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WORK IN PROGRESS

Women's Education in Saudi Arabia

The Way Forward



Education in Saudi Arabia is an area in which women have experienced significant progress. The Saudi government has gone to considerable effort to increase girls' access to education and reduce the gender gap at different educational levels. Women's education has brought about a number of social developments in the country, such as a reduction in fertility and mortality rates, an improvement in health and nutrition, and an increase in female participation in the labor force. However, lingering social norms, local traditions, and the structure of the system of public education have been constraints on women's realization of their equal opportunities in society and their full participation in the labor market. Today, reforming the educational system for girls has become a priority as well as a great challenge for the Saudi government.

Saudi Arabia has invested large amounts of money in the system of public education. However, the substantial increase has not resulted in an equal increase in women's production output. Investing in women's education has led to a quantitative expansion of the number of girls' schools, to the detriment of the quality provided and the skills developed. Educational reform in the country has focused for the past few years mainly on infrastructure changes, building schools, hiring a large number of teachers, and issuing a loaded curriculum.

A discrepancy exists between the type of skills provided for in the curricula of public education for girls and those needed in the labor market. The absence of those skills has led to a high unemployment rate among Saudi women and a high participation rate for foreign labor in the country. Educational reforms should focus on improving the equity outcomes of the system of public education for girls for further training and lifelong learning, while promoting employability, productivity, and social inclusion.

A more flexible perception of women's participation in the workforce is needed. This would generate more job opportunities for Saudi women, contributing to national income, while reducing the country's dependence on foreign labor. Further educational reforms and developments, improving the quality of girls' education and emphasizing their role in community development, should strive to produce a society committed to mobilizing its human resources for a competitive market.

It is true that Saudi society has its unique social characteristics; however, the Saudi government should invest more in specific specializations and skills so as to build a balance between tradition and the demands for the productive participation of women in society.

Our analysis identifies the major achievements made by the Saudi government in the field of public education for girls. It also probes the issues which are hampering the development of girls' education and women's active involvement in the labor market. Finally, it presents a number of policy reforms and recommendations that, if implemented, would lead to the institution of high-quality education for women, along with a more advanced and knowledge-based society, the participation of Saudi women in society, and the reshaping of the sociocultural perception of women in Saudi society.

THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT: DECADES OF ACHIEVEMENT

Toward Universal Education

A major priority of the Saudi government has been to guarantee the right to education to all male and female citizens, free of charge without any discrimination. This right is embedded in the fundamental provisions of the Basic Law of Governance and in all education and training laws, which makes education compulsory for children between the ages of 6 and 15, with equal conditions for access to free education.ⁱ

Over the past 40 years, the government has succeeded in building an educational infrastructure that has led to an increase in school and university enrollment as well as a reduction in illiteracy rates. It has provided basic education for children by enrolling all school-age children (boys and girls) in primary school and offering literacy classes for adults (men and women). Achieving universal primary education encompasses not only full enrollment but also high-quality education—i.e., all children who are attending school regularly should learn basic literacy and numeracy skills and complete primary school on time. According to the latest UNESCO 2008 projections, Saudi Arabia is moving toward the goal of achieving universal primary education with rapid progress but still has further to go.ⁱⁱ

Results indicate that net enrollment (for both boys and girls) in primary education has increased significantly, from 84.5 percent in 1990 to 93.0 percent in 2007. The number of students enrolled in primary education reached 2.44 million in 2007, distributed in 13,454 schools across the country. The percentage of students who had started grade 1 and reached grade 5 also increased, from 74.5 percent in 1990 to 98.2 percent in 2007.ⁱⁱⁱ

The number of schools in the kingdom reached 31,399 in 2005–06, an increase of 808 schools or 2.6 percent from the previous year 2004–05. Also, the total number of enrolled students, both boys and girls, reached 4,746,579 in 2005–06, an increase of 103,410 students or 2.2 percent from the previous year.^{iv}

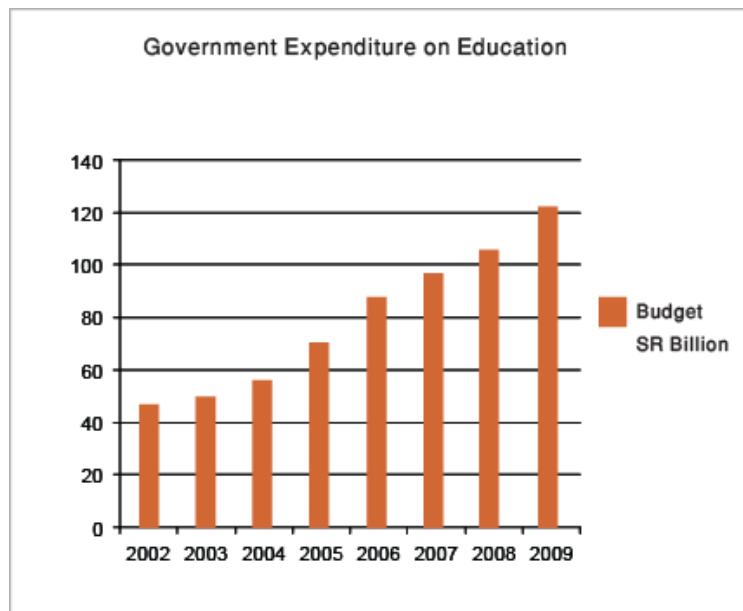
The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

Saudi Arabia participated in the United Nations Millennium Summit of September 2000, which produced the Millennium Development Goals, and pledged to achieve the eight U.N. general development goals. Among other objectives, the MDGs have emphasized the vital role of education in building a society and increasing a foundation for sustainable economic development. Goal 2, which seeks to achieve universal primary education, has the target of ensuring that by 2015, boys and girls everywhere will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. Goal 3, which seeks to promote gender equality and to empower women, targets the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education by no later than 2015.^v

Ever-increasing Government Expenditure on Education

The special emphasis given by the Saudi government to achieving its objectives in universal education has led to an increase in the allocation for education and human resource development, from SR47 billion (US\$12.5 billion) in 2002, to SR96.7 billion (US\$25.7 billion) in 2007, to SR105 billion (US\$28 billion) in 2008, to SR122 billion (\$32.5 billion) in 2009 (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1
Government Expenditure on Education, 2002–09



Source: Ministry of Education, Statistical Report (1426-27); Al Rajhi Report, p. 7; Arab News, 23/12/2008

These numbers represent an ever-increasing share of the general government budget: In 2002, the government allocated 20.13 percent of its total spending to education and human resource development; in 2009, that number rose to 25.7 percent.

