

Negotiating Islam, Modernity, and Gender: A Discourse Analysis of Muslim Women's Responses to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030

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Abstract: The social reform movement launched through Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia represents a new phase of Islamic modernity by positioning women's empowerment as a key pillar of national transformation. This study aims to examine Muslim women's responses to these reforms and analyze how contemporary Islamic discourse reconstructs the meaning of women's roles within the framework of modern Islamic civilization. Positioned within a critical-descriptive approach, this study employs a qualitative literature analysis using Foucault's discourse theory integrated with Amina Wadud's Islamic feminist perspective. Data were obtained from Vision 2030 policy documents, international reports, scholarly publications, and Twitter/X discussions reflecting Saudi women's opinions. The findings reveal three major patterns of response: adaptive, resistant, and ambivalent. Furthermore, the state uses Islam as an ideological instrument through three discursive stages: religious legitimation by clerical authorities, reinterpretation of teachings in global religious forums, and internalization of moderate values in social policy. The study concludes that Vision 2030 reforms signify not only gender policy transformation but also the recontextualization of Islamic discourse that situates women as active agents in negotiating religion, culture, and modernity. On a transnational scale, these dynamics offer a critical comparative lens for the evolution of moderate Islamic (*wasathiyyah*) discourse and gender mainstreaming initiatives across the global Muslim world, while providing vital reflections for the domestic context in Indonesia.

Keywords: Vision 2030, Saudi Muslim Women, Social Reform, Islamic Feminism, Discourse Analysis.

Abstrak: Gerakan reformasi sosial yang diluncurkan melalui Vision 2030 di Arab Saudi menandai fase baru modernitas Islam dengan menempatkan pemberdayaan perempuan sebagai pilar utama transformasi nasional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menelaah respons perempuan Muslim terhadap reformasi tersebut dan menganalisis bagaimana wacana Islam kontemporer merekonstruksi makna peran perempuan dalam kerangka peradaban Islam modern. Dengan pendekatan deskriptif-kritis, penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi kepustakaan melalui analisis wacana Foucault yang dipadukan dengan perspektif feminisme Islam Amina Wadud. Data diperoleh dari dokumen resmi Vision 2030, laporan lembaga internasional, publikasi akademik, dan percakapan media sosial (Twitter/X) yang merepresentasikan pandangan perempuan Saudi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga pola respons utama: adaptif, resistif, dan ambivalen. Selain itu, negara menggunakan Islam sebagai instrumen ideologis melalui tiga tahap wacana; legitimasi keagamaan oleh otoritas ulama, reinterpretasi ajaran Islam dalam forum keagamaan global, dan internalisasi nilai Islam moderat dalam kebijakan sosial. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa reformasi Vision 2030 tidak hanya mengubah kebijakan gender, tetapi juga merekontekstualisasi wacana Islam yang menempatkan perempuan sebagai subjek aktif dalam negosiasi antara agama, budaya, dan modernitas. Secara transnasional, dinamika ini memberikan cermin komparatif yang kritis bagi perkembangan wacana Islam moderat (*wasathiyah*) serta gerakan pengarusutamaan gender di dunia Muslim global, termasuk memberikan refleksi penting bagi konteks domestik di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: Vision 2030, Perempuan Muslim Saudi, Reformasi Sosial, Feminisme Islam, Analisis Wacana.



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Introduction

The social reforms that have been taking place in Saudi Arabia since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman launched Vision 2030 have opened a new chapter in the relationship between the state, religion, and society. One of the main pillars of this vision is the empowerment of Muslim women through access to the public sector, education, and a broader economy. Wider involvement of women in the public sphere will have an impact on development in the social, economic, and political fields. The contribution of women's roles will add real value to national economic growth in both the public and private sectors. The representation of women in the Saudi Vision shows that women are presented by the government as figures who are able to play an active role in the public sphere. This step marks a major change in a social structure that was previously very conservative and patriarchal.¹

Various studies have examined the transformation of Saudi women in the context of Vision 2030. Madawi Al-Rasheed highlights how these liberalization policies are often paradoxical; on the one hand, they open up space for public participation, but on the other hand, they remain controlled by the official religious narrative.² Pardis

¹ A. Hassan, "Modern Islam and Social Harmony: The Ideological Foundation of Saudi Vision 2030," *Journal of Islamic Civilization Studies* 15, no. 2 (2023): 98-115.

² Madawi Al-Rasheed, *The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia* (Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197558140.001.0001>.

Mahdavi's study identifies a pattern of adaptive agency, which is the ability of women to negotiate their position within the state power structure.³ Meanwhile, the Islamic feminism approach developed by Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas offers a reinterpretation of religious texts that have been used to limit the role of women in Islamic society.⁴

However, there is a gap in previous studies: there has not been much research that systematically maps Muslim women's own responses to these reforms, especially in the context of contemporary Islamic discourse. Most studies focus more on state policies or legal frameworks and do not explore how women shape meaning, resistance, or adaptation to these social changes from the perspective of faith and individual agency.

