



# Addressing social norms impacting Saudi job seekers

Date: August 2022



## Executive summary

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's ambitious Vision 2030 plan is a unique combination of economic and regulatory reform coupled with major investments and cultural modifications that are fueling growth-friendly initiatives throughout the nation. From wage growth and changes aimed at bringing more women into the workforce to broad-based social messages driving changes on the personal and societal level, Saudi Arabia is growing like never before. So many promising opportunities exist for citizens and businesses to take advantage of this shift.

But these changes are taking place in a country where social norms and stereotypes play an incredibly prevalent role. Many changes are slow to occur as a result. How Saudi Arabia can adapt while working within the framework of these norms is vital to Vision 2030's ultimate success. This new policy paper delves deep into the changes taking place and examines how they are affecting Saudi society at large and creating unique opportunities for prosperity and growth not only for Saudi citizens, but also for modern businesses.

Behind an increasingly dynamic economy are millions of individuals making choices about what skills to learn and which types of jobs to pursue. Will they vie for a public-sector career, traditionally seen as more valuable and enviable in Saudi Arabia, or will they opt for a job in the rapidly growing private sector? These are big, complicated decisions, and for most young Saudis, it takes more than salary considerations to make a job attractive. The social beliefs and expectations surrounding particular careers are paramount. Even younger Saudis face similar questions when they decide which fields to study in school.

It doesn't end there. For young Saudis, marriage prospects are closely tied to career choices. A family who finds the private sector appealing for their children will still have to worry about how it will affect future marriage prospects, since it is assumed in Saudi culture that most other families strongly prefer the public sector. These decision-making processes work in reverse as well. Companies must make choices about what types of people they want to hire, and they look for certain types of employees often based on stereotypes (or stigmas) and social norms.

As a result of all this, young Saudi citizens are often conflicted. To solve their dilemma, they primarily consult with their families, particularly their parents and older male figures, before making major life choices. They also compare themselves to peers and colleagues and even contend with broader societal messages about which jobs are appropriate for them to take. Nearly half of all young Saudi citizens report consulting with family and friends before making a career choice, and almost 60% said they would not take a job if their parents disapproved of it.

As we can see, social influence is an incredibly powerful factor in Saudi American life. It shapes many labor market decisions, whether for young people entering the labor market or seasoned professionals with decades of experience. No career decision is made in isolation. To build meaningful change here requires turning to social science, which is fully explored in this highly researched new paper. The growing field of behavioral science has taught us that our behaviors are heavily influenced by context and environmental cues. And as we've seen, job seekers' decisions are affected by many different factors, particularly social norms and expectations. Further, rapid changes in the labor force, as we've seen in Saudi Arabia, are both driven by and likely to further shape the stereotypes and social norms that influence employment decisions.

This brief draws on social and behavioral science research to present the importance of social norms and expectations on labor market decisions in Saudi Arabia. It highlights the most prevalent ones affecting job decisions, along with key trends that are dynamically changing the labor market landscape across the Kingdom. This report also explores ideas for using dynamic social norms as a

basis for making behavioral interventions that could support emerging labor market trends and nudge young Saudis toward growth areas. Dynamic norm interventions take an emerging norm that has not yet caught on widely and try to spread it to pockets of the population that have not yet heard about or internalized it.

People are constantly monitoring the consistency and stability of social norms. Research suggests that people are sensitive to changes and can update their behaviors based on new information. Some of the most successful interventions related to social norm change have leveraged these dynamic norms by facilitating the spread of new ideas, including through public campaigns, targeting social networks, and changing beliefs within families.

Behavioral interventions can act as a catalyst for changes by spreading information about new norms, especially among influential decision-makers in the family. Using successful examples from the past, this report examines how dynamic norms can move beliefs, norms, stereotypes, and stigmas forward so that people can enjoy progress in their personal lives and careers. Once social norms and stereotypes are identified in connection with priority growth networks, public media campaigns can aim to shift norms and stereotypes in a positive direction.

As Saudi Arabia's economy transforms, so does its workforce, and so does society at large. Changing social expectations play a major role in these trends, and understanding how individuals make labor market decisions is essential to meeting the ambitious plans set out in Vision 2030. The exciting opportunities for growth and change outlined in this policy paper shine a beacon for making the necessary changes to social norms that will allow Vision 2030 to be more fully realized in the years ahead.

