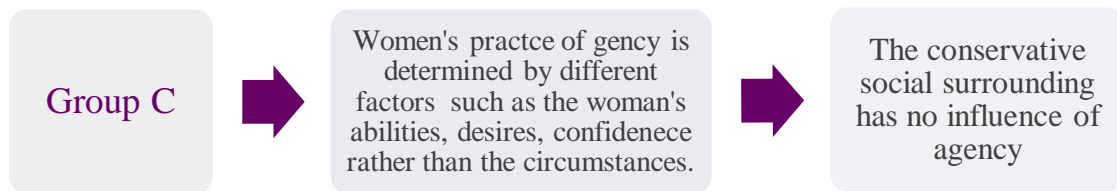


Figure 11. Influence of Social Surrounding C

Source: Author.

The final group perceived that the influence of employment in relaxing social limitations, or the strength of the social environment's influence on a woman's agency in general, depends on the strategic decision a woman wants to make, and whether it threatens a value of the family. To clarify: the family might not exert their control on all matters, while at the same time employment might enlarge women's practice of agency in some aspects but not others, depending on what suits the family (Figure 12).⁴²⁴

For example, the Focus Group 2 generated information on cases of women who are educated, rich, working and who lived abroad for many years; they have practised agency freely regarding several decisions but their family didn't allow them to choose the person they marry. Despite that "women nowadays increasingly choose whom they marry... Marriage could be heavily governed by social customs. Some families refuse that the younger daughters marry before the older". Other informants added that in other cases the family tolerates that a woman chooses her career or whom she marries, but she has to sustain a certain appearance (covering the face, or only the head, or dressing in a certain manner). Similarly, in her research on the negotiation of domestic power in relation to employment, Sakshi (2015) illustrated that women can obtain power to negotiate their gender roles and domestic responsibilities, although bargaining power varied depending on the aspect.⁴²⁵ In another example, Kabeer et al. (2016) took note that the surrounding setting can possibly permit working women to negotiate customs of marriage or motherhood, but it didn't have the same weight to transform other areas.

⁴²⁴ Mothers in Bangladesh were supportive of the girls' choices of education and economic participation but they were restrictive of their decisions related to marriage and childrearing (Schuler & Rottach, 2010).

⁴²⁵ Some aspects were easier to negotiate than others.

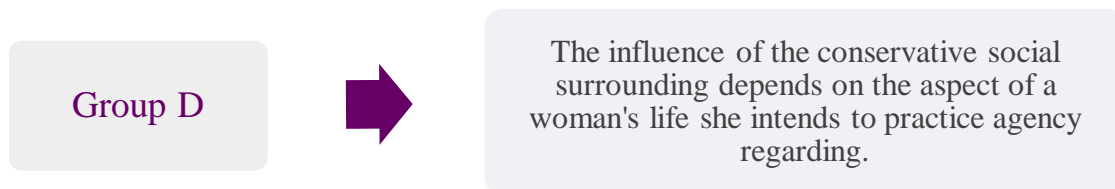


Figure 12. Influence of Social Surrounding D

Source: Author.

In fact, it is a well-established proposition that having agency in one aspect doesn't imply women's ability to practise agency regarding another; in many cases this relates to gender norms, power relations, and the social structure (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Cornwall, 2016; Cornwall & Edwards, 2014; Kabeer et al., 2016; Tsikata & Darkwah, 2014). Ultimately, the variation in the views amongst the four groups discussed above suggests the significance of considering each case independently when examining agency, and underlines the complexity of drawing conclusions about the different dimensions of agency. Furthermore, the findings illustrates the usefulness of qualitative methods to understand the multidimensional concept of agency in a holistic manner (Gammage et al., 2016; Kabeer, 2016).⁴²⁶

On another note about the diversity in the judgments regarding the influence of the social surrounding on a woman's agency, the participants in Group 2 agreed that Saudis' social texture is very diverse and contradictory at times,⁴²⁷ therefore it is very difficult to form a general opinion about a social matter,⁴²⁸ especially with reference to women.⁴²⁹ Women exist in different circumstances and live according to different family rules, hence their journeys and determinants of acquiring/fostering greater agency vary. This disparity, in part, is highly influenced by the values and the judgments of the social environment. Therefore, the analysis of the participants' perceptions endorses that the strategies devised to empower women should understand and take into account these particular social values.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁶ Agency is multi-dimensional and cannot be tracked or addressed looking at one aspect only (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Visvanthan et al., 2011).

⁴²⁷ Corresponds with (Al-Eissa & Gahwaji, 2012; Al-Seghayer, 2015; Thompson, 2015).

⁴²⁸ It was difficult for the informants and for my self to identify whether it is a class issue or not. Many wealthy and well-known families can adopt strict patriarchal norms while others don't regardless if they were habitants of the city or rural areas.

⁴²⁹ As described by Group 2, similarly Group 4, S.H.R and E.F.T agree.

⁴³⁰ For example, enlarging female employment opportunities in Saudi Arabia was allowed provided that women work in a completely segregated work-spaces in the beginning. This factor has encouraged the expansion of their employment as illustrated in Chapter 4 and as section (8.4.2) will elaborate. Furthermore, when the government offered international scholarships for higher education abroad, they offered to cover the financial expenses for the

8.3 The Financial Situation of the Women and Their Families.

According to the results of this study, the economic situation of women and their family or husbands is another factor that influences their practice of agency, or their attainment of agency by the aid of employment. Spierings et al. (2010) demonstrated that when the economic need exist, it changes the social perceptions about the value and acceptance of women's work. Evidence from diverse countries suggested that the development of different aspects of agency through employment are class related (Bespinar, 2010; Malhotra & Mather, 1997; Wolf, 2011; Haghghat, 2013). As an illustration, Haghghat (2013) maintained that employment could further diminish the status of women from the lower class, whilst employment of upper and middle class women showed a different effect.

According to the data gathered for this research, the wealth of the family or the husband eliminated the women's need for work, yet it creates another sphere of opportunities for them to realise their goals. Three informants of this study shared an interesting opinion regarding the relation of wealth to restrictions on women's agency. During the conversation with one of the focus group sessions (non-working women from the upper class), the women viewed that when wealthy families limit the opportunities or the ability of a woman to make a certain choice, it would be easier for her to accept as she enjoys a comfortable luxurious life and she would be offered other alternatives.⁴³¹ For example, if a woman's family is wealthy and does not allow her to travel alone they will make the effort to take her to that place, and if they don't let her work they might supply her with the money to start up a business. From their viewpoint, having limited exercise of agency would be easier on a wealthy woman because she understands her family's values and motives, as well as enjoys s comfortable living. In such cases, employment is less likely to be attractive for those women, as it might offer them less variety of options or advantages than the those they are already enjoying.⁴³² The father of T.I.M is another example; he covered all her expenses even after her marriage, but was strongly against the idea of her employment. When she was offered a tempting job offer she wanted to try the experience of

woman's guardian too. Despite that the laws requires the guardian's permission for women to travel abroad, the financial incentive encouraged many families to allow their daughters seize the opportunity.

⁴³¹ D.E.M also agrees.

⁴³² As established in other studies, in Arab countries women from middle and upper classes have better access to education and employment opportunities (Spierings et al., 2010).

employment, but she hesitated at the end: “I knew my father will know eventually and he will get mad”, and she preferred not to lose his support.

Employment for women of the upper class can be a fulfilment of a purpose or a personal enjoyment,⁴³³ but the weight of the family or the partner’s wealth is more important in realising their goals. As Alkhateeb (1987) illustrated, the family’s wealth and status is a main source of power for a Saudi woman in her community. Women of this class bargain their practice of agency, because their needs and desires are satisfied and/or they feel empowered by the family’s financial resources. In such cases, the wealth of the family or the partner substitutes employment as a resource for exercising choice. In her examination of women’s status in the Middle East Haghghat (2013) explained this view reporting that women in MENA receive high protection and maintenance in exchange for their lower status than men. She underlined that women who take up employment can sacrifice these rewards (Haghghat, 2013). Equivalently, Kandiyoti (1988) explained that tying the family status to women is part of the patriarchal bargain within Arab countries; women rather find security through husbands and sons than resist the system. She underlined that the withdrawal from employment is required when being from the upper class or marrying a man from a wealthy family because it is a sign of a high status (Kandiyoti, 1988). Researching the Saudi case in particular, Khadija Nasseef accentuated that both education and employment are tools for self-realisation and improvement of status for Saudi women. Nevertheless, she found that financially they favour marrying a man who provides for their homes and needs rather than work, she illustrated (Nasseef, 2004).

Middle class families with lower financial abilities might not have the capacity to offer such a variety of alternatives. The lower financial positioning of the family makes them less controlling about a woman’s decision to work, and thereby it gives her a higher possibility for obtaining greater bargaining power regarding other matters later. In Focus Group 2 (mid-class women working in different sectors), one participant mentioned that: “The need for money was a central reason to change social perceptions about women’s work. This made the women work with the blessings of their families despite the fact that female employment was against their values in the past”. This confirmation recalls with the argument of Iversen and Rosenbluth that no matter how strong the norms, they adapt to the economic need (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010a, 2010).

Several participants agreed that the Saudi family of the middle class today requires more than one income, as one doesn’t suffice the requirements to secure the living standards they desire.

⁴³³ N.D.A, R.U.H, D.I.A.

Many of the participants drew attention to the constant increase in the prices of utilities and essentials, such as water and electricity bills, rents, groceries, cosmetics, and fuel. L.E.E shared:

“The change in economic circumstances and the shortage of proper employment opportunities made young people want to work at anything, and this influenced their parents and family’s opinion regarding the type of work they take”.