The Seventh and Eighth Five-Year Development Plans of the Saudi Government

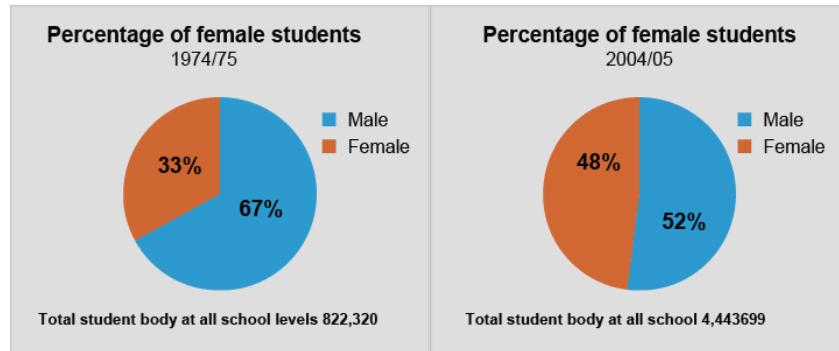
The Seventh Five-Year Development Plan (2001–2005) makes primary and secondary levels of education compulsory for both boys and girls. It aims to increase the number of male and female students enrolled in education from 3.99 million in 1999 to 5.1 million by 2005. The Plan also aims to update and develop school curricula and teaching methods and to improve teachers' skills. It also encourages the private sector to participate in the provision of higher education. Technical education is also being emphasized, mainly by increasing enrollment in the Kingdom's 74 technical colleges and vocational institutes.

The Eighth Five-Year Development Plan (2005–2009) seeks to achieve an enrollment average of 100 percent in primary education. It endorses a new educational strategy to meet the requirements of the local job market. The Supreme Council of Education, appointed by the government, aims to raise the standard of higher education and to improve the quality of Saudi education, including technical education for girls and greater vocational training while preparing them to enter the labor market.

Tangible Efforts to Promote Gender Equality

1. The Saudi government has made considerable efforts to promote gender equality, per the third Millennium Development Goal, and to ensure girls' equal access to basic education. On 7 September 2000, **Saudi Arabia signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** with some reservations. The term "discrimination against women" refers to "any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex." Both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education are responsible for male and female education; the latter is segregated from boys' education, in accordance with the Shari'a law.
2. National results indicate that there has been considerable progress in achieving gender equality among school students. Statistics indicate that a considerable increase occurred in the number of female students at all school levels over a period of 30 years, from 272,054 in 1974–75 to 2,121,893 in 2004–05. The percentage of female students at all school levels increased from 33 percent in 1974–75 to 48 percent in 2004–05 (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2
Percentage of Female Students at All School Levels (1974–75 and 2004–05)

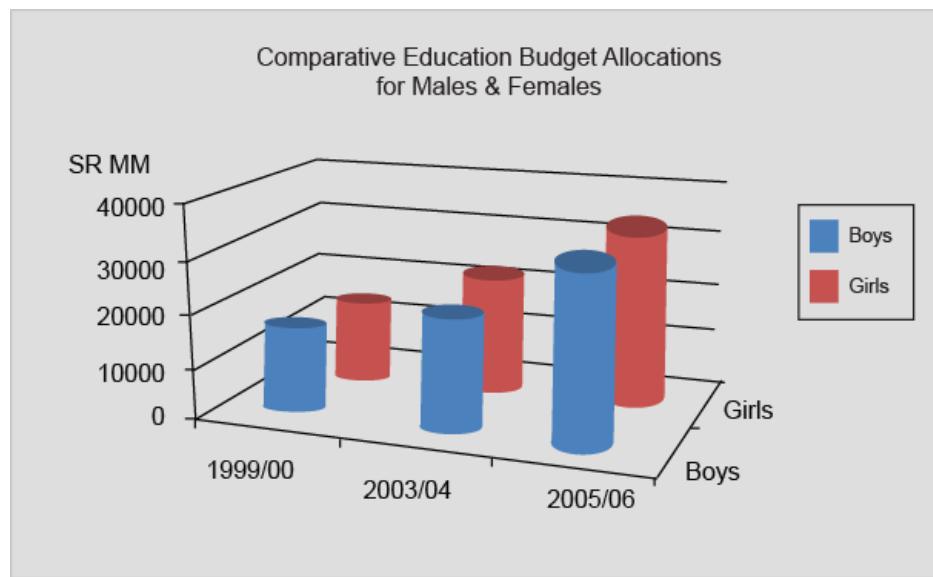


Source: SAMA, 2008, Ministry of Education, p. 374

Similarly, in 1974–75, there were 1,024 female schools, which represented 26 percent of the total number of schools at all levels. But after 30 years, the number of female schools increased to 24,464 and represented 49 percent of the total number of schools at all levels.^{vi}

3. The government's considerable interest in girls' education is demonstrated by the financial assistance granted to female students in all areas and stages of education. Budget allocations for boys and girls were almost equal in 1999–2000, but the percentage allocation for girls' education surpassed that for boys a few years later (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3
Comparative Education Budget Allocations for Males and Females



4. The Saudi government also provides opportunities to young Saudi women to enroll at all levels of higher education, with incentives in the form of allowances throughout their years of study.

- More than 38 educational institutes for women in the country and eight universities for women are directly under the patronage of the Ministry of Education.
- Women represent more than 58 percent of the total number of Saudi university students. Government statistics indicate that the total number of female students enrolled at the university level, seeking a bachelor's degree, more than tripled from 93,486 in 1995–96 to 340,857 in 2005–06.^{vii}
- The government has also accorded great importance to vocational training for women. The number of vocational institutes for women reached 27 in 2004–05, enrolling more than 3,408 women students studying home economics. The number of other institutes for training in sewing reached 51 in 2004–05, where more than 2,218 students are enrolled.^{viii}
- At the same time, the private sector launched a number of private schools and universities for girls and women, based on the efforts of individuals or private institutions and under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. There are approximately 10 private colleges and universities for women spread throughout major cities including Riyadh, Al Khobar, Jeddah, and Al Baha.