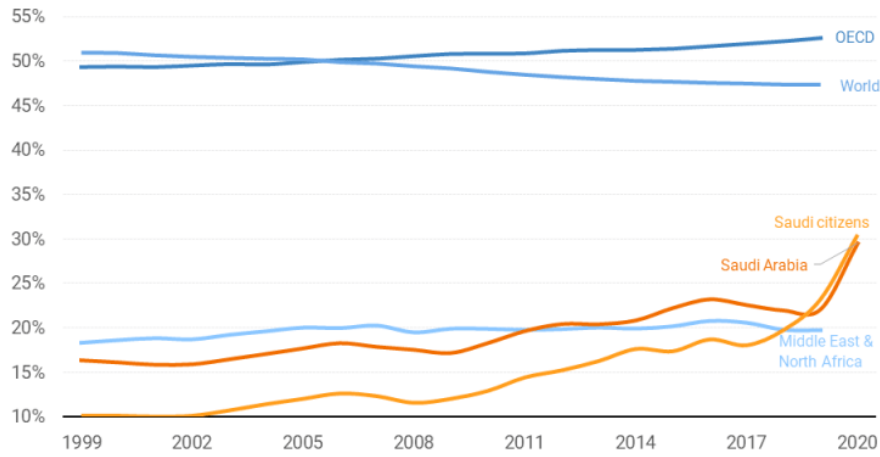
## Introduction

With Vision 2030, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has developed an ambitious plan to grow and diversify its economy. Growth-friendly regulatory reform, major investments in private-sector innovation, and an increasingly active national labor force are all driving the Kingdom forward and creating major economic gains. Understanding the social dynamics driving labor force behavior can help maximize those gains.

In early 2022, Brookings highlighted the rapid transformations taking place in the Kingdom. Women’s labor force participation, growing at an unprecedented rate following regulatory reforms removing formal gender-based barriers to employment, is one. Another is wages, which are on the rise again after the COVID-19 pandemic. The churning labor market shows a Saudi workforce ready and eager to take advantage of new opportunities.

**Figure 1. Historically, the female labor force participation rate for Saudi women was low, but increased substantially in the last three years**

Female labor force participation rate by region and country

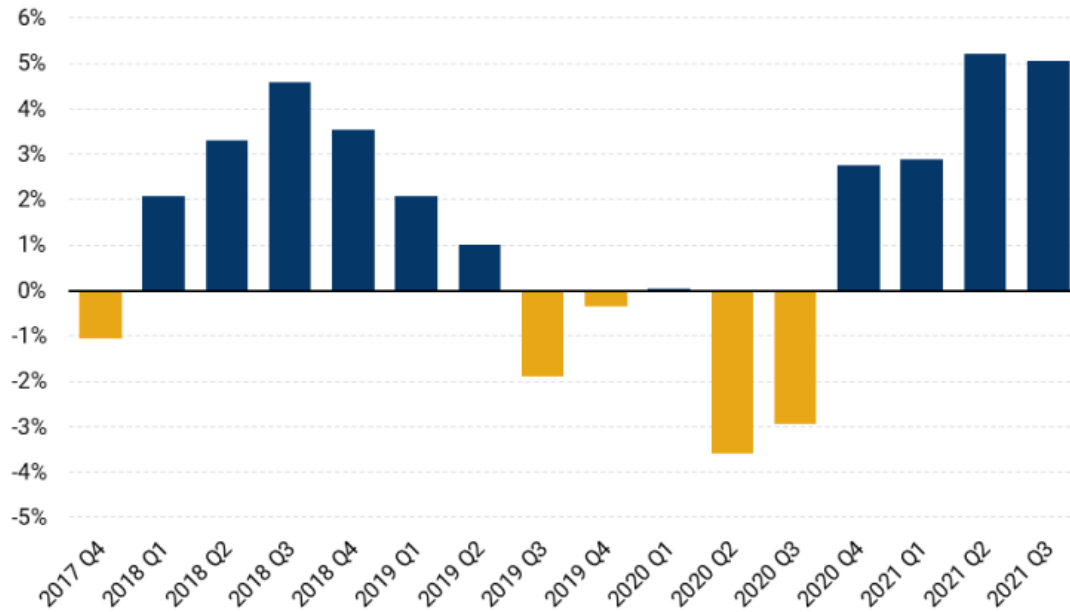


Source: World Bank World Development Indicators. Data for Saudi citizens and for Saudi Arabia 2020 taken from the Saudi General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT). Notes: (1) The female labor force participation rate is measured as the share of the adult (15+) female population that is active in the labor market (having or actively looking for a job) over the total adult (15+) female population. (2) For Saudi Arabia, the number refers to the total female population, including the female expatriate population. Saudi citizens shows the same number for only women with Saudi citizenship.