In addition, twelve participants viewed that younger men of this class prefer to marry employed women as a result of the increased life expenses. As a confirmation, the General Authority of Saudi Statistics announced an increase of 4% in the cost of living between December 2016 and December 2017 (General Authority of Statistics, 2017). Also in their article, Naseem and Dhruva (2017a), included the increasing cost of living as a main influence on the decline of fertility rates in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, women’s financial contribution to the family or being in charge of her own expenses became appreciated in middle class. It enables women and their family to maintain their social status, and to fulfil their consumption desires; as a result, women’s financial gain and contribution could lead them to larger exercise of agency.⁴³⁴

By contrast, the group discussion with women working in the minimum wage (working class) revealed that the modest financial situation of the family makes them use their daughters/wives’ employment for their own benefit. Such families would make sure that a woman’s employment does not result in her independence and liberation, as they explained. They utterly denied that the urgent financial need changes the values and norms of the family regarding woman’s gendered role and positioning, or that her financial contribution can enlarge her practice of agency.⁴³⁵

From the testimonies, the analysis revealed that employment serves in increasing the level of agency for women from the middle class more than other classes (Figure 13). An article on employment and gender roles indicated that the employment of women can give rise to financial independence and self-fulfilment for middle-class women more than working-class women (Tang & Zuo, 2000). Another study on workingwomen’s agency in Turkey reported similar findings (Bespinar, 2010). It demonstrated that women of the middle class exhibit more control of money and negotiation power than working-class women, despite the fact that the value of traditional roles and the interference of husbands in women’s decisions appeared in all classes.⁴³⁶ For working-class women employment is an economic matter, whereas for middle-class women

⁴³⁴ See Chapter 6.

⁴³⁵ K.L.D, Group No. 1,

⁴³⁶ It provides an example of Middle-class women who obligated their husbands to pay for their insurance and retirement when they demand their wives to leave their jobs and stay home.

it is a matter of keeping status, practising motherhood, and fulfilling consumerism (Atal, 2017; Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005; Sakshi, 2015; Sholkamy, 2014).⁴³⁷

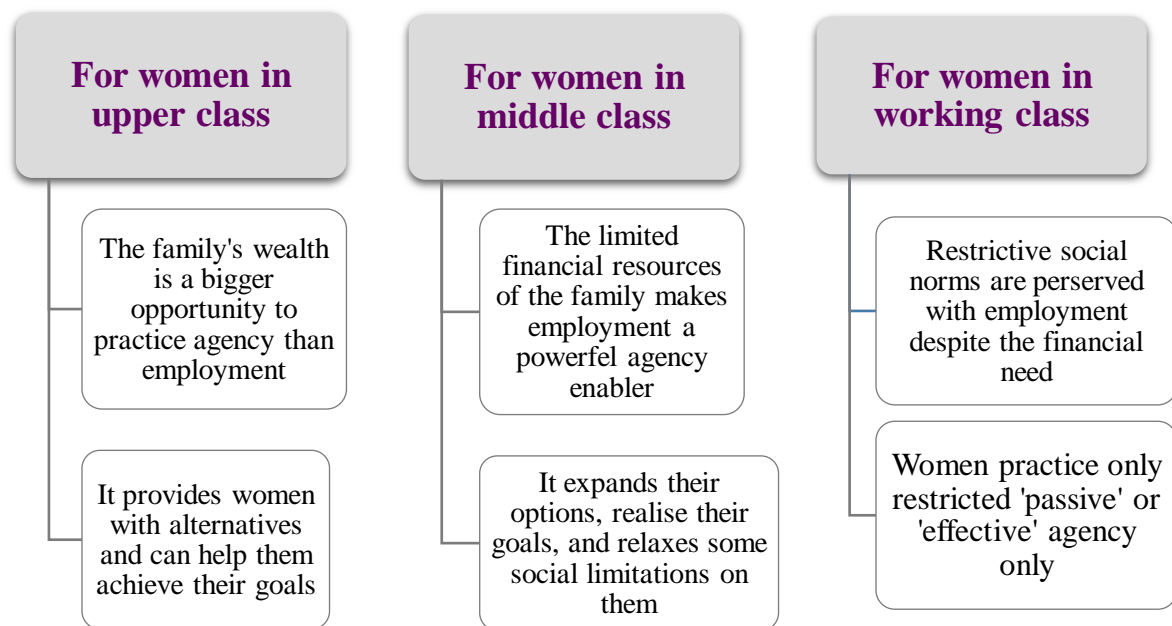


Figure 13. Influence of the financial circumstances on women’s agency via employment

Source: Author.

8.4 Relevant Laws and Regulations

Delving into the last point of external structural influences on Saudi women’s agency, and/or their attainment of agency via employment, this part discusses the participants’ stance regarding relevant laws and regulations in Saudi Arabia. The discussion of legal rights intertwined with employment was important because first, they delineate the formal side of the opportunity structure, i.e. how efficient the structure of employment is. Second, because they influence the level of agency women can practise or develop through employment. To explicate, the legal rights and the position of policies towards gender equality strongly influence women’s practice of agency in public and within the household (Kabbeer et al., 2016). The importance of the government’s involvement and the supportive policies lies in their role to change social practices (Kabbeer et al., 2016). Thus issuing and promoting laws that are women-enabling can grant Saudi

⁴³⁷ “Women’s experiences of gender equality varied according to individual circumstances such as one’s class” (Syed et al., 2018, p.171).

women a credible tool to challenge their conservative surrounding culture; when they desire to seize available opportunities (Doumato, 2001). Previously, Chapter 4 introduced several legal obstacles facing Saudi women, and discussed their development since the reforms of King Abdullah. This part continues the discussion departing from the interviewees' standpoints. It concentrates on regulations governing the employment of women or issues relevant to them, as per the participants' dialogues.

When the informants were asked about "formal" structural limitations, which restricted their agency in general or gaining agency via employment, they mainly concentrated on the limited choices of education specialisations (as discussed thoroughly in Chapter 6). Nevertheless, a number of participants provided some opinions and suggestions, regarding the regulations of women's employment, which are worth highlighting. Consequently, this part shall discuss opinions regarding 1) feminisation policies and programs, 2) sex segregation at the work place, 3) childcare support, 4) transportation, and 5) male guardianship.⁴³⁸ The participants didn't mention wage inequality between men and women or bad work conditions as an obstacle, in contrast with numerous studies examining agency and employment (Atal, 2017; Haghghat, 2013; Kabeer, 2005; Sakshi, 2015; Sholkamy, 2014).⁴³⁹ Nevertheless the interviewees suggested recommendations for improving policies to enable them to acquire a greater role in the labour market and extend their practice of agency in their domestic and public life, which will be included in the discussion of the five main points.

8.4.1 Feminisation policies and labour programs expanding women's employment

Beginning with female employment policies, Chapter 4 provided details on the policies and regulation of expanding women's employment in the Kingdom, and the government's programs supporting their employment, or "the feminisation of jobs". These included the incremental penetration of women into certain employments, in specific time periods. Furthermore, the supporting programs comprised monetary allowance for job searchers, linking the private sector with applicants, rewarding companies employing Saudi women, as well as offering day care and

⁴³⁸ Correspondingly, Moghadam (2011) distinguishes wage equality, paid maternity, social insurance, childcare amenities, vocational training, career advancement, and sexual harassment laws, as well as not requiring male guardian's permission for work or travel, as important entitlements of women's economic citizenship.

⁴³⁹ For studies examining wage inequality as a negative influence on women's status see (Cook, Roberts, & Waylen, 2000; Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010; Klasen & Lamanna, 2009).

transportation allowance to distinct employed women.⁴⁴⁰ In their book, Iversen and Rosenbluth (2010) argued that strong policy interventions by offering subsidies to cover the cost of hiring women would result in advantageous consequences for advancing women's equality in labour markets.

N.W.R holds a position in the HR department of a business group that owns one of the largest supermarket chains in Saudi Arabia. She said that these programs encouraged the company to employ Saudi women in large numbers.⁴⁴¹ Similarly, although G.H.D is a housewife, when she needed to work she received help from the employment programs. First, she benefited from the unemployment allowance for a year. Then the Ministry of Labour program secured a job for her in the insurance department of a well-known bank. She couldn't continue working because she became pregnant for the third time, but she expressed her appreciation for the opportunity. H.D.L also confirmed that such strategies were effective in provoking the private sector to employ women. Another informant (W.D.H) said that the factory where she works secured a bus for the transportation of female employees with the support of employment regulations and programs. Finally, A.N.A (a lecturer in Law) communicated that the approval of introducing laws of harassment in line with the expansion of women's employment indeed works for the advantage of women and activating their role in the society.⁴⁴²

Alternatively, one of the main issues concerning the employment programs of the Ministry of Labour is the creation of fake positions or what is called disguised unemployment (Adham, 2018; Wehrey, 2015). Women sign symbolic contracts with companies that desire to increase their percentage of Saudi employment to comply with the quota requirements and avoid fines.⁴⁴³ The women's names appear in the payroll but they do not work in the company (Kinninmont, 2017b). T.I.M explains that, in exchange these women receive the amount of the allowance which the government pay to support the enterprises, "whilst staying comfortably in their homes... I know many of my friends who used to look for such opportunities and accept them, and I was personally offered one", she said. Both the employers' demand and the women's agreement with

⁴⁴⁰ See Chapter 4 (4.3.2).

⁴⁴¹ This contradicts Adham (2018) findings indicating that firms in SA have their ways to avoid the quota system Nitaqat, the employment of Saudi nationals in general, and females in specific because they cost more than expatriates.

⁴⁴² The participant referred to the breaking news about the legislative council discussion about activating harassment laws ('Eight articles against harrasment...', 2018).

⁴⁴³ "Fake *Saudisation* refers to Saudis allowing their names to be used by a firm in exchange for a modest salary (around 800 USD). Rather than providing any actual work this arrangement serves simply to demonstrate official compliance with the *Nitaqat* quota-policy" (Adham, 2018, p.78). Kinninmont (2017) named it as "Ghost workers".

such dishonest ways doesn't improve their agency because the monetary gains are minimal and they do not benefit from work as a learning and a developing experience. Furthermore, it leads to the reluctance of companies to recruit those who wish to work; consequently it narrows the available opportunities for other women.

Some interviewees yielded another observation; they desired that the policies include more effort to increase the number of women in positions of power.⁴⁴⁴ M.N.R also commented:

“Women's positions have developed indeed, yet until today we haven't seen a Saudi female minister or an ambassador”.⁴⁴⁵

G.D.R questioned:

“Why women haven't existed enough in decision-making positions until now. I acknowledge that all new domains need time, but men still dominate in banks although women have been working there for a long time!”

Indeed Saudi women in management positions are increasing at a very slow pace according to the Global Gender Gap index of 2017 Saudi women represent only 5.8% of positions in management (*The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017*). Similarly, in other studies Saudi women complained about the insufficient possibility for career advancement “beyond mid-level positions” (Alfarran et al., 2018, p. 719; Tlaiss et al., 2017). To overcome this issue, one informant suggested prioritising and supporting women's hiring in high positions to compensate for the period of their marginalisation.