The urgency of examining the shift in Islamic discourse and the fulfillment of women's rights in Saudi Arabia is fundamentally inseparable from its position as a central axis of geopolitical and spiritual orientation in the Islamic world.⁵ Within the transnational Islamic landscape, any theological articulation, religious edict (*fatwa*), or social policy produced in Saudi Arabia will, sooner or later, resonate across and influence the trajectory of Islamic thought in other parts of the Muslim world, including Indonesia.⁶ As the country with the largest Muslim population globally, which is currently intensively advocating the narrative of moderate Islam (*wasathiyyah*) and gender mainstreaming, Indonesia grapples with similar cultural tensions in reconciling sacred texts with modernity.⁷ Consequently, analyzing how Saudi authorities negotiate women's rights within the framework of Sharia is far more than a localized sociological report on the Gulf region; it represents an academic imperative to establish a critical comparative mirror. This exploration is crucial for reflecting on the extent to which the dialectic among the state, women's agency, and domestic religious authorities in Indonesia can navigate the opportunities and challenges generated by the ongoing social *ijtihad* in Saudi Arabia.

This study aims to address this gap by analyzing the forms of Muslim women's responses to social reforms in Saudi Arabia, as well as how they interpret the Vision 2030 policy through the lens of contemporary Islam. This approach is not only relevant to the study of gender and politics in the Middle East but also contributes to enriching

³ Pardis Mahdavi, *Gendered Citizenship and Social Change in the Gulf* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

⁴ Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, Revised edition (University of Texas Press, 2019); Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oneworld, 2006).

⁵ Rohil Zilfa, "Telaah Komparatif Pengarusutamaan Gender Dalam Pendidikan Islam Di Saudi Arabia, Mesir, Malaysia, Dan Indonesia," *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam (Journal of Islamic Education Studies)* 5, no. 2 (2017): 264, <https://doi.org/10.15642/jpai.2017.5.2.264-287>.

⁶ Khamami Zada et al., "The Constitutionalization of Sharia in Muslim Countries: Historical and Political Struggles in Indonesia, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia," *Mazahib* 24, no. 2 (2025): 435-55, <https://doi.org/10.21093/mj.v24i2.11679>.

⁷ Nizma Armila and Mega Satria Nurul Falah, "Negotiating Text and Context: The Hadith on the Prohibition of Women's Travel Without a Mahram in the Social and Legal Histories of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia," *Al Qalam: Jurnal Ilmiah Keagamaan Dan Kemasyarakatan* 20, no. 1 (2026): 131, <https://doi.org/10.35931/aq.v20i1.5883>.

the discourse on Islamic feminism and the study of religion-based social reforms in the modern Muslim world.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a library research method. This design was chosen to gain a deep and contextual understanding of how Muslim women respond to the social reforms launched by the Saudi government during the Vision 2030 era. The subject of this study is the discursive representation of Saudi Muslim women's responses as reflected in secondary data sources. These sources include the Vision 2030 Annual Report (2024), international and national journal articles, independent institutional reports, verified online news from Arab News (2024), and social media content (mainly posts on Twitter/X) documenting Saudi women's participation and their public perspectives on Vision 2030 policies. These sources were deliberately selected based on their relevance and accuracy in addressing issues of gender roles and representation.⁸

The data was analyzed using a combination of content analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis, aiming to trace how state power and religious interpretations interact in shaping women's responses to social transformation. To better understand women's attitudes, whether adaptive, resistant, or ambiguous, this study adopted the framework of Islamic feminism proposed by Amina Wadud.⁹ The data analysis process included reduction, categorization, interpretation, and verification to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings.¹⁰ Through this method, this study aims to critically describe how Saudi women are not merely passive recipients of reform, but active agents who negotiate identity, role, and religious authority within the framework of modernity and contemporary Islamic discourse.

Result and Discussion

The Impact of Vision 2030 Social Reform Policy on Women

The launch of Vision 2030 by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2016 marked a new chapter in socio-economic reforms that had a broad impact on women. These reforms were designed to diversify the economy and build a modern society without abandoning Islamic values.¹¹ Since the program began, the government has gradually launched various policies that expand women's participation in the public sphere, education, and the economy.

One of the most symbolic steps was the lifting of the ban on women driving in 2018, which opened up opportunities for social and economic mobility.¹² The next step

⁸ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design : Choosing among Five Approaches* (SAGE Publications, 2018).

⁹ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman : Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, Dan R&D (Edisi 2020)* (Alfabeta, 2020).

¹¹ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030 Annual Report 2024* (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2024), <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/25042025ev1/En-Annual%20Report-Vision2030-2024.pdf>.

