

Perceptions versus Reality: How providing information on female employment trends lowers perceived barriers to female employment

KEY INSIGHT

Information about trends in female employment lowers perceptions of the barriers to female employment among Saudi unemployment benefit recipients¹ and makes both men and women perceive of female employment more favorably.

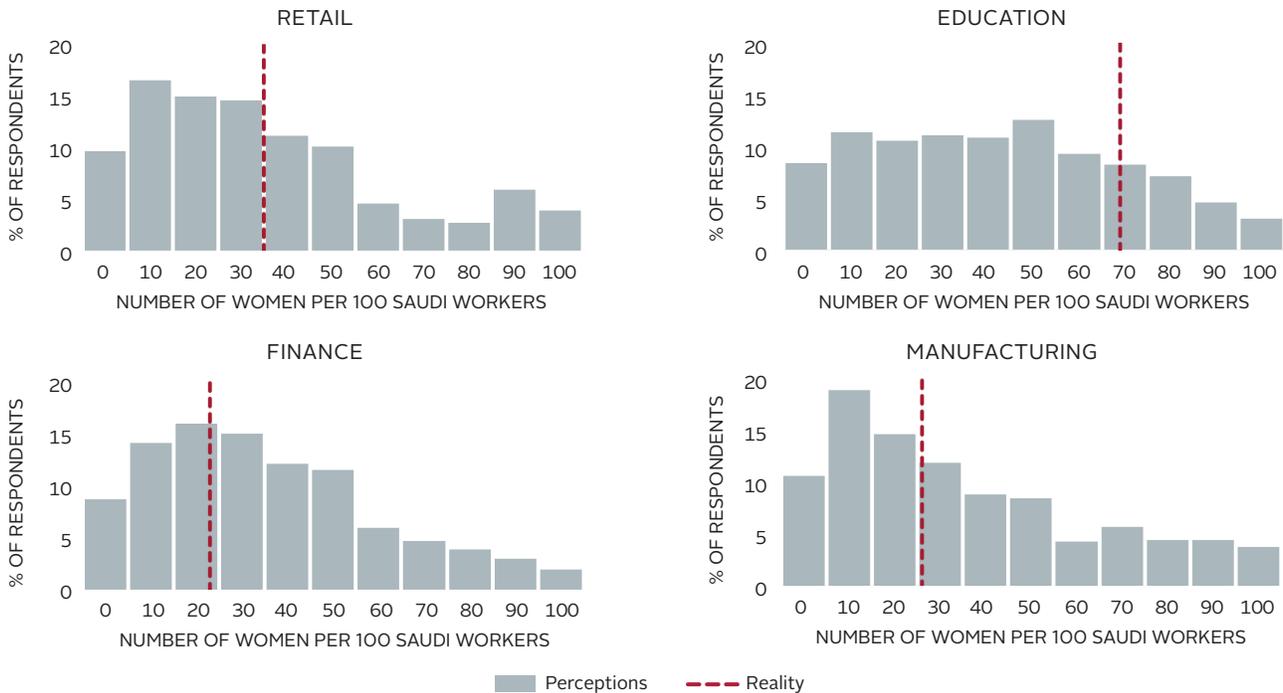
PERCEIVED EMPLOYMENT TRENDS AND BARRIERS TO FEMALE EMPLOYMENT

A recent survey field experiment among beneficiaries of the unemployment benefits program — Hafiz — conducted by Professors Martin Abel, Rema Hanna, Rohini Pande and Hisham Esper examined how information about rising Saudi female employment can influence male and female perceptions about the barriers that limit female employment.

Hafiz beneficiaries, male and female, were presented with the percentage of females employed in four different sectors in 2010 — Financial Services, Education, Manufacturing, and Retail — and asked to specify what they believed the share had become by 2015. Figure 1 shows that many respondents underestimated the share of women in each sector. Significant misperceptions were seen in the Retail and Education sectors, where 57% and 76% of respondents underestimated the share of women in each sector in 2015, respectively.

Figure 1 | Share of Women in Each Sector: Perceptions vs Reality

“By 2015, what do you think the number of women was of every 100 Saudi workers in the following sector:”



A random sample of respondents were subsequently informed that the share of women in each sector had increased between 2010 and 2015; others did not receive this information. The survey then asked all respondents to rate the importance of four potential barriers to female entry into the job market: “Firms prefer hiring men;” “Women are not qualified to work in the sectors that have vacancies;” “Saudi society does not approve of working women;” “Firms do not provide separate work spaces for men and women.” The barriers were rated on a four point scale from “not at all important” to “very important.”

