



Research Article

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Gender Equality at Public Universities in Saudi Arabia: Achievements and Ambitions

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Abstract

Gender equality is one of the 17 fundamental targets of the Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030. Many countries including Saudi Arabia have made intensive efforts to close gender gap. This paper aims to uncover how Saudi Arabia is addressing gender inequality in higher education, mainly at public universities. The paper employs both Gender Parity Index (GPI) and Gender Gap Global Index (GGGI) generated by the World Economic Forum (WEF). This is enhanced by the critical analysis of the most recent documents and statistical data related to the topic published inside and outside Saudi Arabia. The main sources of statistical data include UNESCO, the World Bank, and the United Nations organizations. The paper affirms that gender parity in higher education is almost achieved and even indicates a reversal of the situation. Political will, political stability, and the implementation of rational policies are the key factors behind achieving gender parity in higher education. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) has risen from 1% in 1975 to 70.6 % in 2020, with 67.9% for males, and 73.5% for females. Moreover, the GPI measure in 2021 was 1.15 indicating that females are surpassing males and dominating public universities. Despite these positive remarks, gender disparities do exist in the field of study, university staff and leadership positions. The paper fills in the research gap as there is a scarcity of comprehensive studies addressing gender inequality in Saudi higher education. Further studies are needed to address this issue and ensure equal representation and opportunities.

Keywords: Gender equality, SDGs, Gender parity index, Higher education, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Planners and policymakers are now concerned about gender equality worldwide. Much attention was taken to guarantee that everyone is treated fairly, regardless of gender or socio-economic status. As stated by Forsyth (2011), gender equality does not always include treating men and women equally or having an equal number of them in all activities. It denotes opportunity, equality and a society where men and women may enjoy equally satisfying lives. According to the United Nations (2023), gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but also a necessary foundation for a peaceful,

prosperous and sustainable world. Gender equality has become one of the 17 fundamental targets of the Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030. Saudi Arabia, like the other 192 countries, has committed to these targets predominantly with regard to education.

Available literature has shown that for several decades, female worldwide are underrepresented in higher education (Abalkhail, 2017; Dahlan, 2023; Elhadary & Samat, 2023). As clearly stated by Alhothali (2020) until recently the academic sphere of Saudi Arabia has been largely dominated by men. Therefore, national governments and international organizations adopted policies to include that no one left behind due to gender. Several initiatives have been implemented to empower women and reduce gender inequality. It has become one the fundamental objectives of the (17th) sustainable development goals lunched in 2015 to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). For example, goal 4th focuses on quality education, "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Specifically, the target 3th of the fourth goal (4.3) ensures that both women and men have equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including enrolment in universities. In addition, the 5th goal is about achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. It is stated clearly in the first target (5.1) ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. Owing to that, the number of students enrolled in higher education has increased substantially, and worldwide, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in tertiary education increased from 10% in 1970 to 42% in 2022 (World Bank, 2023). While the GER of male has increased from 12% to 39 for the same year respectively. On contrast, the GER of female has increased from 8% to 45 for the same year respectively. Despite this positive remark of female in higher education worldwide, gender inequality remains a significant issue. Currently, no country has yet achieved full gender parity (World Economic Forum, 2023) although some have made remarkable progress like Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia has committed itself to the international agreements and adopted internal policies and plans like "Saudi Vision 2030" to address gender equality in all aspects of life including higher education. The vision aims not only to enhance the education outcomes but also to improve the structure of the education sector as a whole. As argued by Alsubaie, (2022) through the Kingdom Vision 2030 that Saudi Arabia is training capable women to take leadership roles in key economic sectors in preparation for the Kingdom Vision 2030. Accordingly, the total number of students in higher education has increased from 1.62 million in 2012 (Jamal, 2021) to 1.97 million in 2022 (Colliers, 2022). This in line with World Bank (2023) as stated that in Saudi Arabia the gross enrolment ratio of female in tertiary education has increase from just 1% in 1975 to 24% in 2000 and jumped to 70% in 2017, compared to male, which were 5%, 14% and 69% for the same years respectively. Moreover, the global gender gap report (2023) reflects some significant variations for graduated students infavour of females (63.40) compared with (40.83) for males with the value of (51.39). This implies that Saudi Arabia is on the right track to achieve gender parity in higher education.

Currently, the number of female enrolled is almost equal or in some cases surpasses male. Despite this positive fact, still gender disparity does exist taking forms away from gross enrolment. Female are underrepresented in a university academic staff and much lower at top leader post at public universities compared to men. As indicated by the World Bank (2023) the percentage of female in academic staff were 13% in 1975, 35% 2000 and only 43% 2022. Administratively, most women in the higher education sector occupied middle-ranking posts and very rarely appointed as vice-chancellors. To date, only one woman has held the position of university president. However, this woman is the president of Nourah University; a campus for women only (Alhothali, 2020). This inequality as indicated by Hakeim (2022) is rooted in the Saudi' society, which is generally characterized as culturally conservative, and is structured according to tribal affiliations and patriarchal family values, with gender inequality woven into its social fabric and perpetuated through the ubiquitous gender segregation. This situation continued until King Abdullah ascended to the throne in 1995. The King has paid much attention to the status of women and implemented several legislations to empower them (Alhothali, 2020). This has been enhanced by the adoption of the vision 2030 which seeks to close the gender gap in higher education and to achieve sustainable

development goals. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to trace the effort made by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in addressing gender inequality in public universities. The main objective is to uncover the challenges and opportunities facing in ensuring that no one is left behind due to gender and socio-economic background. The paper will contribute to the ongoing debates on gender inequality in higher education and open doors for further studies.

2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

2.1 *The concept of gender and gender equality:*

The concept of gender involves biological and cross-cutting socio-cultural dimensions. Gender can also be applied to all other cross-cutting variables such as race, class, age, ethnic group, etc. (United Nations, 2001). Gender systems are established in different socio-cultural contexts which determine what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman/man and girl/boy in these specific contexts (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024). It is also important to emphasize that the concept of gender is not interchangeable with women. It refers to both women and men, and the relations between them (United Nations, 2001). Systematic thinking and scientific research about gender inequality is not new matter. Since the beginning of the 20th century much has been written and many theoretical ideas have been discussed. Feminism is one of the most ideological movements that draws attention towards gender equality (Hyndman, 2004). The term feminists stresses that gender inequality is not an individual matter, but is deeply rooted in the structure of societies. It is built into the organization of marriage and families, work and the economy, politics, religions, the arts and other cultural productions, and the very language we speak (Lorber, 1997). In the same vein, David (2015) argued that the feminist project is to transform women's lives in the direction of gender and social equality has become not only a political but also an educational and pedagogical one. Feminism has transformed women's lives and the processes of knowledge-making, but it has yet to have a wider impact on gender, given the parallel changing socio-economic contexts towards managerial and business approaches to university.