¹² Arab News, "Saudi Arabia's Surge in Female Workforce Participation Drives Economic Impact," August 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2567745/business-economy>.

was the relaxation of male guardianship rules, allowing women to travel, work, and access public services without the permission of a male guardian.¹³ At the same time, Vision 2030 targets an increase in women's participation in the workforce to 30%. This target was exceeded faster than expected; official data shows an increase in female labor participation from 21.2% in 2017 to 36.2% in the third quarter of 2024.¹⁴

Table 1. Women's Participation in the Saudi Labor Force

Indicator	Year	Presentation
Female labor force participation (pra-Vision 2030)	2017	21.2%
Target Vision 2030	2030 (target)	30%
Actual female labor force participation	2024 (Q3)	36.2%

Source: (Alhokail, 2025; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2024; Saudi General Authority for Statistics, 2024)

Table 1 shows that the female labor participation rate in Saudi Arabia in 2017 was recorded at 21.2%, then increased dramatically to 36.2% in the third quarter of 2024. This achievement shows that women's involvement in the workforce has increased rapidly, even exceeding the Vision 2030 target of 30%, with an achievement of 6.2% above the government's expectations.¹⁵ Several major media outlets, such as The Gulf Entrepreneur in 2023, stated that this increase marks a significant social change because women are no longer limited to domestic roles but are also actively involved in the public and professional sectors, such as technology, health, education, and entrepreneurship.¹⁶

The increase in women's participation achieved through Vision 2030 marks an important shift in the social structure of Saudi Arabia. The government reinforced this policy by providing access to higher education, international scholarships, and vocational training programs for women.¹⁷ In the socio-political sphere, women began to occupy managerial positions in ministries and public institutions and participated in municipal council elections.¹⁸ These achievements show that the Vision 2030

¹³ News, "Saudi Arabia's Surge in Female Workforce Participation Drives Economic Impact."

¹⁴ Loujayn Alhokail, "The Inclusion of Women in the Labor Market: Saudi Arabia's Leap from 21.2% to 35.5% and Beyond," *World Journal of Women and Sustainable Development* 1, no. 1 (2025): 15, <https://doi.org/10.47556/J.WJWSD.1.1.2025.3>; Saudi General Authority for Statistics, *Methodology of Labor Market Statistics 2024* (Saudi General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT), 2024).

¹⁵ Alhokail, "The Inclusion of Women in the Labor Market: Saudi Arabia's Leap from 21.2 % to 35.5 % and Beyond"; Arabia, *Vision 2030 Annual Report 2024*; Statistics, *Methodology of Labor Market Statistics 2024*.

¹⁶ "The Gulf Entrepreneur | Inspiring Middle East Business Success," n.d., <https://thegulfentrepreneur.com/>.

¹⁷ Arab News, "35,000 Saudi Women Studying Abroad on Government Scholarship," 2017, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1082551/amp>.

¹⁸ Arabia, *Vision 2030 Annual Report 2024*.

agenda has succeeded in opening up public spaces that were previously closed to Saudi women.

However, behind this progress, various studies highlight structural barriers that have not yet been fully changed. Existing studies indicate that gender reform in Saudi Arabia is still taking place within the framework of “state patriarchy logic,” where modernization serves as a political strategy to negotiate religious legitimacy and power.¹⁹ Van Burg also asserts that women's success in occupying public positions is often symbolic because it is still limited to the representative sphere and has not yet touched on strategic decision-making. Moral norms controlled by religious institutions remain an ideological barrier that hinders substantive equality.²⁰ Thus, Saudi social transformation is ambivalent: on the one hand, it expands women's participation, but on the other, it maintains the hierarchy and moral boundaries of Islam that are inherent in the state's identity.

Muslim Women's Responses to the Vision 2030 Reform

1. Adaptive Response (Progressive and Active)

The Vision 2030 social reforms have been welcomed by progressive women's groups in Saudi Arabia, who are taking advantage of policy changes to expand their professional and public participation. This group includes academics, young professionals, and social activists who see the reforms as an opportunity to build a modern Muslim identity that is productive and empowered. A study by Alhawsawi & Jawhar explains that many young Saudi women interpret Vision 2030 as a form of “equal participation in national development” without having to abandon religious values.²¹

The discourse of women's empowerment in Saudi Vision 2030, which was followed by reforms that provide freedom to women, has had a significant impact on increasing the role of Saudi Arabian women in recent years. The participation of women in higher education and the workforce is increasing. This increase is in line with reports from various international organizations. As a direct result of the reforms, women's participation in the workforce has increased significantly over the past eight years. Data from the International Labor Organisation (ILO) shows a sharp increase after the launch of Vision 2030 in 2016.²²

¹⁹ Sajjadllah Alhawsawi and Sabria Salama Jawhar, “Education, Employment, and Empowerment among Saudi Women,” *Gender and Education* 35, no. 4 (2023): 401–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2023.2189917>.

²⁰ Niencke Van Burg, “Gender Reforms in Saudi Vision 2030: Freedom Vs Equality,” *Leiden Student Journal of Humanities*, 2024, <http://thenewsolar.nl>.