¹ The sample is drawn from Hafiz recipients; Hafiz is a national unemployment assistance program which provides employment support services and financial assistance to Saudi jobseekers.

INFORMATION MATTERS

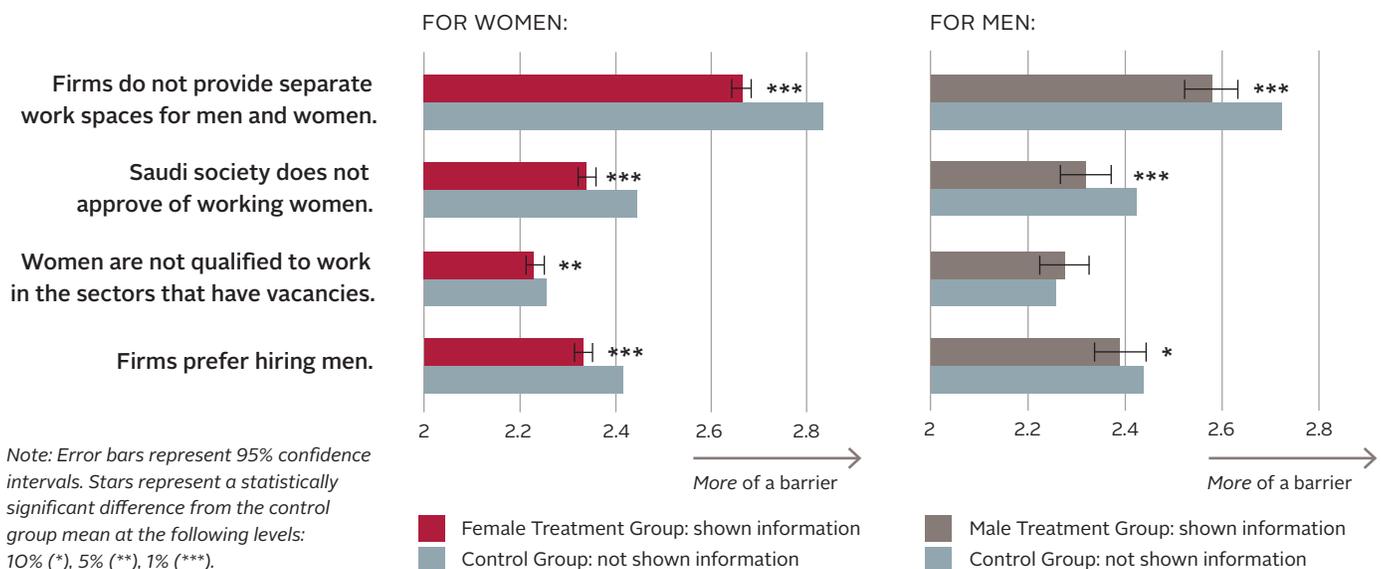
Hafiz beneficiaries that received information on increased female employment trends changed their beliefs so as to perceive lowered barriers to female employment. We show these impacts for women and men in Figure 2. The gray bars represent the beliefs of those not provided information i.e. those who relied on perceptions. **Female Hafiz beneficiaries were more likely than their male counterparts to believe that Saudi society does not approve of working women and that firms do not provide separate working spaces for men and women.** They are also less likely to believe that firms prefer to hire men.

The red and tan bars report the beliefs of those who received information on the trends. The stars represent different levels of statistically significant difference between those who were and were not provided the information on female employment trends.

In all cases, women shown information on female employment trends rated all four barriers to be less important than those women not shown the increased share of women in each sector. For example, the largest change was on belief that “Saudi society does not approve of women working” and “Firms do not provide separate working spaces for men and women,” where there was a 6.1% and 4.4% change in perception, respectively. For male Hafiz beneficiaries, effects are similar, but tend to be smaller.

Figure 2 | Treatment Effects on Perception of Barriers

“How important are the following challenges:”



Next, the research team will track the Hafiz beneficiaries’ job search behavior, analyzing log-information and job applications, to determine if change in perception of barriers to female employment translates into increased job search and employment.

How can policymakers effectively use this information?

Analysis suggests that Saudi job seekers are not fully informed of the extent of female labor force participation in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, a targeted information intervention on the increased rates of female participation in various sectors may change their perception of job prospects for women. Female job seekers may, as a result, increase their job search and explore more sectors than they traditionally do, given a lack of complete information.



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