Development of Women's Education in Saudi Arabia

Interest in education in Saudi Arabia grew along with the development of the economy after the discovery of oil in 1935. The Ministry of Education was established in 1953 and public schools for boys opened the same year. Girls were still confined to their homes by the traditional norms of gender segregation. Their education was restricted to the house, where a sheikh would teach them how to read the Qur'an and the basics of writing. It was only in the late 1950s and early 1960s that important steps were taken to open the first schools for girls in Saudi Arabia. By the mid-1970s, about half of all Saudi girls attended school. In the early 1980s, education was available to all Saudi girls, and young women were already enrolled in and graduating from the universities. The public system of women's education in Saudi Arabia is segregated and is supported by the Saudi government.^{ix}

Achievements in Social Development

Investing in female education has been crucial to Saudi national development, as it improved the country's social and cultural development. Women's education is associated with vital measures of human resource development, such as reducing population growth and mortality rates, improving health and nutrition, and increasing literacy rates.

Human Resource Development in Saudi Arabia

Total fertility rates (*number of children per family*) decreased from 7.3 (1970–75) to 6.2 (1995–2000) to 5.5 (2000–05) and reached 3.7 in 2007.

Infant mortality rates (per 1,000 infants) decreased from 118.0 in 1970 to 21.0 in 2005 and to 18.6 in 2007.

Life expectancy at birth increased from 53.9 years (1970–75) to 71.6 (2000–05) and reached 74.3 in 2007.

Youth literacy rate (boys and girls age 15–24 years old) has increased from 85.9 percent in 1990 to 96.7 percent in 2007.

Adult literacy rate (15+) increased from 66.2 percent in 1990 to 79.4 percent in 2000–04. For males, the literacy rate went from 76.2 percent to 87.1 during that period; for females, from 50.2 percent to 69.3 percent.

Female illiteracy rate (10 years and above) reached a low of 20.2 per cent in 2007, as compared to the male illiteracy rate, which registered an average of 7.3 percent.

Gross enrollment ratio (GER) for females at the primary level increased from 67 percent in 1991 to 92 percent in 2006 (regional average). At the secondary level, the female GER increased from 39 percent in 1991 to 65 percent in 2006.

MAJOR CONSTRAINTS AFFECTING THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN

Local Customs and Traditions

The Saudi Universities Law, the Civil Service Law, and the Labour and Workers Law treat women the same as men with regard to specific considerations such as grade, salary, curricula, opportunities in education, employment, and training, as long as they are consistent with the Shari'a law that is the basis of Saudi law.

However, there are many shortcomings in implementation, as operationally these laws are not fully enforced. **A mixture of local norms and traditions, social beliefs, and principles emanating from the patriarchal system stand in the way, exerting a considerable influence on women's lives and limiting their opportunity to acquire or complete their education.** They are linked to gender discrepancies, i.e., the traditional roles of men and women in society, which often favor boys over girls.

Marriage and the low level of awareness of the social and cultural value of girls' education are major factors that hamper girls' education.

The major symptom of this gender disparity is the high dropout rates in schools and colleges. Despite the improvements in access to and the participation in primary education as well as the rising age at marriage as seen in the increasing number of girls at secondary level, the dropout rate is still high.

"Education alone is not enough. Our Arab men should become more tolerant and understanding of accepting us as educated women. They are still attached to the traditional view that a woman should not receive too much education but on the contrary she should marry and stay at home."

—Medical doctor, 35 years old, married, three children

High Dropout Rates for Girls

- **The problem of dropouts is significant at all educational levels.** UNESCO estimated the total number of out-of-school children in Saudi Arabia (boys and girls in primary education) at 793,000 in 2005. This number, which corresponds to a rate of 3.22 percent of the total population in Saudi Arabia, is relatively high when compared with the average dropout rates (as a percentage of total population) of Arab states (1.96 percent), developing countries (1.32 percent), and the world (1.11 percent).^x Another study published by a number of Saudi educational experts estimated the percentage of dropouts (out of the total student body, male and female) at 13 percent at the primary level, 18 percent at the intermediate level, and 37 percent at the secondary level.^{xi}
- **The total rate of 37 percent (boys and girls) dropping out during high school is significant.** Based on the prevailing traditional culture and the equal distribution of boys and girls in high school, it would be conservative to assume that the drop-out rate among girls is within that range. As girls reach puberty, they mostly drop out to get married. This phenomenon is confirmed once again after high school graduation. Dropout rates for girls become very significant as we approach university levels.
- Based on a close analysis of the annual number of female secondary school graduates between 1996–97 and 2004–05 and the number of new female students enrolled at university in every subsequent year,^{xii} **the percentage of girls who opted not to enter university after completing high school was on average above 25 percent** during that period. However, the drop-out trend shows an improvement, with the number of female students opting not to continue their studies decreasing from 38.8 percent in 1997–98 to 20.48 percent in 2004–05. Nevertheless this improvement, which seems to reflect an increase in age at marriage, is negated by the large number of dropouts during university.
- A comparison of the annual number of female students newly enrolled at the university between 1996-97 and 2002-03 and the corresponding number of graduates four years later indicates that an alarming average of **33 percent of the class did not graduate in the target year. This number greatly increased in 2004–05 and 2005–06 as it reached respectively 40 percent and 60 percent.**

All of these facts represent a significant waste of educated human resources, which has been continuously reported and which is associated with social and cultural factors. Marriage is still a priority for young women. In particular, young girls still face serious problems in terms of completing their schooling. Many of them are withdrawn from school near or after puberty, carrying a heavy obligation of domestic duties, and many drop out under family pressure, due to early marriage.

“Education alone cannot improve our lives. If local customs and values are deeply ingrained in the life of a person, then a long time is needed before the mentality changes and new things are accepted. We need more enlightenment and awareness about what constitutes social traditions and what constitutes Islam.”