²¹ Alhawsawi and Jawhar, “Education, Employment, and Empowerment among Saudi Women.”

²² International Labor Organization (ILO), *Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+)* (Modeled ILO Estimate) (ILOSTAT, International Labor Organization, 2025), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>.

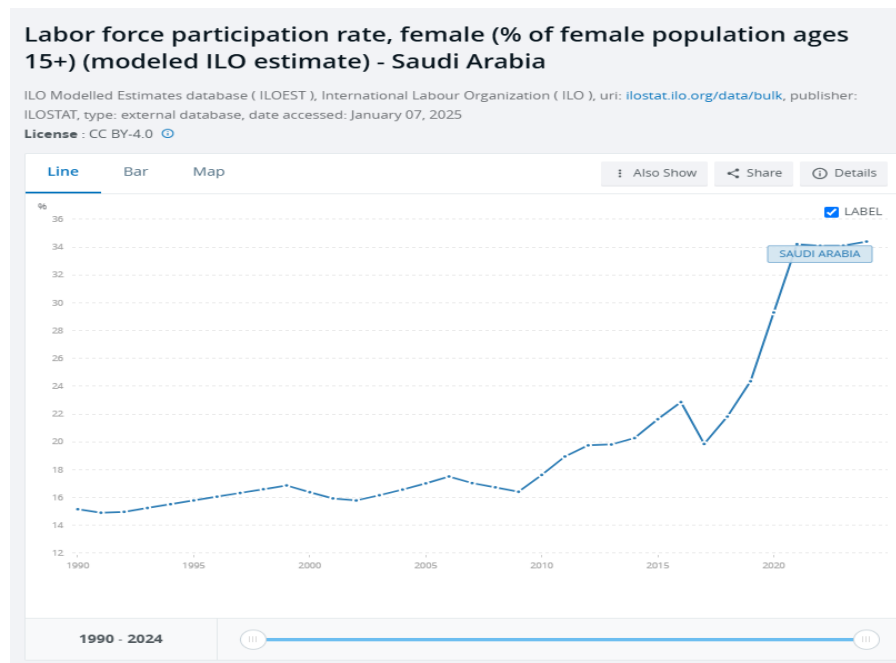


Figure 1. Trends in Labor Force Participation of Women Aged 15+ in Saudi Arabia (1990–2024) Source: International Labor Organization (ILO), 2025.

Figure 1 shows the trend in female labor force participation in Saudi Arabia from 1990 to 2024. For nearly three decades before the reforms (1990–2016), the female participation rate remained relatively stagnant at around 15–22%. However, following the launch of Vision 2030, the curve shows a sharp increase in the labor force participation of women aged 15 and above, from around 23% in 2017 to 34% in 2024. This increase marks a significant social change and is in line with the trend reported by the Saudi General Authority for Statistics in 2024, although there are slight differences in the figures due to differences in calculation methodologies between international and national sources.²³

This phenomenon can be understood as a form of adaptive response by Muslim women to state policy. Within the framework of Islamic feminism, progressive women interpret this policy not as westernization, but as social *ijtihad* to actualize Islamic values of justice and public interest.²⁴ They interpret professional participation as part of a social mandate, in line with the spirit of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, which emphasizes the public interest. Furthermore, from the perspective of Foucault's discourse theory, this surge in labor participation illustrates how state power operates through the production of a "modern Islam" discourse that encourages women to become active subjects of development without departing from the state's moral framework.²⁵ In

²³ Organization (ILO), *Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate)*.

²⁴ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Taylor and Francis, 2013).

other words, the Vision 2030 policy has succeeded in shifting women's position from objects of protection to productive actors in the social and economic system.²⁶

Muslim women's adaptive response to Vision 2030 shows that modernization policies in Saudi Arabia are not only responded to passively, but are reconstructed into a discourse of empowerment that is in line with religious values. Progressive women take advantage of these new structural opportunities to negotiate their social roles, cementing their position as agents of change within a dynamic and contextual Islamic framework.

2. Resistant Response (Conservative)

Resistant groups in the context of this study refer to those who reject or criticize the Vision 2030 social reforms because they are considered contrary to Islamic religious values and morality. Meanwhile, the term conservative refers to an ideological orientation that seeks to maintain a traditional social order based on Sharia law. Thus, conservative groups are the main basis of the resistant response to state-driven social modernization.

This resistance does not always take the form of political opposition, but more often appears as moral and cultural rejection of symbols of Westernization associated with the liberalization of women. Social modernization in Vision 2030, such as the relaxation of *ikhtilat* (gender mixing), permission for international concerts, and freedom of dress, is seen as a deviation from *al-'urf al-dini* (religious customs) and a threat to *haya'* (modesty).

2.1. Moral Narrative Against Gender Mixing on Social Media

Religious resistance has emerged on social media, particularly on Twitter/X, through posts emphasizing the importance of gender segregation. For example, a post from the account @shhda63048369 states: “*قلة الإختلاط بالناس*” (“Keeping your distance from many social interactions is a source of health, peace, tranquility, and security.”)