This is a valid suggestion if the employment expansion targeted gender equality and women empowerment as well as diversifying the economic resources, and replacing foreign labour with nationals. In support of her suggestion, economic analysis indicated that quotas of female labour would help to attenuate the effects of oil wealth on the labour market, and to diversify economic resources as well (Caraway, 2009). Therefore, to overcome social and structural challenges facing women to reach leading and managerial positions, this research supports applying a quota for positions of power in the same way it was implemented in the *Shura* council.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁴ Group 2.

⁴⁴⁵ It is worth remarking, Princess Reema bint Bandar was appointed as the first Saudi female ambassador in Washington DC in February 2019 (Mackenzie, 2019).

⁴⁴⁶ See the second part of Chapter 4. The appointment of princess Reema as the first Saudi female ambassador in Washington DC opens new doors of hope for more women in positions of power (Mackenzie, 2019; ‘Saudi Arabia announces princess as US ambassador.’, 2019).

In a final remark about the regulations of female employment, one participant in Group 2 took note:

“The requirements of women employment in the past were more considerate to women and families’ needs. Women had less working hours, longer paid leaves, and the nature of their jobs didn’t require physical effort like nowadays”.⁴⁴⁷

She perceived that the new employment opportunities should have maintained those privileges.

8.4.2 Sex-segregation in the work place

As discussed previously in the last part of Chapter 4, a number of researchers have criticized the policies regulating Saudi women’s employment for preserving sex segregation at the work places and predestining women for particular jobs.⁴⁴⁸ In reality, segregation adds high cost on businesses, which leads to gender discrimination in employment (Adham, 2018; Naseem & Dhruva, 2017). Other Arab countries overcame gender inequality at work places by integrating women in previously male-dominated jobs, whereas the Saudi Kingdom expanded women employment and opportunities in the public sphere without allowing their competition with men (Doumato, 2001; Le Renard, 2008).⁴⁴⁹ As a result, according to their explanation segregation doesn’t enable equality between men and women or improve women’s status.

The opinions of the participants distinguished between the influence of segregation in the private and the public sectors. The great majority of opinions rejected that segregation in the private sector has a negative impact on women’s employment, their role at work, or their status. In contrast, they viewed it as enabling women’s work in an environment that makes her (and her family) comfortable and secure about the employment. Therefore, Saudi women employees prefer a female work environment (Alfarran et al., 2018; Naseem and Dhurva, 2017). On the other hand, there was unanimity in the opinion that segregation in the public sector is a significant restriction to women’s role.

With regard to the private sector, all the participants except two perceived that the cultural conditioning of the labour market in the private sector is for women’s benefit and protection. They expressed that they are comfortable with the regulations, which organise women’s

⁴⁴⁷ Other participants in the group and S.D.S agreed.

⁴⁴⁸ See Doumato, 2001; Elamin & Omair, 2010; Pharaon, 2004.

⁴⁴⁹ Except for the medical sector (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004).

participation in the labour market, such as forms of sex segregation and the compulsory head covering. The informants of this study considered the segregation regulations as understanding to Saudi woman's personal-space limits, and as an effort for providing them a comfortable work environment. The participants in one of the focus groups commented that they enjoy going to shopping malls more than before, after women started working. As they related, they feel more comfortable and happy with the regulations at their work place and in all other places. The majority of the informants do not wish the situation to change regarding this matter. They perceived such regulations enabled the majority of women to access the various opportunities of employment; hence they worked as an element of support rather than an obstacle. S.F.A affirmed:

“These laws encourage women's work; they make them feel that the work environment shares the same values of their upbringing; they are considerate of women's personal space and special physical and emotional needs”.

In addition, segregation measures never impeded the workflow or influenced the quality of services except in public universities, in their own view. Several participants clarified that in the private sector segregation is not really strict and doesn't entail complete separation between men and women. To the contrary, employees work together when necessary and meet regularly. As R.H.F observed:

“Women in private sectors even with these regulations are exposed to a work environment that is developing... they can physically interact with both men and women or even with men only if the job demands”.

B.T.N, a CEO of a marketing agency who manages men and women employees, commented:

“In many companies around the world different departments are segregated in different floors or different locations sometimes, and they work together perfectly. It is the same thing!”

As a customer, however, S.D.S regarded segregation as an “excellent” solution for the distribution of services, which resolves crowding and benefits the customer.

The participants perceived that these policies are justifiable, specifically in the current transitional phase towards social and economic change. They found that regulations serve to balance between the economic development of the country, the participation of women in the labour market, and maintaining the social culture and identity in the way people are familiar and comfortable with. G.D.R and D.I.N both agreed that if these regulations were removed currently,

“the society would go through crisis”,⁴⁵⁰ in their words. To them, such regulations are necessary measurements to encourage women to work, and the society to accept and adapt. M.D.I took the view:

“Mandating segregation in some sectors works as a protection for women”.

L.A.S held a different point of view:

“We as women are used to the social regulations of our society, and I personally don’t see such laws as restrictions”.

A.B.R, a supervisor of industrial production lines, observed that when she visits locations in rural areas the families of the female employees become worried about their daughters mingling with her. They fear she might influence their daughters’ values, because she comes from the city where people are more liberated and modern. She viewed that without respecting strict segregation in these areas, women won’t have the interest or the blessings of their families to work. Furthermore, Saudi women are concentrated in education and jobs in the public sector (Doumato, 2001; Naseem & Dhruva, 2017a). The informants confirmed that a large number of the population mind that women work in non-segregated sectors like hospitals, and that is why they build up in the academic sector. Therefore, they saw that these regulations helped to shift women’s interest into different sectors of employment.

That is to say, according to the data women’s agency regarding their choice of employment, and realising the benefits of work to develop their agency are enhanced by such regulations. Nevertheless two interviewees beheld that segregation regulations are neutral or of no importance. To them, in reality they neither enable nor interrupt women’s work. Yet, H.L.A took note of one point: “women need to work on their communication skills and make more effort to be in the loop of the work rhythm” whilst working in a segregated environment. They need to improve their characters, take initiatives and be more attentive if they want to develop in their career and be recognized. Even so, one participant (A.M.L) was against segregation policies because she desires that Saudi Arabia become like other countries where different gender interaction is normal.

To further analyse this finding, it is worth considering that cultural beliefs and values highly impact the individual’s perception and feeling of having agency; therefore, including values became essential in the examination of women’s agency (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005). Developmental plans that aim to empower women effectively recognize that importance. For

⁴⁵⁰ W.D.H, S.O.F, and others agree.

example, successful women's organisations in Bangladesh understood that the domestic duties and the consent of the husbands to women's activities were significant to the members. Therefore they tied the advantage of participation to the cultural value; they invited the husbands together with the women to explore the nature of activities and how the membership can benefit the whole family (Kabeer, 2011). In a similar manner, segregation policies or conditioning the labour market to respect the social culture was perceived as an advantage rather than an obstacle.⁴⁵¹ In his research, Al-Harhi (2000) explains that although the Saudi culture doesn't reject the employment of women, it demands a certain work environment. His explanation also confirms that segregation is not an issue that limits women's advancement, but rather a motivation for more women to work.

In fact, the opinions of the informants regarding segregation resembled the views of Saudi women participants in other studies (Alfarran et al., 2018; Meijer et al., 2012). For example, the report of Meijer et al., (2012), communicated the views of Saudi women who were satisfied with the current situation of segregation as it is, whilst others expressed their aspiration for more female-only places and some suggested a separate transportation system. Only a few women of their sample considered that segregation should be terminated. In relation to agency, one of their interviewees described her desire to work in a women-only environment as a "conscious choice" of a particular organisation, clarifying that it was not on the basis of not working with men. Furthermore, the researchers presented Karin van Nieuwkerk argument that effective policies match the understanding and the practices of women in the country,⁴⁵² of which segregation policies in SA attempt to realise. Her research uncovered that Saudi women prefer and support the creation of "parallel female institutions" across sectors, "including education, the labour market, civil society, leisure and consumption" (Meijer et al., 2012, p.10).

Referring to the results of this study, in the public sector, the story is different. Besides the bureaucracy and centralisation of decisions, there is a complete sex-segregation; men and women work in different buildings, and do not communicate directly. Over and above, men's departments hold the main authority and exclude women from important decision-making, which

⁴⁵¹ Al-Seghayer (2015) shared, Saudi women feel respected not restricted, they view that the local laws protect them.

⁴⁵² A senior researcher arguing western frameworks of development policies for women empowerment can be ignorant of local women's specific needs. She distinguished that differences between the sexes without discrimination or imposing dominance of one sex over the other is not inequality (Meijer et al., 2012).

impact their agency and empowerment at work. When asked about the situation of segregation in public universities R.N.D questioned:

“Why do we have to separate men and women everywhere? We created a problem out of nothing! For every work environment we have a division for men and another for women... In [the public academic sector] segregation is a real obstacle. We meet weekly as a department; this means women sitting in a separate room with a screen viewing the men’s room while they talk and we listen. There is no interaction at all between both rooms, we don’t exchange ideas and opinions or participate in making any decision. [She laughed and continued] sometimes women mute the voice and just talk to each other instead. This is just a waste of time”

R.H.F also works in a public university; she clarified that the issue is not the segregation but rather not having the authority in the women’s department of public sector bodies. As she explained:

“These regulations in the public sector restrain women’s autonomy or authority.... Every decision we make a man has to look at and approve; we don’t have the authority to make decisions. Women only do paper and administrative work even though women are doctors, lecturers and deans... It’s completely inconvenient and unrealistic”.

This entails that the ideas, the contribution, and the decisions of women are subjected to men’s approval, keeping them in a lower positioning than men in such organisation. Discussing this issue, Al-Ahmadi (2011) also identified several challenges to women’s development and decision-making in the public sector as a result of complete segregation and having restricted power of decision-making. Those were: poor organisation and communication between departments, lack of clarity in the strategic vision, and insufficiency of information. Clearly, this is a formal restriction in the structure of opportunity for developing women’s agency, in particular when the public sector encompasses the majority of female employees.⁴⁵³ Therefore, the analysis suggests the application of female employment regulations equally across sectors so women in the public sector can have an active role as well.