—B.A. in Social Sciences, 27 years old, single

Early Marriage Is Still a Serious Problem

- **Early marriage is still a problem in pockets of Saudi society, mainly in rural areas and among illiterates.** Many cases have been reported in which very young girls were married to much older men.^{xiii}
- **Early marriage (before 16 years) hinders girls' education** due to their marital and family responsibilities, which in turn negatively influences their chances of employment and the economic status of the family. It also negatively affects their health as they are at greater risk of dying from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.
- According to a medical research study undertaken in Jeddah, 27.2 percent of the Saudi women participants were married before 16 years old and “they were at twice the risk of spontaneous abortion, four times the risk of combined fetal death and infant mortality, and twice the risk of losing pregnancies any time during their childbearing years.”^{xiv}
- **Low minimum age for marriage is an issue of concern in Saudi Arabia^{xv}** as there is no legal minimum age for marriage, for boys or girls. The Saudi Human Rights Commission (SHRC) launched a campaign to set a minimum age for marriage in the country of 17 for women and 18 for men.

Structure of the Public Education System

Weaknesses of the System

- **Extensive criticisms and complaints have been raised by various Saudi academics and professionals (men and women) regarding the limitations of the structure of the system of public education for students, both boys and girls.**
- **Criticisms have also been addressed by members of the Shoura (consultative) Council to the Minister of Education** questioning the educational performance of the Ministry during the past years, specifically about the curriculum and programs that do not meet students' socioeconomic needs or their expectations.^{xvi}
- A recent World Bank study examined the better-engineered education systems in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, looking at physical conditions, curriculum, teaching, finance, and administration. **Saudi Arabia scored low in pedagogy, structure of education, flow of students, and resource mobilization, and only medium in teaching capacity.**^{xvii}
- According to the 2007 “Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study” (TIMSS) undertaken by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, and based on an international evaluation of 50 countries, **the educational system in Saudi Arabia is lagging well behind European, Asian, American, other Arab countries in mathematics and sciences.** It took 46th place out of 49 in mathematics and 44th place out of 49 in sciences. Saudi students got an average of 329 points, which was well below the world average of 500 points.^{xviii}

“It is very important to change the curriculum. We need to adopt a new and different strategy that accommodates both men and women to the needs of modern stages of development and active participation in the labor market. Today you feel that expectations are rising and people’s demands are increasing. This is why we need to have more reform.”

*—Director of welfare association, B.A. in English Literature,
47 years old, married, four children*

Shortcomings of the Curriculum for Girls

- **The public education system treats males and females differently due to the gender-based expectations of society.** Public school systems direct boys and girls into different courses by a differential tracking system whereby boys are taught to think about “male” activities and girls are encouraged to develop for their future roles as mothers and housewives. The curricula in girls’ schools stress courses that are suitable for the social and biological function of a woman in a traditional society and to prepare her to do what suits her “nature” (i.e., maternity). This association has led to a limited range of fields for female students in schools, universities, and colleges.
- **Girls’ curricula at all school levels have not been seriously revised for more than 20 years** and textbooks have not been updated. Without the introduction of new information that reflects developmental changes in society, the curriculum is not providing students with the necessary skills to enhance their overall education and to find jobs.
- **The girls’ curricula at the primary, intermediate, and secondary levels are dominated by religious studies and Arabic language. Mathematics, sciences, foreign languages, and information and communication technology (ICT) are lagging behind.** Schools at the primary and intermediate levels are not equipped with computers and girls do not use the Internet. At the secondary level, the use of computers in girls’ schools started only four years ago but to a lesser degree than in boys’ schools. English language classes were only introduced in 2007 at the primary level (two hours per week) and are lagging at the intermediate and secondary levels. Home Economics (two hours per week) is a cooking class that seems to have no educational value. History and Geography classes are limited and do not incorporate a broad overview of the Arab region and the world. When compared to the boys’ curriculum, the girls’ curriculum lacks also administrative and business studies, accounting, general activity, physical education, and national education.
- **Physical education is nonexistent for Saudi girls in schools at all educational levels.** Sports are considered to be incompatible with local traditions and customs. However, physical activity is a necessity for the health and mental well-being of girl students. In addition to keeping the body strong and flexible, it boosts circulation to the brain and helps clear thinking. It also plays a major role in the prevention of diseases. Due to the lack of activity and exposure to the sun, respectively, **Saudi females have alarmingly high rates of obesity (51 percent) and osteoporosis (67 percent).**^{xix} When the issue of physical education was discussed in the Shoura Council, 75 members out of 120 expressed the opinion that the decision should be a political one.^{xx}
- **National education is also lacking in the girls’ curriculum.** Girls lack civic and national education, which covers the concept of country affiliation, the feeling of identification with the state and the government, and the ways they can defend their country. In order to prevent terrorism, this is vital for girls who will become mothers and will be responsible for teaching future generations of boys and girls.
- **General and extracurricular activities are also missing** in most parts of the girls’ curricula, including educational and cultural trips to museums and archaeological places; cooperation with other schools, universities, and libraries; and education about social issues and health care.
- **The girls’ curriculum lacks fieldwork, teamwork, and innovative research based on evaluation and brainstorming.** Methods for teaching girls still tend to focus at all educational levels on the traditional way of learning, based on repetition and memorization instead of analytic research methodology, creative thinking, personality development, and the development of skills.

“Honestly, our system of education needs revision. I don’t think that what we have now is enough. We need a diversification in women’s specializations and I want the opening of a department of a college of journalism for women. Also, I think that there should be some specialized departments ready to give women diplomas and grant them the possibility to work even if they did not get a university degree.”

—Journalist, 55 years old, married, three children

Educational Reforms in Other Countries

Curriculum Reform in Jordan

A number of Arab countries, including Jordan, Tunisia, and Lebanon, have already adopted pedagogical reforms in primary and secondary schools. These emphasize inquiry-based learning, student-based learning, and multiple-chance learning, as well as technology, science, and foreign languages.

Jordan has been at the forefront of curriculum reform in the region. In addition to the topics mentioned above, these reforms have targeted core subject areas such as Arabic, mathematics, science, and English. Jordan also introduced a new subject stream—Information Management—to prepare secondary students for positions in e-commerce, information management, and computer-based accounting. The emphasis in the new curricula is on both subject matter skills and other transferable skills that are necessary for success in the private sector, including communication, teamwork, analysis, and information synthesis: The government reformed textbooks and curricula with the ultimate goal of preparing students for the knowledge economy. Jordan has also invested in information and communication technologies in schools, including computers and Internet connections, as an integral part of its plan to transform into a knowledge-based economy.^{xxi}

Educational Reform in Finland

In Finland, where education is the centerpiece of national identity, students rank at the top of the scale according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests 15-year-olds from a number of countries in literacy, mathematics, and science. Their educational reform policy for improving learning and teaching is linked to economic competitiveness and built on flexibility and loose standards, intelligent accountability, and broad and deep learning with creativity.^{xxii}

The National Core Curriculum established by the Finnish National Board of Education emphasizes media, mathematics, sciences, information, technology, foreign languages, international cooperation, visual arts, and

sports. The designing of a new school curriculum is usually a two-year process involving the National Board of Education and other participants such as a management team, a curriculum team, parents, and a student board.

