

GULF ANALYSIS PAPER

SUMMARY

Saudi Arabia has avoided the turmoil that has gripped many of its neighbors, but a survey of Saudi youth by Women without Borders suggests that this reality could change. Young people, nearly two thirds of the kingdom's population, hold diverse views about social issues. As these attitudes continue to shape debates over reform, the Saudi government will need to engage more deeply on the needs of youth if it wishes to foster long-term stability and security.

KEY FACTS

- Fewer than half of Saudi women and just over half of men believe that their educations will help them get jobs.
- Over 70 percent of both women and men believe that traditional approaches to learning downplay critical thinking.
- Attitudes towards gender roles remain mixed, but a majority of youths believe that change in women's rights is inevitable.

Saudi Youth: Unveiling the Force for Change

by Dr. Edit Schlaffer and Dr. Ulrich Kroppunigg

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been spared the unrest that recently swept many of its neighbors in the Middle East. Although many perceive that the Saudi royal family has maintained a high degree of both legitimacy and stability, the country faces many of the same socioeconomic ills that helped spark uprisings elsewhere in the region: a massive youth bulge, high unemployment, an education gap, and gender inequality. Up until now, young Saudis largely ignored calls for public protests. Yet with over 60 percent of the population under the age of 30,¹ shifting attitudes among youth will help determine Saudi Arabia's course over the next decade and beyond.

With this in mind, Women without Borders, a Vienna-based non-governmental organization, conducted a series of surveys targeting nearly 4,500 university students in Riyadh, Al Qassem, Dammam, and Jeddah. The surveys, conducted over a two-year period prior to the political changes now sweeping the Arab world, explored young male and female attitudes toward a wide range of social issues, including changing relationships between tradition, religion, family, and gender dynamics.²

The findings help shed light on the attitudes of young Saudis and underscore the interconnection between education, labor, and gender-related challenges that will demand creative thinking on the part of the Saudi government in the years ahead. One of the key findings of the survey is how much diversity there is among both male and female populations. The popular view in the West is that Saudi men want to keep things precisely as they are, while women are anxious for change. The survey suggests significant pockets of support for change among young Saudi men, and support for conservatism among young Saudi women, especially on sensitive issues.

For the last several years, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud has acknowledged the need to address Saudi Arabia's social challenges. Most notably, the King has promoted greater

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In conjunction with its Gulf Roundtable series, the CSIS Middle East Program writes periodic policy papers addressing key economic and security issues in the Gulf region. The reports are distributed prior to a corresponding Gulf Roundtable to help inform the debate and generate discussion. Launched in April 2007, the Gulf Roundtable series convenes monthly and assembles a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region and identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. Topics for discussion include the role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of Gulf energy, media trends, trade liberalization, and prospects for regional integration. The roundtable defines the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran and is made possible in part through the generous support of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. ■

equality for women by providing greater access to higher education and widening space for public debate on women's issues and the role of women in Saudi society. Most recently, the King promised that women will be allowed to participate in the Shura (Consultative) Council, and to vote and run for municipal elections starting in 2015.³

While many believe that King Abdullah genuinely supports greater women's rights, one analyst has noted privately that fostering a debate over gender issues has also allowed the regime to stem a wider debate on political reform. Women's issues do not pose a direct threat to the royal family, as do questions of power distribution and accountability. The domestic costs of allowing debate on gender are relatively low, and so far the payout for the regime has been high.

This strategy may have been sufficient in the past, but as deeper challenges spurred by regional political change rise to the surface—in particular a massive youth bulge, high unemployment, and shifting attitudes toward gender equality—it will be difficult for the Saudi government to contain this explosive mix in the future. The Women without Borders survey's findings suggest the need for deeper engagement on the part of the Saudi government in addressing the needs of Saudi Arabia's young population.