While, gender equality is defined as the state in which access to rights or opportunities is unaffected by gender (Mitchell & Boyd, 2023). It means that the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female. In this context, debates about gender consider the different roles played by men and women in socio-economic relations, and the differential impact of the development process on women and men (Forsyth, 2011). According to Marxist theories, gender inequality is a product of the economic, political, and social structures of capitalism (Robison, 2018). While the developmental school of thought, gender inequality is the result of structural adjustment policies which is likely to vary depending on the extent to which such policies include cutbacks or increases in educational expenditures (Forsythe et al., 2003). Available literature has shown that male and female have not been treated equally in accessing education worldwide. In Saudi Arabia male accessed higher education earlier in the year 1949 while for female was in 1960. According to Alhothali (2020) the first opportunity for Saudi women to pursue higher education was through King Saud University in 1961. However, women were only allowed to enroll in the university through the College of Arts and Administrative Sciences, and in a part-time enrollment status; therefore, the enrollment for women was only five percent. Therefore, several international, civil societies and international organizations paid much attention to empowering women. As we all believe, the absence of gender equality means a huge loss of human capital and has costs for both men and women and for development (Forsyth, 2011). The concept of empowerment circulated around providing economic power to the women in society (Alsubaie, 2022). According to Hoque & Itohara (2009), women are considered empowered when they have the same access to resources like education as men do, when institutional discrimination based on gender is eliminated, when women are able to organize and negotiate with their husbands, and when they receive higher levels of social assistance. Several authors like Alsubaie (2022); Al-Zahrani (2012)

suggested that the most powerful tool for advancing women's roles and empowering them as individuals is through education. The empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality is one of the eight internationally agreed upon Millennium Development Goals. For education equality, goal 4th focuses on quality education, "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). Globally, Saudi Arabia is one of the 192 countries that have committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) issued by the United Nations in 2015, aiming to achieve 17 sustainable development goals by 2030. Both goals 5th and 10th highlighted the need for gender equality. The fifth goal is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, while the tenth goal is to reduce inequality within and among countries (to empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all by 2030, irrespective of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, economic, or other status) (United Nations, 2023).

3. Empowering Women through Higher Education: Policies Intervention

Historical evidence has shown that higher education made available to women in 1962 and in 1970 the first college for women was established to provide female teachers (Alaugab, 2007). However, it was only in 2002 that the administration of education for females was taken over by the Ministry of Education. Prior to 2002, education for females was administered by the Department of Religious Guidance to ensure it did not deviate from its original purpose to make women good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for 'acceptable' jobs such as teaching and nursing that were believed to suit their nature' (Hamdan, 2005). It is important to note that the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education was established in 1975 to undertake the implementation of the Kingdom's policy in higher education. In 2015 the Ministry of Higher Education was merged with the Ministry of Education into one ministry under the name (Ministry of Education). Generally speaking, the Minister of Education is responsible for implementing the government's policy in the field of university education (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2023a). For Saudi Arabia, education is a key to socio-economic development and technological transformation. Therefore, the education sector has received much attention from planners and policymakers in the kingdom. In this context, the Ministry of Education seeks to achieve building human resources, encouraging continuous education and affording opportunities to all, and continuing to act upon the principle of gender-fair and balanced access (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2023b).

Since 1970 up to the present, nine development plans have been implemented by Saudi authorities to ensure economic growth, improve social services, reduce gender equality, and conserve natural resources; each plan is for five years. Available data indicates that the development plans have succeeded in promoting economic growth, increasing the gross national product, and strengthening the social sector (Saudi Ministry of Finance, 2023). Regarding education, the first development plan (1970-1974) looks to continue the expansion of opportunities for education at all levels, from pre- primary to tertiary education. For higher education, the plan requires all students to complete secondary education. In addition, special programmes were adopted to allow students with disability (blind, deaf, and dumb) to continue their studies (Central Planning Organization, 1390 A.H). The second development plan (1975-1980) has emphasized the importance of education in national development, with continued financial support, and facilities for students. The third and fourth Development Plans (1980-1985; 1986-1990), followed the previous plans particularly the second plan and continue on achieving social goals. It is important to note that during the third plan Saudi authority established the Education Development Center. The fifth development plan (1991-1995) paid more attention to female's education especially with the increasing numbers of graduated girls in secondary schools. The sixth development plan (1995-2000) supported the rapid expansion of female educational institutions. The seventh development plan (2000-2004) gave priority to human resources by providing good quality education and training. Also, the plan aimed to ensure high education opportunities and expand the base of higher education to achieve the development

requirements. The eighth development plan (2005-2009) was based on an integrated set of general objectives, among which are to raise the standard of living, improve the quality of life and provide job opportunities to citizens, by accelerating the development process, increasing the rates of economic growth, and ensuring enhancement of the quantity and quality of education, health and social services. This plan has included a chapter on woman and development, with main concentration on education and employment. The educational strategy of the ninth development plan (2010-2014) aims to achieve qualitative and quantitative development through a consistent integrated set of general objectives, policies and targets for each level of education. For higher education, the objectives aim to raise internal and external efficiency in order to meet the requirements of development, and expansion and diversification of graduate programmes (Saudi Ministry of Finance, 2023).

One of the most prominent success of these plans was the spread of universities across regions and governorates. According to the Saudi Ministry of Education (2023c, 2023d), there are 29 public universities, and 38 private universities and colleges with various fields of knowledge. It is interesting to note that Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries have to established a university catering only for women named the Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University. This will enable the country's female workforce to take advantage of newly available educational opportunities (Alsubaie, 2022). It is important to highlight that the kingdom secured funding for all public universities and up to the present, student joined such universities received a monthly allowance. The annual budget for education reached 136 billion riyals in 2023. Regarding funding, many access and rewards are offered by Saudi governments to students in public universities, among these is the financial reward (a specific amount of money given to students at public universities during the academic year). This financial reward will be doubled for excellence and unique students. Moreover, the government has offered transportation service to female students. These facilities explain why Saudi students prefer joined public universities. Around 95% of the age group of 18-24 years, were enrolled in public institutions, as these are free of charge (Colliers, 2022). Moreover, the Saudi Ministry of Education has enabled disabled students to complete their education by providing them with a qualifying academic year. The ministry was also established specialized committees, as well as partnerships with local, regional, and international communities.