Figure 2. Religious Narratives Calling for Rejection of *Ikhtilat* as an Impact of Modernization Vision 2030 (Source: Twitter/X @shhda63048369, accessed October 20, 2025)

²⁶ Faiq Ainurrofiq and Nurul Khasanah, “FROM DOMESTIC TO PUBLIC: THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT DISCOURSE IN SAUDI ARABIA’S VISION 2030,” *Akademika: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 29, no. 1 (2024): 101, <https://doi.org/10.32332/akademika.v29i1.7755>.

This post symbolizes a form of virtue discourse that positions social separation as spiritual protection. This phenomenon can be linked to hashtag movements such as #لا للاختلاط (“say no to gender mixing”), which represent Islamic modesty values digitally amid the rapid pace of social reform.

Within the framework of Foucault's theory, this kind of discourse can be read as a form of counter-discourse, namely a discursive strategy used by society to reject the hegemony of the state's version of “modern Islam” narrative. Women who post such messages function not only as recipients of values but also as producers of moral discourse, reaffirming the authority of religion in the digital public sphere.²⁷

2.2. Rejection of Pop Culture and Entertainment Liberalism

Another form of resistance was seen in the controversy surrounding the international concert at Riyadh Season 2022. A post by the account @SIAKIM89745569 showed a poster for a Korean music group's concert with a large red cross and the statement: "I oppose Black Pink going to Saudi Arabia, not just Black Pink, but all bands and singers... what is happening is forbidden." A follow-up post emphasized a personal religious stance: "For God's sake, I know what you're saying is true... I've decided to stay away from those songs and repent."



Figure 3. Campaign rejecting international concerts in Saudi Arabia (Source: Twitter/X, @SIAKIM89745569, accessed October 20, 2025)

²⁷ Alhawsawi and Jawhar, “Education, Employment, and Empowerment among Saudi Women”; Lana Sirri, “From Theory to Action: A Saudi Arabian Case Study of Feminist Academic Activism against State Oppression,” *Societies* 14, no. 3 (2024): 31, <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14030031>.

This figure shows the digital expression of conservative groups against entertainment liberalization policies within the framework of Vision 2030. The poster with a red cross symbolizes moral rejection of foreign cultural symbols that are considered incompatible with Islamic teachings. Narratives such as “what is happening is forbidden” reinforce the belief that ghina’ (song and music) is religiously prohibited, so that the presence of international concerts is perceived as a form of moral decadence (anhilal).

These posts reflect a form of collective moral resistance to Vision 2030’s entertainment liberalization policy, which is considered to be loosening the boundaries of Sharia law. This phenomenon shows how digital space has become an arena for symbolic resistance to social modernization. Within the framework of Foucault’s theory, such practices can be read as micro-resistance, which is a form of reaffirmation of the moral power of society against state authority. Meanwhile, from an Islamic feminist perspective, this expression signifies an effort to maintain the authenticity of Islamic culture and spirituality amid the expansion of entertainment-based economics.²⁸

3. Ambivalent Response

Between two extreme poles, the adaptive group that fully supports reform and the resistant group that rejects it based on religious morality, there is a group of Muslim women who are ambivalent. They accept the Vision 2030 policy as a social and economic opportunity, but still uphold Sharia values in their appearance and behavior. This attitude has given rise to a new form of religiosity that can be called religious modernity, which is a combination of modern professionalism and Islamic spirituality.

One concrete example can be seen in a post on the @LifeSaudiArabia account, which features Fouzia Zahour, a young woman wearing a hijab who drives a 22-wheel truck while wearing an abaya and flat shoes.



²⁸ Alhawsawi and Jawhar, “Education, Employment, and Empowerment among Saudi Women”; Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*; Sirri, “From Theory to Action: A Saudi Arabian Case Study of Feminist Academic Activism against State Oppression”; Burg, “Gender Reforms in Saudi Vision 2030: Freedom Vs Equality.”

Figure 4. Fouzia Zahour is a symbol of the ambivalence of Saudi women, driving a heavy truck while still maintaining her Islamic dress code. (Source: Twitter/X @LifeSaudiArabi, accessed October 20, 2025)

Figure 4 shows a screenshot of an English-language Twitter/X post with the following translation: “Fouzia Zahour climbs into a 22-wheel truck, takes control of the steering wheel, and conquers all the sharp turns and maneuvers in her flat shoes and abaya. She is the youngest woman to obtain a heavy vehicle license in the UAE.” In addition to displaying this text, the image also shows Fouzia Zahour, a woman wearing a hijab who is active in the heavy transport sector. She wears an abaya and full hijab while driving a 22-wheel truck, showing that women's involvement in masculine workspaces is not always synonymous with violating Islamic values of modesty. This visual representation reinforces the finding that some Saudi Muslim women interpret social reform selectively. They accept professional advancement but still maintain religious symbols as part of their identity.