RECENT TRENDS IN PUBLIC DEBATE

Over the past several years, a mixture of new openings and reinforced redlines has characterized Saudi public debate. On gender issues, the opening has been remarkable. Under Abdullah's relatively liberal rule, women have enjoyed more leeway to mix with men at public events, as well as to voice their opinions in print media and fiction writing.⁴ The King has even used religious arguments to justify greater women's rights. In his September 2011 speech announcing the right of women to participate in future Municipal Council elections, the King said, "We reject to marginalize the role of women in Saudi society, in every field of works, according to the (Islamic) Sharia guidelines."⁵ In 2009, to portray shifts in women's rights as greater gender equality, King Abdullah appointed the first-ever female minister, the sociologist and educational expert Norah al-Faiz. The King also established the kingdom's first coeducational university in 2009, the King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST). One analyst has argued that the King is deliberately encouraging this opening on

gender issues in order to pave the way for gender reforms on the institutional level.⁶

While gender issues have become much more hotly debated, the government guards a range of other issues much more carefully. The royal family's power and privilege in political and economic affairs remain unchallenged, and the government goes to great lengths to shield royal politics from public view. The Shura Council's role in politics is not subject to public debate, nor does the council have any recognizable influence on policymaking. Corruption has started to make its way into public discussion in a minor way,⁷ but the royal family has remained largely immune from criticism. The kingdom's new anti-corruption body takes its orders directly from the King,⁸ suggesting that public engagement on issues of accountability is not a major priority. The floods in Jeddah in late 2009 led the King to take the rare step of referring corrupt officials responsible for the city's sub-par infrastructure to the judiciary,⁹ but little follow-through seems to have occurred since then.

RESPONSE TO REGIONAL POLITICAL CHANGE

Uprisings across the region, including close to home in Bahrain and Yemen, have forced the Saudi government to adjust its approach to some degree. King Abdullah's response has been a mixed strategy of buying support and promising to address certain popular demands. The government tapped its \$214 billion reserve fund to neutralize domestic opposition and blunt potential calls for political reform.¹⁰ In late February and early March, King Abdullah announced a series of government expenditure programs worth roughly \$130 billion and designed to address myriad socioeconomic ills. The first plan earmarked up to \$37 billion to introduce unemployment benefits as well as improve education and provide vocational training for Saudi nationals unable to participate in a skilled labor market dominated by foreigners.¹¹

The second plan, totaling about \$93 billion, called for a minimum wage of 3,000 riyals (approximately \$800) per month for government-sector workers and promised 60,000 new jobs in the Ministry of Interior alone.¹² It also included nearly \$70 billion for the construction of over half a million housing units for lower-income Saudi families.¹³ To accomplish this goal, the government established a new Ministry of Housing that intends to make developed land more readily available and provide incentives for

municipalities to develop residential districts.¹⁴ The King is betting that these measures will be sufficient to prevent social unrest. While in the short term Saudi society has been lulled, changing attitudes among the younger generation make it difficult to gauge the long-term sustainability of the strategy.

UNDERSTANDING SAUDI YOUTH

The King’s response to the changes sweeping the Arab world comes at a time when the situation of Saudi Arabia’s youth is more uncertain than ever. About 60 percent of Saudis are under the age of 30.¹⁵ Many of these youth lack the perspective their parents gained during the fall in oil prices in the 1980s and 1990s. They came of age at a time when oil prices were on the rise, and when Saudi Arabia’s regional power and prestige were growing beyond what anyone from the previous generation could have predicted. At the same time, the new generation has access to information and communication tools that decrease their buffer with the outside world, highlighting disparities between Saudi norms and those outside the kingdom.

Saudi rulers are betting on a political-economic model that is nearly as old as the kingdom itself, yet the prospects for youth under that model remain ambiguous. As of 2007, statistics illustrate that Saudis, like their counterparts across the region, are delaying marriage, largely because of financial constraints. The average Saudi does not get married until age 26, up from age 24 in 2002.¹⁶ The average employed person’s share of GDP (in PPP terms) was no higher in 2008 than it was in 1990, and while many countries in the Gulf have experienced wild increases in their per capita GDP in the past few decades, Saudi Arabia’s increase has been quite modest.¹⁷ Young Saudis seeking to start families face significant housing shortages, which some sources estimate could total over 1 million homes before 2015.¹⁸ The kingdom lacks a robust mortgage sector, and the IMF estimates that the waiting period for interest-free home loans from the national Real Estate Development Fund (REDF) is approximately 18 years.¹⁹

While Women without Borders’ survey of Saudi university students reveals that youth have benefitted from the government’s socioeconomic initiatives in the past, it also suggests that the challenges ahead may be greater than many in the kingdom are currently imagining. Saudi youth today are thinking more critically about their educational