**BROOKINGS**

## Figure 2. Wages of Saudi workers are growing again

Year-over-year growth in average wages (seasonally adjusted)



Source: Estimated data from LFS - GaStat

BROOKINGS

Behind an increasingly dynamic economy are millions of individuals making choices about what skills to learn and which types of jobs to apply for. They're basing their decisions not only on material considerations, but also on social expectations. They are consulting with their families, comparing themselves to peers or colleagues, and contending with broader societal messages about the jobs that are appropriate or desirable for them. Firms, too, are making decisions about the types of people they want to hire.

This brief draws on social and behavioral science research to present the importance of social norms and expectations on labor market decisions in Saudi Arabia. Based on a recent national survey conducted in Saudi Arabia, it highlights the most prevalent social norms and beliefs, along with key trends that are dynamically changing the labor market landscape across the Kingdom. This report also explores ideas for behavioral interventions (using social norms), with the aim of generally supporting emerging labor market trends and nudging young Saudis toward growth areas in the Kingdom's labor market. Importantly, this realm of research is still in its infancy. Opportunities for behavioral interventions are plentiful in the labor market, of course, but they must be carefully designed, piloted, monitored, and evaluated within the context of Saudi Arabia's norms.

## Social Norms and Stereotypes in the Labor Market

Social influence is a powerful factor. It shapes many labor market decisions, whether for young people making their first decisions about entering the labor market or seasoned professionals with decades of experience. No career decision is made in isolation.

The growing field of behavioral science has taught us that our behaviors are influenced by context and environmental cues rather than a simple cognitive evaluation of preferences and utility. In the labor market, job seekers' decisions are also influenced by different factors in their environment, along with mental shortcuts and biases. One of the most influential is social norms and social expectations.

A 2014 study in Pakistan found that some of the most prominent factors shaping career choice among university graduates were the level of prestige and respect they expected to receive for their career choice, its social influence, and the opinions of parents, friends, siblings, and teachers. In a study of political participation in the United States, researchers found that recruiting people to a controversial political rally was more successful when participants were invited with a message including information about how others would view them with esteem for attending, thus suggesting that social perceptions can shape behaviors in a variety of venues. Although this example seems far afield when it comes to labor market concerns, it underlines the power of social influence and the lengths to which people go to earn the respect of their communities.

Here, we focus on two social factors that influence job seekers' decisions in the Saudi labor market: stereotypes (or stigmas) and social norms.

Stereotypes are fixed, often simplified beliefs about a particular group of people that classifies them into types. While stereotypes are most commonly discussed in studies of ethnic, religious, or gender-based discrimination, they are also powerful factors in the labor market, often defining the characteristics of specific sectors and roles. In the Saudi context, prevalent examples are beliefs related to work in the private versus public sectors. Those with public-sector careers are generally perceived to have a higher status than those in the private sector, incentivizing more job seekers to head to the public sector. Although material concerns about salary and job stability are important, stereotypes associated with particular jobs or industries also drive decision-making in the professional world. We explore stereotypes and social norms related to sector preferences through an original survey described in more detail below.

Social norms are collectively recognized rules for behavior that dictate what is normal, appropriate, and desirable in different contexts. A behavior is a social norm when we engage in it because we expect others to do so as well. Scholar and social sciences philosopher Cristina Bicchieri has referred to social norms as "the grammar of society, because, like a collection of linguistic rules that are implicit in a language and define it, social norms are implicit in the operations of a society and make it what it is." In other words, they are the unwritten rules of society. As people go through their day, they unconsciously adhere to dozens of norms. Norms tell us how to address our elders, what kind of behavior is appropriate in different contexts, which beliefs are acceptable to share with others, and which spaces are considered appropriate or desirable for different kinds of individuals. A major study of US energy consumption found that simply telling households about how far their energy use was from their neighborhood average acted as a magnet for study participants. Those below the average increased their use, and those above it decreased theirs. In this study, participants received information about a norm they were not previously aware of and made major changes to their household's private behavior to adhere to it.