Development Priorities for the Educational System in Finland

- Information Society
 - Education in Mathematics and Natural Sciences
 - Language Teaching and Internationalization
 - Raising the Standards and Quality of Education
 - Cooperation between Education and Working Life
 - Initial and Continuing Training for Teachers
 - Lifelong Learning^{xxiii}
-

Lack of Adequate Teacher Training

Girls' education also suffers from a shortage of well-qualified teachers. Saudi academics have expressed their criticism to the Ministry of Education about the performance of teachers and the need to formulate new programs for teaching.^{xxiv} This criticism arises even though statistics indicate that the total number of female teachers in the public system of education (at all school levels) has increased from 185,956 in 2001–02 to 211,283 in 2005–06.^{xxv} This number is high and members of the teaching profession are relatively well-paid by the government—between SR5,000 (US\$1,335) and SR17,000 (US\$4,535) per month.

Experts confirm that **Saudi teachers lack frequent assessment and monitoring of the quality of their teaching performance** during the school year. Another common complaint among experts in the field and among members of the teaching body itself is that the system should extend beyond the traditional methods of teaching because it is **not providing teachers with adequate teaching and training programs**. This lack of training is reflected in the inability to communicate and interact with students, encourage teamwork, and develop the personality of students while promoting the value of understanding and tolerance.

This also is reflected in a **general inability to use information and communication technology (ICT)** and to integrate it into the teaching and learning process. **The system is also not providing teachers with sufficient incentives to upgrade their competencies;** high academic qualifications are not part of the requirements and the concept of lifelong learning, which is essential to update knowledge and skills, is broadly missing.

Teaching in Saudi Arabia

“The performance of our teachers is weak and they should be highly qualified. We should work more on developing not only their professional level, but also their personalities, psychologically and socially, and provide them with capacity-building training on self-development, communication, and how to be flexible with students with an open mind.”

— Head of girls’ education in one of the provinces in Saudi Arabia

Teaching in Finland

“The main focus needs to be on learning. The concept of learning changes a teacher’s role from information dealer to trainer. A teacher organizes, supports, and leads individual students’ learning processes. Students work in groups, in pairs, they’ve got a lot of discussion; they make projects and experiments, use the Internet and ICT technology; they go to museums, theaters with teachers. You don’t often see students sitting in the classroom listening to a teacher, tables and chairs arranged in a traditional way. Also, you cannot forget students’ valuable part in developing the school. They are professional as learners, experts in their own learning. They may take part in teachers’ meetings.”

—Ms. Eira Kasper, Principal of Vaskivuori Upper Secondary School for 19 years, Vantaa, Finland

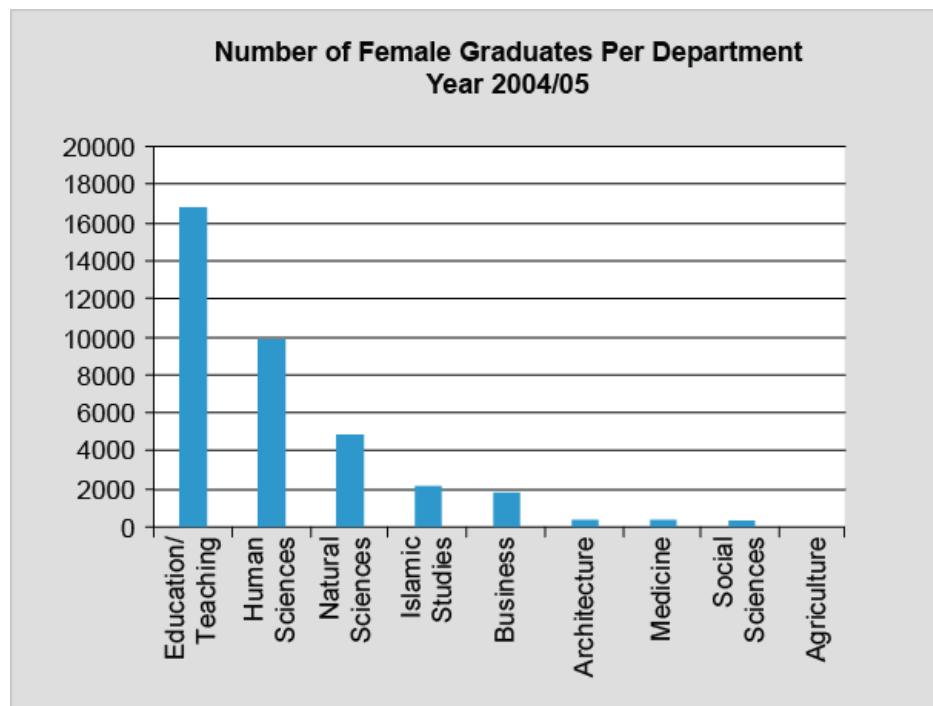
Lack of Equal Gender Opportunity in Decision Making

- **Saudi women do not share sufficiently in decision making at the highest levels in government educational policies.** A Supervisory Bureau for Women’s Education, consisting entirely of women employees, exists in each province and district of the Kingdom; it is in charge of inspecting, orienting, and directing the primary, intermediate, and secondary levels of girls’ education. It also deals with major administrative affairs pertaining to girls’ schools and teachers. Each bureau reports to the General Manager of Educational Affairs, a man, who heads the bureau in each area, and who reports to the Minister of Education. A woman has been appointed as Assistant General Manager of Educational Affairs to each area manager.
- **The major posts in the Ministry of Education are held by men** (the Minister of Education, the Vice Minister, and the Deputy Minister). Major final decisions about women’s education are made by them in coordination with male administrators and staff in the Ministry of Education and in the Shoura Council. Significant cooperation and communication between men and women are not at all frequent. In February 2009, Ms. Nora Al-Fayez was appointed as the first female Vice Education Minister for girls’ education.
- **At the higher education level, only one post has been assigned to a woman** since 2000. The current Director General of Girls’ Higher Education, reporting to the Minister of Higher Education, is Princess Dr. Jawhara bint Fahd bin Muhammad bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud;
- **At the most basic level, women students suffer also from the lack of equal opportunity with men in obtaining scholarships.** This is due to the fact that the Ministry of Higher Education requires that every female student should be accompanied by a *mahram* or a male relative when traveling outside the country. She also needs to have his consent to be granted a scholarship to study abroad.