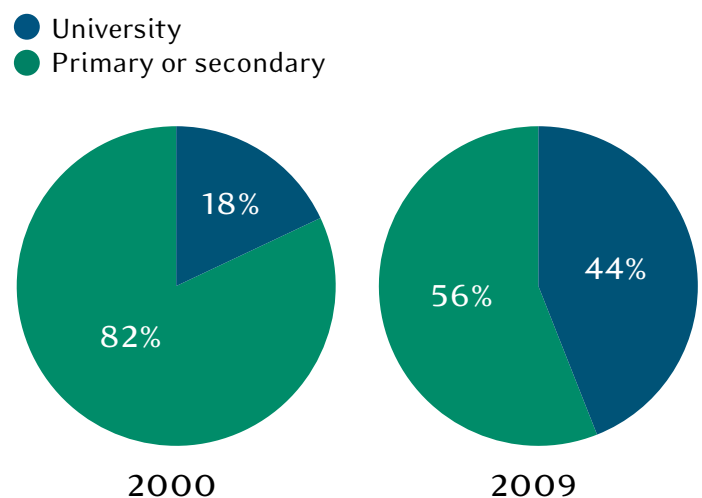
and employment pursuits as well as their gender roles. Combined with the way the government has approached the question of political reform and debate, the survey suggests that the government will have to think creatively about new strategies for maintaining security and stability.

EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPECTS

A number of observers have noted the disconnect between the educations that young Saudis receive and the skills that are in demand in the kingdom’s growing economy.²⁰ This mismatch between the Saudi job market and education system is perhaps one of the greatest anxieties that the Women without Borders survey reveals. Only 48 percent of women and 57 percent of men are confident that they will find jobs after graduating from university, and nearly 70 percent of both groups feel they need more support in marketing themselves for jobs. Their fears would seem to be justified: between 2000 and 2009, university graduates went from 18 percent of the unemployed population to 44 percent (figure 1).²¹ According to the World Bank, over 40 percent of higher education graduates specialize in the humanities, and only about a quarter in areas like science and engineering that are in high demand in the private sector.²²

As a result of insecurity in the private sector, both men and women would strongly prefer to work in the government sector after completing their studies. Yet given that the public sector already employs roughly 80 percent of all

Figure 1. Unemployed population by education level, 2000 and 2009



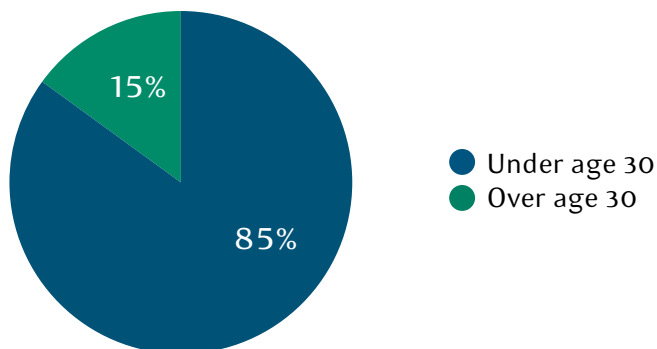
Source: World Bank Development Indicators.

working Saudis,²³ there is little room for more public sector jobs. Between 2004 and 2009, less than a quarter of new private sector jobs were taken by Saudi nationals, according to government statistics.²⁴ Overall, foreign workers make up over 80 percent of the private sector.²⁵

Unemployment presents an additional challenge. According to official statistics,²⁶ the unemployment rate for Saudi nationals was 10.5 percent in 2009 (the most recent year available). Unemployment of Saudi women registered at 28 percent. According to official statistics, of all Saudi nationals unemployed in 2009, about 85 percent were under the age of 30 (figure 2),²⁷ and the unemployment rate among youth ages 20-24 alone was about 40 percent.²⁸ In such an uncertain environment, the young, educated generation is caught between wanting to prepare for future challenges and being uncertain about what those challenges might look like. For example, 73 percent of women and 60 percent of men surveyed believe that men and women in the modern family should bring an income into the home. However, while 73 percent of women favor opening the job market to women, only 15 percent of men agree. These contradictory views highlight the conflicting expectations that color young Saudis'—especially young males'—views not only of their economic prospects, but also of the impact of women's employment on the Saudi family and society.