People are constantly monitoring the consistency and stability of social norms. Although most social norms tend to be stable over time, research suggests that people are sensitive to changes and that they can update their behaviors based on new information. Some of the most successful interventions related to social norm change have leveraged these “dynamic norms” by facilitating the spread of new ideas through social groups. Dynamic norm interventions take an emerging norm that has not yet caught on widely and try to spread it to pockets of the population that have not yet heard about or internalized it. They often inform others about the emerging norm, signal that it is desirable, and invite people to join in. , These interventions have been successful in promoting environmental sustainability behaviors in the West, such as reducing meat consumption, but their potential is much broader. As women’s labor force participation takes off and private-sector as well as small- and medium-enterprise employment opportunities grow, the Saudi labor market provides ample opportunities for exploring dynamic norm interventions.

When it comes to changing labor market social norms, especially in the Kingdom, the most developed area of research focuses on gender norms. However, our survey diagnostic shows clear opportunities to intervene in other areas. Overcoming stereotypes and social norms related to different sectors within the labor market presents unique opportunities.

Now that we’ve defined the social influence concepts, we’ll deep-dive into the ways that different social norms and stereotypes influence job seekers’ preferences and decisions.

## How Family and Peers Affect Job Seekers' Decisions

Social norms and stereotypes are initially learned at home, and norms embraced by family continue to influence labor market trajectories over time. A wide range of studies point to the importance of family in young people's career choices, beginning with whether to enroll in university or vocational training after finishing secondary education and continuing on with which career paths to explore.<sup>1</sup> One 2013 US study found that parents had significant influence over whether their children pursued STEM careers.<sup>2</sup> Another study on the same subject that interviewed over 200 young people found that parents influence their children's interest in STEM careers by shaping their impressions of their own abilities and providing information about the lived experience of different jobs.<sup>3</sup> In short, parental beliefs matter. They shape perceptions about the desirability of different career paths.

Parents often explicitly guide their children toward particular jobs or industries as well. Even if direct guidance is absent, families inevitably convey information about the desirability and suitability of various jobs to their children as they go about daily life. Elders, especially male elders, are highly respected authority figures within Saudi society and have some of the strongest influence in their family members' career decisions.

In the Saudi context, not only are young people thinking about their own parents' expectations, but also those of a future spouse. Marriage prospects are tied to career particularly closely in the Kingdom. Consequently, young people are impacted not only by their own families but also by broader societal expectations. For example, a family who finds the private sector appealing for their children will still have to worry about whether encouraging their children to pursue private-sector jobs will diminish their future marriage prospects since it is assumed that most other families strongly prefer the public sector.

These factors highlight the importance of thinking about workforce decisions not only from the perspective of the individual but also from that of the family. Behavioral interventions targeting young people as they make labor force decisions may benefit from targeting family units as well.

The few peer- and family-based behavioral interventions that have been implemented support these findings. An experimental study in India found a positive effect on women's labor force participation when behavioral interventions to change social norms related to women working outside the home targeted women *and* their families.<sup>4</sup> A Saudi study found that informing both men and women about

---

<sup>1</sup> Bärbel Kracke, "Parental Behaviors and Adolescents' Career Exploration," *The Career Development Quarterly* (1997), 45(4), 341-350; Charles Eesley and Yanbo Wang, "Social Influence in Career Choice: Evidence From a Randomized Field Experiment on Entrepreneurial Mentorship," *Research Policy* (2017), 46(3), 636-650; Antonia L. Guerra and Julia M. Braungart-Rieker, "Predicting Career Indecision in College Students: The Roles of Identity Formation and Parental Relationship Factors," *The Career Development Quarterly* (1999), 47(3), 255-266.

<sup>2</sup> Marsha Ing, "Can Parents Influence Children's Mathematics Achievement and Persistence in STEM Careers?" *Journal of Career Development* (2014), 41(2), 87-103.