During the eighth development plan, Saudi authority established the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Program for External Scholarships was a new initiative that was created in 2005 by King Abdullah. Students from Saudi Arabia have access to a wide range of opportunities including the possibility to pursue their education in western countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. According to the statistical yearbook for Saudi Arabia for the years 2012-2013, there were approximately 150,109 males and 49,176 females who were studying outside of the country (Manail, 2015). According to Alsubaie (2022) the Ministry of Education Statistics Center (2017) reports that there are 5,165 female students enrolled in PhD programmes in western countries. This number accounts for 41.91 percent of Saudi students who are currently pursuing their PhDs in western countries (Bacha et al., 2021). The External Scholarships Program has gone through a number of stages since its inception until today. In 2010, the program launched the Safer platform that connected students on scholarship with the ministry and identified the most important obstacles they faced in their educational journey. The second phase of scholarships began in 2011. In 2015, the third phase came with the experience of the project called "Your Job, Your Scholarship," in which the Ministry linked scholarships with the specializations required in the labor market to provide jobs for scholarship students. In 2019, the Ministry of Education announced the end of the third phase of scholarships as it worked on organizing a new track for scholarships and setting the conditions to ensure the achievement of the objectives of the scholarship programs (Saudi Ministry of education, 2023e). After King Salman ascended to the throne, additional changes were made to the government's scholarship program to reflect the Kingdom's Vision 2030 reform strategy. The Vision 2030, was built around three themes: a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation. Owing to that, Saudi Arabia's economy has witnessed diversification and no longer dependent on the production of oil. The economy has shifted into high-tech, creative, and other specialized industries (Alsubaie,

2022). Regarding education, the vision aims to continue investing in education, and close the gap between the outputs of higher education and the requirements of the job market. Moreover, the vision seeks to provide equal opportunities and empower woman. As stated in the vision: "Saudi women are yet another great asset. With over 50 percent of our university graduates being female, we will continue to develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy" (Saudi Government, 2017). As the Ministry of Education stated clearly, all women, regardless of socio-economic status, have access to a high-quality education in order to produce citizens who will contribute to the country's future progress and prosperity (Alsubaie, 2022).

As stated above, the fastest way to empower women in all aspects is through education. Therefore, the kingdom adopted rational policies to overcome constraints that hinder female from accessing education. Abalkhail (2017) mentioned that women in Saudi Arabia face a number of challenges preventing them from achieving equitable representation in leadership positions; conversely, they do have some opportunities that help them in their careers, and these challenges must be understood in a socio-cultural context. Alsubaie & Jones (2017) mentioned that although women in higher education acquired higher qualifications, and have longer experience than their male counterparts, men were given preference in recruitment processes for leadership roles, while this discrimination was attributed to cultural reasons and power linked to religious views. Al-bakr et al (2017) stated that "Saudi women still face discrimination in accessing the education system, receiving quality instruction, and pursuing their desired courses of study. In addition, strict gender segregation relegates female students to inferior educational facilities and unequal academic opportunities. In the same line, Hakiem (2022) mentioned that the most significant factors restricting women's academic freedom in Saudi Arabia are gender segregation; social hierarchies; exclusion and marginalization; and other structural and attitudinal barriers to undertaking research. For Alotaibi (2020), Saudi women in higher education are facing many barriers include organizational, cultural, and personal. According to Alhareth et al (2015), the number of female students have increased from roughly 3,879 in 2004/2005 to approximately 35,700 in 2011/ 2012. In addition, the number of female lecturers in Saudi universities has correspondingly risen from just 4,700 in 2003/2004 to approximately 19,600 by 2008/2009. However, despite all the efforts being made, women who live in the Northern and Southern regions still continue to have fewer opportunities to access higher education than those who live in the other regions because of the distribution of universities between regions, and the barriers of traditional culture (Alhareth et al., 2015). Morley (2010) indicates that participation rates for women in higher education have increased between 1999 and 2005 in all regions of the world, with a global gender parity index (GPI) of 1.05. Between 1999 and 2004, the GPI for gross enrolment in higher education increased. However, many obstacles hinder gender equality in higher education including socio-economic, ethnicity, and age. Therefore, this paper aimed to uncover the challenges facing women in accessing higher education institutions and explain how the kingdom overcomes such constraints.

4. Methodology and Materials

The paper is based mainly on a desk review of recent and relevant statistical data collected from both governmental institutions, and international actors. These sources include the Saudi Ministry of Education (SME), Saudi Ministry of Finance (SMF), Saudi Ministry of Economy and Planning (SMEP), the Saudi General Authority for Statistics, the National Transformation Programme Document, the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Economic Forum, the World Bank and UNESCO. This coupled with the deep analysis of articles and documents related to the topic published inside and outside Saudi Arabia as shown in the methodological framework (Figure 1). The frame starts by showing the overall objective of the paper (addressing gender disparity in public universities) followed by the various sources of data collection, which is divided into text and numerical type. Moreover, the paper employed the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) to measure

gender parity. This index has been used by World Economic Forum to measure gender parity across four sectors (Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment). It is the longest-standing index tracking the progress of numerous countries' efforts towards closing gender gap over time since its inception in 2006 (World Economic Forum, 2006). This index is very essential to place Saudi Arabia in the global and regional context with regard to parity.

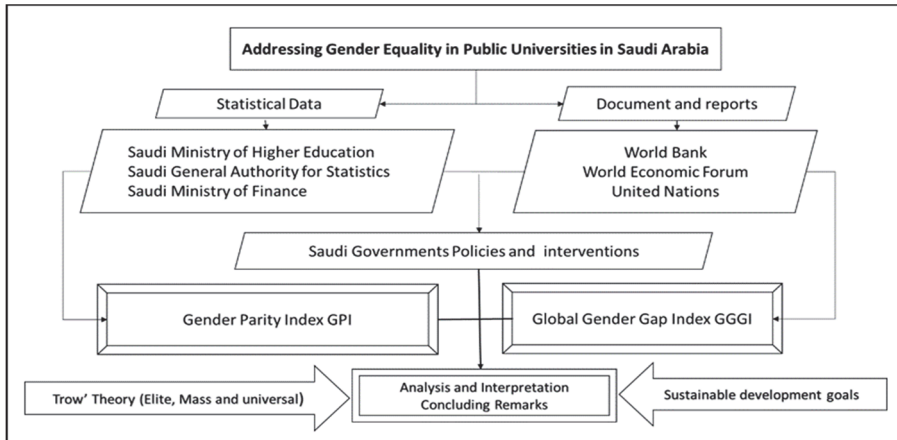


Figure 1: Methodological Framework.