It is ultimately the nexus of employment and education where the kingdom's greatest reform challenges lie. Higher education is no guarantee that young Saudis will have the skills needed to meet the demands of an evolving workforce. The survey data shows a remarkable desire among Saudi youth to address this challenge. Majorities of both men

Figure 2. Saudi unemployed population by age, 2009



Source: Saudi Central Department of Statistics and Information.

and women implicitly reject the traditional approach to learning, which favors rote memorization and seeks to perpetuate the official demand for religious, social, and political obedience. Sixty-seven percent of women and 61 percent of men feel that “There is little space for activities other than learning at universities.” Further, 91 percent of women and 87 percent of men respond affirmatively to the statement that “Teachers should let us develop our own opinions and not push us in certain directions,” an implicit critique of existing pedagogy.

So while critical thinking is not encouraged, critical minds are already present. Students feel that they lack opportunities to independently develop their own ideas and to engage in a creative thought process. Combined with limited opportunities for non-family social gatherings outside the educational setting, the prohibition of non-conformist thinking might easily promote extremist behavior, as one case study illustrates.²⁹ At the very least, it could amplify popular demands for educational reform and present a new challenge to the strategy of managed regime-led reform.

GENDER ISSUES

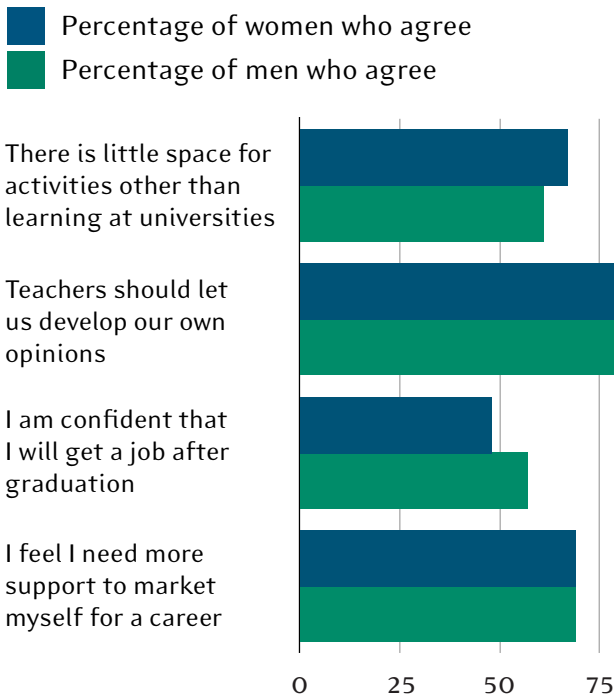
The “Bridging the Gap” survey paints a nuanced picture of attitudes regarding reforms to women's rights. A majority of the young women (65 percent) in the survey see changing roles as a personal opportunity. There is also substantial male support for reforms to traditional gender roles: only 28 percent of the young men surveyed view changing gender roles as a burden, while over 60 percent of men, in fact, view changing gender roles as a personal opportunity. Based on these findings, it seems that Saudi youth are ready for change. At the same time, the survey results also provide an illuminating view of attitudes toward women's roles in the political, educational, and professional spheres.

Political Participation

Three quarters of the women surveyed believed that “there [would] be substantial changes in regard to women's rights within the next five years,” while half of their male counterparts agreed with them. Despite the slow pace of political change within the kingdom, youth nonetheless remain optimistic that reform is both possible and inevitable.

Although the majority of both men and women view changing gender roles as a personal opportunity, there is a huge divide between accepting changes in women's roles on

Figure 3. Attitudes toward education



Source: Women without Borders’ “Bridging the Gap” Survey.

a personal level and accepting them in the political sphere. Female leadership and participation in governance still face strong opposition from both men and women. Fifty-eight percent of women and 82 percent of men oppose the visible involvement of women in politics and governance. Thirty-nine percent of the female respondents agree with the statement that “women need to be more visible in politics and government,” as opposed to only 15 percent of the male respondents. Although the King announced that women will be able to participate in municipal elections in 2015, the four-year time lag may reflect society’s shared reluctance to see women holding political power.