<sup>3</sup> Jody L. S. Jahn and Karen K. Myers, "Vocational Anticipatory Socialization of Adolescents: Messages, Sources, and Frameworks That Influence Interest in STEM Careers," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* (2014), 42:1, 85-106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2013.874568>

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Heath and Seema Jayachandran, "The Causes and Consequences of Increased Female Education and Labor Force Participation in Developing Countries" in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and the Economy*, Susan L. Averett, Laura M. Argys, and Saul D. Hoffman (eds.), Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 344-68, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190628963.013.10>.



widespread support for women working outside the home among young Saudi men had a positive effect on women’s labor force participation.<sup>5</sup>

In our survey of young Saudis between the ages of 18 and 30, respondents emphasized the importance of their families and peers in regard to labor. Roughly six in ten said they would be unlikely to take a job their parents did not approve of; 28% strongly agreed with that statement. A slightly larger majority (65%) said their family has a major influence over their choice of work industry. Small shares strongly disagreed with these statements, indicating that relatively few young people entirely disregard their families when making these decisions. There were no major differences by gender, age, or socioeconomic status. Family views are influential across demographic groups.

| <b>I would be unlikely to take a job my parents did not approve of.</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Male</b> | <b>Female</b> |
|---|--------------|-------------|---------------|
|   | <b>%</b>     | <b>%</b>    | <b>%</b>      |
| Agree   | 61           | 60          | 62            |
| <i>Strongly agree</i>   | 28           | 27          | 28            |
| Disagree  | 39           | 40          | 38            |
| <i>Strongly disagree</i>  | 16           | 16          | 17            |

| <b>My family has a major influence over my choice of work industry.</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Male</b> | <b>Female</b> |
|---|--------------|-------------|---------------|
|   | <b>%</b>     | <b>%</b>    | <b>%</b>      |
| Agree   | 65           | 64          | 67            |
| <i>Strongly agree</i>   | 30           | 27          | 33            |
| Disagree  | 35           | 37          | 33            |
| <i>Strongly disagree</i>  | 16           | 17          | 15            |

Young Saudis are likely to seek out advice from both friends and family when looking for work. Although the top job resource in our survey was online job-searching websites, asking friends (48%) and family (45%) for guidance on how to get a job were close behind. Fewer young people said they would go to their local communities or their school or university for job-market advice. The youngest respondents in our survey—those aged 18 to 20—were more likely to see their families as a job-search resource than their older counterparts, underlining the influence the family has in the earliest labor force decisions a person makes.

| <b>Which of the following people or groups would you go to for information about how to get a job? Select all that apply.</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>18–20</b>     | <b>21–25</b>     | <b>26–30</b>     |
|---|--------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|   |              | <b>years old</b> | <b>years old</b> | <b>years old</b> |
|   |              | <b>%</b>         | <b>%</b>         | <b>%</b>         |
| Online job-searching websites   | 57           | 57               | 54               | 61               |
| Family  | 45           | <b>52</b>        | <b>44</b>        | <b>43</b>        |
| Friends   | 48           | 49               | 50               | 47               |
| People I know in my local area  | 37           | 36               | 36               | 39               |
| School or university  | 33           | 36               | 34               | 31               |

<sup>5</sup> Leonardo Bursztyn, Allesandra L. González, and David Yanagizawa-Drott, “Misperceived Social Norms: Women Working Outside the Home in Saudi Arabia,” *American Economic Review* (2020), 110(10), 2997–3029.

Together, these findings, coupled with evidence from other contexts, suggest that using interventions to update social norms and stereotypes should not be pursued in isolation from families.

## Community Influence on Job Seekers’ Decisions

Much like family influence, larger communities play an important role in communicating social norms and stereotypes. As young people evaluate their prospects, they are thinking about both the material and social considerations of different jobs and industries. One important consideration is the respect and status within wider society associated with different careers—relevant for an individual’s self-esteem and identity as well as marriage prospects. In our survey, we asked respondents to rank 11 job qualities in order of importance to them personally. While earning the respect of the community was not the top characteristic, it was important to a substantial portion of respondents. High salary and stability, on average, were ranked as the most attractive qualities, followed by personal passion and creativity. Community respect ranked in the top half of desirable job characteristics and is likely correlated with other factors including job stability and salary. A full quarter of young Saudis ranked community respect in their top three, and nearly half (44%) ranked it among the top five most desirable job characteristics. These rankings held across gender, employment sector, and age range (18–30). The one notable exception is that young people working in the private sector were slightly more likely to value having a job they are personally passionate about (13% of private-sector workers said this was their most valued job quality; just 7% in the public sector said the same).