The Gender Parity Index (GPI) is another measure used by this paper to measure gender gap principally in higher education at the global, regional, and national levels. The index released by UNESCO to measure the relative access to education of males and females. This index requires only the number of males and females enrolled in higher education. Thereafter, the results are obtained by dividing the total number of females by the number of males then and rounding up to two decimal places (Tienxhi, 2017, Elhadary & Samat, 2023) as follows:

$$GPI = EF/EM$$

EF: enrollment ratio of higher education for females

EM: enrollment ratio of higher education for males

The resultant score of the above formula reflects the condition of gender parity. A GPI equal to one indicates parity between females and males; a value less than one indicates disparity in favor of males, and a value greater than one indicates disparity in favor of females. If the score is 2.0, then there are two females for every male. According to Elhadary & Samat (2023), a GPI of 0.97 to 1.03 indicates that gender parity has been achieved. Four classes are generated based on the results obtained: extreme disparity, intermediate disparity, close to parity, and gender parity. These classes are elaborated in Table 1.

Table 1: Gender Parity Index

GPI	Result	In favor of	Result	In favor of
Extreme disparity	Below 0.5	Males	>1.5	Females
Intermediate disparity	(0.05–0.89)	Males	(1.11–1.5)	Females
Close to parity	(0.9–0.96)	Nearly equal	(1.03–1.1)	Nearly equal
Gender parity	(0.97–1.03).	Equality	(0.97–1.03).	Equality

Source: Adapted from Elhadary & Samat (2023).

5. Result and Discussion

5.1 Saudi Arabia: Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)

As stated in the methodology, the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) measure gender parity across four key dimensions (Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment), table 2 summarizes the ranks and scores of Saudi Arabia during the period 2006-2022.

Table 2: Saudi Arabia Global Gender Gap Index (SAGGGI)

Sub-Indices	Rank			Value		
	2006	2010	2022	2006	2010	2022
Economic Participation and Opportunity	115	132	128	0.240	0.335	0.524
Educational Attainment	93	92	93	0.880	0.974	0.979
Health and Survival	54	53	116	0.977	0.976	0.964
Political Empowerment	115	131	132	0.000	0.000	0.077
Global Gender Gap Index	114	129	127	0.524	0.571	0.636

Source: World Economic Forum (2006, 2010, 2022).

In 2006, out of 115 countries cited in GGGI, Saudi Arabia ranked number 114, it was one ahead of the last, and then the situation has improved a little bit, out of 146 countries in 2010 and 2022 the kingdom ranked 132 and 128 respectively. From 2006 to 2022, the overall value has slightly changed from 0.524 to 0.636. It is surprising to note that Saudi Arabia ranked sixth out of thirteen countries within the Middle East and North Africa region (Saudi Arabia zone) in 2022 (World Economic Forum, 2022). This implies that the kingdom is still far in achieving full gender parity. The figures also indicate some significant variations between sub-indices in favour of education attainment, and health and survival, which are almost approaching gender parity (0.979, and 0.964 respectively). Nevertheless, for political empowerment, the indicator is still far to achieve fully parity, and needs more efforts. Despite the fact that the country is classified as one of the rich countries in the Arab world and is one of the top twenty industrial group (20G). Despite these facts, Saudi Arabia is still far from achieving gender parity in economic participation. For education attainment and health, the secret of success is due to the successive efforts provided by Saudi governments during the previous development plans, and to the attention paid to education as a key element in promoting the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda. In addition, education plays vital role in the transition to a sustainable society. The government aims not only to improve the education outcomes but also to improve the structure of the education sector as a whole. The ultimate intention of this is to mold an education system that continually ensures it is fit for purpose and ultimately is in line with the developments and requirements of global and local labour markets (Jamal, 2021). In this context, according to the Saudi Ministry of Education (2023f), the allocated amounts for education had risen from SR127.6 billion (\$34 billion) in 2017 to SR 136 billion (\$36.3 billion) in 2023. Quarter of the total budget is allocated to the education as stated by Alsubaie (2022) 25.7% of the total spending of the government is for education.

The above section clearly reflected clearly that the kingdom is on the right track to close the gender gap mainly in education and health. This is also affirmed by the data gathered from the UNESCO regarding higher education. For example, in 2020, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in tertiary education in Saudi Arabia was 70.6 per cent, increasing at an average annual rate of over six percent since 2012 (Ryan, 2023). This even surpassed the world average GER which was at 40% in 2020. Based on Trow (1973) theory, Saudi Arabia is passing the first two stages and now enjoying the universal level (table 3). According to Trow, higher education system has evolved from being elite to a

mass, and subsequently, a universal system. The transition within the stages depends on the percentage of the gross enrolment ratio. The elite system enrolls less than 15% of students within the age cohort; a mass system ranges between 15 and 50%; and a universal system has more than 50% (Elhadary & Samat, 2023).

Table 3: Gross Enrolment Ratio for Tertiary Education in Saudi Arabia (2015-2020).

Sex	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Both sex	61.06	67.34	69.70	68.04	70.90	70.63
Male	60.69	67.15	70.03	66.34	68.34	67.93
Female	61.44	67.54	69.34	69.88	73.68	73.56

Source: UNESCO, 2023

Table 3 shows the continuous rise of GER for both sex during 2015-2020, and indicates some variations in favor of females. For male, GER has increased from 60.69 in 2015 to 67.93 in 2020, while the GER for female has increased from 61.44 in 2015 to 73.56 in 2020. This figure explained clearly that gender parity regarding higher education has almost achieved. Not only that, but the situation is reversed as there is more female in higher education institutions compared to male. Moreover, the GER in Saudi Arabia seems to be good when it compared with the global or regional ratios (table 4 and figure 2). Saudi Arabia is progressing well in gender parity within its regional context and surpassing the world average.

Table 4: Gross Enrolment Ratio for Tertiary Education for Both Sex at Global, Regional, and National level (2015-2020).

Sex	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Saudi Arabia	61.06	67.34	69.70	68.04	70.90	70.63
South & West Asia	24.86	24.74	25.09	25.46	26.43	26.86
world	36.87	37.40	37.85	38.43	39.41	40

Source: UNESCO, 2023

Table 4 indicates significant variations between Saudi Arabia and the other countries in South and West Asia regions. These variations are due to the successive efforts made by Saudi government, beside the socio-economic stability and political will.