Limited Fields of Specialization and Scientific Research

- At the university level, the fields of education and training for women are limited, as the specializations do not correspond to the needs of the labor market. **Women's degrees are concentrated in education and teaching, human sciences, natural sciences, and Islamic studies** (see Exhibit 4).

*Exhibit 4
Female Graduate Degrees by Department (2004–05)*



Source: Al Hamed, M., Ziadeh, M., Al Oteibi, B., and Mutawalli, N., Al Taalim fi AlMamlaka al Arabiya AlSaudia: Rouyat al Hader wa Istishraf al Mustakbal, 4th ed., Al Rushd Library, Beirut, Lebanon, 1428/2007

- Of all female university graduates in 2007, **93 percent had degrees in education and teaching or human sciences.**^{xxvi}
- **While the enrollment of women in the fields of science and technology is low, the fields of engineering and agriculture remain predominantly male territory.** The other fields of specialization are limited depending on the university. Women have also limited options to join higher studies programs and get degrees in the ICT field.
- Due to cultural restrictions and biases in relation to the expected role of women in society, the **system of education has been reinforcing gender-segregated cultural norms.** This explains the high concentration of women in education, as teaching is generally perceived as a female job, and a social extension of a woman's cultural role as mother and housewife.
- **Data indicates the lack of women's enrollment in scientific fields.** This limits Saudi women's potential for progress in an age that is increasingly oriented toward scientific and technological advancement.
- **A strong teaching and scientific research approach is therefore necessary** in the field of women's public education; opportunities for cross-disciplinary education and research with other international universities, as well as the use of international expertise, are not broadly available.

Limited Fields of Specialization

King Saud University in Riyadh: Female students are not admitted to the College of Engineering or the College of Architecture and Planning, and limited seats are available to them at the College of Medicine and College of Science. The College of Computer Sciences, which was opened in the mid-1990s for women students, has only one specialty—computer applications. The men's section college, by contrast, has different departments: computer science, computer engineering, and information systems. As for the colleges of languages and translation, women have only two departments, French and English, whereas men have the additional options of German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Japanese, Hebrew, Persian, and Turkish.

King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah: Female students are not admitted to the College of Environmental Design, Agriculture in Dry Areas, Earth Sciences, Engineering, Marine Sciences, and Medical College in Najran.

King Faisal University—Eastern Province: Female students are not admitted to the College of Pharmacy in Al Ahsa', Dentistry in Dammam, Veterinarian Studies in al Ahsa', and Medicine in Al Ahsa'.

Al Qassim University: Female students are not admitted to the Colleges of Engineering, Agriculture, Veterinarian Studies, and Islamic Law.^{xxvii}

Disconnect with the Country's Social and Economic Priorities

- Thousands of Saudi women are graduating each year from university but are not effectively utilized. **The problem for Saudi women is related to availability of jobs and restrictions on work opportunities.** Due to these restrictions, considerable resources and talents are not utilized although they are urgently needed in the labor market.
- **Women are a valuable resource who should be effectively utilized in the national economy** by allowing them to join all fields of education and to work in all sectors. This is a vital and necessary step for national development and progress.
- **The number of Saudi men and Saudi women is nearly the same** (50 and 49 percent, respectively), but there is an imbalance in their participation in the labor market.
- The fact that **the majority of young women are graduating in the fields of education and social services has created a gender imbalance** in the Saudi labor market and contributed to high unemployment rates of female university graduates.
- **The rate of Saudi women's participation in the labor force was 5.4 percent in 1992, increasing to a rate of 14 percent in 2007.**^{xxvii} This is an improvement; however, it is still very low as compared to **Saudi males' participation, which was 40.9 percent** in the same year.^{xxix}
- This situation has intensified the dependence on foreign skilled and unskilled labor, which is expensive and considerable, **as non-Saudis' participation in the labor force reached 51 percent of the total in 2007.**^{xxx}

MAJOR STEPS CURRENTLY BEING TAKEN BY THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT TO IMPROVE THE SYSTEM OF PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

The Sixth National Meeting for Intellectual Dialogue

In November 2006, a meeting was held in the Jouf region on “*Education: Current Situation and Means of Development.*” The major recommendations were:

- The present state of education in the Kingdom needs to be reviewed and a comprehensive strategy for the development of all components of general, higher, and technical education must be adopted. This strategy must be founded on new economic, social, and political developments as well as on local and international variables and incorporate a review of educational policy.
- Curricula and course material must be reviewed and updated on an ongoing basis and the occupational level of teachers and faculty must be improved.
- Buildings and technical equipment must be provided; assessment and accreditation programs through independent agencies must be instituted, particularly with regard to assessing the performance of educational institutions and their output; the standard of scholarly research must be raised; the task of carrying out some programs of university, technical, and vocational education must be given to the private sector; outstanding international experience in this field must be taken into consideration.^{xxxi}

Tatwir

Tatwir, which is the King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud Project for General Education Development, is a new educational measure, launched two years ago to introduce changes to the system of education for boys and girls. This project, which costs nearly SR12 billion (US\$3.2 billion), aims to train more than 400,000 male and female teachers in school management, educational supervision, curriculum development, computer science, training, and self-development skills. Fifty secondary schools in different parts of the Kingdom have been already selected to implement the project; the school leader or resident supervisor will be responsible for improving the efficiency of teachers. The project intends to apply modern technology in the educational process, and has been adopted after successful experiments at schools took place in other countries. Tatwir is now implemented in each of the 13 provinces in two secondary schools (one for boys and one for girls) where the schools are provided with modern technological facilities. The goal of Tatwir is to help students achieve knowledge and expertise.^{xxxii}

Princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman University for Women