| <b>Job quality</b>  | <b>Avg. rank</b> | <b>Share of top rank</b> | <b>Share of bottom rank</b> |
|---|------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Having a job that is stable and reliable  | <b>4.7</b>       | 17                       | 2                           |
| Earning a high salary   | <b>4.7</b>       | 16                       | 3                           |
| Having a job that I am passionate about   | <b>5.3</b>       | 12                       | 4                           |
| Having a job where I can be creative and innovative                                       | <b>5.3</b>       | 11                       | 4                           |
| Having a job that will give me the respect of people in my community                      | <b>6.0</b>       | 6                        | 4                           |
| Being able to work flexible hours   | <b>6.0</b>       | 6                        | 4                           |
| Contributing to Saudi society   | <b>6.2</b>       | 8                        | 6                           |
| Having a job that is close to home  | <b>6.2</b>       | 7                        | 6                           |
| Helping other people  | <b>6.4</b>       | 7                        | 7                           |
| Being able to work from home  | <b>6.8</b>       | 7                        | 11                          |
| Having a job that will help me marry well (asked among those who have never been married) | <b>7.1</b>       | 6                        | 21                          |

## Public Versus Private Sector Stereotypes

One of the defining features of the Kingdom’s labor market is the stark divide in views regarding public- versus private-sector employment. Given well-documented disparities in average salaries and job stability, it is no surprise that a majority of young Saudis prefer public-sector employment (62%). Only young Saudis from wealthier households show a weaker preference for public-sector employment—there are no differences by gender or age.

However, material concerns tell only part of the story. Social science research has shown that people get a sense of meaning and identity from their work. Jobs help people answer questions about who they are and where they sit in the larger hierarchy of society.<sup>6</sup> Perceptions of sector respectability likely play an important role in driving preferences for public employment.

In our survey, respondents rated the level of respect they believe public- and private-sector workers get in Saudi society, with the public sector far outpacing the private. Over half of young Saudis gave public-sector workers the highest rating, while only 30% gave the same rating to private-sector workers—a 23-point gap. Just 2% say public-sector workers are not too or not at all respected, while 9% say this is the case for private-sector workers. This gap in social esteem is likely creating an additional barrier to the private sector in the labor market.

| <b>Impressions of respect given to workers in different sectors</b> | <b>Public sector</b> | <b>Private sector</b> |
|---|----------------------|-----------------------|
|   | <b>%</b>             | <b>%</b>              |
| Very highly respected   | 53                   | 30                    |
| Highly respected  | 32                   | 32                    |
| Somewhat respected  | 14                   | 30                    |
| Not too respected   | 2                    | 7                     |
| Not respected at all  | 0                    | 2                     |

After expressing their preference for public- versus private-sector employment, respondents gave their reasoning. Young people who prefer the public sector pointed to community respect as a reason by a margin that was ten points higher than those who prefer the private sector. While this was not the top reason for those who prefer either sector, this gap provides further evidence that the public sector is currently more attractive for those who put a premium on earning the respect of others.

However, the private sector was not without its own merits: 38% of young Saudis say they prefer private-sector jobs. The private sector outshines the public sector in two qualities—personal passion and innovation/creativity—that pair well with the pursuit of respect and status. Marrying these private-sector strengths with credible signals of respect and admiration may be effective in boosting interest in private-sector employment among young Saudis.