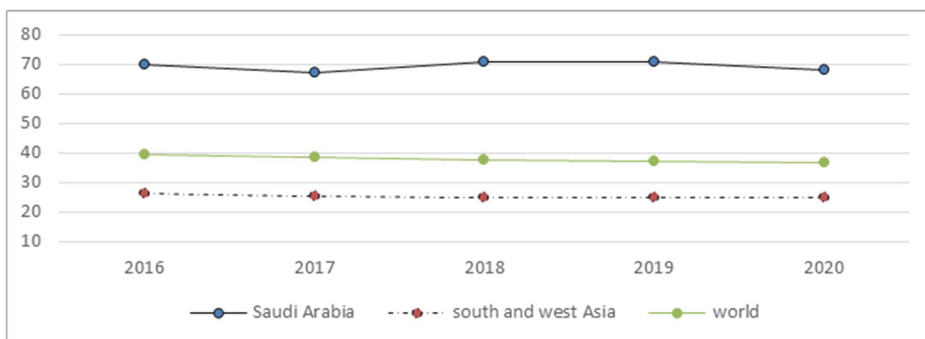


Figure 2: Gross Enrolment Ratio for Tertiary Education for Both Sex (2016-2020)

Source: UNESCO, 2023

5.2 Public Universities and Gender Equality:

One of the strategic goals of the Saudi Ministry of Education is to develop a higher education system and training institutions. The ambition is to have at least five universities listed among the top 200 universities in international rankings by 2030 (Vision, 2030). In this context, higher education in Saudi Arabia is undergoing rapid transformation with regard to policies and infrastructures. Currently, Saudi Arabia has 29 public universities, distributed over thirteen regions. One of these universities caters only to females is the (Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University), most of the staff, if not all are women. On contrast, there is also a university for only male, which is the Islamic University of Madinah. It is important to note that (King Abdullah University of Science and Technology) is a co-educated but only for postgraduate and research studies and also offered a places from outside students. Moreover, up to the year 2020, there is no official admission for female at King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals, only then are allowed.

The following section provides detailed information about the GER at public universities (2013 – 2021) as summarized in table 5. The fourth column in table 5 reflected GPI among public universities. The result shows that except for very few universities, gender parity has been achieved and in universities like (Jouf, Bisha, Hafr Al Batin and Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal) there are two females against one male.

Table 5: Students Enrolment in Public Universities (2013-2021)

Public Universities	2013	GPI	2021	GPI
Umm Al-Qura University	69,345	1.26	87,564	1.21
Islamic University of Madinah	13,410	NA	12,846	NA
Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University	85,659	0.68	139,362	0.73
King Saud University	49,896	0.79	66,693	0.73
King Abdulaziz University	168,398	0.70	124,655	1.03
King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals	8,139	NA	12663*	0.007
King Faisal University	131,798	0.70	113,660	0.56
King Khalid University	52,153	1.45	59,219	1.30
Qassim University	58,197	1.41	69,014	1.39
Taibah University	52,974	1.30	55,082	1.59
Taif University	48,438	1.15	52,407	1.58
King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for health Sciences	3,088	1.50	11,266	1.17
Jazan University	44,986	1.28	49,879	1.78
University of Hail	38,232	1.45	36,222	1.86
Jouf University	21,245	1.03	21,277	2.32
University of Tabuk	28,465	1.50	35,818	1.38
ALBaha University	26,260	0.89	18,216	1.39
Najran University	14,838	1.17	21,996	1.70
Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University	38,138	NA	25,783	NA
Northern Border University	11,957	1.26	16,250	1.61
Shagra University	18,181	1.63	25,499	1.47
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University	22,792	1.54	26,270	1.35
Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University	38,832	5.45	30,198	2.92
Majmaah University	14,199	0.92	18,736	0.89
Saudi Electronic University	5,260	1.17	36,965	0.91
University of Jeddah	NA	NA	28,692	1.90
University of Bisha	NA	NA	17,534	2.29
University of Hafr Al Batin	NA	NA	21,123	2.90
Total	1,064,880	1.07	1,234,889	1.15

Source: Saudi General Authority for Statistics (2023a), Open Data (2023). * Data for 2020

Figures in table 5 indicate that the total number of students enrolled in 2013 was 1,064,880, of which 513,688 were males (48.2%) and 551,192 were females (51.8), where the GPI was 1.07. In 2021, the total

number of students enrolled jumped to 1,234,889, of which 571,989 were males (46.3%), and 662,900 were females (53.7%), where the GPI was 1.15. This finding affirmed that the number of male students enrolled are decreasing compared to females (from 48.2 % in 2013, to 46.3 % in 2021). At the university level, figures indicate dissimilarities in GPI among public universities in 2013, where the GPI was 5.45 for Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, while it was 0.68 for Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University. In 2021, the University of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University ranked first with 2.92 GPI score, compared to 0.007 GPI score at King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals, due to the fact that admission of female has opened only in 2021. Moreover, figures indicate that the GPI was 1.15, which indicates an intermediate disparity infavour of females. This implies that gender parity at most of the public universities have been achieved and female enrollment is currently exceeding male enrollment except for a very few universities.

With regard to new students enrolled in public universities, table 6 illustrates the new students' admission in 2019.

Table 6: New Students GPI in Public Universities 2019

Public Universities	New Students	GPI	Enrolments	%
Umm Al-Qura University	14,805	1.14	97,736	15.1
Islamic University of Madinah	1,991	NA	10,748	18.5
Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University	17,850	0.77	168,639	10.6
King Saud University	9,392	0.58	48,788	19.3
King Abdulaziz University	16,713	1.05	137,526	12.2
King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals	2,889	NA	9,707	29.7
King Faisal University	6,704	1.37	98,819	6.8
King Khalid University	10,543	1.14	53,458	19.7
Qassim University	13,382	1.52	65,881	20.3
Taibah University	13,671	1.17	63,122	21.7
Taif University	9,912	1.22	57,633	17.2
king Saud bin Abdulaziz University for health Sciences	2,131	1.08	11,192	19
Jazan University	14,397	1.89	56,809	25.3
University of Hail	7,008	1.88	32,995	21.2
Jouf University	6,182	1.36	25,831	23.9
University of Tabuk	8,484	1.26	34,689	24.5
ALBaha University	4,595	1.25	21,914	21
Najran University	4,796	1.35	16,728	28.7
Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University	4,682	NA	34,393	13.6
Northern Border University	3,016	1.58	21,393	14
Shagra University	4,981	1.36	28,517	17.5
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University	5,538	1.08	27,068	20.5
Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University	4,979	3.03	34,701	14.3
Majmaah University	4,054	0.78	18,900	21.4
Saudi Electronic University	14,256	0.66	24,268	58.7
University of Jeddah	5,205	1.66	21,517	24.2
University of Bisha	4,213	2.00	15,541	27.1
University of Hafr Al Batin	5,869	2.16	21,216	27.7
Total	222,238	1.18	1,259,729	17.6