It is worth highlighting that, none of the women I met or questioned complained about the working condition in terms of the workspace environment, and the facilities they needed such as

⁴⁵³ The majority of women in Saudi Arabia is employed by the government in the public sector (Doumato, 2001, 2010; Naseem & Dhruva, 2017b).

restrooms and eating areas, or working extra hours without a reward.⁴⁵⁴ They have emphasised that the regulations and the employers respect their needs and value their security. This in turn excludes the case of Saudi Arabia from the argument that feminisation policies or the expansion of women employment can be at the expense of worsening working conditions that work against empowering them (Kabeer, 2005; Miles, 2016b; Ross, 2008).

8.4.3 *Childcare support*

Since the expansion of women employment in the private sector, the labour law was reformed to regulate the rights of women. It approves women's paid maternity leave for 10 weeks and the possibility of an unpaid one-month extension. It also required employers to pay for the medical care during pregnancy and delivery (S. Fatany, 2009; Ministry of Labour in Saudi Arabia, 2016). Furthermore, it grants women employees a nursing hour deducted from the working hours when she returns from the leave (Ministry of Labour in Saudi Arabia, 2016). However, diverse informants expressed their dissatisfaction with the absence of adequate day-care facilities in the organisations that employ women in large numbers. They all complained about the quality of the service and care provision in nurseries, and they viewed that the fees are over expensive. A few others complained that even when you have the ability to pay for a good nursery, the opening hours don't help a working mother, because they close at 1 p.m. Surprisingly, article No. 159 from the labour law states that the Minister may oblige employers to supply day-care service when the number of female employees exceeds 50 women (Ministry of Labour in Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 59). As S.D.S suggests this should be imposed on all organisations for employment to empower women and to help them balance between their work and family responsibilities.

Tang and Zuo (2000) also suggested that the lack of childcare services can influence women to favour their domestic gender role as mothers over taking employment in the labour market. In this study, while interviewing the general manager of textile factories, she shared that the female employees appreciated their provision of day-care service at the work place. It increased their loyalty and attachment to the organisation, and prevented their resignation from work when they had new babies. Correspondingly, N.W.R said "I wish my work provided a nursery; if it weren't for the help of my mother I would've resigned when I had my first baby". A.S.I also agrees that workingwomen still depend on their families for childcare rather than nurseries. These requests match policy recommendation to advance women's rights in Saudi Arabia proposed by Safaa

⁴⁵⁴ The sample included women working in the industrial sector and saleswomen.

Rajkhan. She recommended the development of adequate transportation and the creation of nurseries in work places, amongst other recommendations (Rajkhan, 2014).

As a single mother, had L.L.S additional requests, she was appreciative that she has the custody of her son,⁴⁵⁵ and that the law grants her a percentage of the father's salary for the expenses, yet she suggested there should be more legal support for single working mothers. For example, she required to be excused from work on her son's first day at school, to attend her son's parents' meetings, and participate in schools activities. This would allow her to practise more agency regarding work choices, and organise her caring responsibilities more efficiently without guilt, she shared. Furthermore, she highlighted that gendered culture finds its way to the internal regulations in various organisations. As an illustration, she said that employers allow men to arrive late for work to drop off their children to schools, or they take more time after the lunch break to take the children back to home. This, however, is not possible for women employees, because culturally men were responsible for the transportation of the family. This leads to the next point, which discusses transportation issues. Finally, the research team in the AKBK Centre suggested amendments to reform the maternity benefits of employed women in Saudi Arabia according to best practices around the world. The proposition included permitting the employee a choice between full-time and part-time return to work after the leave for a period of six months (AKBK Center, 2015).

8.4.4 Transportation

Previously, Chapter 4 discussed the nature of restrictions on Saudi women's mobility, and Chapter 6 explained how this factor influenced their agency. This subsection looks at the participants' perceptions about the lack of transportation possibilities as a formal limitation in the opportunity structure of their employment. According to a survey that included 1,502 women from 11 Saudi cities in 2012-2013, 50% of the respondents viewed that the ban on driving was a limitation, and 46% transmitted that arranging transportation was troubling. Despite that, only 47% said they wish to drive in the future, although 86% said they are willing to use public transportation if provided (*Survey of Saudi Public Opinion on Women's Participation...*, 2013). Later studies reinforce that securing transportation for Saudi women is a substantial constraint

⁴⁵⁵ S.F.A a divorced mother of three- shared her experience of divorce and custody, and she noticed the development in legal rights. "Divorcees now have a separate identity card [to use for official matters without the need of the man's], women can issue their own family register, and can file for custody. Furthermore, the mother who obtained the children's custody became the exclusive decision maker of their matters, including travelling".

facing their benefit from employment (Syed et al., 2018; Hodges, 2017; Tlaiss et al., 2017). Certainly, transportation for Saudi women was a structural limitation that required serious improvement.

As for the results of this study, a few participants shared their perception about how the inability to drive together with limited transportation alternatives was a formal challenge restricting their agency. To women, arranging transportation wastes a great deal of time and consumes lots of money. L.E.E, for example, had to ride with her husband to her family's house every morning, from where she then rides with her brother to work, returning home with her father-in-law in the afternoon. She conveyed:

“Transportation to work was really difficult, especially because I live remotely from the town centre where I work. I am thankful that I can use Uber now, but I don't feel safe using it late in the evening. That is why I really wish that I live to witness the day when I could drive”.

Likewise, others also viewed that transportation applications resolved a great part of the issue, even though, their usage on a daily basis could be costly. That is the reason why only four participants mentioned transportation as an obstacle.⁴⁵⁶ Similarly, in their study interviewing 11 unemployed Saudi women, Alfarran et al., (2018) mentioned, one woman only complained about the expenses of the transportation to work as a barrier for employment when the salary is low.⁴⁵⁷ Other participants of this study communicated their dissatisfaction about not having alternative public transportation options, such as buses and trams. R.N.D narrated:

“Expanding the employment of women should've been paralleled with creating suitable transportation ... I suffer from this issue as I currently work away from my family and I can't have my own driver, and I would've never minded if I had any kind of public transportation as an alternative”.

In addition, M.H.A recalled her experience working in a different city away from her hometown, and she proposed a distinct suggestion. She suggested that in such cases female employees should get flight discounts on the national airlines so they can return to their families and keep up with work commitments without paying high extra costs.

⁴⁵⁶ NWR, HDL, RND, LEE.

⁴⁵⁷ “Whilst hiring a private car was considered too expensive for women from a low social class, women from a wealthier family did not have this financial barrier to commute to a workplace” (Syed et al., 2018, p.171).

It is to be noted that, at the beginning of the data collection period women in Saudi Arabia were still banned from driving. However, the announcement of lifting the ban was on 27th September 2017 during the data collection, to be active in June 2018 (Alrasheed, 2017; Kinninmont, 2017). Therefore, I had a chance to ask some participants about their willingness to drive in the future. Some were eager and said they will definitely drive, whether because they had already experienced driving abroad or because it will resolve their issue with transportation. Others perceived the permission for women to drive is a victory for expanding opportunities for all women in Saudi Arabia and for activating their agency for real. Yet, they admitted they were reluctant about their choice to drive, as they described; they wanted to wait and see how it will be regulated. A few more said they might try the experience for fun but they never wish to lose their personal drivers. But for all of them the real value of the permission to drive is giving them the choice to drive or not, and not feeling absolutely dependent on men or being obliged to carry the costs of having a driver. Such reform is enabling for agency by all means. Not only has it expanded women's options; but also they challenged a long-lasting gendered norm, which was the most discriminative between men and women in Saudi Arabia. In other words it worked on changing structural limitations both formal and social. However, information regarding whether the permission for women to drive currently has resolved the issues of transportation and restriction on their mobility, is yet to be investigated in further research.

8.4.5 *The male guardianship*

Several positions denounce the male guardianship over women in Saudi Arabia, as it compels them to discriminative gendered customs in varied aspects of their lives (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Doumato, 1999; Fatany, 2009; Fatany, 2013; Quamar, 2016). This formal barrier restrains women's full practice of their human rights (Eijk, 2010), and it largely influenced their autonomy and practice of agency regarding marriage and divorce, business and wealth management, as well as travelling outside the country (Alfarran et al., 2018; Doumato, 1999; Eijk, 2010; Nasseef, 2004; OECD Development Centre, 2014). According to Saudi female participants in a previous study, the guardianship law was a key challenge to women empowerment in the Kingdom (Meijer et.al, 2012). As per L.A.S., she viewed that in the past "as a woman you needed a man's official permission in all matters that you can think of, from birth to death". However, with reforms improving a number of social and legal aspects for women, the male guardianship laws were attenuated.

The law no longer requires women to obtain the guardian's permission to work, to study, or to access the services of the government or health care (Alfarran et al., 2018; Baqi, Albalbeesi, Iftikhar, & Baig-Ansari, 2017; Rajkhan, 2014). For example, women can issue their own identity cards and register their children on a family card under their names, which was not allowed before (Alrasheed, 2015; Vora, 2015). Yet, requiring the male guardian's permission is still widely practised as a routine in several organisations (Alfarran et al., 2018; Bursztyn et al., 2018; Danish & Smith, 2012; Syed et al., 2018), or as a matter of caution to avoid conflicts with employees or customers, as one participant shared. A few participants of this study shared their opinions vis-à-vis the guardian's official control of their matters, agreeing that it still remains in the culture of internal organisations, even when the law doesn't require the permission anymore.

It appears that even when the law is in women's favour, its application in different organisations is not enforced, or adequately monitored (Rajkhan, 2014). In addition, women don't seem to be aware about their rights. One participant highlighted, "despite the fact that the male guardian's permission for women's work is not legally required anymore, there are companies that still require it".⁴⁵⁸ Another interviewee was surprised when I told her that the law doesn't require the husbands' permission for services, because she was asked to provide it when she wanted to open a bank account in Mecca. Appropriately, a national survey showed that only 23% of the female respondents knew about women's work without permission, and only 36% knew about women's ability to travel inside the country without the guardian's permission (*Survey of Saudi Public Opinion ...*, 2013).

Remarkably, an opposite case also existed where the law required the male guardian's presence and permission but it is not strictly implemented. R.H.F expressed her disturbance from the fact that the access to the opportunity of studying abroad in a scholarship was conditional on the permission and the company of a male guardian. "If you need a male guardian then you are not considered 100% an independent individual", she stated. Yet she continued her studies in the U.K for more than six years without the company of a male relative, like a few other participants.