By giving women the right to vote, the King has postponed a crucial decision now by granting them potential political participation in the future. While this may also give the government more leeway to hold off on other reforms, it also might only open the space for a much broader demand for female participation. And, if reforms in other areas remain scant, Saudis seeking economic opportunities and family stability may come to rely more heavily on the gender debate as a forum for expressing their broader needs. The vast majority of analysts and women’s rights activists agree that the proposed changes—especially the announcement that women will be able to actively participate in the Shura

Council—will allow women’s voices to directly reach the highest decision-making levels without being filtered through male intermediaries. Moving forward, Saudis may increasingly hold the King to the promise of such changes, and use women’s gains as a way of articulating demands for other reforms.

Some momentum for this kind of shift has already been building. Nadia Bakhurji, an outspoken architect in Riyadh, was one of the first six women to try to run in the 2005 municipal elections, after she found a loophole in candidacy laws. She was denied the right to run, but has hopes of being appointed to the Shura Council or, barring that, to run in the 2015 municipal elections. Bakhurji and other women like her have accumulated important experience to use in mentoring others through the electoral process, which could turn the drive for female participation into a self-sustaining force. The experience of women in other countries, such as Kuwait, where four women were recently elected to the 50-seat parliament, could also prove a valuable resource for Saudi women moving forward.

Education

Since girls were first given universal access to education in the 1970s, there has been a continuous struggle to close the gender gap in education; this goal has now nearly been achieved. Saudi families generally place high value on girls’ education: a robust majority of both men and women feel that a woman’s goal should be to be an educated wife and mother (82 percent of women, 84 percent of men). Moreover, women dominate at the university level and receive 79 percent of the PhDs awarded each year.³⁰ The increase in girls’ education has been accompanied by an increase in the average age of first marriage and a decrease in polygamy in Saudi Arabia.³¹ Between 2002 and 2007 alone, the average age of first marriage for females increased from 22 to 25.³²

Overall, equal access to education for boys and girls has become nearly undisputed in Saudi society. The vast majority of survey respondents are “happy that there are more girls attending university these days” (92 percent of women, 84 percent of men). Only a minority of the respondents—though a sizeable minority—hold ultra-conservative views on education, such as the 19 percent of women and 39 percent of men who agree that boys’ education is more worthwhile than girls’ education, or the 25 percent of women and 40 percent of men who believe

that an educated man has more power than an educated woman.

Despite the relatively promising signs of progress, roadblocks remain. Saudi law mandates a limited number of fields in which it is appropriate for women to work. Educators provide training to women only in those areas, meaning, for example, that 93 percent of female university graduates specialize in education and the humanities. The list of acceptable fields is limited to jobs such as receptionist, tailor, and beautician, to name a few.³³

Work

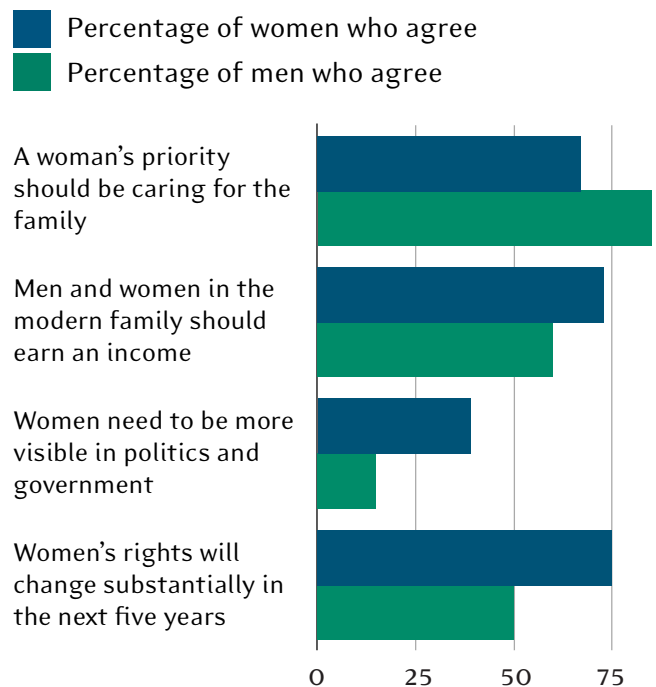
Saudi society remains conservative and family oriented. There is a consensus between men and women about the division of labor and responsibilities within the family: 84 percent of women and 87 percent of men believe that a man's priority should be providing for the family. The male breadwinner role is undisputed.