Source: Saudi General Authority for Statistics (2023b) (Statistical Year Book, 2019)

As shown in table 6, the total number of new students enrolled in public universities in 2019 was 222,238, of which 101,705 were male (45.8%) and 120,533 were female (54.2%), with 1.18 GPI. The result showed some variation among universities. For example, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University

got the highest score of GPI (3.03) implying that there are three female against one male. On contrast King Saud University got the lowest score (0.58) showing a disparity infavour of male. The overall GPI indicates that females outnumbered males. Generally, the overall GPI (1.18) indicates an intermediate disparity infavour of females, and confirms that gender parity has been achieved in terms of new students enrolled.

No one can deny the huge effort made by the kingdom in closing the gender gap in higher education. The female gross enrolment ratio has exceeded male in most of the public universities. This implies that gender parity in tertiary education in Saudi Arabia has been achieved and the situation has even reversed. However, the question that in need to be asked, is it all about the Gross Enrolment Ratio or a number of enrolments? Our data has shown that gender disparity does exists, despite the positive remarks in GER taking other forms and shapes. It manifested itself in the field of study, academic staff and in top leaders' posts. There is no positive connection between the rapid enrolment of female and participation in academic staff and in leadership posts particularly in the higher institutions. The section below elaborates on these matters.

5.3 Gender disparity in the Field of Study:

Although female students have dominated public universities in the last decade, still disparity exists in the academic disciplines (table 7). The use of GPI confirmed that in public universities female dominates fields like education, services and astonishingly in Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics. This result implies that female is pursuing programmes previously associated with the 'masculine' type, rather than art and education, which were previously associated with 'feminine'. While female are underrepresented in Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction, Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary.

Table 7: Student Enrolment and GPI in Public Universities by Field of Study (2018)

Field of Study	Males	Females	Total	GPI
General Programs and Qualifications	37,544	27,372	64,916	0.72
Education	25,182	81,974	107,156	3.25
Arts and Humanities	131,759	196,303	328,062	1.48
Social Sciences, Journalism and Media	31,407	36,005	67,412	1.14
Business, Administration and Law	227,656	151,196	378,852	0.66
Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics	42,713	79,044	121,757	1.85
Communications and Information Technology	18,121	32,284	50,405	1.78
Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	40,132	2,211	42,343	0.05
Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary	3,242	1,161	4,403	0.35
Health and Welfare	47,683	59,526	107,209	1.24
Services	2,031	4,549	6,580	2.23
Other	61	63	124	1.03
Total and Percentage	607,531	671,688	1,279,219	1.1

Source: Saudi Ministry of Education (2023g).

Table 7 shows that females outnumbered males in all disciplines, including subjects like natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics where males are expected to be numerous. In responding to the market, females are dominant in subject like education, communication and information technology, and services seems. The only field y where male continue to surpass females is the engineering, manufacturing and construction, for which the GPI was 0.05 indicating extreme disparity infavour of males. This finding is consistent with Elhadary & Samat (2023) who stated that the participation of female students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), where job opportunities are expanding, is still a matter of concern. Despite the fact that public and private

universities have higher proportion of female students at 54%, the proportion of male students is significantly higher (86%) at other public institutions offering technical/ vocational /military courses (Colliers, 2022). The lower representation of female in STEM subjects has become a worldwide phenomenon. In contrast, four subjects show extreme disparity infavour of females namely education, natural sciences, mathematics and statistics, communications, information technology, and services. It is important to highlight that female are dominant in arts and humanities, with 1.48 GPI, which represents an intermediate disparity infavour of females. This specifies that males and females are still influenced by society’s norms regarding “feminine” and “masculine” roles. Moreover, women prefer studying "education" as the opportunities for getting jobs in teaching are higher than in other studies. In addition, some fields are restricted for women, as example up to 2007 female are not allowed to study law (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017).

Regarding new students by field of study, figures in table 8 show that the total number of new students in the academic year 2018 was 205,988, of which 93,284 were males (42.3%), and 112,704 were females (57.7%), with significant variations between study fields.

Table 8: New Students in Public Universities by Field of Study 2018

Field of Study	Males	Females	Total	GPI
General Programs and Qualifications	24,406	20,088	44,494	0.82
Education	2,071	10,677	12,748	5.15
Arts and Humanities	22,296	37,450	59,746	1.67
Social Sciences, Journalism and Media	2,287	2,894	5,181	1.26
Business, Administration and Law	19,841	14,503	34,344	0.73
Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics	7,975	12,484	20,459	1.56
Communications and Information Technology	2,837	4,178	7,015	1.47
Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	3,188	254	3,442	0.07
Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary	877	413	1,290	0.47
Health and Welfare	7,284	8,813	16,097	1.20
Services	161	887	1,048	5.50
Other	61	63	124	1.03
Total and Percentage	93,284	112,704	205,988	1.20

Source: Saudi Ministry of Education (2023g).

As stated in the above section, female underrepresented in some programmes namely engineering, manufacturing and construction, and agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary. These fields are dominating by male as scored 0.07, 0.47 GPI respectively, indicating an intermediate disparity infavour of males. In contrast, females are exceeding male in services, and education, with 5.5 and 5.3 GPI respectively representing extreme disparity infavour of females. This disparity led female to be congested in teaching jobs not only in girls’ schools but also in some coeducation school. This led planners to dry up admission in social science in responding to the market needs as highlighted in Saudi Vision 2030. Currently, the ministry of education has embarked on reducing the admission of students in education and social sciences at the expense of the applied sciences.

5.4 Disparity in student graduation

The massive enrolment of female in higher education has impacted positively in graduation. Our data has shown that the number of female annually graduated exceeding male in all disciplines except in engineering and agriculture. The question is need to be asked is why males are less represented in higher education. Alternatively, why are males less motivated to pursue higher education in public universities? The underrepresentation of males in higher education has become a global

phenomenon in both developed and developing countries (Elhadary & Samat, 2023). In the US, there are six female's university students for every four male students, which is the largest female-male gender gap in the history of higher education (Stoet and Geary, 2020). New concepts have entered the arena of higher education owing to the increase in female enrolment and to the decrease in male students. These concepts include 'National Scandal' (Weale, 2016), 'Lost Boys' (Tienxhi, 2017), reversed gender gap dilemma (Jan Bavel et al., 2018) and 'changing gender disparity' which all indicate the lower representation of male in higher education. Although addressing this issue is complicated and needs additional research, some studies have related the current phenomenon to males' poor reading proficiency (Stoet, & Geary, 2020), the better performance of females in secondary schools (Tienxhi, 2017) and to socio-economic matters (Chang, Chou, and Chen, 2022). This phenomenon is urgently in need to be addressed to avoid its negative socio-economic consequences. Detailed information regarding gender disparity is in table 9.

