

How Do Information and Social Norms Influence the Employment Aspirations of Saudi Women?

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Project: Developing Career Readiness in Higher Education

KEY INSIGHTS

- **Most Saudi females expect to enter employment upon graduation.** A survey of Saudi female undergraduate students at a large public university suggests that nearly 70 percent expect to work once they graduate.
- **When students receive information about the Saudi labor market and the employment aspirations of their female peers, their own working aspirations increase.** Students that receive this information reported higher expectations of working by 3.5 percentage points.
- **The role of the family is salient.** Students reminded of their family were more likely to report that they expected to work than those whose family was not called into mind.

EXPECTED LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION OF SAUDI FEMALE STUDENTS IS HIGH

Labor force participation among women in Saudi Arabia is about 22%¹, among the lowest in the world. To better understand the reasons for low female labor force participation, a research team surveyed around 900 Saudi undergraduate female students at a large public university about their educational experiences, beliefs about the labor market, and education and employment expectations. The team exposed different sub-groups of respondents to information, and called to mind their family within some sub-groups, in order to measure how these different stimuli affected responses.

Current female university students surveyed have much higher expectations of working than the actual female labor force participation among older generations. The reported likelihood of working at the age of 25 among those surveyed was 69.4%.

Exposure to information about the labor market, peer behavior, and employment support programs raises the likelihood of expected employment. Respondents who received information about labor market outcomes and

aspirations of their female peers had slightly higher expectations of working full time (3.5 percentage points more) than those who received no such information. Those who received information about the unemployment assistance program, Hafiz, expressed a 4.5 percentage point higher likelihood of expecting to enroll in the program (41.8%), than those who didn't (37.3%).

Respondents who received the information and were reminded of their parents reported much higher expectations to work. To remind students of their parents, they were asked a question about whether they wanted to share their survey responses with them. Regardless of the answer, the question served as a “mental prime”, calling to mind a respondent’s family. While 61.2% of respondents who received neither stimuli reported an expectation to work full-time, that rate increased to 67.7% for respondents who received both. Figure 1 shows the reported likelihood of working full-time at the age of 25 for respondents who did not receive information (“Control”), received information (“Info”), and those that received information and were reminded of their parents (“Info & Parents”).

The presence of a working mother matters. Figure 2 shows that the beliefs in the “Info & Parents” group were particularly high for students whose mothers had worked outside the home. This suggests family-specific norms and attitudes towards female labor force participation may be a crucial driver of employment behavior. In theory, women with mothers who worked express higher likelihood of labor force participation either because (a) their parents expect them to, so they feel pressured to report it, or (b) they genuinely desire to work, possibly inspired by their working mothers.

How can policymakers effectively use this information?

Both labor market information and social norms have sizable impacts on intended labor market participation. These should be accounted for and perhaps leveraged when designing policies to increase female employment.

In particular, involving parents in discussions about students’ career aspirations may be beneficial. Employment counselors in universities could encourage students to share their labor market aspirations with their families to gauge their support and receive advice.

Additionally, universities can launch information campaigns disseminating information about employment opportunities and trends. Increased awareness of these issues may also encourage female students to enter the labor market upon their graduation.

Whether such interventions can impact actual labor market behavior remains an open question.

Figure 1 | Expressed Expectation of Working Full-Time at Age 25, by Group Assignment

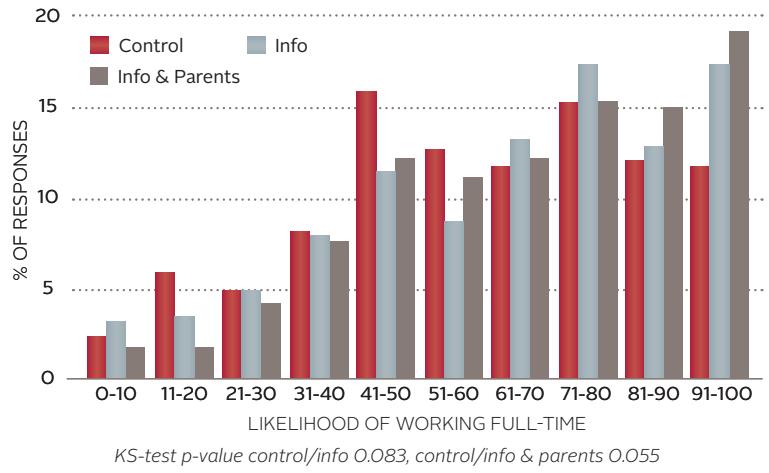


Figure 2 | Expressed Expectation of Working Full-Time at Age 25, by Group Assignment and Mother’s Labor Force Attachment