King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud laid the foundation stone for the new infrastructure of Princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman University for women in October 2008. The university is designed to become one of the largest centers of higher education for Saudi women, presenting them with new educational opportunities to enter the labor market. It will include an academic area of 15 colleges, including the College of Medicine, College of Nursing, College of Pharmacology, College of Physiotherapy, College of Dentistry, and a number of other colleges such as the College of Administrative Sciences, the Computer and Technology College, the Kindergarten College, the College of Science, and the College of Languages and Translation. It will also include a housing area for staff and students with public facilities, including mosques, schools, and other recreational installations. It will have a capacity for 40,000 female students by 2010. The general cost will exceed SR20 billion (US\$5.3 billion) and the 2009 Saudi government budget allocated SR1.43 billion (US\$381 million) especially for the university.^{xxxiii}

Preparatory Year for University Entrance

This is a pioneering educational measure recently adopted by the Ministry of Education in all major universities of the Kingdom, to improve the level of female students who are planning to specialize at the university in the fields of medicine, business administration, computer sciences, and agriculture (which will be opened by 2010). The students will have to enroll in one preparatory year taking intensive courses in English, mathematics, computer sciences, and communication. In addition, they will take courses in health awareness, civic education, and self-learning. The girls will be accepted at university only if they succeed with a high average. The number of girls enrolled for the 2008 year reached approximately 3,000 at King Saud University in Riyadh.

Al Ameen for School Transportation

The new transportation project launched by the Ministry of Education in October 2008 for female general students has been implemented in the regions of Makkah, Al Madinah Al Munawwarah, Qassim, the Eastern region, Riyadh, and the Northern Frontiers. About 500,000 female students are transported on 3,823 buses and 2,678 vehicles. The cost of the project is more than SR3 billion (US\$801 million).^{xxxiv}

It is clear that the Saudi government is serious about improving the quality of girls' education and has started to implement a new reform policy. The educational reform process is supervised by a high-level committee, consisting of academics and experts as well as members of the Shoura Council. These reforms are still at an initial and exploratory stage and it may take a few years before their impact is evident.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROPOSED ACTIONS TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S EDUCATION

What Should Be Done?

More must be done at the governmental level to provide women equal opportunity in education and to ensure that women benefit from full education, eradication of illiteracy, and vocational training. **The government needs to formulate an educational reform strategy for young women that includes major structural changes in the school system and that will respond to the demands and priorities of a dynamic society.** It is vital that the policy of the government be geared toward facing the new social and economic changes affecting the country and the Arab region. The success of Saudi society depends on how it will invest in all its members, not only men, as women are also a valuable potential resource in the development of the country. The development of female skills will lead to the development of human resource capital, thus minimizing their economic isolation in the Saudi market. The education system has been producing a large number of employment-seeking women graduates that the economy of the country needs. **It is only by strengthening the general education system of girls at the primary, secondary and university levels, and improving women's access to high-quality education that Saudi women's participation in the labor force will increase** and more work opportunities will be available for them. Saudi Arabia will be able to face the global challenges of a present-day society.

High-level policy should be oriented toward creating a favourable sociocultural environment for women. Educational change cannot in itself reform a whole society; the right environmental conditions must be present or created. It is essential that education be recognized as a vital issue requiring the total commitment of society, including men, women, the government, the private sector, and civil society. **It is crucial for the Saudi government to revise the concept of girls' education, to focus on the role and nature of education in a conservative society, and to define what role it should play in reshaping a modern society.** Cultural constraints placed on women should be cleared away gradually through education and public enlightenment with a view that accepts women as equal partners with men in society. Social and cultural patterns should be modified according to a more tolerant interpretation of the values of Saudi society. **These reforms should start at home with the education of the mother and the father and with the upbringing of the present generation of children, while initiating them into an open culture, based on tolerance and understanding.** The success of women's education **requires changes in the conduct and actions of major actors, such as policy officials and educational authorities.**

Decisions/Actions Required at High Governmental Level

1. **Enforce the May 2004 law that makes primary education compulsory** for 10 years of schooling and extend its period to at least the age of 15.
2. **Enforce a minimum age for marriage of 18 years for both men and women** so that girls are not prevented from continuing their education.
3. **Establish a National Commission for Women's Social Affairs to participate in high-level decision making**, coordination, and formulation of girls' educational policies; the Commission will help implement a National Educational Strategy for girls and women that takes into consideration women's social and economic needs, including the use of ICT in all school curricula. The National Commission may include an equal number of female and male staff as board members.
4. **Raise awareness through the Ministry of Culture on the vital and positive role of**

girls' education in society through mosques, local media, newspapers, radio, the Internet, TV, videos, and publications. **Establish a Saudi TV educational channel** that will help to enlighten the populace about cultural subjects.

5. **Recognize the role of civil society organizations (i.e., women's associations) and the private sector as important partners** in building a tripartite dialogue for educational policy-making decisions, service delivery, and school funding.
6. **Organize regional-level workshops to share experiences and best practices on the improvement of girls' education** in the Kingdom. These can include conferences and seminars to discuss, evaluate, and exchange information about girls' education projects and policies that have been successfully implemented in other countries in the Arab region, and formulate programs of action.

Actions Required at the Ministry of Education Level

1. **Mainstream gender equality and promote women's education in country policy and educational strategic development.** Revise, evaluate, and reform women's curricula for all phases of education. Introduce changes to make the curriculum more responsive to the needs of the local market, by providing basic education skills, vocational training skills, computer sciences, and the use of the Internet at all school levels. Curricula should emphasize foreign languages, mathematics, sciences, health, business administration, engineering, geology, computer sciences, information technology and programming, agriculture, media, politics, archaeology, law, physical education and national education, social voluntary and welfare work, community services, and environmental education. The system of education should also promote scientific research and technology development.
2. **Form a task force of women's advisory services through the Ministry of Education to visit girls' schools in urban and rural areas,** oversee their working conditions, and probe the needs of young women in different provinces. Its membership should include non-governmental organizations and representatives from the private sector.
3. **Replace traditional methods of girls' teaching, such as rote learning and memorization, with good learning techniques and skills.** These include development of cognitive skills; innovative, creative, and critical thinking; information analysis; ICT in scientific research; ability to take the initiative; teamwork; ability to meet deadlines; ability to bear responsibilities; ability to communicate and present ideas; development of self-confidence, and development in computers and communication technology. This will improve girls' opportunities for future employment and their capacity to earn financial reward.
4. **Update textbooks, increase the use of instructional software and computers in girls' schools, offer access to the Internet,** and introduce more technology in the classroom. These could include the use of Smart Board and distance learning programs to connect students with the outside world.
5. **Establish effective monitoring mechanisms for girls' schools, including comprehensive evaluation of schools** for accountability, quality of learning conditions and environment, the relevance of policies and strategies, and whether girls are acquiring knowledge and skills.
6. **Recruit and evaluate qualified teachers on the basis of competence and merit, following assessment and aptitude policies and guidelines;** provide sufficient compensations and incentives to encourage high-quality teaching. Excellent teachers are a prerequisite for outstanding education. Teachers with a high degree of education (i.e., a master's degree) should be recruited. A lifelong training system should be

- designed to develop practical and professional expertise so as to meet the needs of the labor market. Introduce a system of reward to encourage teachers to improve performance.
7. **Provide girls' schools with special libraries** at the elementary, intermediate, and secondary levels to encourage reading and promote culture.