This phenomenon shows how Saudi women negotiate the boundaries between modernity and piety. Within the framework of Foucault's theory, actions such as those taken by Fouzia reflect self-regulation, whereby women become active subjects who organize themselves between state power and religious power. Meanwhile, from the perspective of Islamic feminism by Wadud, this kind of expression is a form of social *ijtihad* that combines equality and obedience in a single form of daily praxis.²⁹

Overall, Muslim women's responses to the Vision 2030 social reforms reflect the complexity of the relationship between religion, culture, and modernity in Saudi Arabia. Some women welcome change with progressive adaptation to professional and public opportunities, while others show moral resistance to policies that are considered to relax Sharia boundaries, and still others occupy an ambivalent position by accepting social progress while maintaining religious symbols and values. These three patterns illustrate that social transformation in Saudi Arabia is not a linear process, but rather the result of negotiations between female actors and the ideological structures that govern their social lives.

The diversity of responses cannot be separated from the construction of Islamic discourse by the state and religious authorities. Every form of acceptance or rejection is actually a manifestation of how religion is interpreted, communicated, and politicized in the public sphere. To understand these dynamics more comprehensively, the following analysis focuses on how

²⁹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*; Najla Tharman Almutairi, “Does Oil Wealth Matter to Female Labor Force Participation: New Evidence from the Oil-Intensive Economy of Saudi Arabia,” *Resources Policy* 78 (September 2022): 102797, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2022.102797>; Burg, “Gender Reforms in Saudi Vision 2030: Freedom Vs Equality.”

the Saudi Arabian government, through official religious institutions, interprets Islam as the basis for legitimizing modernity and women's empowerment. Thus, point C will examine contemporary Islamic discourse as the ideological foundation of Vision 2030, which balances religious authority and the social reform agenda.

Contemporary Islamic Discourse on Social Transformation

Contemporary Islamic discourse in the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 social reform presents a complex dynamic: the state, scholars, and religious actors in society are negotiating how traditional Islamic values can be reconciled with the modernization agenda.³⁰ The state's social agenda, which focuses on women's participation, cultural liberalization, and economic diversification, demands a reinterpretation of Sharia law, gender identity, and the religious public sphere. In this case, Saudi scholars and religious institutions face a challenge: maintaining their interpretive authority while accommodating social change.³¹

Analysis of recent studies shows that the official Vision 2030 document elevates women as “national assets” capable of contributing to socio-economic and national development.³² This is theoretically different from the traditional position of women, who are more often associated with the domestic or private sphere.³³ Meanwhile, traditional religious scholars and institutions have shown caution in supporting this agenda, especially if the changes are considered to threaten established moral values or Sharia norms. In this framework, contemporary Islamic discourse can be viewed through three main aspects:

1. Religious Legitimacy of the State

Contemporary Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia shows how the state uses religious authority to reinforce the legitimacy of the Vision 2030 social reforms. In this context, the government seeks to present Islam as a source of values compatible with modern development and women's empowerment. One of the most representative examples can be seen in the official statement by Dr. ‘Abdullatif Al-Sheikh, Minister of Islamic Affairs, Da'wah, and Guidance, delivered at the 35th International Conference of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in Cairo, themed “Women and Building Awareness.” In his speech, Dr Al-Sheikh emphasized that: “The Kingdom has protected the rights and dignity of women and given them their share in education, health, financial rights, career opportunities, and leadership... This is in line with the

³⁰ Sean Foley, “Legitimizing Transformation without Calling It Change: *Tajdid, Iṣlāḥ*, and Saudi Arabia’s Place in the Contemporary World,” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 2, nos. 1–2 (2015): 55–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798915577717>.

³¹ Faiq Ainurrofiq and Nurul Khasanah, “FROM DOMESTIC TO PUBLIC: THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT DISCOURSE IN SAUDI ARABIA'S VISION 2030,” *Akademika: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 29, no. 1 (2024): 101, <https://doi.org/10.32332/akademika.v29i1.7755>.

³² ٢٠٣٠ رؤية في ضوء رؤية ٢٠٣٠، “تمكين المرأة في المجالات التنموية في ضوء رؤية ٢٠٣٠،” *المجلة العلمية لعلوم التربية النوعية* ١٣، no. 13 (2021): 106–30, <https://doi.org/10.21608/sjsep.2021.343719>.

³³ Ainurrofiq and Khasanah, “FROM DOMESTIC TO PUBLIC: THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT DISCOURSE IN SAUDI ARABIA'S VISION 2030.”

achievements of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 and efforts to empower women to fulfill their da'wah mission and participate in development.³⁴



Figure 5. Dr. Abdullatif Al-Sheikh delivering a speech at the 35th International Conference of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in Cairo.
(Source: Ministry of Islamic Affairs, 2024. accessed October 20, 2025.)