---

<sup>6</sup> Stephen R. Barley, Beth A. Bechky, and Frances J. Milliken, “The Changing Nature of Work: Careers, Identities, and Work Lives in the 21st Century,” *Academy of Management Discoveries* (2017), 3(2), 111–115.

| <b>Why do you prefer a [private/public] sector job?<br/>Select all that apply.</b> | <b>Among those who<br/>prefer private sector</b> | <b>Among those who<br/>prefer public sector</b> |
|--|--|---|
| Good salary  | 59   | <b>64</b>                                       |
| Stability  | 34   | <b>59</b>                                       |
| Helps Saudi society  | 34   | <b>42</b>                                       |
| Flexibility  | <b>39</b>  | 30  |
| Innovation and creativity  | <b>39</b>  | 29  |
| Personal passion   | <b>38</b>  | 31  |
| Respect of family and community  | 26   | <b>36</b>                                       |
| Many jobs available  | <b>36</b>  | 28  |
| Marriage prospects   | 15   | <b>18</b>                                       |

### Women at Work

In the Kingdom today, social norms are in flux. Cultural expectations around women focusing solely on the domestic sphere are weakening, and new expectations around formal employment are taking off. Norms communicated through communities and families can be particularly influential in relation to gender and play a primary role in women’s workforce decisions. From here, cultural conceptions will be key—both within the family and throughout Saudi society.

Norms in society are spread through visible role models and the cultural messages that follow them. As Saudis, especially young Saudis, see more women working and notice those women being accepted and even rewarded for their labor force participation, these new norms will take root. In our survey, young people exposed to more working women were more likely to say a wide variety of employment roles were appropriate for women. This gap is particularly wide at the senior executive/official level, where there was a 13-point gap among women based on their exposure to working women role models and a 12-point gap among men.

Overall, women were more likely than men to support women working at all levels. Given men’s prominent role as decision-makers in the family and in broader Saudi society, targeting men for behavioral intervention around gendered work norms may be particularly productive.

| <b>Job levels that are appropriate for women</b> | <b>Among young women who say all or many of the women they know work</b> | <b>Among young women who say some, a few, or none of the women they know work</b> |
|--|--|---|
| Senior executive/official                        | 61%  | 48%   |
| Manager  | 67%  | 59%   |
| Professional                                     | 58%  | 50%   |
| Skilled worker                                   | 49%  | 37%   |
| Clerical   | 56%  | 48%   |
| Manual labor                                     | 35%  | 25%   |
|  | <b>Among young men who say all or many of the women they know work</b>   | <b>Among young men who say some, a few, or none of the women they know work</b>   |
| Senior executive/official                        | 40%  | 28%   |
| Manager  | 46%  | 44%   |
| Professional                                     | 46%  | 31%   |
| Skilled worker                                   | 41%  | 31%   |
| Clerical   | 49%  | 47%   |
| Manual labor                                     | 19%  | 16%   |

### Marriage Prospects

Social expectations around women’s employment extend to marriage. Naturally, as young people think about their future careers, they also consider their future family lives. If young women see having a professional career as something that is merely tolerated instead of encouraged, especially when it comes to marriage, they may shy away from the labor force or, more specifically, from leadership positions within the labor force.

In our survey, we saw mixed results on how working impacts a woman’s prospects for marriage. Roughly half of young Saudis agreed with the statement that a woman who wants a professional career will have difficulty finding a husband. This view was more common among young men than young women. When women ranked their desired job characteristics earlier in the survey, finding one that would help their chances for marriage was at the bottom of the list. This indicates that women may see their career options as more likely to hinder than help when they are ready to marry.

These findings are consistent with a study of female MBA students in the US that showed women reporting lower levels of career ambition when they knew their answers would be shared with

colleagues. Women who expected an audience reported aspirations for lower salaries, fewer working hours, and less travel.<sup>7</sup>

| A woman who wants to have a professional career will have difficulty finding a husband. | Total | Male | Female |
|---|-------|------|--------|
|   | %     | %    | %      |
| Agree   | 48    | 54   | 42     |
| Disagree  | 52    | 47   | 58     |

### Potential Areas for Behavioral Intervention

There are promising opportunities for behavioral interventions to support emerging labor market trends and norms, some of which we discuss below. Few interventions have been tested thus far, as this is new ground in behavioral research in the labor sector. All interventions should be carefully designed, piloted, and evaluated.