Actions Required at the Level of Both the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education

1. **Ensure family education in all schools, including a proper understanding of the role of women as mothers and active agents in society**, as well as the common responsibility of men and women in the education and development of their children. Educational programs should be directed at parents and girls to provide them with scientific information on the health and socioeconomic implications of early marriage.
2. **Improve communication within the educational system by establishing a plan for social counseling and guidance** coordinated between the student, his or her family, and the school, and teachers.
3. **Build a reliable database on girls' and women's education** including statistical data and data about educational programs, the way courses operate, the results they should achieve, student motivations, and needs assessment surveys.
4. **Encourage NGOs to coordinate their efforts with the government (mainly in rural and remote areas) to raise awareness about the importance of girls' education** as a human right and a religious duty. Convince families to send their daughters to school and insist that education is free and compulsory; provide NGOs with financial and technical support to help provide educational services, organize informal gender training for families in rural communities, participate in functional literacy programs, and be responsive to the social needs of girls.
5. **Raise health-awareness campaigns on a national educational level, including school curricula** for the dissemination of information on public and preventive health, nutrition, hygiene, and sanitation.

Successful Educational Reforms/Actions Undertaken in Other Arab countries

In Yemen, Egypt, and Morocco, progress in girls' educational opportunities has been achieved through a combination of policies. The National Girls' Education Strategy in Yemen is at the center of the country's overall sectoral policy. Key elements include community mobilization to raise awareness of the importance of girls' and women's education, construction of co-educational and female schools, especially in rural areas, and more female teachers. Female secondary school graduates from remote rural areas are selected to teach lower grades in local schools. They receive in-service training and professional support. Egypt has also been conducting successful initiatives to increase girls' access, such as community schools, one-classroom schools, and girl-friendly schools. Morocco has established incentives for girls' enrollment: conditional food aid in rural areas, boarding facilities, and boarding grants.^{xxxv}

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- ⁱ Prime Ministerial Order, no. 22646; 21 June 2004
- ⁱⁱ UNESCO, “Education for All,” Global Monitoring Report, 2008, Table 2
- ⁱⁱⁱ UNDP, Ministry of Planning, MDGs in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2008, p.3
- ^{iv} Ministry of Education, Statistical Report (1426-27)
- ^v United Nations, The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2008, p. 12, 16
- ^{vi} SAMA, Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 376
- ^{vii} UNDP-POGAR: Gender and Citizenship, <http://gender.pogar.org/Saudi%20Arabia> & SAMA, 2008, p. 379
- ^{viii} Al Hamed, M., Ziadeh, M., Al Oteibi, B. and Mutawalli, N., *Al Taalim fi AlMamlaka al Arabiya AlSaudia: Rouyat al Hader wa Istishraf al Mustakbal*, 4th ed., Al Rushd Library, Beirut, Lebanon, 1428/2007
- ^{ix} AlMunajjed, M., *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, Macmillan, London, 1997.
- ^x UNESCO, “Education For All,” Global Monitoring Report, 2008, Table No. 3
- ^{xi} Al Hamed, M., Ziadeh, M., Al Oteibi, B., and Mutawalli, N., *Al Taalim fi AlMamlaka al Arabiya AlSaudia: Rouyat al Hader wa Istishraf al Mustakbal*, 4th ed., Al Rushd Library, Beirut, Lebanon, 1428/2007
- ^{xii} SAMA, Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 374
- ^{xiii} Saudi Arabia: “Child Marriage Stirs Saudi Debate,” 26/8/2008, www.forwarduk.org.uk; www.Islamonline.net (27/8/2008).
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- ^{xv} UNICEF, Saudi Arabia; www.unicef.org
- ^{xvi} Al Hayat newspaper, 19/12/2008
- ^{xvii} The World Bank; “The Road Not Traveled,” 2008; p. 182
- ^{xviii} Al Hayat newspaper, 16/12/2008
- ^{xix} Al Shark Al Awssat newspapers: 11/3/2006 & 28/12/2006
- ^{xx} CEDAW, The Shadow Report, Saudi Arabia; 2007; p. 36
- ^{xxi} The World Bank, “The Road Not Traveled,” 2008; p. 183
- ^{xxii} *The Economist*, “Top of the Class,” 26/6/2008.
- ^{xxiii} Educational Reform and Child Raising in Finland, 2008, www.childresearch.net/resource/PRESEN/2008/Finland/index.html
- ^{xxiv} Al Hayat newspaper, 6/12/2008
- ^{xxv} Ministry of Education, Statistical Report; p. 251
- ^{xxvi} UNDP, Ministry of Planning, MDGs in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2008; p. 50
- ^{xxvii} Ministry of Higher Education, Statistical Book, 2006-2007
- ^{xxviii} UNDP, Ministry of Planning, MDGs, 2008, p. 45
- ^{xxix} SAMA, 2008, p. 230
- ^{xxx} SAMA, 2008, p. 230
- ^{xxxi} King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue, “Prologue,” p. 35
- ^{xxxi} Arab News, “General Education to get a major facelift,” 15/10/2008
- ^{xxxiii} Al Riyadh Newspaper, 2/11/2008; Arab News, “Women’s Varsity to Have New Campus,” 5/12/2008
- ^{xxxiv} Saudi Gazette, “Al Ameen for School Transportation,” 11/12/2008
- ^{xxxv} UNESCO, “Education for All,” Global Monitoring Report, 2008, p.8

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