Table 9: Graduated Students in Public Universities by Field of Study 2017

Field of Study	Graduated			%		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
General Programs and Qualifications	0	0	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Education	6,302	20,518	26,820	3.3	10.6	13.9
Arts and Humanities	14,039	28,904	42,943	7.3	15	22.3
Social Sciences, Journalism and Media	11,326	13,701	25,027	5.9	7	12.9
Business, Administration and Law	29,867	25,968	55,835	15.5	13.4	28.9
Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics	5,517	11,664	17,181	2.9	6.0	8.9
Communications and Information Technology	2,459	4,910	7,369	1.3	2.5	3.8
Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	5,357	237	5,594	2.8	0.1	2.9
Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary	220	0	220	0.1	0.0	0.1
Health and Welfare	3,922	6,678	10,600	2.0	3.5	5.5
Services	258	1,094	1,352	0.1	0.6	0.7
Other	253	89	342	0.1	0.04	0.14
Total and Percentage	79,520	113,763	193,283	41.1	58.9	100

Source: Saudi Ministry of Education (2023g).

The total number of students who graduated in 2017 was 193, 283, of which 79,520 were males (41.1%), and 113,763 were females (58.9%). This stipulates that females are not only outnumbering male in gross enrolment but also in graduation. With regard to disciplines, our data has shown that Arts and humanities ranked first with a total of 42,943 graduated students. In contrast, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary ranked last with a total of 220 graduated students. Graduated students in business, administration and law represents 28.9% out of graduates, while the agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary represent only 0.1%. In general, these percentages correspond with the numbers of students' enrolment by field of study.

5.5 Gender inequality: Staff University Members

Despite the fact female dominating public universities and currently are outnumbering male in graduation their participation in labour force remains much lower compared to male. This paper is not going to deal with women in the labour force as it looks only on the participation of females on higher institutions posts. It includes academic staff and top leadership posts in tertiary education. Table 10 reflects some signs of gender disparity at public universities.

Table 10: Saudi Staff Members at Public Universities

Public Universities	2013			2022		
	males	females	GPI	males	females	GPI
Umm Al-Qura University	1,566	1,349	0.86	2,403	2,258	0.93
Islamic University of Madinah	631	0	NA	913	0	NA
Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University	2,002	892	0.44	1,978	1,625	0.82
King Saud University	2,722	1,935	0.71	4,324	2,853	0.65
King Abdulaziz University	2,316	2,855	1.23	3,592	3,023	0.84
King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals	325	0	NA	1,915*	60*	0.03
King Faisal University	476	383	0.8	1,228	880	0.71
King Khalid University	779	791	1.01	1,846	1,546	0.83
Qassim University	1,075	707	0.65	1,934	1,546	0.79
Taibah University	404	451	1.1	1,359	1,339	0.98
Taif University	615	510	0.82	1,367	1,225	0.89
king Saud bin Abdulaziz University for health Sciences	277	207	0.74	475	614	1.29
Jazan University	632	238	0.37	1,533	1,256	0.81
University of Hail	195	79	0.40	1,048	978	0.93
Jouf University	255	210	0.82	918	657	0.71
University of Tabuk	316	398	1.25	904	798	0.88
ALBaha University	358	214	0.59	916	604	0.65
Najran University	272	143	0.52	853	539	0.63
Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University	1	1,536	NA	15	2,080	138.66
Northern Border University	108	81	0.75	614	502	0.81
Shagra University	300	429	1.43	675	625	0.92
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University	428	335	0.78	1,168	841	0.72
Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University	480	1,082	2.25	1,316	1,729	1.31
Majmaah University	313	199	0.63	837	532	0.63
Saudi Electronic University	40	8	0.2	393	356	0.90
University of Jeddah	-	-	-	1,031	1,553	1.50
University of Bisha	-	-	-	510	560	1.09
University of Hafr Al Batin	-	-	-	326	536	1.64
Total	16,886	15,032	0.89	36,391	31,115	0.85

Source: Saudi Ministry of Education (2023g). Open Data (2023). *Data for 2020

The total number of staff members in 2022 was 67,506, of which 36,391 were males (53.9%) and 31,115 were females (46.1%), with 0.85 GPI, which represents intermediate disparity infavour of males. The abnormal score was (138.66) for Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University. Since this university is admitted only girls and most of the staff if not all were females. At universities level, figures indicate variations in GPI among universities. In Hafr Al Batin University, the GPI represents extreme disparity infavour of females with score of 1.65, while it represents extreme disparity with score of 0.03 infavour of males at Najran University.

Regarding the participation of women in leadership posts, still a matter of concerns, despite the appointment of women as deputy ministers in 2009. Historical evidence has shown that King Abdulla bin Abdul-Aziz in 2009 granted Saudi women the right to be leaders, and announced that the first woman to be appointed to a leadership position would be Deputy Minister of Education. Since then a wide range of governmental policies have begun to reverse the deficit of women leaders (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). Although, the Ministry of Education is committed to ensure equal access to education and leadership posts for both male and female (Alsubaie, 2022) female are underrepresented in the top leadership positions mainly in higher education institutions. In Saudi universities, women work in secretarial roles with limited power to implement the decisions made by male leaders (Gorondutse et al., 2019). Despite the current challenges regarding female leadership, Saudi Vision 2030 and its

programs have paid significant attention in empowering women. Notably, the vision formulates rational legislations to authorize women's rights, including wages, and the provision of job opportunities in all sectors, thus supporting women in leadership positions and promoting women's rights (Shura Council, 2021). It is believed that giving women the opportunity to hold top positions will help increase the effectiveness of female leaders and positively influence the performance level of universities, enabling them to accomplish Saudi Vision 2030 (Dahlan, 2023). Details regarding women's leadership in higher education are found in Table 11.