Potential intervention opportunities:

- Facilitating the spread of emerging social norms through public campaigns:** Public campaigns can go a long way in communicating desired changes in stereotypes and social norms. For example, in the United States, public campaigns that focused on social norms related to quitting smoking proved to be equally and sometimes more effective than those that focused on consequences like personal health.<sup>8</sup> Once social norms and stereotypes are identified in connection with priority growth networks, public media campaigns can aim to shift norms and stereotypes in a positive direction.
- Target social networks:** Social norms are often slow to change as information about what constitutes appropriate or desirable behavior passes through social networks. One extremely promising area of intervention is facilitating the spread of these new norms, especially where there is reason to believe a majority of people privately believe in the norm while not publicly adhering to it. This may be particularly effective for encouraging women’s labor force participation, but it should also be explored in the context of young people’s sector decisions. From our survey, roughly four in ten young Saudis prefer the private sector. Research in education suggests that peers have strong influences on the behavioral and career choices of young people,<sup>9</sup> it may be useful to encourage young people to pursue

<sup>7</sup> Leonardo Bursztyn, Thomas Fujiwara, Amanda Pallais, “‘Acting Wife’: Marriage Market Incentives and Labor Market Investments,” *American Economic Review* (2017), 107(11), 3288–3319.

<sup>8</sup> Xueying Zhang, David W. Cowling, and Hao Tang, “The Impact of Social Norm Change Strategies on Smokers’ Quitting Behaviours,” *Tobacco Control* (2010), 19(Suppl 1), i51–i55.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Sacerdote, “Peer Effects in Education: How Might They Work, How Big Are They and How Much Do We Know Thus Far?” in *Handbook of the Economics of Education* by Eric Hanushek, Stephen Machin, and Ludger Woessmann (eds.), Elsevier, 2011 (Vol. 3, pp. 249–277).

more private-sector careers by facilitating the spread of norms through peer networks around their desirability.

- **Rooting interventions in the family unit:** Behavioral interventions can act as a catalyst for these changes by spreading information about these new norms, especially among influential decision-makers in the family. In one recent study in the Kingdom, researchers informed married men of their peers' views about women working outside the home. When men who were personally supportive of this idea heard that other men agreed with them, they were more likely to encourage their wives to work. When women who were being recruited for a one-day survey job heard about widespread male support for them working outside the home as part of the recruitment package, they were more likely to pursue the position.<sup>10</sup> Social influence is extremely important in career decisions and, as we've illustrated, young people defer to their families in job decisions; they are unwilling to take a job their parents do not approve of, and their families are influential in industry selection. Moreover, many said they would go to family and friends for advice on how to find a job. Behavioral interventions need to take this into account. An intervention focused solely on the job seeker may not be effective if it runs contrary to the views of authority figures in the family. Policymakers should consider joint interventions that provide information to both job seekers and the people in their lives who will help make job market decisions.

---

<sup>10</sup> Leonardo Bursztyn, Alessandra L. González, and David Yanagizawa-Drott, "Misperceived Social Norms: Women Working Outside the Home in Saudi Arabia," *American Economic Review* (2020), 110(10), 2997–3029.



## The Way Forward

As the Kingdom's economy transforms, so does its workforce. Young Saudis are increasingly attending university and learning skills oriented toward technology and sustainability, and women are entering the labor force with greater frequency. Saudi nationals are pursuing jobs previously held by foreign workers, and new sectors are growing in prominence. These rapid changes in the labor force are both driven by and likely to further shape the stereotypes and social norms that influence employment decisions.

Changing social expectations play a major role in these trends, and understanding how individuals make labor market decisions is essential to meeting the ambitious plans set out in Vision 2030. Behind the millions of workers across the Kingdom are families and communities that are influencing current career decisions and the aspirations of the next generation. Changing the way young people think about labor market decisions begins by considering family and peer influence, community respect, and gender-based social norms.

Our survey results mirror findings in the literature indicating that job seekers hold powerful beliefs about stereotypes in the labor market, such as public-sector jobs being more desirable than those in the private sector. If job growth occurs in the private sector, it is likely that broad efforts will need to be made to shift stereotypes to make it more attractive.

A top priority for future research should be to identify where the greatest employment supply is likely to be and assess the skills, stereotypes, and norms associated with working in these areas. Too often, stereotypes and norms are neglected in an effort to incentivize interest and demand in growth sectors. Failing to identify and address underlying social norms and constraints associated with specific sectors and roles will limit the effectiveness of skills training and may lead to a mismatch between labor market priorities and preferences among job seekers. This can result in unfilled labor market needs, inefficient returns on skills training, and high turnover in priority sectors.