The guardianship system/law is commonly associated with negative connotation, but it is worth highlighting that it is only restrictive to women's agency when the male guardian is not cooperative. 82% of 1,502 female participants in a survey indicated that their male guardians were supportive of their decision to work, with only 6% viewing that their guardians had a

⁴⁵⁸ D.E.M. (S.F.A also agrees).

negative influence on their employment decisions (*Survey of Saudi Public Opinion on Women's Participation in the National Development.*, 2013). Several informants of this research shared that they had their father's or husband's unlimited consent on their travelling abroad. This denotes that the guardianship doesn't always mean men's oppressive authority over women, yet at the same time it allows some men to take advantage of it against the agency of women. Furthermore, two informants working in legal consultancy confirmed that women could file a case against their guardians if they misuse this authority against the woman's advantage.⁴⁵⁹ One of them noted that "*adh*" cases, which involve requesting that the father can no longer interfere in the decision of his daughter's marriage, are increasing.⁴⁶⁰ Recently, a newspaper reported that a thousand cases were filed against male guardianship in a period of 16 months (Aldbais, 2017).

The relaxation of the male guardian's authority facilitated women's practice of agency in several matters regarding business, money management, and health care services. However, women still need their guardian's consent to marry and to travel out of the country; those aspects are yet to be reformed if we were to consider enabling women's agency. Besides that, the analysis revealed two observations: the first, reforming the law by changing it is not enough in itself to change practices; thereby this research advise the government to enforce and monitor the application of the laws, to increase women's benefit from such reforms. The enforcement of different laws in Saudi Arabia is weak and inconsistent, as Ahmad (2012) notes. Therefore, strong actions towards enforcing other rights are recommended, as like when they obliged the "Saudi feminization" of certain stores to expand employment of Saudi women in its beginning.

Second, it is of high importance to raise the public awareness and to advertise for other rights in conjunction with promoting women's employment, so that the women can recognize their entitlements. The efficiency of the reform depends on its reach to the recipients and the benefit it brings to them. The proposition to raise awareness about the development of women's legal rights and to publicise them accentuate Kabeer's condition of choice, which entails that the opportunity and its alternatives must be noticed and acknowledged by women in order to consider their choices as acts of agency. In parallel, raising consciousness and awareness about women's rights had been suggested as one of the key pathways for advancing the empowerment

⁴⁵⁹ Such cases existed prior to employment reforms however their usage by women are increased recently ('Filing a case against male guardianship.', 2013).

⁴⁶⁰ *Adhl* in Arabic has two meanings according to the interpretation of *Imam Alrazi* (2004). 1) to "tighten", 2) to prevent or deter. However, the *sharia* based *adh* cases came from the holy Quraan. The first meaning is used in [*Surat Al-Nisaa*], it addressed husbands to have fine manners with their wives, and not to suffocate them acting immorally. The second usage came in [*Surat Al-Baqara: 232*] it addressed men not to prevent women from marriage.

of women in Saudi Arabia from top-down (Meijer et al., 2012, p.73). The analysis highly recommends expanding public awareness regarding women's rights and empowerment, provided that the awareness campaigns focus on the points of convergence between women's rights in Islam and the principles of empowerment, to be approved and adopted by the public.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined important external influences on the agency of Saudi women intertwined with employment. It examined the structure of employment as an opportunity and looked at three imperative influences on Saudi women's agency in that regard. Firstly, it revealed how the informants perceived the difficult environment or the conservative surroundings in quite distinct ways. Some women viewed it as the greatest obstacle, while others saw it as source of strength, and certain participants perceived its influence to be neutral on agency or to depend on the particular choice. Secondly, it demonstrated how the benefit of employment to enhancing the agency of women could be related to their financial circumstances. It appears to benefit women of the middle class more than those in the upper or lower financial segments.

Finally, the chapter assessed several laws and regulations related to expanding women's employment interlinked with agency. It found that the views of the researchers who saw segregation strategies of women employment to be a limitation were different from the reality experienced by the women, who perceived them to be supportive and protective of their interest. Furthermore, it illustrated that support services such as public transportation and childcare facilities still require attention and development. In addition, it underlined remaining issues facing Saudi women relevant to their employment, such as the limited career advancement and positions of power for women, and the inadequate application and awareness of women's labour rights. Finally, it examined the issue of male guardianship in relation to the topic.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

“Pathways of women’s empowerment are likely to be ‘path dependent’. They will be shaped by women’s struggles to act on the constraints that prevail in their societies, as much by what they seek to defend as by what they seek to change.” (Kabeer, 2011, p.499)

9.1 Research Summary

This research set out to examine Saudi women’s agency as a component of empowerment, after the reforms expanding their employment opportunities since 2010, as the limited employment opportunities before was one of the main obstacles to Saudi women’s exercise of agency. Moreover, access to employment opportunities is considered one of the main resources of empowerment and a key asset of developing agency. The study acknowledges that agency is partly enhanced by accumulating material and non-material assets. However, it is based on the conviction that understanding agency requires scrutinising the structure of opportunity and constraints, norms and gender power relations in a particular context (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2016; Hanmer & Klugman, 2015; Malhotra et al., 2002). Accordingly, this study supports the notion that fostering agency requires a systematic examination and transformation of the challenges and constraints facing particular women in a particular place.

The research attempted to answer a dual research question: how Saudi women perceive employment 1) enlarging their exercise of agency, and 2) loosening limitations on their agency within their social structure? Methodologically this study utilises qualitative ethnography to explore Saudi women’s perceptions and experiences regarding the research topic, inspired by the World Bank’s study ‘On Norms and Agency’ (Munoz Boudet et al., 2013). Specifically, it employed Alsop & Heinsohn’s (2005) framework to study agency as a part of empowerment, and the analysis of the data relied on Naila Kabeer’s understanding of agency as a point of reference: acting actively upon choice, according to one’s meaning, purpose and motivation, as well as overriding the will of others when met by opposition (Kabeer, 2005). Therefore, besides considering the structure of opportunity and constraints, the analysis paid close attention to understanding individual circumstances, attitudes, perspectives and motivations regarding agency in relation to employment.

9.2 Research Findings and Contributions

This research was established to fill a gap in the literature by examining qualitatively the under-researched topic of Saudi women's agency in relation to expanding their employment opportunities. It explores the perspectives of Saudi women themselves, neglected in a number of previous studies on female employment in the Kingdom, whilst paying a special attention to the context. This research specifically gave Saudi women a voice and highlights the local and the individual, particularity of understanding and experiencing the assets and the influences on women's agency, in a country where research access is difficult when it comes to subjects related to women. This particular analysis, which combined two analytical frameworks (Alsop & Heinsohn 2005; Kabeer, 2005), contributes to knowledge by breaking down the specific pathways that lead from employment to agency, shedding light on whether and how the two are actually linked and under what circumstances, thus greatly deepening our understanding of the effects of employment, how women can exercise agency and ultimately how they can become empowered members of society. It also adds to the prevalent statistical information existing on Saudi women, as well as informing local and international policymakers with bottom-up recommendations regarding the usefulness and the shortcomings of employment for developing women's agency.

In this study, I first scrutinised the structure of constraints on Saudi women's agency before the expansion of employment opportunities, by underlining how oil wealth eliminated women's need for employment, and how the *Wahhabi* establishment's interpretation of Islam, their control over social and legal matters and the legal endorsement of patriarchal norms limited Saudi women's employment opportunities and shaped the constraints on their agency. These factors enforced their role as caregivers only, limited their life options and made them legally and socially dependent on men in various aspects of their lives. In addition, I analysed the opportunity structure of Saudi women's employment after the reforms by accentuating how employment reforms contribute to Saudi women's empowerment, and how the segregation policies as well as the new economic plan relying on privatisation could limit the benefit of employment reforms to women.

To discuss the empirical findings, this thesis began by underlining the perceptions and experiences related to how employment was helpful in developing Saudi women's agency in Chapter 6 (figure 14). It started by discussing one of the exceptional findings of this research;

underlining that despite well-established achievements of Saudi Arabia in female education, the structure of education (i.e. the content of the curricula and the education system) falls short in developing women's agency. Furthermore, it explained how employment enabled them to overcome limitations on their exercise of agency caused by the inadequate education experience, mandatory sex segregation and by restricted mobility. Employment motivated their practice of purposeful agency by providing them an effective learning experience, which developed their skills and increased their awareness about themselves, their interests and abilities, and the career options appropriate for them. Furthermore, it enabled their exposure to life experiences and interaction with the wider community, and enlarged their very limited social connections and space of mobility. In so doing, employment equipped the participants with characteristics of "power within", such as self-confidence and self-value, bargaining and negotiation abilities, and ambition for development.

The income generated from employment in particular served as means to their exercise of transformative agency, one that motivates change in their situations and expended their choices in life. Earning an income independently formed a source of security to the participants; it permitted their resistance to oppressive situations and achieving life goals, improved their living standards and entertainment variety, and developed their bargaining skills. The final finding discussed in this chapter was regarding the informants' perception that expanding female employment opportunities in Saudi Arabia increased women's possibilities in life, encouraged women's participation in the public sphere, and motivated change in the public perceptions about women and their role in society, thereby allowing a better environment for women's practice and development of agency. This finding highlights that the provision of the opportunity of employment in new domains was important to Saudi women and that the government's interest and their support to female employment produced some positive changes for women at the social level.

Next, the thesis stressed that fostering women's agency by employment is not an automatic result, and it ascertained five conditions that work as assets for Saudi women to benefit from employment in acquiring a greater practice of agency (figure 14). Hence, a lack of these can disturb the development of their agency through employment. The first is the control of earnings, despite this aspect being considered a social and a legal right for women in Saudi Arabia, and the majority of the participants had control over earnings, it is important to ensure that gender power relations do not violate this right and interrupt women's exercise of agency. Accordingly, this aspect is important for maintaining their practice of agency, unless not controlling the money

was a purposeful choice practiced by the woman.⁴⁶¹ The second condition is help with domestic responsibilities, and this appeared to be significant to the participants both employed and non employed because their fulfilment of caring responsibilities alone restricts their choices regarding employment, entertainment and self-care. Therefore, help with such responsibilities enlarges women's options and their practice of active agency, and encourages balance in gender roles. The third asset is the support of a family member, especially the father or the husband. The importance of their support relies in facilitating legal and social obstacles on women's agency, which enlarges and maintains their practice of agency.