Figure 5 shows Dr. ‘Abdullatif Al-Sheikh speaking at an international religious forum. He emphasizes that women's empowerment is part of the Kingdom's commitment to moderate Islamic values and Vision 2030. This statement affirms the construction of the state's religious legitimacy, in which official scholars serve as a bridge between religious values and social modernization policies. Through this discourse strategy, Saudi social reform is not presented as a form of secularization, but rather as the implementation of wasathiyyah or moderate Islam, which is rational and adaptive to the developments of the times.

Theoretically, this phenomenon is in line with Foucault's analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge, in which religious authority is used to shape social subjects who are obedient to the state's vision.³⁵ In this case, Islam is used as a dispositif of power that legitimizes social transformation without losing its theological character. These findings show that the process of modernization in Saudi Arabia is not taking place through opposition between religion and modernity, but through the re-articulation of Islamic discourse as a source of moral legitimacy for the Vision 2030 reforms.

2. Reinterpretation of Religious Thought

The reinterpretation of religious thought in Saudi Arabia in the era of Vision 2030 shows how the state and religious institutions are attempting to reframe Islamic teachings to align them with the agenda of modernization and women's empowerment.³⁶ This transformation did not occur spontaneously, but rather through a process of institutional ijtihad involving scholars, academics, and leaders of

³⁴ Ministry of Islamic Affairs, “٢٠٢٤”, https://www.moia.gov.sa/MediaCenter/News/Pages/21021446_9.aspx.

³⁵ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

³⁶ Mohammad Fauzan Ni'ami et al., “MODERNIZATION, ECLECTICISM, AND SAUDI ARABIA VISION 2030 ON FAMILY LAW: Positivization of Talaq Divorce in Nizām Al-Aḥwāl 1443 H,” *Al-Ahwal: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam* 16, no. 1 (2023): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ahwal.2023.16101>.

Islamic institutions at the national and international levels. In the context of Foucault's discourse theory, this step reflects a shift in epistemic power, where religious interpretation is used not only as moral legitimacy but also as a political instrument to direct social change.

One concrete example can be found in the International Conference on Women in Islam (Status and Empowerment) organized by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in collaboration with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Jeddah on November 6–8, 2023.



Figure 6. Excerpt from the OIC Conference “Women In Islam: Status And Empowerment” in Jeddah, 2023, which produced the Jeddah Document as a roadmap for the empowerment of Muslim women.

(Source: Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), 2023.
Accessed October 20, 2025.)

The figure 6 shows the atmosphere at the International Conference on Women in Islam (Status and Empowerment). The conference brought together scholars, human rights leaders, and Muslim intellectuals to discuss strategies for women's empowerment based on Islamic values. In her closing speech, Dr Hala bint Mazyad Al-Tuwaijri, Chair of the Saudi Arabian Human Rights Commission, emphasized that “Vision 2030 reforms have strengthened women's presence in all sectors of life while remaining grounded in Islamic values.” Furthermore, the conference produced the Jeddah Document, defined as “a road map for legislative reforms and executive initiatives to empower women and enhance their participation in all fields.” This document affirms the commitment of OIC member states to make Islam the ethical basis for social reform, including expanding women's participation in the public sector, education, and leadership.

Symbolically, the active participation of female scholars and public officials reflects a new discourse of Islam that is inclusive of women. From the perspective of Islamic feminism, this phenomenon can be interpreted as social *ijtihad* to affirm the

compatibility between gender equality and maqāṣid al-shari‘ah.³⁷ Meanwhile, within the framework of Foucault's theory, this practice illustrates how religious discourse has transformed into state discourse that combines Islamic morality with modern governance strategies.³⁸

Thus, the reinterpretation of religious thought in the context of Vision 2030 is no longer defensive against modernity, but rather functions as a legitimizing narrative to reinforce the position of Islam as a source of moral inspiration and a foundation for social reform and women's equality in the Muslim world.

3. Internalization of Moderate Islam

The final stage of the construction of contemporary Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia can be seen in the process of internalizing moderate Islamic values in the Vision 2030 social agenda.³⁹ After religious legitimacy was strengthened (through fatwas and the support of religious scholars) and religious interpretations were reinterpreted contextually, the state then sought to instill moderate Islam as a public social and moral identity. This strategy became the ideological foundation for social reform to balance modernity and piety, economic progress and religious stability.⁴⁰

In 2017, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has emphasized the vision of “returning Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, open to the world and all religions” as the ideological cornerstone of Vision 2030 (Arab News, 2017). This narrative has been institutionalized through national forums such as the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND) and the Saudi Human Rights Commission, which actively hold interfaith discussions, gender equality workshops, and “Living Values of Islam” campaigns that emphasize tolerance and social responsibility. In the education sector, the National Transformation Program (2024) also places inclusion, awareness, and values-based education as the main pillars of social reform.



³⁷ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman : Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 1.

