

# Revealing Social Norms to Increase Female Labor Force Participation in Saudi Arabia

SEPTEMBER 2018

Project: Understanding and Shifting Social Norms of Female Labor Force Participation in Saudi Arabia

## KEY INSIGHTS

- **Young men substantially underestimate the level of support for female employment by other men.** Among a sample of Saudi men, 72% underestimated how many other men with similar geographic and social backgrounds supported female employment.
- **Once men realize the level of support among their peers, their own level of support changes, and is reflected in their wives' increased labor force participation.** Among men who received the information, more of their wives applied for a job, interviewed, became employed, and expressed interest in registering for driving lessons.

## INCREASED AWARENESS OF MALE PERCEPTIONS ON FEMALE EMPLOYMENT CAN IMPROVE FEMALE LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

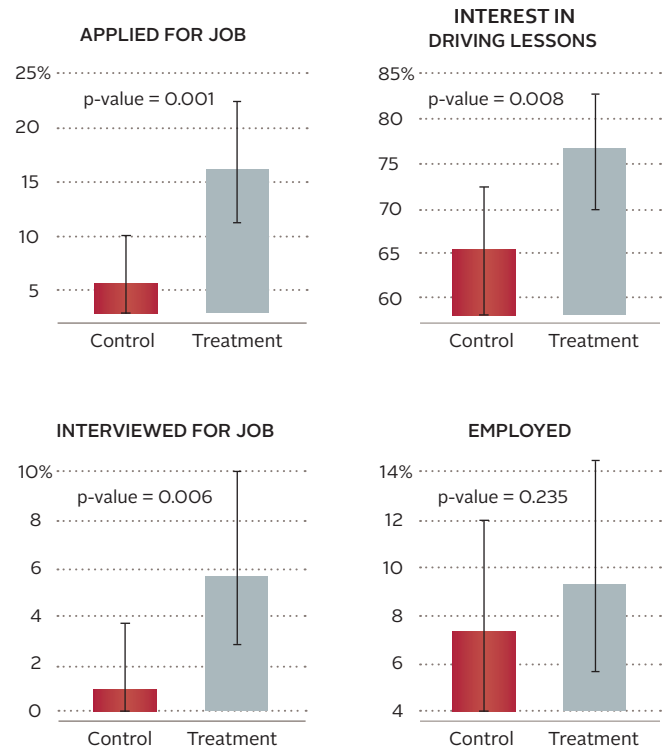
In Saudi Arabia, less than 20% of the working age Saudi female population aged 15 and above was employed in 2018. Anecdotal evidence suggests that societal norms are a key constraint on female employment. However, men's misperceptions about norms surrounding female employment may dissuade them from expressing their positive attitudes or supporting their spouse to enter the labor market. By providing women with more opportunities to contribute economically, policymakers can help lower the country's high unemployment rate and create enormous economic growth.

Researchers surveyed a sample of 500 Saudi married men, aged 18–35, regarding their beliefs on female employment. Nearly 87% of the men agreed that women should be allowed to work outside of the home. Despite this, 72% of survey participants underestimated how many other participants agreed with the same statement.

**Married men's willingness to let their wives join the labor force increases when they learn the majority of other men also support female employment.**

Men who received feedback on the responses of other

**Figure 1 | Long-Term Labor Supply Outcomes (Follow-up Survey)**



participants were 9 percentage points more likely to sign up their wives for a job matching mobile application. Researchers conducted a similar nationally-representative survey of 1,500 men, and found similar results.

**When men learn that they have overestimated public censure of women working, it seems to make a real difference in women's lives.**

More of their wives apply for jobs and work. In the 3-5 months following the information intervention, researchers found: 1) the percentage of participants' wives who applied for a job outside the home increased from 5.8% to 16.2%, 2) the share of wives who interviewed for an outside job increased from 1.1% to 5.8%, 3) rates of employment outside of the home increased from 7.4% to 9.4%, and 4) the share of participants who would sign their wives up for driving lessons increased from 65.2% to 76.4%, as shown in the figure above. The findings suggest that the information provided about beliefs can lead to changes extending beyond increased employment.

Misperceptions about opinions held by other men negatively impact support and acceptance of women's employment. **The findings from this study show that providing information about female employment beliefs can increase female labor force participation.**

**How can policymakers effectively use this information?**

In order to achieve Vision 2030's goal of increasing women's participation in the workforce to 30%, Saudi policymakers could:

- 1) conduct opinion polls on female employment and diffuse information about their findings, and
- 2) implement an effective outreach campaign to raise support for female employment. The government can partner with civil society, NGOs, and the private sector to advocate for more inclusive attitudes that will benefit overall economic progress.

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