The fourth enabler is having or developing inner strength; this includes bargaining, negotiations, and manoeuvring, all of which allow women to reach their goals and practice agency without confronting familial relations that provide them with benefits and that they consider as support. However, according to the participants' views, inner strength is also represented being decisive and persistent about realising goals even when the surrounding people disagree. Additionally, it includes challenge and resistance in the case that alternative solutions have not been sufficient to enable their agency. The participants who shared this opinion considered that without having or developing inner strength qualities employment might not serve women in acquiring or fostering agency. The final key condition is to have a motive, because motives help to define goals and work as drivers for practicing agency. Furthermore, the motive distinguishes whether a woman's practice of agency is 'effective' or 'purposeful'. It also informs which resource is more adequate to foster agency for a distinctive woman.

With regard to the final part of the findings, I discussed the external influences on women's practice of agency via employment, whether social related to both the values of the family and their financial situation, or legal i.e. regulations related to women's employment (figure 14). The analysis discovered four distinct views regarding the influence of the surrounding environment's values on women's agency. The first group perceived that the conservative social norms and values form an obstacle to women's practice or acquirement of agency through employment or any other resource. By contrast, the second group viewed that the conservative social environment fosters women's agency because it inspires them to have a motive and it improves their inner strength. The third group regarded the influence of the social surrounding on women's practice of agency (whether restrictive or supportive) to be dependent on the particular strategic choice a woman wants to make. In other words, employment might expand the woman's practice of agency regarding one aspect but not the other depending on the values of

⁴⁶¹ *This applies to women of the upper class in the sample.

her surrounding environment. Unexpectedly, the final group considered that the social environment surrounding women has no influence on her agency; they viewed that agency is fostered by the woman's willingness, confidence and determination to reach goals, thereby accentuating the value of psychological assets for women's practice of agency.

Furthermore, I underlined three influences of employment on women's agency according to the financial position of the woman and her family. Employment fosters more the agency of women in middle class than in other classes. For women in the upper class, the family's wealth and financial support offers them a larger sphere of benefits than employment. Meanwhile, for women of working class employment does not seem to relax social limitations on their practice of agency. These findings also featured an evaluation of laws and regulations related to women's employment that impact their practice of agency regarding work such as: masked employment, sex segregation at work place, transportation, day-care facilities and male guardianship. Thereby, the findings covered bottom-up information on the opportunity structure of women's employment in the kingdom, to educate future strategies and actors about particular aspects, which need amendments or enforcement to enable women with greater exercise of agency.

In general, this study establishes that agency is a multi-dimensional concept which embraces overlapping aspects. It demonstrates how developing agency in general, or by employment in particular, is highly dependent on the context and various factors related to the individual circumstances of the woman in question. It was not possible to answer the research question for a wide group of women without considering individual circumstances. Nevertheless, the findings have identified key vectors to look at in those individual contexts that are applicable more widely whilst trying to understand agency and employment across countries.

To explain, the findings have provided details particular to Saudi women on why access to resources (employment) or empowering one aspect of a woman's life does not simultaneously turn into a superior exercise of agency or balance power relations (Ballon & Klein, 2018; Cornwall, 2016). They allow understanding the process through which the opportunity of employment translates into larger agency. The findings as a whole inform the reader and future policies about the particularities regarding acquiring or fostering agency by employment. This research concludes that developing agency by employment is context-dependent, as it relies on each woman's particular path, material and immaterial properties, circumstances, challenges, requirements and goals. The findings of this research offer detailed insights on these different

paths that are useful for drawing strategies aiming to develop women's agency in the process of empowerment overall or via employment in particular.

9.3 Strategic and Future Research Recommendations

The findings of this research prompted a number of strategic recommendations. With reference to the findings related to education, this study recommends improving female education systems in Saudi Arabia to enhance women's exercise of agency. This can be achieved through: increasing the fields of education available to them, ensuring the effectiveness of curricula contents and the outcome they deliver to students in a way that a) does not reinforce gender roles, and b) fosters women's abilities for practicing purposeful choices by improving skills of critical thinking and analysis, problem solving and self-awareness.

In addition, the discussion of the five key enablers for developing agency by employment in Chapter 7 suggest that in order to improve women's practice of purposeful agency efforts should be extended into spreading awareness and endorsing the practice of these enablers. This entails asserting women's right to control their earning as an Islamic, social and legal right, as well as enhancing the value of cooperation in domestic responsibilities. Additionally, efforts should include encouraging family support to women's goals and aspirations, cultivating women's critical thinking abilities, strengthening their character to be strong, assertive and decisive, as well as highlighting the importance for women of having a motive in life. This can be fulfilled through diverse media channels, education institutions, and awareness campaigns at workplaces. Moreover, policymakers can focus on these enablers to improve future empowerment strategies in Saudi Arabia accordingly and to inspire policies of different contexts in other countries as well.

Finally, there are other strategic recommendations which arose from the informants' suggestions regarding formal aspects in the opportunity structure of female employment discussed in Chapter 8. These comprised, firstly, enhancing the monitoring and the application of laws concerning masked employment and the provision of day-care facilities within work places, as well as enlarging the availability of private day-care facilities and improving their quality. Moreover, the findings stimulated spreading awareness of labour programs and employment rights and regulations amongst women, along with finding solutions to eliminate gendered organisational practices influenced by social norms or older regulations, and ensuring and accurately

supervising the application of reformed laws and regulations at all levels. Also, the findings called for increasing and facilitating the reach to managerial and leading positions for women, possibly by implementing quotas for women in leading positions and authorising women's decision-making power in jobs of the public sector. Finally, after lifting the ban on women's drive, the research still advises that more effort be paid to diversifying the means of transportation available to women in Saudi Arabia.

On a final note, the findings and the recommendations are instructive to the UN Sustainable Development Goals of women empowerment in general, and echoed specific targets which this research provided detail about in the Saudi context. Those targets were: 1) acknowledging the value of unpaid care and domestic work, 2) the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, 3) the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate, and 4) ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.⁴⁶²

With regards to scholarly recommendations, examining Saudi women's agency in relation to employment in this research stimulated further inquiries about other dimensions of the topic that work as suggestions for future research. This research examined the practice of Saudi women's agency and discovered what Saudi women valued as assets of agency. However I highly recommend that further research focus on exploring the meaning of the concept of agency as part of empowerment amongst Saudi women, attempting to construct a local meaning of the concept and compare it to the existing theoretical definitions of agency. Discovering what the theoretical term in specific means for Saudi women could be a useful theoretical contribution.⁴⁶³ In addition, this study invites more research to examine different dimensions of women empowerment in different areas of Saudi Arabia, in particular to fully evaluate empowerment with achievement via conducting a mixed method research that covers rural areas in the Kingdom as well.

Furthermore, the timeframe of this research did not allow for including information about significant reforms that took place in Saudi Arabia after the interviews were conducted and which related to women's agency, such as lifting the ban on women driving, authorizing automatic children's custody for mothers in case of divorce, and the huge expansion of

⁴⁶² See ('Sustainable Development Goals', 2016; 'Goal 5: Achieve gender equality', n.d.)

⁴⁶³ This suggestion derived from the fieldwork experience in this research, and is inspired by Klein's (2016) ethnographic work in Mali.

entertainment options around the Kingdom. Therefore, this research suggests exploring new challenges to women's practice of agency after the recent national reforms aiming for social transformation and for cultivating a vibrant society in Saudi Arabia with Vision 2030.⁴⁶⁴ This examination shall enable evaluating whether reforms in Saudi Arabia at the political level are matched by change at the social level, in general and in relation to women's agency.

Moreover, this study hopes to prompt further research using comparative analysis on the relation between agency and employment across different sectors and types of female's employment, which can inform future policies about the types of employment that are more effective in empowering different women. Furthermore, this research have shown the necessity of examining a particular set of factors including: sharing domestic responsibilities, the control of income, and the family support, a woman's internal strength and abilities, and the social class which future work should aim to ensure a voice for the women themselves in order to fully capture those factors in relation to agency and empowerment. This is likely to be true across country contexts and not just in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the findings of this research were important in laying the groundwork for future thinking on women's agency and employment, from both a scholarly and policy perspective, and not only in Saudi Arabia but across the globe.

9.4 Research Limitations

This research is interested in gaining detailed insights through a small-n sample to explore in-depth a variety of perceptions and experiences regarding Saudi women's agency in relation to employment in Saudi Arabia. However, the data collection was conducted during a limited timeframe of three months. In order to focus the study and improve the quality and cohesion of data, I limited my data collection to one city only (Jeddah); consequently, the sample did not include women in rural areas. This research targeted the diversity of the participants to gain a better coverage of diversified opinions, and it considered the variations where relevant. And yet, it does not provide a comparative analysis on the determinants of Saudi women's agency before and after a particular period of time or according to demographic characteristics (employed vs. unemployed, rural vs. urban, older vs. younger, educated vs. non educated, citizens vs. non-nationals). Furthermore, this research acknowledges the consequences of expanding Saudi women's employment opportunities at the expense of foreign labour's benefit, however it

⁴⁶⁴ See <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en/vision/themes>.

focused on the segment of Saudi women, whilst other segments such as men or migrants were not included in this research focus. This is because it particularly aimed to explore Saudi women's agency and provide them with a voice regarding the research topic.

Figure 14

Findings' Summary

First: Employment enabled Saudi women greater agency in 5 ways.

1. Employment compensates for the flaws of the education system.
2. Employment offers exposure to real life experiences, which were hindered by imposed segregation and restricted mobility.
3. Employment awakens women's "Power within", which represent the soft assets of agency.
4. Financial independence is instrumental for attaining agency. It is a source of security, it improves living standards, relaxes some social constraints, offers the ability to access other rights such as divorce or investments, expands choices of leisure, allows living according to one's goals.
5. Increased visibility of women in public forwarded social change in favour of women and in away that altered perceptions of gender roles.

Second: There are 5 conditions for women to develop agency via employment

Those work as key enablers and the lack of them can hinder the process of developing agency via employment

1. The control of earnings.
2. Help with domestic responsibilities.
3. The support of a family member.
4. Possessing or developing inner strength → challenge and resistance, negotiation and manoeuvring, persistence.
5. Having motives, they are a leading driving force to exercise agency.