³⁸ Almutairi, “Does Oil Wealth Matter to Female Labor Force Participation: New Evidence from the Oil-Intensive Economy of Saudi Arabia”; Sirri, “From Theory to Action: A Saudi Arabian Case Study of Feminist Academic Activism against State Oppression.”

³⁹ Ainiyatul Latifah and Ade Solihat, “Power Relation and Knowledge: Linking Islamic Education to Socio-Political Reform in Saudi Arabia,” *ATTARBIYAH: Journal of Islamic Culture and Education* 9, no. 2 (2024): 157–72, <https://doi.org/10.18326/attarbiyah.v9i2.157-172>.

⁴⁰ Ainurrofiq and Khasanah, “From Domestic to Public: The Construction of Women's Empowerment Discourse in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030”; Hassan, “Modern Islam and Social Harmony: The Ideological Foundation of Saudi Vision 2030.”

Figure 7. The King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND) forum, themed “Moderate Islam and Social Harmony”, is part of the implementation of Vision 2030.

(Source: <https://www.kaccc.org.sa/>, accessed October 20, 2025.)

This figure shows the practice of cross-gender dialogue within the framework of moderate Islamic discourse as outlined by Vision 2030. Such forums serve as a means of internalizing the values of tolerance, social responsibility, and collaboration between men and women in religious and public spaces. In addition, KACND activities also function as educational and ideological instruments in expanding the understanding of moderate religious values at the community level.

The image shows how the narrative of moderate Islam is no longer limited to political slogans, but is internalized through public forums and national education. In the context of Foucault's theory, this step shows that state power works through governance by discourse, namely, instilling moral values into the system of knowledge and social practices. From an Islamic feminist perspective, this internalization also creates a new space for women to actively participate in da'wah and social education without abandoning their religious identity.⁴¹

Thus, the internalization of moderate Islam in the Vision 2030 social agenda reflects the evolution of Saudi Arabia's modernization project rooted in religious values. Islam is not merely used as a legitimization of change, but functions as a mechanism for cultural transformation that shapes an adaptive, religious, and productive society. This stage confirms that modernity and Islam are not two opposing poles, but two complementary forces in building a contemporary Islamic civilization.

Based on the three layers of analysis above, it can be concluded that the construction of contemporary Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia within the framework of Vision 2030 not only serves as a legitimization of state policy but also as an arena for ideological negotiation between religious authorities, the state, and society. Through strategies of legitimization, reinterpretation, and internalization, Islamic values are positioned as both a moral foundation and a political instrument to reinforce modernity rooted in tradition. Social reforms that touch on women's issues reflect not only structural changes but also discursive transformations, where religion, culture, and gender meet in a new, more dynamic space of interpretation. Thus, the Vision 2030 project can be understood not only as an economic development agenda but also as a process of recontextualizing Islamic civilization in the global era, where women become the main symbol of balance between piety and progress. Contemporary Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia not only reacts to modernity but also functions as a field of negotiation between national reform and religious authority.

⁴¹ Sirri, “From Theory to Action: A Saudi Arabian Case Study of Feminist Academic Activism against State Oppression”; Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*.

Conclusion

This study shows that the Vision 2030 social reform in Saudi Arabia is not merely an economic or administrative policy, but an ideological project that reconstructs the relationship between religion, state, and gender in the context of Islamic modernity. Through an analysis of social policies, women's responses, and contemporary Islamic discourse, it was found that this transformation process took place through three discursive stages: religious legitimization, reinterpretation of Islamic thought, and internalization of moderate values in social life.

Saudi Muslim women occupy a dual position in this dynamic: as recipients of the impact of reform and as producers of discourse that negotiates the boundaries between piety and progress. Although reform has opened up greater opportunities for public and professional participation, patriarchal structures and state ideological control remain the main factors shaping patterns of social adaptation and resistance. Nevertheless, the emergence of moderate Islamic discourse emphasizing spiritual equality and women's participation marks a new direction for Islamic modernity rooted in *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*.

More broadly, the dynamics of gender reform in Saudi Arabia offer valuable transnational reflections for the global discourse on moderate Islam, particularly for academic audiences in Indonesia. As fellow Muslim-majority nations navigating the currents of modernity, this theoretical comparison demonstrates that gender emancipation and mainstreaming within the public sphere do not inherently compromise the identity of religious piety. The adaptive and ambivalent response patterns exhibited by Saudi women post-Vision 2030 prove that Muslim women are capable of constructing a hybrid space that seamlessly merges modern professionalism with spiritual values. Consequently, these valuable lessons from the Saudi Arabian context are expected to serve as a critical reference for policymakers, academics, and gender advocates in Indonesia when formulating strategies to advance substantive women's rights without severing ties to orthodoxy and local Islamic cultural values. Thus, Vision 2030 can be understood as Saudi Arabia's attempt to present an Islamic civilization that is relevant to the times, in which women become both the symbol and the main agent of the recontextualization of Islamic values in the space of global modernity.

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