At the same time, substantially fewer women than men believe that a woman's priority should be confined to caring for the family (67 percent of women versus 85 percent of men). It is clear that women no longer see themselves only in the role of wife and mother, but hope to gain greater agency outside the home as well.

Whether this is an effect of globalization or the fruits of 40 years of access to free education for women is unclear, but the fact is that the need for two incomes for the majority of Saudi families is only growing. This in turn raises the prospect of further changes—from allowing women to drive in order to reach their workplace to a modification of the dress code. The fact that such liberties have already been granted on the campus of KAUST, for example, suggests willingness by certain forces within the government to consider such changes. It also represents a small-scale experiment in the educational sector that may give women a basis for demanding larger-scale changes of the same sort in the professional sector.

This will surely be a long process, but young Saudi men and women are well prepared to navigate it. Eighty-four percent of women and 65 percent of men responded affirmatively to the statement “I feel that I have the courage and the strength to overcome all the challenges that might be associated with the working life of women.”

Figure 4. Attitudes toward gender roles and women's rights



Source: Women without Borders' "Bridging the Gap" Survey.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The uncertainty of the current regional political climate has made addressing Saudi socioeconomic challenges and youth marginalization more pressing than ever. Thus far, the government's strategy has been to use a combination of social welfare incentives and promises for greater reform to secure stability. While this strategy has been successful in the past, the changing regional environment and shifting attitudes of younger Saudis—who make up nearly two thirds of the population—raise questions about the viability of the strategy going forward. Questions about succession to the throne over the next decade are another potential driver of uncertainty.

Economics are a big piece of the puzzle. The Saudi public sector is already saturated, and yet the government continues adding jobs to the public payroll. Meanwhile, young people do not feel that their educations prepare them for the rigors of the private sector. As economic prospects for average Saudis continue declining, more families will need to rely on a second household income. And yet, the social ramifications of more females working outside of the home will be dramatic. Increasingly, the challenges

of the job market, education, and shifting gender roles are interconnected. Addressing the intersection of these trends is one of the most important long-term challenges facing Saudi society.

Though many young Saudis see change as inevitable, they remain proud of their culture and traditions. External pressure to encourage social, political, or economic change in Saudi Arabia will likely undermine any prospects for reform. Rather, structural change will only evolve through Saudi debates and social pressure by young people who demand more space for critical thinking and entrepreneurship. This will have to be driven by the government in coordination with the private sector, which together can take a number of concrete steps.

First, the Saudi private sector, working in cooperation with the public sector, should foster entrepreneurship among the younger generation. As the Women without Borders survey results illustrate, a large majority of young Saudis (80 percent of women and 78 percent of men) see self-employment as an alternative to public sector jobs. It is unlikely that the kingdom can rely on a broader self-employment trend to solve its job market challenges, but facilitating the trend could help spark a spirit of entrepreneurship and private sector development. The government could also work more closely with the private sector to make small business loans and training programs more widely available and on more attractive terms. Additionally, the government could provide additional incentives and subsidies to private sector firms that hire young Saudis, as well as to young Saudis who choose to enter the private sector.

Second, as space grows for women to work outside the household, internships and mentoring opportunities should become more available to women who want to pursue careers in the private sector. Private-sector companies should support leadership training programs and executive education opportunities for women. International companies working in Saudi Arabia could also offer training programs and internships for young Saudis.

Third, the data clearly shows that young, educated Saudis are very conscious of the limitations they face in their daily lives. While educational institutions worldwide try to encourage young minds to develop bold and independent thinking, Saudi society continues to expect and value

conformity. While widespread and immediate change on this front is unlikely, the Saudi government could launch pilot school programs in limited locations with curricula that encourage critical thinking. International and private sector actors could have a role to play here, especially given the recent trend of international educational institutions opening branches in the GCC, and the general shift in the private sector toward greater emphasis on skill-building.

Overall, the attitudes of Saudi youth toward gender roles highlight the complexity of the country's broader socioeconomic challenges. Women are a locus of great potential for the advancement of the nation and the promotion of its values, but those same values also constrain their ability to make useful contributions. By the same token, the gender debate is increasingly set to become an emboldening force for those seeking broader economic and social reforms, in direct counterpoint to the government's use of gender in lieu of a broader discourse on political reform. Gender reforms and broader societal changes are intertwined. The more the kingdom tries to compartmentalize them, the harder it will be to do so.

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NOTES

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