Third: There are external influences on the process of developing agency via

The participant's perceptions of the social and legal opportunity structure:

1. The influence of the social surrounding.
 - a. An obstacle to agency.
 - b. A motive of agency.
 - c. Doesn't influence agency.
 - d. Its influence depends on the strategic choice.
2. The Financial Situation. (Employment fosters more the agency of women in middle class than in other classes)
3. Laws and Regulations:
 - a. Feminisation policies and labour programs expanding women's employment.
 - b. Sex segregation at work.
 - c. Childcare support.
 - d. Transportation.
 - e. Male guardianship.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interviews' Questions

After introducing the research topic, the researcher used the following questions as guidance to conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

1) Practicing agency regarding strategic decisions

How do you describe your ability to make decisions and act upon choice regarding the strategic matters listed below?

What were your motives for making these decisions and choices?

What do you perceive as influences in making these decisions and choices, if they exist (persons, regulations, norms, beliefs, past experiencesetc)?

Have you faced any kind of challenges or limitations with regards to making-decisions and choices about the following aspects?

- Education decisions: the specialisation, the place of study.
- Employment decisions: the choice of whether to be employed or not? Choosing the type and the place of employment?
- Marriage and divorce decisions.
- Financial decisions: control of money, freedom of spending, investment, and savings.
- Use of contraception (if applicable).
- Mobility decisions: going out, travelling for work or for tourism.
- Appearance decisions.
- Entertainment and leisure decisions.
- Medical decisions: going to the hospital, and choosing the doctor.
- Children's decisions (if applicable): schools, activities, care, and other.

In your opinion how does your employment (or the employment of women) enhance the ability to make decisions and act upon choice regarding the strategic matters above?

In your opinion how does your employment (or the employment of women) eliminate or reduce challenges encountering women to practise decision-making and to act upon choices?

In your opinion what do you consider as important in enhancing your abilities to practise more decision-making and to act upon choice? Or what do you identify as factors of support to your ability to make decisions and to act upon choice?

2) Women's role in the household

How do you perceive women's role in the household?

In your experience, how do you describe spouses' help in domestic responsibilities?

According to your experience, how do you describe the cooperation in decision-making regarding different life matters within the household, between men and women (whether between you and your husband, or between your parents)?

3) Women's role in the public sphere

How do you perceive and evaluate Saudi women's role in the public sphere?

In your opinion what are the existing limitations facing Saudi women to have an active and a successful role in the public sphere (social, legal, religious...etc)?

4) The expansion of women's employment opportunities in Saudi Arabia

Do you perceive that the expansion of Saudi women's employment opportunities has influenced their roles and position in society? In your opinion, does it influence gender roles and norms in any way?

Do you perceive that the expansion of Saudi women's employment opportunities has influenced limitations facing women regarding their abilities to make strategic decisions and to act upon choice?

What can you tell me about expanding employment opportunities of Saudi women in the national labour market? How does it benefit women and the society? What does it need to improve?

What are your views regarding the regulations of women's employment in Saudi Arabia?

What are your views regarding segregation regulations at work places? And how do they impact women and their abilities to exercise decision-making and act upon choice?

Do you know any of the Ministry of Labour programs for women's employment? If yes, do you have any comments about them? Are they successful in promoting women's employment?

Appendix 2: Information Sheet

Researcher: PhD candidate **Mona Al-munaiey**

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School of Politics and International Relations

Supervisors: Dr. Sarah von Billerbeck.

Dr. Christina Hellmich.

Dr. Marina Della Guista.

Background

Since 2010 the national labour market opportunities for Saudi women have been expanding. In accordance with the direction of the former Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah Al-Saud, the Ministry of Labour issued several laws and regulations that enable women to work in all domains, both in public and private sectors. These regulations were further supported by programs to encourage women's employment; such as Hafiz, Nitaqat, and Saudi feminisation of certain sectors. These efforts are expected to improve Saudi women's status as active citizens. Women's work and their economic participation and opportunities are considered one of the main components and indicators of empowerment, in particular because they enable women to achieve financial independence as well as contribute to the national economic development. Therefore, this research aims to explore Saudi women views regarding these opportunities and their implications on a particular aspect of empowerment: agency, the ability to make purposeful choices regarding strategic decisions in life.

Why are we doing this study?

This study is a contribution to the inadequate academic literature discussing Saudi women's agency, empowerment and employment. From one side, it provides a space for Saudi women to voice their own opinions and perceptions on their practice of agency as part of empowerment and the challenges they face in their context. From another side it shall deliver a bottom-up recommendations and suggestions for public policies that concern them.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study intends to learn about women's practice of agency in relation to employment regarding a variety of strategic matters such as education, career, family, investment and household, in particular after the recent expansion of employment opportunities. It attempts to explore the implication of these policies on women's role and decisions.

Who is invited to participate in the study? Why have I been invited?

Any Saudi woman above the age of 18 (employed or unemployed) is invited to participate. Only students are excluded from participation. The aim is to get a wider coverage of various opinions on the research topic.

How can you be involved?

You are invited to participate in a “one-to-one” semi-structured interview and/or participate in a group discussion (focus group) to discuss the practice of agency and discuss the motives of decisions regarding (work, education, roles, family, career building, financial planning...etc.), and elaborate on whether the recent expansions of opportunities in the Saudi labour market have had influence on your ability to practice choice, on your decisions, and on eliminating or relaxing social constraints. In addition you will be asked about your perceptions regarding Saudi women’s roles and challenges in the society before and after the reforms.

Do I have to take part?

You are only invited to participate upon your complete will and there are no any obligations.

If you agreed to participate, you would still have the full right to withdraw from the study at any time before 15 January 2018.

What will the results of the study be used for?

The collected information shall be analysed and the results will contribute to a PhD thesis.

Confidentiality, storage and disposal of information

All information collected for the purpose of this study will be saved in a locked file of which only the researcher can access. In addition, all the documents will be deleted and disposed one year after the award of the PhD degree.

Who has reviewed the study?

Beside the two supervisors of this research, this project has been reviewed by the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable opinion for conduct.

Thank you for your help.

Appendix 3: Consent Form



Consent Form

1. I have read and had explained to me by**Mona Al-Munaiey**...
the accompanying Information Sheet relating to the project on:
Expanding Saudi Women's Employment Opportunities and their Agency as Part of Empowerment.
2. I have had explained to me the purposes of the project and what will be required of me, and any questions I have had have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the arrangements described in the Information Sheet in so far as they relate to my participation.
3. I understand that participation is entirely voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from the project any time, and that this will be without detriment.
4. I agree to the interview/session being audio taped.
5. This application has been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct.
6. I have received a copy of this Consent Form and of the accompanying Information Sheet.

Name:

Signed:

Date:

Appendix 4: Participant's General Information Sheet

Name:

Age:

Marital Status:

City:

Education:

Work:

Monthly Income:

Children:

Appendix 5: Table of Participants.

No.	Name Symbol	Age	Education	Class	Status	City	Employment	Brothers	Children	Participation
1	SMR (Reading)	33	MSC Psychology	Middle class	Divorced	Riyadh	Never been employed	Yes 3	2 boys	Interview
2	RAF (Reading)	31	Phd Student Business	Upper middle class	Single	Jeddah	University Lecturer	Yes 2	No	Interview
3	RND	34	PhD Nutrition	Middle Class	Single	Makkah	Associate professor	Yes 2	No	Interview
4	RNA	33	English Literature + computer Sc	Upper middle class	Married	Jeddah	Not employed (used to work)	Yes 4	3 girls	Interview
5	NDA	35	PhD in Health care business and informatics	Middle class	Single	Jeddah	Health care project management and analyst	Yes 1	No	Interview
6	BTH	45 -50	2 Bachelors MSc, and PhD	High class	Not given	Jeddah	Owner and CEO of advertising agency	Yes	Yes	Interview
7	RAA	36	Bachelor of Science	Middle class	Married twice	Jeddah	General manager of factories	NO	Yes 3	Interview
8	RUH	34	Bachelor	Middle class	Divorced	Jeddah	Yoga and Antigravity instructor	Yes 1	Yes 1	Interview
9	DIA	28	MA. Designing	Middle	Single	Jeddah	Freelance	Yes 2	No	Interview

				class			graphic Des.			
10	HWZ	32	BA- Law	Upper middle class	Married	Jeddah	Corporate legal Dep	Yes	Yes 2	Interview
11	LEE	27	BA media	Middle class	Married	Jeddah	Worked in Companies and now as a teacher	Yes 2	No	Interview
12	MDI	33	BA Special Edu MS Info system	Upper class	Married	Riyadh	HR	No	Yes 1	Interview
13	NAR	29	MS Management	Middle class	Married	Jeddah	HR	Yes	Yes 1	Interview
14	MNR	29	BA - Finance	Middle class	Recently married	Jeddah	Banking	Yes	No	Interview
15	WHD	40	MSc- Food science	Middle class	married	Makkah	Used to be employed in Factories – recently resigned.	Yes	Yes 3	Interview
16	DMA	25	BA of Law	Upper middle class	Engaged	Jeddah	Law firm	Yes	No	Interview
17	HTN	28	BA- Graphic design	Upper middle class	Married	Jeddah	Advertising co	Yes	Yes 2	Interview
18	HLA	32	BA Administration	Middle class	Married	Jeddah	Was in food distribution Now: party planner (business owner)	Yes	No	Interview

19	ABD	29	BA linguistics	Middle class	Married	Jeddah	Customer service	Yes	No	Interview
20	HDL	29	BA Marketing	Middle Class	Single	Yanbu	Hotels and Hospitality	Yes	No	Interview
21	SHR	33	BA Art	Middle Class	Married	Jeddah	Used to be employed in sales	Yes	Yes	Interview
22	SFA	41	High School (Currently enrolled in distant learning BA)	Limited - income	Divorced	Makkah	Chamber of commerce	Yes	Yes	Interview
23	EFT	39	BA sociology	Limited income	Married	Jeddah	Employed = 3 years Home business = 5 years House wife = 5 years	Yes 4	Yes 4	Interview
24	AML	28	High school (Distant learning BA)	Limited income	Single	Jeddah	Sales	Yes	No	Interview
25	GHD	26	High school	Middle class	Married	Jeddah	Housewife	Yes	Yes 3	Interview
26	KLD	23	High School	Limited income	Single	Jeddah	Sales	No brothers or sisters	No	Interview
27	LLS	30	BA Nursing	Middle class	Divorced / Married twice	Jeddah	Nursing	Yes	Yes 1	Individual Interview and Focus Group