Table 11: Saudi Female Leaders in Higher Education 2017

Table 11: Saudi Female Leaders in Higher Education 2017			
Position	Women	Men	F. to M.
Director of university	1	33	3.0 %
Vice President	12	128	9.3 %
Dean	61	330	18.4 %
Deputy dean of faculty	228	542	42 %
Total	302	1033	29.2
Adopted from Alsubaie & Jones, 2017.			

Table 11 showed clearly that women are hardly qualified to become vice chancellors, although academically qualified. Women in Saudi Arabia face a number of challenges preventing them from achieving equitable representation in leadership positions (Abalkhail, 2017)). Despite the perceived need to diversify the system and use females' potential capabilities to advance education, the participation of females in leadership positions still lags behind compared to males (Dahlan, 2023).

The fundamental question that question that need to be answered is why women are less likely to hold high rank post in the higher education institutions. One key explanation is that historically, women have been prevented from occupying positions of leadership in Saudi Arabia due to strict cultural conventions and legislative restrictions (Alsubaie & Jones 2017). Females face limitations in providing educational and employment opportunities, as society gives more weight to their male counterparts (Dahlan, 2023). Moreover, the acceptance of female leaders in Saudi Arabia's higher education sector is highly subjective and depends on several factors (e.g. age, educational background, and the leader's proficiency). Alotaibi (2020) has summarized the lower level of representation of women in leadership positions in higher education into the organizational, cultural, and personal barriers. In the same line Hakeim (2022) stated that despite the rise of feminism and women's involvement in academia over the last fifty years, hegemonic masculinity is still strongly felt and experienced in higher education.

5.6 Sustainable Development Goals: Can it be achieved by 2023?

As indicated above the kingdom has paid great attention to achieving SDGs by the time limits. In 2015, 192 nations, including Saudi Arabia has adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. The agenda covers 17 goals, 169 targets, and 232 indicators to be achieved by 2030. Our analysis approved that Saudi Arabia has embarked on these goals and made much effort to achieve the demands. Therefore, many steps have taken, like the establishment of SDGs higher committee, the adoption of a practical framework, hiring international SDGs experts, and strengthening people's capacity in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In addition to the introduction to Vision 2030 which includes most of the SDGs. This is coupled with the implementation of the National Transformation Program 2020. Consequently, several challenges facing gender equality have been tackled and woman today enjoy more rights. For example, women have no right to drive cars, only in 24 June 2018 a decree issued the right of women to drive. In so doing women can access remote universities and increase their participation in labour force. Furthermore, the legislation provides a

freedom to travel in and out of Saudi Arabia without the permission of a guardian. As mentioned by Alhothali (2020) on June 24, 2018, Saudi Arabia lifted the ban on women drivers and on August 1, 2019, the Saudi government relaxed the strict male guardianship laws, allowing women to leave the country without requiring permission from male relatives. Moreover, great effort is paid to the education sector, which is considered as key factor in facilitating gender parity. The education of women has brought about numerous socio-economic improvements in the country, including an increase in female labor force participation, a decline in mortality rates, and improved health and nutrition (Alsubaie, 2022). The education sector has received more funding almost around one-fourth out of the total budget. Several policies have been implemented to improve the quality of education and much effort have been made to close gender disparity and ensure no one is left behind due to gender. Since the inception of Vision 2030 women have more right in accessing leadership positions in higher education. The turning point was in 2018 when appointment of women as Dean of Student Affairs at Taif University (TU) and many more in the top administrative posts. During the women international day on 13 march 2018, the TU President Dr. Hossam bin Abdulwahhab Zaman appointed six females to administrative posts: a Vice President for Student Affairs, two deans, and three heads of departments in different colleges (Taif University, 2024).

Generally, Saudi Governments have made clear efforts to achieve SDGs. For instance, the Saudi General Authority for Statistics (2023c) stated that the economy of the kingdom has witnessed substantial growth in the last five years. The growth rate of GDP increased from 2.26% in 2015 to 6.67% in 2021, and the spending on social protection increased to 42% in 2020 compared to the previous year. For gender equality, the proportion of women in senior positions in the government sector accounted for 5.465% in 2015 and rose to 6.269% in 2020. Regarding higher education, the proportion of female students enrolled in public universities reached 51.8% in 2019, where the GPI accounted for 1.17. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia ranked 35 globally in 2021 with a score of 0.875, under a category of very high human development countries (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

Despite these positive legislations, females in higher education have affected by a socio-economic, cultural, political factors. Moreover, family-related variables are central to research productivity and gender gaps and are associated with structural and systemic discriminatory practices within academia Saudi Arabia (Hakiem, 2022). This led the paper to confirm that the kingdom has made some progress in achieving gender parity covered in the seventeen SDGs. The gap is almost close in the education and health sectors, with less improvement in key areas like economic and political participation. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2022), World Economic Forum (2022), some aspects, such as economic participation, political empowerment are in need to be addressed. In this context, some obstacles hinder the progress towards SDGs by 2030, of which is COVID-19 Pandemic, this not only in Saudi Arabia, but also in many developed and developing countries. According to the United Nations in Saudi Arabia (2022), Saudi Arabia has invested more than 7% of GDP to alleviate the negative impact of COVID-19 on the economy, the labour market, and individuals. Notwithstanding the efforts made by the Government, however, the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic is generating socio-economic disruptions in the country and beyond, affecting every sector of the economy and every aspect of life.

6. Conclusion

This paper concludes that gender parity in higher education has been achieved and even the situation is currently revered. This is due to the fact that equal access to higher education has become one of the top priorities for the Saudi Arabia government. The education sector received around 25% of the total budgets. This coupled with the implementation of dynamic rational policies responding to the current needs and overcome challenges. Since 1970, Saudi Arabia has accomplished a nine development plans, and recently embarked on the Vision 2030. The vision adopted legislations to empower women and support them to take top leadership positions in higher education sector.

Consequently, the percentage of female enrolled in public universities reached 54.8% in 2019, compared to 51.8% in 2013, with the GPI accounting for 1.17. With reference to Trow (1973) the kingdom is currently in the universal stage implying that higher education is more accessible to the wider population that lies within the cohort age (17-24). Despite these positive remarks, gender disparities manifested in academic disciplines, staff members and leadership posts. With reference to the World Economic Forum, the Kingdom made an outstanding progress in education and health but much lower success in economic participation and political empowerment. Without enhancing public awareness, education alone is inadequate to achieve gender parity in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, planners and decision makers have to consider taking action in empowering female to have equal access to market oriented colleges, offering female same opportunities in occupying a university staff position and increasing their participation in the leadership posts mainly in higher education institutions. Without tackling these limits, achieving full SDGS by 2030 will become an ambition rather than a reality.

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