28	MRM	23	BA Media	Middle class	Married	Makkah	House wife + home based business	Yes	Yes 1	Interview
29	TIM	26	BA sociology	Upper Class	Married	Jeddah	House wife Never been employed	Yes	Yes 1	Interview
30	SEH	62	High school	Middle Class	Married	Jeddah	Housewife Never been employed	Yes	Yes 9	Individual Interview and Focus Group
31	LAS	37	BA. Management	Middle class	Married	Jeddah	13 Years Interior Designer. Currently a housewife for more than a year	Yes	Yes 2	Interview
32	ASI	24	BA Health management	Middle Class	Married	Makkah	Housewife	Yes	Yes1	Interview
33	SDS	55	BA. Arabic and Islamic	Middle Class	Married	Makkah/ Jeddah	Housewife	Yes	Yes 6	Interview
34	RWA	31	MSC - Finance	Upper Middle Class	Divorced	Jeddah	Lecturer	No	No	Focus Group
35	SOF	32	BS French MA Marketing	Upper middle class	Single	Jeddah	Worked in different companies and now a teacher.	Yes 2	No	Individual Interview and Focus Group
36	NOR	30	BA Graphic	Middle Class	Single	Jeddah	Graphic designer Corporate experience	Yes	No	Focus Group

37	ANA	31	MA- International Law	Upper Middle Class	Single	Jeddah	Lecturer Life-coach	Yes	No	Focus Group
38	ALM	31	MA Law	Middle Class	Married	Jeddah	Compliance officer in corporate banking	Yes	No	Focus Group
39	SUM	49	BA Child care	Upper class	Married	Jeddah	Housewife Never been employed	Yes	Yes 4	Focus Group
40	GDR	23	BA- Finance	Upper class	Single	Jeddah	Unemployed Never been employed	Yes	No	Focus Group
41	DIN	23	BA – HR	Upper class	Married	Jeddah	Unemployed Never been employed	Yes	No	Focus Group
42	ALY	27	BA – Sociology	Middle Class	Married	Jeddah	Unemployed Never been employed	Yes	Yes	Focus Group
43	OHU	30	BA- Psychology	Middle Class	Married	Jeddah	Unemployed Never been employed	Yes	Yes	Focus Group
44	MIN	20-25	BA	Limited income	single	Jeddah	Industry line		No	Focus Group
45	MNA	20-25	Intermediate School	Limited income	Divorced	Jeddah	Industry line		Yes	Focus Group
46	ABR	35	BA	Limited income	Married	Jeddah	Industry line		Yes	Focus Group
47	FTM	39	BA	Middle Class	Divorced	Riyadh	KG supervisor	Yes 3	Yes 5	Tel. Interview

Appendix 6: An example of field-notes

An Extract of P.O field notes

During my fieldwork I have planned formal and informal visits to women's working places. As for the formal ones I have managed to visit two sex-mixed locations the first was a large brands retailing group, whilst the second was an advertising agency owned and lead by a woman C.E.O. Furthermore I visited two only-women working-environment; the first was a tailoring and embroidery centre with well equipped laboratories,⁴⁶⁵ and the second was a charity society that teaches impoverished women to do hand crafts and sell their products in a small store and in charity events.⁴⁶⁶ I planned those visits seeking participants in the first place, but I took the chance to make a tour around women's working spaces and have quick random chats whenever it was possible.

The first visit was to a seven-levels brands retailing firm,⁴⁶⁷ in each floor there was a separate section for women that can be accessed by a security card only. Each section had a kitchen, restrooms and spacious office spaces only for women, however there was barely anyone on their desks. The women I saw around the ladies areas were making work-related phone calls, taking a break or preparing some documents. Mostly, Men and women employees were found running around the corridors, or working together in the common meeting rooms. These rooms were found in the middle of each department, and they were fully transparent according to the regulations (I.e. the walls are made of glass and without curtains). During this visit I was able to make quick conversations with the employees. For example, when I first saw the women's working space I said "what a nice space it seems well serviced", a girl turned her head to me and replied "Yeah... Isn't it? It's good to have our own space". I also noticed that Saudi women were very visible as if they constitute the majority of employees. One of the brand managers explained that the company was adapting with the new employment regulations, which required the employment of Saudi nationals at a certain percentage. They preferred to replace the previous foreign employees with Saudi women rather than men because they are count as 2 men in the Saudisation system. With a higher percentage of Saudisation the company can keep foreigners working at managerial levels. I saw that the work rhythm at that company was speedy and hectic, yet Saudi women were there for years. A Saudi female brand manager had been working for more than ten years, and an H.R employee has been working for four years. I learned that their jobs frequently required them to stay for

⁴⁶⁵ October the 2nd, 2017 at 2 P.M.

⁴⁶⁶ September the 24th, 2017 at 11 A.M.

⁴⁶⁷ September the 25th, 2017 at 12:45 P.M.

late hours after work; and whilst the remuneration wasn't satisfactory yet they enjoyed the work atmosphere and appreciated the learning experience and the exposure they gain. This immediately reminded me with several opinions accusing Saudi women to be leaning towards relaxed life styles and types of work. My observation made me ask each interviewee about their knowledge and opinion on segregation policies in the work place, and also ask about how they evaluate the efficiency of Saudi women employees?

As for the second formal visit, I went to a mixed-environment advertising agency.⁴⁶⁸ At the entrance, the reception, and the waiting area I couldn't see any woman passing by, only men entering and others were going out. Later when I was called to enter to the working spaces to interview the CEO, I found out that half of the team was women. They also had their own separate working space and a meeting room where they can work with their men colleagues. The C.E.O confirmed that the productivity was not affected by the segregation and the rules were flexible to the extent they needed. One thing I noticed about both visits however; I hadn't seen any woman that covers her face working in these companies. This confirms the assumption that, women of certain values or background still do not accept to work in places that requires dealing with men.

Only-women work-environment varied, some of them only employed women but men customers can enter to the place, therefore women had to wear a certain uniform (like the embroidery centre). In other places men were prohibited from entering, thus women were free to wear whatever they want (like the charity society). The employees of the embroidery center appreciated their work environment and were satisfied, however I unfortunately I was not able to talk to the women working in the charity society. I was accompanied by one of the supervisors to walk round the different rooms of the building and watch how women performed different crafts. The purpose was twofold; to look for potential participants, and to examine the work environment. Unfortunately, none of the women showed interest in participating. However I had a chance to ask the supervisors some questions when needed along the tour.

In addition to the formal visits, informal walking-around different locations were very informative using participant observation. During my data collection of three months I used to go out weekly on random visits to restaurants, shopping malls, beauty centers to seek potential participants or at least have casual conversations with women employees. For example, I tried several times to interview female cashiers in supermarkets and women working in beauty salons (formally and informally) but all my attempts were in vain. In such cases casual conversations were useful. During my chats with the cashiers I learned that they have the

⁴⁶⁸ October the 10th, 2017 at 1:30 P.M.

priority to take day shifts so they can return to their homes at a reasonable timing. They were also offered restrooms to take breaks, and they have career development as well. Moreover I learned that supermarket cashiers attract women who cover their faces because other sales' jobs do not commonly accept face covering.

Besides that, I didn't have the information that Saudi women started working as receptionists in restaurants before I saw them standing there in every restaurant I went to. I was once picking up a food order at 1 a.m. on the way back to my house and a Saudi woman handed it to me! I was amazed ... that was unusual. I couldn't stop myself from telling her about my research and ask, "Since when do Saudi women started working in restaurants? And how do you find your job?" She looked at me surprised from my question and she replied, "it had been a while, more than a year now ... and well ... I like the job so far". I sensed from her look that she was questioning how come do you live in this country and not know about this? It didn't seem to me that she gets this question a lot. I think that after women were being cashiers and sales women for years now, the people became more open to the idea of women working in new jobs in public. I didn't ask her more questions because I didn't want to intimidate her, however I explained to her that it was interested in her participation in an interview. I left my name and number and told her that I would really appreciate it if she was willing to participate.

The following times I saw women working in restaurants I asked them different questions. For example I asked about whether they require a degree to get the job? Whether the restaurant offered training? or if they required English? I learned from these girls that Saudi women started working in the kitchens of some restaurants. Even though I know that the law allows women to work in restaurant kitchens, I never saw them or heard about someone working there before my field visits.

Before my visits to several places, I haven't imagined that all make-up artists in the beauty salons became Saudis, as a result of feminization policies. Mainly, they used to be Lebanese. One afternoon, I wanted to pick a parcel from Aramex and I found out that Saudi women are working there too. Three years ago you would barely see a woman entering to that place, let alone working in it. Frankly, the visibility of Saudi women in work places, and the available opportunities impressed me. I was only gone for 2 years! The replacement of foreign worker with Saudi women employees was obvious and my observations in the field confirmed it.

The usefulness of practicing P.O during these visits can be illustrated by the other examples. During my visits to several companies and stores, I was able to observe that segregation policies neither prevented women from moving freely around the location, nor restricted the

communication with their men colleagues. In each company, common meeting rooms existed so men and women can work together whenever the job required. However I learned that men customers were sometimes not allowed to pay at counters with a woman cashier, after I witnessed an incident. That afternoon I walked into a supermarket in attempt to seek a participant for the interviews, therefore I was looking at the cashier counters waiting for a chance to talk to one of the female employees. Suddenly, one man began to unload his basket to pay, and the woman working as the cashier froze! She waved to the security man who was standing by the gate; and he immediately approached the customer and said “Sir... you are on the wrong counter, please go to the other side”. The man replied pointing at a woman who was walking towards him “I am not alone I am with my family and here is my wife coming with the kids”. Later when I managed to schedule a meeting with an H.R employee of a supermarket chain, I remembered the incident and asked more questions about the regulations. She explained to me that such regulations were mandatory in 2011, but recently they became part of the internal regulations of the management. As she clarified, the women working in this kind of job prefer it this way. This is a perfect link to the point I wish to elaborate next; how the use of interviews clarified some overlapping aspects.